1-1-2010

As A Leader Do You Choose to be a Horse, Lemming or Goose?

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Recommended Citation
Kohl, Ruby (2010) "As A Leader Do You Choose to be a Horse, Lemming or Goose?," Academic Leadership: The Online Journal: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 : Article 10.
Available at: https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol8/iss1/10

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Academic Leadership Journal

Organizations are often compared to living organisms (Morgan, 2006). In nature, there are many examples of group organizations that demonstrate leadership patterns: herds, bands, families, mobs, colonies, prides, gaggles, flocks, schools, etc. Survival of a species is often based on the type of leadership nature has established for a particular species in a particular environment at a particular time or season.

Horses and geese seem to be at opposite ends from one another with lemmings falling somewhere in between in relation to the leadership needed for the survival of the species. Each species has similarities to the other, and yet each species is distinctly different. A number of species have established leadership that ranges from a strong patriarchal system of complete domination by one leader to a shared stewardship of multiple leaders within the system in which each species lives.

Horses have four hooves, fur, and are led by a strong dominant patriarch, the stallion. Lemmings are earth bound, small, furry rodents with no real apparent leader which could be either a weak patriarch or a weak stewardship. Geese are flight engineers, feathered, and operate with a stewardship of a shared leadership style during migration.

Stallions lead herds of wild horses, predominantly mares, fillies, and colts. Stallions find food, water, and shelter for the herd. The stallion provides the leadership while the herd forages for food and water in a harsh or plentiful environment. When necessary, the stallion provides the leadership while the herd forages for life sustaining nourishment. When necessary, the stallion provides protection from predators.

Young colts developing into stallions within the band often skirmish and practice battle skills with other colts in the herd. On separate occasions one of these colts will eventually confront the leader in a battle for control of the band. The youngsters are either successful in this violent and brutal confrontation to take over the leadership position, or the colts are forced to leave the herd. The young stallions exiled from the original herd begin to take mares from other bands in order to develop their own individual bands. The cycle of patriarchy continues with each new herd established (Wikipedia, 2007).

Public schools seem to compare in many ways to this nature model of leadership. It is primarily a patriarchal style of “I”, “I”, “I”. Furthermore, this theory seems to be strongly connected to the belief that “I” have been chosen to lead this band and everyone will do as “I” direct. Because “I” am the strongest and most powerful, everyone will follow without question from the administration down through the classroom teacher and his or her students.

Many other organizations follow this model of leadership. Workers are expected to be task oriented and do what working subordinates are supposed to do. The “I” leadership allows for little independent, creative, or critical thinking (Morgan, 2006).

Tasks are often bogged down in a hierarchy of who to contact for the correct procedure or information. No one individual wants to accept responsibility because of the possible fallout by providing a wrong
direction or answer. Immediate action or service to others is restricted by this method of managing (Pfeffer, 1994).

Many leaders in a patriarchal form of management do not permit deviations from the norm. Deviations from what is expected are perceived as a negative trait or undesirable traits. In this manner, patriarchal leaders actually prevent service to their employees and to their eventual clients or customers (Block, 1993).

Geese flock together with no apparent leader although the leader may be an older goose or gander. Yet, when nature dictates it is time to migrate by the decreasing sunlight, dropping temperatures and declining food source, one goose (or gander) will take to the skies. Another and another goose will follow until the entire flock is aloft. Eventually, the original flock is joined by other flocks in a monumental gathering of thousands flying southward to a renewed source of food and warmer weather for all.

The other geese in the flock do not question, but every goose will follow the leader. The geese form themselves in a “V” formation. During the southward journey, which encompasses many days and hardships, a single goose takes the point and leads toward the southern goal slightly ahead of a goose on either side of its wing tips, left and right. Flying in this pattern, the leader is continuously breaking the air flow for all the geese following in the flock. Eventually, tiring from this continuous battle against air resistance, the lead is relinquished to one of the geese located at the wing tip either right or left. The previous leader falls into line behind the new leader. This shift of leadership continues throughout the long flight as the entire flock continues to steadily make progress toward the warmer climate and the winter nesting ground. Young fledglings learn from the mature geese and will eventually assume the lead in later flights.

