



Leadership Essay

Published: 23rd March, 2015 **Last Edited:** 16th January, 2017

Keywords: [leadership qualities \(/search.php?q=intitle%3Aleadership+qualities&action=titleSearch\)](#), [good leader \(/search.php?q=intitle%3Agood+leader&action=titleSearch\)](#), [effective leadership \(/search.php?q=intitle%3Aeffective+leadership&action=titleSearch\)](#)

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The Qualities Of A Good Leader

Introduction

Leaders have an important role within an organisation related to its success, productivity and the performance of the employees. The 'fundamental task of a leader is to build and maintain a high performing team' (Furnham, 2005, p.566). However, Yukl (2013, p.18) argues that there are numerous and diverse definitions concerning the concept of a leader as well as the term leadership, although a general consensus appears to suggest it involves a process of influencing and guiding relationships within an organisation. Guirdham (2002, p.15) emphasises the importance of leaders having good interpersonal and communication skills, which as Yukl suggest involves the ability to persuade others. Yukl (2013, p.18) further states there are additional factors that contribute to good leadership such as the situational context and the use of power. Another issue regarding the characteristics of leaders is that many theories and models have been based on Western perspectives (House and Aditya, 1997, p.409) and typically based on research with white males (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, CIPD, 2008, p.7). There is some cultural crossover in servant leadership, which according to Northouse (2013, p.219), was originally proposed by Greenleaf in the 1970s, and also has origins in ancient Eastern and Western philosophies; for example, it is deeply embedded in Arab-Islamic culture (Sarayrah, 2004, p.59). A further concern is raised by Mullins (2008, p.265) who states that determining who is a 'good leader' is a subjective judgement and cannot be based, for example, on financial performance alone. The aim of the following essay is to investigate whether certain characteristics are related to good leadership and which can be identified in theories and models of leadership such as trait theory, transformational and charismatic leadership as well as authentic and servant leadership. Finally, there will be a brief discussion regarding interpersonal characteristics such as emotional intelligence and communication skills.

Theories and Models of Leadership

Trait Theories

Trait theories of leadership proposed that successful leaders possessed distinctive traits or characteristics that differentiated them from unsuccessful leaders and subordinates. As Northouse (2013, p.7) mentions there are common phrases in use in society such as '*he was born to be a leader*' or '*she is a natural leader*' which suggest that people tend to think good leaders are born and not trained. The concept of leaders having certain characteristics dominated research prior to the Second World War. It was thought that individuals could be selected for leadership positions if they showed the appropriate characteristics or alternatively that traits could be taught to leaders (Furnham, 2005, p.571). Popular books, such as Stephen Covey's book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, propose that certain traits or characteristics can be learned. Covey (2004, p.46) states that 'our character, basically, is a composite of our habits.' Covey continues saying that habits are consistent, can be learned or unlearned and express an individual's character and how effective or ineffective they are (Covey, 2004, p.46). Covey suggests that effective people are proactive, have a clarity regarding their life-goals, manage themselves, value and respect other people, are empathic and encourage positive teamwork (Covey, 2004, p.65). The seventh habit involves taking time to 'sharpen the saw' which Covey translates as meaning time to refresh physical, spiritual, psychological and socio-emotional dimensions of a person's character (Covey, 2004, pp.287-288).

A number of characteristics and traits related to good leaders have been identified; for example, Smith and Foti (1998, p.147) undertook a study investigating the characteristics of emergent leaders and found that the traits of dominance, intelligence and self-efficacy were significantly higher in emergent leaders than other individuals who were not classified as emergent leaders. According to Furnham (2005, p.572), good leaders usually possess characteristics such as persistence, innovation and a willingness to take responsibility for their actions. Yukl (2013, p.146) similarly identifies certain characteristics related to good leaders which include a high tolerance of stress, emotional maturity, personal integrity, motivation and self-confidence. However, Furnham (2005, p.574) suggests that although there are numerous traits, there appears to be little agreement regarding which characteristics contribute to a leader being effective.

