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What Do We Really Know About Leadership?

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Abstract
There are important differences within the academic world and between academia and the outside world regarding basic concepts of leadership. This paper explores those differences trying to improve our knowledge of the subject. It is found that maybe the lack of consensus cannot be interpreted as a failure to discover the truth but as the realization that leadership is a complex notion, which even supports opposing viewpoints.

Keywords: Leadership Development, Ethical Leadership, Authentic Leadership, Spiritual Leadership, Charismatic Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Situational Leadership

Introduction

Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber (2009), and Nohria and Khurana (2010) presented very good recent reviews of the research on leadership. Those reviews honestly pointed out the existence of opposing viewpoints about almost anything related to leadership. Latham (2014) also found an inability for researchers to converge on a universal answer to leadership. The conflicts or disagreement are present not only within the academic community but mainly between the academia and the outside world. Those differences will be analyzed in this paper, hoping to clarify our knowledge on this subject.

There are different opinions and beliefs on topics that go from the very notion of leadership to its real importance, including whether leaders are born or made, have to be virtuous, and should adjust their styles to the situation.

What is leadership?

The differences begin with the notion of leadership. In everyday language we speak of leaders to refer to the people who occupy the highest positions in different organizations: political, military, business, religious, etc. There is also talk of leadership as a characteristic or quality that some people possess and distinguishes them from those who do not have it. In academia, however, there is almost a consensus that leadership is more a circumstantial relationship between a leader and his or her followers. For example, Rost (1993) defined

leadership as "an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes and outcomes that reflect their shared purposes".

Academic researchers discard popular notions of leadership stating that not all persons occupying the highest positions are leaders, i.e. many of them have no true followers, and no one is a leader for all groups and at all times, which means that nobody owns permanent leadership qualities but some people are accepted as leaders by some groups in certain circumstances. Although these observations are indisputable, supporters of popular notions of leadership may argue that people who occupy the highest positions exert some degree of influence over others because of their authority and therefore should be considered as leaders. They may also argue that it is true that leadership is circumstantial, but groups choose as leaders only those people who they believe to have leadership skills, and people that do not possess leadership qualities will not be considered as leaders by any group in any circumstance.

Are leaders born or made?

The differences in the concept of leadership are reflected in the frequent concerns about whether leaders are born or made. Again, many people think that leaders are born, but the academia insists that leaders are made.

According to Avolio (1999): "most psychologists believe that leadership qualities are innate or genetic and thus impossible to learn". And although there is not a consensus about this point between all political, military, sport or business leaders, many of them believe that leaders are born, although some knowledge and management skills must be acquired and developed in practice and courage should be tested in real experiences. For example, Lee Kuan Yew, former Prime Minister and Singapore's founding father, firmly expressed: "I think you are a born leader or you are not a leader. You can teach a person to be a manager, but not a leader. They must have the extra drive, intellectual verve, an extra tenacity and the will to overcome" (Teng Kok, 2013).

In the academic world, however, it is thought that all the leadership skills can be learned, perhaps with the exception of intelligence. For example, Bennis and Thomas (2002) interviewed 43 leaders and found that they became leaders after a transformative experience in their life, and maintained their condition as leaders thanks to their adaptive capacity, ability to relate to others, conviction to do the right thing, and sense of integrity. Arvey et al. (2007), studying identical and fraternal twins, and using a behavioral genetics approach, found that most of the variation in their leadership features was explained by differences in environmental factors, such as different role models and early opportunities for leadership development, and less by heritability.

Do leaders must be virtuous?

Another important difference between academia and popular opinion, in relation to leadership, has to do with the moral status of the leader.

In the academic world it is believed that leaders must be virtuous, otherwise they cannot inspire trust and have true followers. Based on this belief researchers have developed models of ethical, authentic, and spiritual leadership, very popular in this field of study. Avolio et al (2009) have examined the work that has been done on this area, demonstrating how active the research

on moral leadership is. If we take a look at the most recent papers on leadership keywords like ethical leadership, servant leadership, moral leadership, authentic leadership, etc., continue to dominate the scene.

There is evidence, however, whether we like it or not, that the leader need not be virtuous to have followers and excite and motivate them to act in a certain direction. Examples such as Adolf Hitler and Mao Zedong may be presented to support this position. Many of these bad leaders are very charismatic and manipulate their followers. And even in the academic world the charismatic leadership has been a subject of interest. Klein and House (1995) considered charisma as "a fire that ignites followers' energy and commitment, producing results above and beyond the call of duty". Bass (1990), a distinguished scholar and the main promoter of the concept of transformational leadership, also very fashionable, considered that charisma rather than virtue is the essential quality of a leader, although he later tried to substitute for the term "charisma" the term "idealized influence", to account for leader's morality.

Is leadership style important?

There are differences within the academia about leadership styles. Some researchers believe that leadership style is very important and should be adapted to the situation, while others think that style change is not possible or desirable, and some even believe that what is important is the very essence of leadership and not the style. But there are also differences in this matter between academia and the outside world. For instance, among those researchers who believe in leadership styles there has been much debate on when a leadership style focused on the task is better than a leadership style focused on the employee, leading to the development of several models of situational leadership, from Fiedler (1954) to Vroom and Jago (1988). Those models are still taught at the universities, but most people in business will tell you that a leader will not succeed if he or she does not devote much attention to both the task and the employees.

Does leadership really matter?

Perhaps one of the most intriguing differences between academia and the outside world has to do with their view of the actual importance of leadership. Countries, armies, companies, sport teams, churches, and organizations of all kinds, including universities, are desperately looking for leaders that can guide them to a better position. Somehow they know that if they do not have good leaders it is going to be very difficult to accomplish their objectives and goals. But Nohria and Kuhrana (2010) reveal that many scholars do not think that there is a strong impact of leadership on economic outcomes and organizational performance. Some studies, for instance, found that industry structure and company history may explain a greater fraction of the variance in company performance over time, and the leadership influence although substantial may vary across industries. Other scholars believe that leadership is more important to infuse purpose and meaning in the lives of individuals than to enhance economic performance. Linking this indirect influence to organizational outcomes is something that researchers have not been able to do.

Conclusion

The conclusion to be drawn from all this is that we have learned a lot about leadership, to the point that we have different approaches and perspectives on this phenomenon. The different

opinions that exist about leadership may be due to wrong perceptions, lack of effective research methods, a combination of both causes, or simply to the fact that all those perspectives are right. Maybe the lack of consensus cannot be interpreted as a failure to discover the truth but as the realization that leadership is a complex notion, which even supports opposing viewpoints. Perhaps:

- Leadership is at the same time a high position in an organization or society, a personal characteristic, and a relationship between leaders and followers
- Leaders are partially born and partially made
- Some leaders are virtuous and others are not
- Some leaders adjust their style to the situation and others do not modify it
- Leadership matter, but it is not everything

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