The organization of geese during this migration is an example of stewardship at its epitome. The leadership position of guiding the entire flock is continuously shared by each and every member flying in the “V” formation. The geese share the leadership position in order to conserve strength and focus for the good of the entire flock. The geese have a shared trust among the flock with dire consequences of accountability linked to the flock’s survival based on individual performance, knowledge, and exercise of power and authority.

Block strongly advocates the stewardship model of leadership. The switching of the lead goose during migration demonstrates the willingness of each goose to be accountable for the safety of the following flock without the use of control or manipulation. Each lead goose is providing a crucial service to those following. Each goose has no apparent thought of reward other than reaching the goal for the entire flock of a warmer climate, food, and rest.

Organizations founded on a true stewardship from the most menial position to the highest could be an ideal place to work. However, much thought, insight and preparation would have to precede such a venture. As humans, individuals have been born with, developed positions, or have created myths that would influence the incorporation of a ‘true’ stewardship from the family outward to society’s organizations. To be a successful stewardship organization, people working there would have to choose to become a servant leader of others. The workers would have to choose to be responsible for themselves and others as equals. Would it not be a wonderful world if everyone would work together for the good of all at all times like the flock of geese?
Lemmings, based on information from Wikipedia, are recorded as stampeding to death over a cliff or dying in a mass drowning during migrations. Lemmings really die because of the lack of leadership. Lemmings are small fur covered rodents living in North America. Lemmings are prolific in reproduction, as are most rodents. When inhabitants of a particular habitat reach critical conditions of overpopulation and a decreasing food supply, a migration begins.

The migration may begin with only one leader and one follower. As these two lemmings progress, the pair is joined by other lemmings because of some inherent instinct. This somewhat larger group of lemmings in turn is joined by others until the group eventually becomes an enormous mass of lemmings marching to a new food source and habitat.

During the march, if the mass comes upon a river, the lemmings following those in the lead will enter the water in such proportions that the lemmings actually drown the preceding lemmings. If by chance the lemmings encounter a cliff, the mass of lemmings following closely to one another will actually force the leaders at the forefront over the cliff. Wave after wave of lemmings follow one another over the cliff. The deaths are not an intentional mass suicide, but a suicide caused by the force behind the migration of such an enormous gathering of lemmings moving as one toward a goal. Lack of leadership led to the demise of the lemmings.

Lemmings have a leader. The one lemming who initially began to seek a new food source for itself and its first follower became the leader of the migration. At this time, this one lemming is the patriarchal leader. As the march continues, the original leader turns into a weak patriarch to be overcome by the sheer number of followers.

The march of the lemmings could also be related to a stewardship because everyone has the shared responsibility of marching to the goal of a new environment of plenty. The group is a weak stewardship in that each lemming does not accept a shared responsibility for all, but one lemming may be a caretaker for a small group within the mass. Every lemming, eventually, looks out only for itself and pushes any lemming in front of itself out of the way with dire consequences for the lemmings in front.

The two styles of leadership, patriarchy and stewardship, for comparison seem to be at opposing ends. The former accepts the responsibility for everyone subordinate to the lead position. Every client under the patriarch’s care and direction expects to be taken care of physically and emotionally. The latter, stewardship, places the responsibility for every client back to the individual’s responsibility for service to self and others. The individual shares responsibility for his own care and direction. One leader does not accept the role of being responsible for everyone else.

The leader cannot abdicate the role of leader (Block. 1993), but a stewardship leader is not crucial in the same manner as the position of the patriarchal leader. Most styles of leadership are somewhere in between the two extremes (Clark. 1998) and may contain elements of a weak patriarch or weak stewardship.

Patriarch is a long established pattern of male dominance (Morgan. 2006). Historically, patriarchy is a leadership style passed from descendant to descendant in a ruling family. More patriarchal cultures exist and have existed since recorded history than any other type of documented leadership style according to Wikipedia. Patriarchal societies have a dominate individual as the leader of subordinates. This type of leadership is widely accepted because of the traditional organization of the
family with the father as the head of the family (Morgan. 2006).