According to Zaccaro, (2007, p.6) trait theories are not able to explain how leaders' characteristics adapt to different situations and contexts and thus a major criticism of trait theories is that they do not consider the wider context of culture, society or the interactions with the characteristics of subordinates (Zaccaro, 2007, p.7). Examining the characteristics of good leaders implies that leaders innately possess certain personality traits although it could be suggested that some good leaders can learn through experience (Bryman, Collinson, Grint, Jackson and Uhl-Bien, 2011, p.78). The notion that good leaders can learn skills through a dynamic learning experience is supported by other researchers; for example, Rodd (2006, p.13) proposes that practitioners within the Early Years profession can become leaders through 'demonstrating increasing competence' and by developing the personal skills necessary to become a leader. Daly and Byers (2004, p.7) suggest that good leaders will also ensure that employees have the opportunity for training and professional development which in turn may help them to become good leaders. Kolb (1984, p.25) similarly supports the idea of learning leadership skills through experience and suggests that learning involves a constant change of ideas, perspectives and opinions which are not fixed and thoughts are 'formed and reformed through experience' and 'continually modified by experience'. The importance of having a flexible approach is emphasised by Daly and Byers (2004, p.187) ensuring that the leader is adaptable and can implement new ideas or procedures when necessary. Even early theorists such as Taylor (1911, p.7) argued that good leaders are not born and required systematic training instead of being reliant on 'some unusual or extraordinary man'.

It is further argued by Zaccaro (2007, p.10) that because being a good leader is complex there is probably an interaction of the leader's characteristics as well as an interaction with the variables present in different situations and contexts. Theories such as Fiedler's contingency theory (Fiedler 1967, cited in Northouse, 2013, pp.123-125) were developed primarily with leaders in the military and focused on how compatible the characteristics and style of the leader were with a specific situation. Thus, 'effective leadership is contingent on matching a leader's style to the

right setting (Northouse, 2013, p.123). A problem with both trait theories and contingency theories is that they appear to focus on the characteristics of the leader and do not consider the characteristics of, the interactions with, or the role of, subordinates. Contingency theory does not explain why some leaders are better in certain situations than other leaders and also how organisations deal with a mismatch between leaders and certain situations (Northouse, 2013, p.129).

Transactional and Transformational Leaders

Furnham (2005, p.588) suggests that transactional leadership can be defined as a contract between the leader and a worker where the leader achieves what they want by offering some sort of reward which is desired by the employee. There is typically a limited relationship between the leader as in certain situations (for example in the military) transactional leadership is necessary as certain actions need to be undertaken without subordinates questioning or debating issues (Bass and Bass, 2008, p.41; Bryman *et al.* 2011, p.55). Transactional leadership does not appear to be concerned with the characteristics of leaders and is more concerned with creating structures and systems which allow the sharing of information (Bryman *et al.* 2011, p.61). Transactional leadership depends on contingency reinforcement which means the subordinate understands that a reward will be received when performance goals are achieved (Bass and Riggio, 2006, p.8).

Transformational leadership developed from the foundations of transactional leadership with four further characteristics namely; charisma and idealised influence which indicates that the leader is admired, respected, and trusted; inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and consideration towards individual workers (Bass, Avolio, Jung and Berson, 2003, p.208; McKenna, 2005, p.411). By showing an interest in the personal development of followers there can be a subsequent increase in performance and productivity as well as creativity and innovation subordinates can often be creative which can then have an impact on the competitive advantage of the company (Bass, *et al.* 2003, p.208). Bass and Bass (2006, p.41) also suggest that transformational leaders usually believe and support the goals of the organisation and are able to articulate the goals to subordinates and engage their support and commitment. Other characteristics identified in transformational leaders is that they show consistent behaviour and tend to have a strong focus on integrity, ethical principles and values together with being flexible and able to adapt to change (Judge and Piccolo, 2004, p.755). McKenna (2005, p.408) states that transformational leaders have characteristics such as vision and are able to motivate and inspire subordinates to share their vision. As Sir John Harvey-Jones, MBE, who was the chairman of Imperial Chemical Industries from 1982 to 1987 and has recently helped failing business shown in a BBC television programme called *Troubleshooter* states:-

'The vision is absolutely key to getting your troops together. It has to be qualitative, daring and grab the imagination. The test of it should be how quickly people will latch on to where you are going.....' (cited in Mullins, 2008, p.261).

