Journal of Business Studies Quarterly   jbsq.org

What is Leadership?

Alberto Silva, Keiser University

Abstract
Although difficult, there is the need of finding a satisfactory definition of leadership. A new definition of leadership is proposed, trying to meet such need. This definition fits properly to the modern concept of leadership, which gives the leader, the followers, and the context a very important role in the leadership process.

Keywords: *leadership, followership, leadership effectiveness, context.*

Introduction

Leadership is one of those concepts that are very hard to define. More than four decades ago, Stogdill (1974) affirmed that "there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept" (p. 7). Bennis estimated, at the end of the last century, at least 650 definitions of leadership in literature (Bennis and Townsend, 1995). The number seems to have been increasing and Kellerman, in an interview with Volkmann (2012), commented: "I heard that there are approximately 1,400 different definitions of the words leader and or leadership". These numbers, real or exaggerated, simply mean that there is not a consensus about what leadership is and therefore the search for a better definition goes on.

McCleskey (2014), citing Bass (2008) and other authors, argues that the search for a single definition of leadership may be in vain since the correct definition of leadership depends on the interest of the researcher and the type of problem or situation being studied.

Although difficult, it is important to have a good definition of leadership. It is one of the terms most widely used in many areas of human activity, including armed forces, business, politics, religion, sports, etc. Dozens of books and thousands of articles about leadership are published each year. Millions of dollars are invested by organizations trying to develop their future leaders. But if nobody knows what exactly leadership is all those efforts could be meaningless.

In this article, an effort is made to develop a definition that may satisfy different viewpoints and provide a better base for the study of leadership. The task is not easy but it is worthy. Even if the proposed definition ends up being one more of the many definitions that have been proposed, the process of elaborating the definition may contribute to a better understanding of the concept of leadership.

Literature review

For many centuries, leadership was seen just as a personal quality. Confucius, the great Chinese thinker that lived about 2,500 years ago, did not propose any definition of leadership but insisted in the need for leaders to be virtuous and look after the people around them. For him, a leader's primary purpose is to serve the people (Confucius, circa 475 BC/1998). For Plato, which many recognize as the founding father of philosophy, the leader should be wise (Takala, 1998). Machiavelli stated that the leader should have good virtues and should be intelligent to have the support of the people (Machiavelli, 1513/1992).

In the 19th century, Carlyle summarized the recurring ideas about leadership in his theory of the "great man" (Carlyle, 1841/2011). For him, leaders were exceptional persons or heroes that were able to use their charisma, intelligence, wisdom, and political skill to have power and influence over other people. Although Carlyle's ideas remained predominant, Spencer pointed out that such great men were the products of their societies or the context, anticipating the modern debate about leadership (Spencer, 1873/2013).

Despite the fact that leadership continued to be defined as a personal quality, after World War II a new trend started. Stogdill (1950) defined leadership as "the process (act) of influencing the activities of an organized group in its efforts toward goal setting and goal achievement". This was perhaps the first effort to point out that leadership was not a mere individual trait but a process of influence upon others. Stogdill also defined the purpose of that process: "goal setting and goal achievement".

Tannenbaum, Weschler, and Massarik (1961) continued in the same line of Stogdill and defined leadership as the "interpersonal influence, exercised in a situation, and directed, through the communication process, toward the attainment of a specified goal or goals". Zaleznik (1977) also emphasized the aspect of influence in leadership: "Leadership requires using power to influence the thoughts and actions of other people".

Kotter (1988) added a new viewpoint when he defined leadership as "the process of moving a group (or groups) in some direction through mostly non-coercive means". According to this definition, the use of coercive means is not akin to leadership, since there should be a voluntary followership. Not all scholars agree with this distinction; for example, Kellerman insisted that the use of force is also leadership (Volckmann,2012).