A single individual is in charge of all the innovative or lack of innovative changes made throughout the organization. Subordinates have the responsibility to fulfill all of the procedures necessary to ensure the incorporation of the set rules the patriarch demands or establishes for either regulation or production. The patriarch in return is obligated to take care of the needs of the subordinates.

People working in a patriarchal type of system are expected to be very task oriented. The workers are to perform as directed. When a product fails or an issue arises, the focus is on “who” is to blame rather than “what” is to blame. Working under a patriarchal type of leadership style may be perceived as extremely punitive and stressful (Pfeffer, 1994).

What is there in the human psyche that creates this need to dominate another so evident in both animal and human species? What is the force or forces that seem to be innately connected to all species that create a position of leadership? Is a specific leadership style a necessity for the continuation of the survival of a species or for a particular way of life? As one progresses throughout childhood there appears a dominant position and a subordinate position at differing times, situations, and ages. Humans carry this need for position and leadership from their personal space to family space, and to society through work and community organizations.

All leadership positions require at least two or more individuals. All leadership positions will ultimately lose strength and position. All leadership positions will eventually fail or fall by the wayside for one reason or another, either death or rite of passage (Doob.1983). All leadership is measured in how well those following define and determine the success or lack of success provided by the leader. Successful leadership is also measured in the trust placed in the communication of the leader with the followers (Clark. 1998).

The essence or charismatic quality of leadership within an individual cannot be viewed under a microscope or captured in a bottle. When one analyzes leaders, most leaders arrive at the leadership position because of personality traits, crisis of some nature, or personal choice. Leaders may arise from a combination of one or more of these situations. However, emerging leadership is not bound by just these three possibilities.

Once an individual has assumed the leadership position, it is up to the individual based on all his prior experiences and his knowledge as to how he will choose to lead. The choice will fall somewhere between a strong patriarchy style or a strong stewardship style.

Examples of these styles are Bobby Knight, often referred to as “The General”, head coach of Texas Tech University and Mike Krzyewski, known as “Coach K”, at Duke University. These two men have been recognized as the two most successful college basketball coaches in the United States. The question arises about the differences in their leadership approach, “Is it better to be loved or feared?” (Silverthorne, 1997, p. 1). These two coaches demonstrate, to most fans, extremely different leadership styles. The General uses a strong patriarch method and Coach K incorporates a stewardship method. Comparing the win-loss records of these two very different coaching approaches there is little differences in the results.

One coach, Knight, has been fired because he was seen with his hands clutching his player’s neck.
Knight was also filmed throwing a chair at a referee. One could say Knight was chosen because of a crisis. Although it could be said, being in a crisis is typical for Knight because of his leadership style. Knight demands drill, drill, and discipline. Knight is very much the strong patriarch.

Krzyewski, on the other hand has a very different leadership style. Coach K has elected to turn down numerous professional and collegiate coaching positions and has chosen to stay at Duke. For Krzyewski, “It’s about the heart, it’s about family, it’s about seeing the good in people and bringing the most out of them.” (Silverthorne. 1997, p. 1). Krzyewski believes it is best to avoid a managerial style that is primarily built around rewards and punishments. Coach K was a student player under The General during his college basketball playing years. Krzyewski would be considered a stewardship leader to his players.

Fans watching both of these coaches immediately form perceptions of each leader and are prepared to justify the reasons behind the choices. Yet, each coach has been very successful. Each coach is held in high regard by his players.

What each of these individuals has experienced in his past undoubtedly influenced his approach to the future. What each coach fundamentally believes about others affects the way each has chosen to lead. Individual beliefs strongly affect whether one chooses to lead others with fear or love. However, it is the opinion of this author, one can always change as long as one is alive and willing to change.

