The Science of Leadership

LEADERSHIP IS A RELATIONSHIP

by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Leadership does not require some special mix of physical or character traits. With the exception of a few traits such as ability, achievement, responsibility and so on, physical and character traits are not reliable predictors of who will emerge as a leader or their success in the leadership role. Leaders who emphasize *consideration* (open communication, trust respect, follower participation and so on) are not necessarily more successful than leaders who emphasize *structure* (organization, task accomplishment, and so on). Leadership is NOT situational. Situational factors are NOT reliable predictors of the success of task-oriented versus relationship-oriented leaders.

The most important thing to understand about leadership is that a leader's success is almost totally dependent upon the type of *relationship the leader develops with his/her followers*. The leader-follower relationship can take two primary forms--Transactional or Transforming. In a *transactional* relationship the leader gains and maintains power by offering his/her followers an instrumental exchange of value. Followers support the leader in return for his/her promise to provide them with something they desire such as money or public policy. In a *transforming* relationship, the leader gains and maintains power by offering his/her followers a heightened since of purpose, mission and understanding. In such a relationship, both the leaders and his followers are *transformed* by the relationship. Leaders who form *transforming* relationships with their followers are much more effective and powerful than leaders who form only *transactional* relationships.

P eople have been studying, discussing, and cussing power, authority, leadership and leaders for over 5,000 years. You can find the topic engraved in Egyptian hieroglyphics and pondered by the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. And yet the word "leadership" doesn't appear in the English language until the early nineteenth century and the "scientific" study of leadership is definitely a modern, largely twentieth-century, undertaking.

Organization theorists, political scientists, psychologists, psychoanalysts, sociologists—indeed academics of almost every stripe have probed and pondered seeking the secrets of great leaders. They have produced tens of thousands of articles.

The Search for "Great Man" traits

Most who studied leadership from the early years of the twentieth century through the late 1940s subscribed to the Great Man theory, which held that leaders were leaders because they possessed some special mix of physical, and character traits that distinguished them from mere mortals. As Martin Chemers in his review of early research on leadership notes, the traits researchers measured for clues to the elusive leadership brew "ran the gamut from indices of height, weight, physique, appearance, energy, and health to intelligence, speech fluency, knowledge, judgment, introversion-extroversion, adaptability, originality, dominance, persistence, social skills, and on and on." [1] In the end, the researchers found lots of relationships between traits and leadership. In fact, they found too many. It seemed that almost every single trait the researchers studied was related to leadership in some way. But with the exception of a few traits such as ability, achievement, responsibility and so on, none of the traits studied could be shown to be reliable explanations of leadership success or predictors of who might emerge as the leader of a group at any given time. As an influential reviewer of the trait-based leadership research put it, the unmistakable evidence was that "…a person does not become a leader by virtue of the possession of some combination of traits." [2]

The Search for Key Leadership Behaviors

Disenchanted with their inability to uncover consistent Great Man traits, social scientists turned their attention in the 1950s to an exhaustive search for leadership behaviors. If leaders weren't great leaders because of who they were, perhaps they were effective because of what they did. During this period, research conducted at Ohio State University was particularly influential. After considerable effort, the researchers eventually developed a 150-item Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire that distinguished between leaders who emphasized *Consideration* (open communication, trust, respect, follower participation, interpersonal relations, and so on) from leaders whose behaviors were directed toward *Initiation of Structure* (organization, defining structures, emphasizing task accomplishment, and so on). They then sought to determine which behavioral style was most effective. The results of their research were not encouraging. From study to study the results varied dramatically. In some cases consideration led to follower satisfaction and performance. In others initiation of structure mattered most. In still other studies both consideration and initiation of structure led to productivity or satisfaction. There was just no consistency. [3]

The Contingency Approach to Leadership

Perhaps, said a new group of researchers, the lack of consistency in findings could be explained by the fact that leadership was situational. Could it be that different styles of leadership were effective under different circumstances and in different situations? They thought so and launched a whole new line of inquiry that dominated much of the 1960s. Arguably the most famous of these contingency approaches to the leadership problem was that offered by Frederick Fiedler. He maintained that the effectiveness of leadership behavioral style—Task-oriented vs. Relationship-oriented—was highly dependent upon three basic situational factors: (1) the nature of leader-member relations (good or poor), (2) the task structure (high or low), and (3) the position power of the leader (strong or weak). Research to test Fiedler's and other contingent theories of leadership throughout the 1970s found some support for their arguments, but on the whole, leadership researchers at the end of the decade were generally frustrated and discouraged.