The characteristics of transformational leaders are important in an organisation because they are viewed as a more effective leadership style than transactional leadership for example. Bass and Riggio (2008, p.10) suggest that many subordinates are very loyal to transformational leaders and are committed to the organisation so productivity increases and improves which Bass and Riggio (2008, p.10) suggest is one way of demonstrating the efficiency of the leader. The characteristics of transactional and transformational leaders are not mutually exclusive and there may be occasions when a leader has to show transactional characteristics as well as transformational characteristics. An example is cited by Bass and Bass (2008, p.51) which states that famous leaders such as John F. Kennedy and Abraham Lincoln displayed characteristics of both transactional and transformational leaders. Transactional leadership, for example, has been found to be more effective in a well-ordered, stable environment whereas transformational leadership is suitable in organisations that are changing rapidly such as in times of financial upheaval (McKenna, 2006, p.418).

Characteristics of Charismatic Leaders

As discussed previously, one characteristic of transformational leaders is charisma (Bass, *et al.* 2003, p.216) although there are some leaders who are characterised as being so charismatic that they are referred to as charismatic leaders. Chio (2006, p.24) defines charismatic leaders as having three additional, core characteristics which are an ability to predict future trends and be visionary; being a creative thinker, and showing empathy and empowering colleagues. According to House, 1977, (cited in McKenna, 2006, p.411) charismatic leaders can motivate subordinates to perform effectively without having to invoke their position of power; they have a vision and the ability to convince subordinates to support that vision. Further characteristics include determination, energy, self-confidence and ability; in addition they are not afraid to be unconventional (McKenna, 2006, p.411).

Although charismatic leaders are unusual and exceptional in the business world, Hellriegel and Slocum (2007, p.240) use as an example Richard Branson who demonstrates the characteristic of both a transformational and a charismatic leader. Branson is characterised as someone who is prepared to follow his instincts and take risks, venturing into new territories (Boje and Smith, 2010, p.308). Branson has a flair for being slightly eccentric and is not afraid of being unconventional which Choi, as discussed previously, describes as a characteristic of charismatic leadership. Branson makes a clear statement about his company, Virgin, as being 'different, colourful, iconoclastic and fun-loving' (Crainer and Dearlove, 2008, p.43). Branson's character appears to reflect the character of his company; for example, he appeared dressed as a Virgin bride and also abseiled down a skyscraper to promote his company (Business Pundit, 2011, n/p).

The CIPD (2008, p.8) report that there is some dislike for the 'celebrity-like focus' on so-called charismatic leaders. In the US a study investigated fifty-nine CEOs of Fortune 500 companies and investigated the link between charisma and performance over a ten year period and found there was no relationship (Tosi *et al.* 2004, cited in CIPD, 2008 p.8). A criticism made by Alvesson and Spicer (2010, p.9) claims that by endowing leaders with characteristics such as charisma, gives them a heroic and unselfish quality which enables them to persuade followers to pursue goals almost unquestioningly. Furthermore, Alvesson and Spicer (2010, p.64) maintain that some transformational leaders can be perceived as 'saint-like'. Chio (2006, p.37) claims that frequently the positive aspects of charismatic leadership are emphasised and dysfunctional characteristics, such as the abuse of power, are often minimised. Chio (2006, p.36) reports that there can be very strong emotional bonds between a charismatic leader and their subordinates and in certain situations individuals may 'sacrifice themselves for the sake of the group to maintain harmonious relationships with others' (Triandis, 1995, cited in Chio, 2006, p.36). Thus charismatic leaders can use their influence malignantly; for example, there have been reports of charismatic leaders of religious sects who are able to persuade followers to commit mass suicide.