It is a fact that as the human body ages everything physically undergoes a change. Can it not also be recognized that leadership styles throughout life, because of maturity or experience, may also change? Leaders do not go unscathed by the decisions they have made. Learning results from failure as much as from success. It also cannot be strictly stated that one leadership style is better for all the people all the time (Pfeffer. 1997). One may choose to lead primarily by strength as a young leader or in an emergency (patriarch). As time or a crisis pass an organization may require the same individual to change to a shared responsibility (steward).

Patriarchy has within its organization specific patterns of expected individual behavior. Patterns are not bad. Repetition of some tasks is necessary in order to acquire specific skills and to provide adeptness at handling those tasks. The only way some skills can be learned is through practice, practice, practice. In this manner, one also learns to discipline oneself. Being forced to comply with these expectations forces individuals and workers to do things they would not ordinarily choose to do. Application of repetition, drills, and discipline is necessary in order to win games and just as necessary to carry out certain procedures in work systems.

Stewardship may also require the incorporation of repetition, drills and discipline. However, the practice, practice, practice differs in that it is a chosen course not a demanded course. Stewardship is task oriented with a specific goal for the good of all involved. Team members, athletes, or workers, are motivated individually to learn and to work for everyone’s mutual success.

One would automatically expect Krzyewski’s players to respect and love Coach K more than Knight’s players love The General. However, Knight is not hated nor feared by his players. Knight’s players love and respect him. Each coach was successful in his own realm with his own selected team members. Each of them had the right approach to his unique organization. Each man knew himself, his players, and his unique situation.
Therefore, can it be stated that for every age and situation there is a needed or required leadership style that fits the individual need of the group (Pfeffer. 1998)? Being an effective leader requires one to know one’s self inside and out. Leaders are to be as aware as humanly possible of the forces that shaped the ideals and goals from birth within themselves. Leaders are to know that the style of leadership one chooses is exercised from within as an extension of prior experiences as well as determined by the situation confronting one. Growing and learning requires adapting to an ever changing leadership requirement. One cannot be effective if one remains static (Silverthorne. 1997).

If one has always been a stallion, there has been and there is no need to grow. Confronting the elder and vanquishing him provides a new leadership in the band of wild horses. Being the lead lemming, if it does not get out of the way, it will plunge or drown to its death. Assuming the lead for the flock of geese flying southward, if one does not yield, fatigue will kill. Leadership is a demanding responsibility. In one manner or another, species survival and an organization’s survival depend on it.

A selected or specific style of leadership in nature seems necessary for the survival of a very particular species and way of life. If the method of leading were to change for a particular species, death and extinction could be an extreme end result. In order to be successful, there exists a leader or organization leadership to provide focus and accountability. The method or mode for leadership varies within the requirements for each organization and culture. Horses need one type of leadership; lemmings another type of leadership; and geese yet another type of leadership to survive. One cannot say one style of leadership is to be preferred over the other. Each species, however, exercises varying degrees of leadership style used through the course of life. Horses do not fight every day for dominance. Lemmings are not searching daily for new habitats. Geese do not migrate daily. The needs of the group will determine the type of leadership at a given time.

Depending on the influences surrounding an individual, the age of the individual, and the individuals in one’s organization or culture, a leadership method emerges. The leader’s outcomes will ultimately determine if the leadership is either successful or unsuccessful. Subordinates, depending on their past influences, their ages, and their organizations, make the ultimate determination of how their leader is perceived, successful or unsuccessful. It seems this is true regardless of the method, patriarchal or stewardship, being used. Judgment seems to ultimately depend on the subordinates perceptions of the leader.

In conclusion, it is the theory and belief of this author on this particular day and at this particular moment of time, the need or necessity arising determines the leadership style required for a particular situation or organization. The obtained results coming from the leader’s directions or instructions validate or invalidate the decisions implemented. Finally, the subordinates will ultimately determine and define the success of the leader and his method. If the decision rested within the author’s realm, stewardship would be the choice of leadership desired. Within stewardship the freedom is given to develop and serve in the manner which acts in the best interests of all. Accountability and responsibility is equally shared.

References


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