In the 1990s leadership thinkers started to give importance to followers in the leadership process. Bass (1990) established a breakthrough in this field when noted that leadership was not only a process of influence of the leader upon others but an interaction process that could be influenced by anyone involved. For Bass "leadership is an interaction between two or more members of a group that often involves a structuring or restructuring of the situation and the perceptions and expectations of members…Leadership occurs when one group member modifies the motivation or competencies of others in the group. Any member of the group can exhibit some amount of leadership…".

Owusu- Bempah (2014) mentioned several other authors that between 1992 and 2001 argued in favor of a "follower-centric" approach, emphasizing followers' contribution and roles in the leadership process.

Handy (1992) insisted on the importance of the leader setting a vision, and sharing this vision with others: "A leader shapes and shares a vision which gives point to the work of others". Rost (1993) also emphasized that leadership was a relationship process oriented to achieve some common goals: "Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes".

Bennis affirmed that leadership is "the capacity to create a compelling vision and to translate vision into organizational realities" (Bennis and Townsend, 1995). In short, Bennis' idea of leadership was the capacity to translate vision into reality.

Drucker (1996) summarized the ideas of the end of the 20th century when he proclaimed: "the only definition of a leader is someone that have followers".

Although most contemporary thinkers have avoided giving a definition of leadership, Kellerman has expressed that she visualizes leadership as an equilateral triangle in which the three sides are the leader, the followers, and the context (Volckmann, 2012). That is, she recognizes the importance of the leader, as has been done for centuries, but states that the followers are as important as the leader, as was suggested by Bass (1990), and most interestingly she adds the context as an equally important component of the leadership process. For Kellerman, leadership is not the same now than five or ten or twenty years ago, and it is not the same in China, United States, Brazil or England.

Discussion

The literature review confirms that the leadership concept has been evolving in time, and after a long period of considering it as a personal quality, it is now understood, at least by some scholars, that leadership is much more than an individual trait since it is a complex phenomenon in which the followers and the context have a very important role.

Perhaps one interesting example to illustrate the modern concept of leadership is the case of the British resistance during World War II. When the British people felt threatened by Germany at the beginning of the war, they looked for Churchill as their leader. Churchill was known as a warrior, particularly after his experience as First Lord of the Admiralty in the First World War, and was appointed again to that position. Very soon he replaced Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and guided England to a victory in the war five years later. To his surprise, Churchill lost the election for Prime Minister just three months after the war ended. British citizens considered that Churchill was not the most appropriate person to lead the reconstruction of the country. Churchill was considered the appropriated leader in a context of war, but not in a context of peace. The leader, Churchill, the followers, the British people, and the context, war and peace, all played an important role in the process and determined the course of events.

The above discussion allows a new definition of leadership: *"Leadership is the process of interactive influence that occurs when, in a given context, some people accept someone as their leader to achieve common goals"*

This definition implies that:

1)	Leadership is a process and not just a personal quality. A process, according to the Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, is "a series of actions that produce something or that lead to a particular result". Among others, Stogdill (1950) and Kotter (1988) have considered leadership as a process.

2)	The leadership process is characterized by influence, not only the influence of the leader upon followers, as described by many authors, but the interactive influence between the leader and the followers, as first suggested by Bass (1990).

3)	The leadership process occurs in a given context. If the context changes the leadership process will also be different. Spencer, in the 19th century, anticipated the importance of the context, and Avolio (2007), Javidan, et al. (2010), and Kellerman (2014) are some of the authors that have recently insisted in the influence of the context in the leadership process.

4) The leadership process requires that people, the followers, accept someone as their leader. The leader could be accepted because he or she makes use of the force to exert influence upon followers, as admitted by Kellerman in her interview with Volckmann (2012), or may be willingly accepted, as suggested by Kotter (1988), because the followers perceive that the leader is the appropriate person to lead them in a particular context. If the followers decide not to continue following their leader, the leadership process may end, as it happens in England after WWII.

