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The Symbiotic Nature of the Leader-Follower relationship and Its Impact on Organizational Effectiveness

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Introduction

The field of leadership studies is overflowing with discussions and explorations of leadership contribution and influence (Winston & Patterson, 2005; Miller, 2007). Unfortunately, as some researchers such as Frye, Kisselburgh & Butts (2007) point out, discussions and research on the full capacity and capabilities of followership are scarce. This lack of research limits our understanding about the impact of followership in organizations. The lack of research derives from a leader-centered approach that has traditionally dominated the field of leadership studies (Lord and Brown, 2003). Also, out of the academic circles society still tends to focus on leadership as positions contained by one person within the organization (Bennis, 1999; Frisina, 2005). However, a few years ago some researchers and scholars began to question if traditional top-down leadership theory is still relevant, or whether new types of leadership are possible (Hollander, 1992). On this regard, Bennis (1999) said that top-down understanding of leadership “was not only wrong, unrealistic and maladaptive but also, given the report of history, dangerous” (p. 71).

Considering this criticism on leader-centered approaches to leadership studies, new perspectives are calling for the consideration of followers and followership as a part of the analysis and study of the leadership phenomenon. As a part of this new school of thought, some authors such as Stech (2008) affirm that leadership and followership are traits in which, at any one time, leaders assume followers’ roles and followers assume leadership roles. From this perspective, the relationship between leaders and followers becomes reciprocal and interdependent (Miller, 2007; Hollander, 1992; Frisina, 2005). Additionally, this reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers enable followership to contain, within its definition, leadership concepts and contributions (Hollander, 1992). With this view, followership escapes the box of simple subordination and obedience of organizational tasks and opens up opportunities for innovative followership that generates and enhances growth within an organization. This kind of followership has the potential to generate a different relationship with their leaders. Additionally, intentional leadership generates a different dynamic of followership in which character, influence, and relationships interweave and solidify the human approach toward organizational effectiveness (Hollander, 1992). This approach claims that followership and leadership are not so much about position (Stech, 2008; Westbrook & Dixon, 2003; Buchanan, 2007) but about their ability to influence through behaviors and self-concept (Kark & Van Dijk, 2007).

Based on these emerging approaches to the leader-follower relationship, this article discusses the importance of followership, leadership potential of the follower, follower self-concept, and followership that is symbiotic with leadership. Also, the article contains a discussion on how the leader-follower relationship becomes a transforming force within the organization generating greater organizational effectiveness.
Stech (2008) discusses a paradigm shift from the leader-follower paradigm to a leadership-followership state paradigm in which leadership and followership are states that can be occupied at various times by different people within a group. This concept supports Hollander’s (1992) idea that leadership is a process rather than a person. Thus, leadership as a process within the organization is transferred among organizational individuals. For that reason, at particular times, those who are followers take leadership roles and those who are leaders assume followership roles. This organizational reality supports Westbrook and Dixon (2003) observation that affirm that followers engage in the organization as a whole person shaping the dynamics of followership to encompass a condition rather than an elected position. This legitimizes the concept that followers have leadership potential through possessing similar if not the same traits or characteristics of leaders. Even further, this acknowledges the paradigm shift from traditional structures to that of collaborative or shared leadership.

**The Importance of Followership**

This new paradigm, in effect, audits organizational effectiveness through both the contribution of leaders and followers. These contributions generate different lenses by which the organization views itself. Hall and Densten (2002) suggest that there are three lenses within organizations: the leadership lens, followership lens, and the situation lens. These lenses give perspective and feedback to the level of success within the organization. Hall and Densten suggest that if organizations view leadership only from the lens of leaders, there is a limited view of the life of the organization. For that reason, to have the clearest understanding of organizational life and effectiveness, the lens of the followers and the situation must be present. In particular, the lens of followers contributes to the viewpoint of the organization, its leadership, and its future. As followers view contribution and success differently than the leaders, integrating both the lens of leadership and followership, allow for an honest assessment of the organization influencing future decisions and strategy. Thus, followership takes an active role in the outcome of organizational effectiveness, leadership and followership begin to change and evolve into organic systems (Dixon, 2008) and followership contribution is elevated and recognized as equal with leadership (Nolan & Harty, 2001).

**Leadership Qualities in Followers**

Effective followership nurtures the view that followers possess a vital role in organizations. This view discards the idea that followership encompasses carrying out commands without independent thinking (Lundin & Lancaster, 1990). It suggests, instead, that characteristics traditionally seen among leaders attributed to followers. Nolan and Harty (2001) argue that effective followership does not assume that certain traits are only worthy of leaders, therefore characteristics attributed to leaders, can also characterize followers (Lundin & Lancaster 1990). This provides insight into the importance of followers as independent thinkers able to implement plans and give input into the bigger organizational vision and purpose as Lundin & Lancaster state.

A review of the literature on followership suggests that several characteristics normally associated with leadership are also associated to the definition of effective followership. Among these characteristics are integrity, charisma, vision, and ability to initiate change (Lundin & Lancaster 1990; Hollander 1992; Nolan & Harty, 2001). Out of the listed characteristics, integrity, influence and intentionality come to the forefront several times in both leadership and followership definitions and descriptions.
Integrity

Integrity is a key leadership characteristic found in effective followership. Lundin and Lancaster (1990) associate integrity among followers as being both loyal and willing to act according to their beliefs. Frisina (2005) states that effective followers keep their key values aligned with both their personal and professional lives and Hollander (1992) supports this idea when describing followers as possessing honesty and dependability. As many authors such as Abassi, Hollman, & Hayes (2008), Bell (2002), Miller (1995) and Hollander (1992) claim, integrity is a common theme among leadership literature. This fact links the definitions of both leadership and followership to and implies that followers share this leadership trait.