The CIPD (2008, p.8) also report on the 'dark-side' of charisma and suggest that although some leaders may superficially appear charismatic they hide undesirable characteristics such as dishonesty and greed. By the time such characteristics are discovered the organisation and employees may have suffered irreparable harm. Research undertaken by Collins (2001, cited in CIPD, 2008, p.8) investigated common characteristics in US companies quoted on the Stock Exchange whose performance was 'outstanding'. The findings indicated that common characteristics included an unshakable belief in their company and also a 'deep personal humility'. These CEOs were not at all charismatic and appeared to be quite unassuming. Collins also noted that failing companies had a CEO 'with a gargantuan ego' causing the company to fail (Collins 2001, cited in CIPD, 2008, p.8).

Interpersonal Characteristics of Leaders.

Characteristics of Authentic Leaders

As discussed in the previous sections there have been concerns regarding unscrupulous leaders; for example, although they may appear to be charismatic they may in fact have 'exploitative' motives (Bass and Riggio, 2008, p.5). Consequently there is a desire for leaders who are genuine and authentic (Bass and Riggio, 2008, p.xii). There appears to be some parallels between authentic leaders and servant leaders although currently there is limited research in this area according to Northouse (2013, p.235). Servant leadership focuses on the empathic characteristics of a leader towards subordinates and nurturing each employee's talents and potential which is beneficial for the organisation (Northouse, 2013, p.233). Servant leadership proposes that leaders want to serve others and emphasises the altruistic characteristics of leaders who are focused on the needs of their subordinates (Greenleaf, 1977, cited in Northouse, 2013, p.219). The characteristic of the servant leader are numerous and the underlying principles involve the way in which the leader treats subordinates in terms of honesty and treating them fairly. A successful relationship between the servant leader and followers is a two-way process and followers must be accepting of the principles of empowerment and the opportunity to grow.

A characteristic of leaders which seems to be related to good leadership is emotional intelligence. Goleman (1998, p.317) defines emotional intelligence as 'the capacity for recognising our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves and for managing emotions in ourselves and in our relationships'. Emotional intelligence involves five key factors; self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills (Goleman, 1998, p.9). It is argued that emotional intelligence is of benefit to leaders as it contributes to an awareness of their own emotions and how to regulate them as well as recognising emotions in others and having the social skills necessary to deal with other people's emotions (Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, 2001, n/p).

Guirdham (2002, p.545) suggests that there are certain qualities that followers look for in leaders and that a leader does not automatically gain the respect from subordinates. However, such qualities vary with different situations and the type of subordinates who are expected to follow. Gaining acceptance as a leader is also more difficult where there is prejudice concerning gender, race and ethnic group, and disability. Guirdham (2002, p.545) states that in general to be accepted by subordinates the characteristics of the leader need to include knowledge, competence, status, identification with the group, motivation, being proactive in promoting the group's goals and good communication skills. As Sir John Harvey says:-

'You only get a company going where you want it to by leadership by example and by honest and endless communication' (cited in Mullins 2008, p.261).

Communication appears to be a very important characteristic of a good leader together with interpersonal relationships which is also related to emotional intelligence as discussed previously. It has been found that directive, coherent and positive communication is an effective style for leaders (Guirdham, 2002, p.550). However, other characteristics are also necessary such as trust, the way in which leaders try to persuade or influence followers and the way in which subordinates are encouraged to participate in decision making.

Conclusion

It can be seen from the evidence presented that identifying the characteristics of a good manager is a complex task as there are many different traits or personality characteristics involved. Additionally characteristics cannot be identified in isolation and the situation or context must also be considered. Early research, for example trait theories, focused on the leader and did not consider the role or characteristics of the subordinates. This would appear to be relevant in contemporary society as employees are more empowered than they were in the past and are therefore less likely to blindly follow a leader. Transformational and charismatic theories of leadership identify many positive qualities in leaders; however, there is the issue identified by many researchers of deceitful leaders who can cause a company to collapse as in the case of Enron and other similar examples. The characteristics of a leader need to be genuine and authentic and the theoretical perspective of servant leadership emphasises the caring aspect of leaders towards their followers. Typically servant leaders are altruistic and are concerned about the well-being of others. There are a number of characteristics which appear to be more important than others although it is difficult to isolate only a few. However, one characteristic that does seem to be high on the list for good leaders is good communication and interpersonal skills (Guirdham, 2002, p.550).

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