5) The purpose of the leadership process is to accomplish shared goals between leader and followers, as stated by Stogdill (1950), Tannenbaum, Weschler, and Massarik (1961), and Rost (1993). If followers perceive that the leader is not acting on their behalf the leadership process may be affected

The proposed definition allows understanding what leadership is, but does not tell anything about good or bad leadership or about effective or ineffective leadership. Good or bad leadership depends on the consequences of the process, but the consequences can be judged differently by different people; for example, most people probably will agree that it was good that England and the allied forces beat Germany but some others may have preferred that Germany won WWII. Leadership effectiveness is somewhat easier to assess because effectiveness depends on whether the desired results have been obtained. In the case of British resistance during WWII results were obtained, and therefore leadership was effective. Now, why was leadership effective? Leadership was effective because people who had to choose a leader did so properly, in accordance with the situation or context, and because the person chosen as leader responded to the challenges, acting with skill, courage, and firmness. In more peaceful environments, as happened in England after WWII, it is likely that what is needed are leaders with organizational skills and ability to build consensus.

Conclusion

It has been shown that leadership is an evolving concept, but it could be satisfactorily defined as "the process of interactive influence that occurs when, in a given context, some people accept someone as their leader to achieve common goals".

This definition seems to fit properly to the modern concept of leadership, that gives the leader, the followers, and the context a very important role in the leadership process.

References

Avolio, B. J. (2007). Promoting more integrated strategies for leadership theory-building. *American Psychologist, 62*(1), 25-33.

Bass, B. M. (1990). "From transactional to transformational leadership: Learning to share the vision". *Organizational Dynamics*. Winter, 19-31.

Bass, B. M. (2008). *The Bass handbook of leadership: Theory, research, & managerial applications* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Free Press.

Bennis, W.G., and Townsend, R. (1995). *Reinventing leadership*. Collins Business Essential, New York.

Carlyle, T. (2011). *On heroes, hero-worship and the heroics in history*. Create Space Independent Publishing Platform.

Confucius (1998). *The Analects*. Penguin Classics, 1st Edition.

Drucker, P. (1996). "Your leadership is unique". *Christianity Today International/Leadership Journal*. Fall 1996, Vol. XVII, No. 4, Page 54.

Handy, C. (1992). "The language of leadership". *Frontiers of Leadership*. Eds. Syrett and Hogg. Oxford: Blackwell.

Javidan, M., Dorfman, P. W., Howell, J. P., & Hanges, P. J. (2010). Leadership and cultural context. In N. Nohria, & R. Khurana (Eds.), *Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice* (pp. 346-372). Boston, MA: Harvard Review Press.

Kellerman, B. (2014). *Hard times: Leadership in America.* Stanford, CA: Stanford Business Books.

Kotter, J. (1988). *The leadership factor*. Free Press, 1st Edition

Machiavelli, N. (1992). *The Prince*. Dover Publications.

McCleskey, J. A. (2014). *"Situational, transformational, and transactional leadership and leadership development"*. Journal of Business Studies Quarterly, 2014, Volume 5, Number 4, pages 117- 130.

Owusu- Bempah, J. (2014). "How we can best interpret effective leadership? The case for Q-method", *Journal of Business Studies Quarterly*, 2014, Volume 5, Number 3, pages 47-58.

Plato (2014). *The Republic*. Create Space Independent Publishing Platform

Rost, J. (1993). *Leadership for the 21st Century*. Praeger

Spencer, H. (2013). *Study of sociology*. Nabu Press

Stogdill, R. M. (1950). "Leadership, membership, and organization". *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 47(1), Jan 1950, 1-14.

Stogdill, R.M. (1974). *Handbook of leadership: A survey of theory and research.* New York: The Free Press.

Takala, T. (1998). "Plato on Leadership", *Journal of Business Ethics* 17:785- 798

Tannenbaum, R., Weschler, I. R., and Massarik, F. (1961). *Leadership and organization: A behavioral science approach.* New York, McGraw- Hill Company.

Volckmann, R. (2012). "Fresh perspective: Barbara Kellerman and the leadership industry". *Articles from Integral Leadership Review*. 2012-06-08.

Zaleznik, A. (1977). Managers and leaders: Are they different? *Harvard Business Review*, May/June 1977, 55(3), 67-76.