Influence

Winston and Patterson (2005) highlight in their integrated definition of leadership that influence is a key component of leadership. The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2008) defines influence as “the act or power of producing an effect without apparent exertion of force or direct exercise of command.” Hollander (1992) asserts that influence is evident in both leader and follower roles, and this fact links followership to leaders’ future performance. From this perspective, there is a two-way influence that both leaders and followers carry. With this definition, influence plays a key role in the leader-follower relationship.

Intentionality

Followership is intentional in nature. The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2008) defines intentional as something that is done “by intention or design.” Kelley (2008) defines effective followers as being both mindful and willing, which implies that followers choose to be purposeful in both their roles and in their behaviors. Kelley’s concept proposes that followers can become active participants in the leadership process of the organization. From this perspective organizational effectiveness does not rest only on the leader’s shoulder, but becomes an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect in shared purposes (Chaleff, 2008).

Symbiotic Leader-Follower Relationship

Self-concept directly influences leadership and followership effectiveness (Kark & Van Dijk, 2007). The followers’ self-concept greatly contributes to the leader/follower relationship. Adair (2008) highlights twelve perceptions followers use to reconcile their role within the organization. These perceptions include personal values, economic status, personal goals or focus, humility, lack of confidence, fear, ignorance or lack of comprehension, lack of trust, lack of feeling of inclusion, and lack of conviction. Out of the list of twelve, lack of confidence, claim of ignorance or lack of comprehension, and perceived social status are particularly interesting to the discussion of follower contribution and influence to organizational effectiveness. First, Adair affirms that followers’ lack of confidence is an obstacle to develop their leadership functions within the organization because they not feel they are good enough to lead. As a result, followers use this excuse as a means to avoid further contribution within the organization. Second, when followers claim ignorance or lack of comprehension, then they do not contribute to the organization due they feel they not have the tools necessary to feel empowered to lead within their organization. Consequently, this also is an excuse not to pursue deeper leadership within their organization. Third, if followers believe they have a lower social status within the organization, they
convince themselves that they do not qualify to contribute to the organization from a leadership role.

On the other hand, leaders’ self-concept can directly influence leaders’ relationship with followers. Miller (2007) discusses the affect leaders have on follower perceptions within the organization. Miller suggests that charismatic leaders focus on their own abilities and charisma to move followers to join this vision. These types of leaders distance themselves from their followers and view their role within the organization as heroic. Miller also suggests that this leadership style does not foster mutual stimulation or elevation, but only to elevate the leader.

In the transformational approach to leadership, leaders seek to engage the whole person elevating and converting followers into great leaders (Miller, 2007). This is characterized by influencing through collaboration, utilizing follower potential and integrating love in their approach. The leaders’ view of their role is not driven by power, but by empowerment and shared purpose. Jaecks (2007) suggests that if leaders only require their followers to listen to them and if leaders only seek to facilitate exact replicas of their leadership not only will nothing get done, but the life of the organization can become stifling.

Transformational Aspect of the Leader-Follower Relationship

Krishnan (2004) highlights research on the transformational relationship between leaders and followers. In his discussion, Krishnan suggests that transformation occurs when both leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of values and motivation. Consequently, leaders are seeking to influence and encourage followers’ interest, while followers look beyond their self-interest to that of the group interest and goals. Krishnan suggests that the quality of the exchange between leaders and followers are positively affected by this transforming relationship.

This transforming relationship leads to a greater commitment to the organization, clarity of roles, and stronger organizational effectiveness (Dionne, Yamarino, Atwater & Spangler, 2004). For this transformation to occur within organizations, leaders and followers potential must challenge the status quo (Adair, 2008). They must expand themselves, choosing to be active participants in the leadership process (Kelley, 2008). They must work towards interactive and collaborative relationships showing a willingness to participate and initiate change within the organization (Howell & Mendez, 2008). In order for this leader-follower relationship to become more symbiotic, there must be an alternative view of the leader follower relationship. Williams (2008) suggests that leaders and followers are the different sides of the same coin. As such, both must create a new culture in which both learn and enact together. For this new culture to exists, leaders and followers must transform themselves first. They must embrace a shared vision (Carston & Bligh, 2008), commit to one another and the organization (Lundin & Lancaster, 1990), and become intimate allies (Bennis, 1999). With a shared vision, leaders and followers work together to collaborate and communicate vision, followers are able to see the big picture and commit fully, and leaders involve followers as intimate allies in the visioning process (Carsten and Bligh, 2008). As both leader and follower are involved in the process, a transformational process occurs not only in the interpersonal relationship but also within the organization. This sense of commitment to the bigger picture and the mutual respect and support become the binding that produces growth and organizational effectiveness.

Conclusion

Leader follower relationships can interweave and solidify the human approach toward organizational
effectives. This happens only happens only when leaders and followers become involved in a reciprocal relationship. As a result of this interdependent relationship, leader and follower band together with integrity, commitment, shared purpose, and influence each other through their behaviors and actions. Thus, organizational leadership are less about position and more about a process in which both leaders and followers work together to bring success and vibrancy to the organization. The power of this symbiotic relationship allows followers to have leadership potential and leaders have followership potential, where a role of one is not greater than the other, and both contribute to organizational effectiveness.

References


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