The Doom and Gloom of Leadership Research

In his review of what he calls the "doom and gloom" period of academic leadership research in the late 1970s and early 1980s, James Hunt recalls that the field had become "rigorous, boring, [and] static, …[with researchers] examining more and more inconsequential questions and providing little value." [4] He cites a critical evaluation of the state of the discipline from the period that decried the "mind boggling" number of prescriptive leadership models based upon "fragmentary, unrealistic, trivial, or [just plain] dull" research

that yielded only contradictory findings filled with "Type III errors (solving the wrong problem precisely.)"[5] Other researchers questioned whether leadership mattered at all since, they noted, in many if not most cases the leader/manager was so constrained by budgetary and other factors outside his control that realistically he could have little impact on organizational outcomes regardless of how he behaved.[6] In the end, some of these researchers speculated, leadership may be nothing more than a romantic fantasy stemming from the all-too-human desire of followers to attribute causes to outcomes that have no cause at all or, perhaps more accurately, have multiple causes many of which are unknowable. In effect, the greatness of the great leaders may be grounded not in their behavior, but in lucky circumstance. They happened to be the leader when great things occurred. Having no other explanation for their good fortune and not wishing to attribute it to luck, followers gazed admiringly upward and thanked their leader.

PRACTICAL LESSON

The lesson to be learned from the first 50+ years of leadership research is a simple one. You cannot understand leadership or learn how to become an effective leader by concentrating on traits and/or behaviors of "great" leaders. Leadership is about something more than just who leaders are or what they do.

The Discovery of the Effective Leader

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, social scientists had gone from a fascination with Great Man traits to the search for leadership behaviors to the analysis of leadership contingencies to the unpleasant reality that maybe they had no idea what they were talking about. Many were about ready to give up leadership research completely and pursue some less aggravating line of work. They needed something to jump-start their discipline. They got it from a political scientist named James MacGregor Burns.

It is probably an exaggeration to date the discovery of what it takes to be an effective leader to the publication of a single book but it's not much of an exaggeration. Just at the point when many were ready to give up on leadership, people began to hear about a book by James MacGregor Burns with the deceptively simple title of *Leadership*. A professor of government at Williams College, former president of the American Political Science Association, former congressional candidate and delegate to Democratic National Conventions, Burns had written a highly respected two-volume biography of Franklin Roosevelt in addition to books on Woodrow Wilson and John and Ted Kennedy. This time he turned his attention to the more general topic of leadership.

Burns drew on multi-disciplinary sources and vividly illustrated his ideas with stories from the lives of leaders such as Moses, Joan of Arc, Gandhi, Franklin Roosevelt, Nikolai Lenin, and Adolf Hitler. He announced an "intellectual breakthrough." Where others looked at the state of leadership research and despaired, Burns looked at the "richness of research and analysis and thoughtful experience," particularly in humanistic psychology and saw opportunity. The problem with leadership research, said Burns, was that it was bifurcated between research on leadership and research on followership. The two must and should be brought together. Leadership was not as much about traits, behaviors or contingencies as it was about *the nature of the relationship leaders established with followers*. The leader-follower relationship, said Burns, could take two forms—Transactional or Transforming.

> [T]ransactional leadership…occurs when one person takes the initiative in making contact with others for the purpose of an exchange of valued things. The exchange could be economic or political or psychological in nature: a swap of goods or of one good for money; a trading of votes between candidate and citizen or between legislators; hospitality to another person in exchange for willingness to listen to one's troubles. Each party to the bargain is conscious of the power resources and attitudes of the other. Each person recognizes the other as a person. Their purposes are related, at least to the extent that the purposes stand within the bargaining process and can be advanced by maintaining that process. But beyond this the relationship does not go. The bargainers have no enduring purpose that holds them together; hence they may go their separate ways. A leadership act took place, but it was not one that binds leader and follower together in a mutual and continuing pursuit of a higher purpose.

> Contrast this with transforming leadership. Such leadership occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality… Their purposes, which might have started out as separate but related, as in the case of transactional leadership, become fused. Power bases are linked not as counterweights but as mutual support for common purpose. Various names are used for such leadership, some of them derisory: elevating, mobilizing, inspiring, exalting, uplifting, preaching, exhorting, evangelizing. The relationship can be moralistic, of course. But transforming leadership ultimately becomes moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, and thus it has a transforming effect on both. Perhaps the best modem example is Gandhi, who aroused and elevated the hopes and demands of millions of Indians and whose life and personality were enhanced in the process.[7]

As its name implies, Burn's transactional leadership involves an exchange of valued things between the leader and his followers. The exchange can involve economic, political and/or psychological "goods" but the relationship is just an exchange; nothing more. The worker (follower) performs tasks assigned by her boss (leader) in exchange for a salary and/or promotion. The political candidate (leader) promises to fight for legislation desired by the voters (followers) in exchange for their vote and the opportunity to hold a position of power. The leader/follower bargainers in the transactional relationship have no enduring purpose other than to secure mutual benefit from the exchange. Both leaders and followers get something they want and need from the relationship. In short, transactional leadership is based on a rather ordinary and mundane instrumental exchange of value.

