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The Eye of the Beholders: What Followers Want from their Leader

The first requirement of a leader is to have followers (Hamedoglu, Kantor and Gulay 322), and consequently, people's concepts and perceptions of leadership have a meaningful impact on leader effectiveness (Bryman 132). The implicit leadership theories formed by followers' expectations not only define effective leadership, but taint the questionnaires and other measurement methods in leadership studies (Bryman). This qualitative research is intended to capture follower perspectives on leadership, their implicit leadership theories, and compare them with contemporary leadership theories to determine similarities and contrasts.

A phenomenological research design was selected to flexibly identify characteristics of implicit leadership theories and leadership perceptions from eight specifically selected participants using short semi-structured interviews. The participants' responses were coded and themes developed, and the results compared and contrasted with current popular leadership theories. The four main sections; Purpose, Research Design, Findings, and Conclusion, reflect the research design and reveal the resulting discoveries in a manner that provides textured insight from the investigation. The purpose of the research provided the framework for the design and methodology of the research.

PURPOSE

Successful leadership depends on motivating followers and meeting the followers' shifting expectations (Ruderman). Leadership is not created in isolation, but "is a socially constructed phenomenon" (Kean, Haycock-Stuart and Baggaley 507) that involves followers in a process whereby they interpret and perceive leadership actions within their notions of what a leader

should be. The followers' interpretation of leadership effectiveness within their own interpretive framework significantly impacts the leader's success (Kean, Haycock-Stuart and Baggaley 507). Individual followers integrate their experiences, literature, worldviews, and other cultural influences to define their implicit leadership theories which contain their beliefs and assumptions about effective leadership characteristics (Yukl 135). Such expectations can also bias the assessments and ratings of leadership that are used to form leadership theories.

Many leadership studies and the resulting theoretical development are based on questionnaires, but there is increasing awareness that implicit leadership theories may influence the answers on such questionnaires (Bryman). Parmer et al. suggested that the growing awareness of the connection of leadership and follower perceptions has even led to an increased use within leadership designs and leader selections of such implicit leadership theories. Offermann, Kennedy, and Wirtz argued that implicit leadership theories are more insightful than alternative leadership theories because "Although psychologists have difficulty agreeing on what leadership really is, the general public seems to have little trouble …" (44). Such implicit leadership theories, if understood, can provide a framework for developing more general leadership theories (Offermann, Kennedy and Wirtz). If responses on questionnaires are actually shaped by implicit leadership theories, then follower leadership perceptions and preferences would be expected to align closely with the contemporary theories that are derived from the research. However, follower preferences are diverse and can vary not only culturally, but as Lee discovered, between demographic groups, job tenure, or even organizational role, and often those variances are not adequately captured in leadership theories. As Hamedoglu, Kantor, and Gulay posited, leadership can even vary across time, place, and specific individuals, so the purpose of my research was exploring how leadership theories developed from follower questionnaires,

leadership outcomes, and even multi-view data align with implicit leadership theories. The broad research questions guiding the study were:

How do follower preferences in leadership and the resulting implicit leadership theories align with contemporary leadership theories? What leadership behaviors are preferred by followers? What leader characteristics are most necessary for today's leaders from followers' perspectives?

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research designs are derived from the research purpose and questions (Creswell) and for my study, the focus was on advancing the understanding of implicit leadership theories resulting from followers' perspectives on effective leadership and how they relate to contemporary theories. The inquiry into what behaviors, values, and characteristics most motivate followers' performance and satisfaction (Ruderman) from a followers view suggested that a phenomenological research strategy would be appropriate to capture participants' perspectives on the phenomena of effective leadership (Creswell). Qualitative inquiry offered the ability to develop a deeper understanding of the participants' underlying perspectives (Creswell) that form their implicit leadership theories, so followers' criteria of leadership could be effectively compared and contrasted with existing contemporary theories.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow participants to contribute more freely, and questions were designed to develop leadership preference data that would promote comparison with contemporary theories. Offermann, Kennedy, and Wirtz, in their early work on implicit leadership theory derived an eight factor structure of implicit leadership theory that was relatively consistent across various demographic groups and included; sensitivity, dedication,

tyranny, charisma, attractiveness, masculinity, intelligence, and strength. Epitropki and Martin explored implicit leadership theory structures further and noted that while different researchers develop different lists, there are "striking similarities" (294), and while the raw lists are often long, most implicit leadership characteristics include intelligence, honesty, dynamic or charismatic, and high motivation. Keller found that personality traits also influenced individual's implicit leadership theories. To effectively collect each participants' implicit leadership theory characteristics, broad, open-ended qualitative questions were design around the prior categorizations within implicit leadership theory research. To capture factors such as masculinity, intelligence, and attractiveness (Offermann, Kennedy, and Wirtz; Epitropki and Martin), question 1 was:

> 1. What traits, qualities, or characteristics are important for an effective leader?