> [Transactional leadership] …has been called the "jackass theory" of leadership. According to this theory, the leader rewards followers with carrots or punishes them with sticks but, in the end, many of them may feel like jackasses.[8]

Transforming leadership is quite different. Here the exchange involves something that rises very much above the common place. Transformational leaders and followers engage in an interaction that leads to a heightened since of purpose, mission and understanding. Both leader and the led are aroused and ultimately transformed; thus the name *transforming leadership*.

PRACTICAL LESSON

One of the most important lessons to be learned from Burns is that regardless of traits, behaviors or situations, leadership at the most fundamental level is about an exchange in which both leaders and followers get something they want and need.[9] Transactional leadership is based on a rather ordinary and mundane instrumental exchange of value. Transforming leadership is quite different. Here the exchange involves something that rises very much above the common place. Transformational leaders and followers engage in an interaction that leads to a heightened since of purpose, mission and understanding. Both leader and the led are aroused and ultimately transformed; thus the name *transforming leadership*.

Burns' Impact

Burns' distinction between transactional and transforming leaders almost single-handedly pulled the leadership scholars out of their doldrums. Here was something to get excited about. If Burns was right there was a kind of leader who really did matter. There was a kind of leader who aroused and inspired followers to transcend their personal interest for the greater good. Here was a leader worth studying. Of course Burns was a little short on specifics. Everyone could identify one or more historical figures such as Ghandi, Roosevelt, or Lincoln who were obviously transforming leaders, but how widespread was transformational leadership? Was it reserved to a select and gifted few or was it a style of leading toward which many, if not most, people who found themselves in leadership roles could aspire? What exactly were the characteristics of transforming and transactional leaders? In particular, what did transforming leaders do that transactional leaders failed to do? What exactly was their impact on followers and why did they have such an impact? Most importantly, was it possible to develop a measurement instrument to identify transforming leaders so their behaviors and impact on followers could be systematically studied? A number of researchers in the 1980s set out to answer such questions. Chief among them was Bernard M. Bass a professor of industrial psychology at SUNY-Binghamton (State University of New York-Binghamton). I will review Bass' findings in my next article entitled "The Effective Leader" and begin to tease apart the specifics of what transformational leaders do and how they work their magic on their followers.

PRACTICAL LESSON

Your success as a leader will depend almost exclusively on your ability to establish and maintain a *transforming* relationship with your followers. Learning how to become a *transforming* leader, or to at least project the image of one, is your first step on the road to becoming a successful leader.

NOTES

[1] Chemers, Martin M. *An Integrative Theory of Leadership*, (Mahwah,NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997), 20

[2] Stogdill, R. M. (1948) cited in Chemers, *An Integrative Theory of Leadership,* 20.

[3] See Chemers, *An Integrative Theory of Leadership,* 23.

[4] Hunt, James G., "Transformational/Charismatic Leadership's Tranformation of the Field: An Historical Essay," *Leadership Quarterly*, 1999/10/2, 130

[5] Cited in Hunt, 133

[6] For example, Jeffrey Pfeffer makes this argument in Pfeffer, J., "The ambiguity of leadership," *Academy of Management Review*, 1977/2, 104-112

[7] Burns, James McGregor, *Leadership*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 19-20

[8] Bass, B.M. and B.J. Avolio, "Training and development of transformational leadership: Looking to 1992 and Beyond," *European Journal of Industrial Training,* 1990/14, 21

[9] See Conger, J. A. and R. N. Kanungo. *Charismatic Leadership: The Elusive Factor in Organization Effectiveness* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988), 9-10. I should note that Burns was certainly not the first to suggest that the leader/follower relationship was an exchange. See for example: Thibaut, J. W. and H.H. Kelly. *The Social Psychology of Groups*.(New York: Wiley, 1959); Homans, G.C., *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1961); Hollander, E.P.,. *Leaders, Groups, and Influence.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Evans, M.G., "The effects of supervisory behavior on the path-goal relationship." *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 1970/5, 277-298; Graen, G. and J. F. Cashman. "A role making model of leadership in formal organizations" in Hunt, J.G. and L. L. Larsons (eds). *Leadership Frontiers*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975), 143-165; and, House, R. J., "A path-goal theory of leader effectiveness," in Hunt, J. G. and L.L. Larson (eds). *Leadership: The Cutting Edge,* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), 189—207 to name just a few.