Prior implicit leadership research also identified a set of factors that described values such as honesty, motivation (Epitropki and Martin), sensitivity, humility (not tyranny), and dedication (Offermann, Kennedy, and Wirtz) so to capture such characteristics, question 2 became:

> 2. What values, ideals, or principles does an effective leader need to demonstrate?

The ability to motivate or inspire had been describe as strength, charisma (Offermann, Kennedy, and Wirtz), or being dynamic (Epitropki and Martin), which were also consistently identified across prior implicit leadership research as key to effective leadership. Question 3 was designed to capture any such preferences:

3. How do effective leaders encourage, or motivate followers?

To provide participants the freedom to contribute their personal perceptions, categories, and metaphors since individual differences and experience shape implicit leadership theories (Epitropki and Martin), a final general question was:

4. What other factors, characteristics or behaviors, besides those identified in the prior questions, are important for a leader to be effective?

Participants were selected from a small, multi-state, multi-functional insurance firm. The diversity of operations and leadership situations offered a broad range of participant roles and leadership structures. Using the suggestions of a key informant, eight participants were selected representing the range of organizational levels, locations, and major company divisions to offer a heterogeneous participant pool from which to collect implicit leadership characteristics. Participants included one senior leader, two manager/supervisors, and five employees across customer support and insurance sales functions. Those included in the interview pool represented a variety of races, genders, and ages as well. Interviews were conducted by phone to the company's operating locations in Florida and Texas with all interviews digitally recorded for later transcription. Interview protocols included an introduction into the purpose of the study as an investigation into the preferred leadership characteristics from a follower perspective. All participants were assured of anonymity and the voluntary nature of participation (Creswell). I, as the sole researcher, conducted all interviews, transcription, coding, and theme development.

FINDINGS: PERSPECTIVES ON PREFERRED LEADERSHIP

This section presents the results of the eight interviews within each of the four questions posed. Rich respondent data is presented and thematic trends offered to describe the implicit

leadership perspectives of the pool of participants. The response themes as indicators of the participants' implicit leadership theories are then compared to contemporary leadership theories within each question. This approach reveals the inductive nature of the analyses.

What traits, qualities, or characteristics are important for an effective leader?

This question was intended to capture observable characteristics or traits such as masculinity, intelligence, and attractiveness that were suggested from prior implicit leadership research (Offermann, Kennedy and Wirtz; Epitropaki and Martin), and to determine if participants' responses would align with prior implicit leadership research. There were capture a diverse set of characteristics, but responses generally indicated that outward physical traits and intelligence were not as important as other characteristics including ethical, caring, follower-focused attributes that would also be captured within the values and ideals focus of Question 2. Participants also emphasized communication skills as a critical leadership characteristic. Comments that represent the participants' more values-based and follower-focused views and communications emphasis were:

- "They have to show that they care about the person they lead. They are not just a resource to be used up but they are part of the solution."
- "Humility and servanthood are important. A good leader wouldn't ask them to do anything (leader) wouldn't do"
- "Have to be able to communicate eloquently or at least effectively what it is that you are trying to get across ... so people aren't confused."
- "Someone that is consistent"
- "Someone who thinks about people he is leading and how what he does will affect them. A leader isn't selfish."

- "Need to know each individual on their team on a personal level, what they are good at… what drives them what defeats them, what motivates them … how they work together as a team."

- "must explain things well"

- "… mentor them on a one-on-one basis then you really have the basis of a good leader."

- "… good concise communicator, steadfast, good communication, unwavering, concise"

- "Honesty and loyalty would be the first two things"

- "Someone who could communicate well with others. Be able to discuss goals or problems. Someone who also has a positive attitude because you want someone who can inspire people as well."

- "They would have to be knowledgeable"

- "Definitely honesty, I think a leaders should be honest"

- "Caring for followers. They should be helpful, understanding, and wanting to listen."

- "I look for a positive attitude. I try to be as much of a positive person as possible and I feel that if the leader in the situation has a positive attitude, it makes for a positive situation."

- "Open minded, not necessarily it's my way or the highway, open minded to ideas of the peers around us."

- "I feel that every leader should lead by example; not just talk about his qualifications or promote his qualifications, or have not just words but actions

behind them. If someone is doing what they say you need to do, or conveying

things that you need to do ... they need to lead by example walk the talk."

The comments reflected many of the implicit leadership factors of the Offermann, Kennedy, and Wirtz leadership research including knowledgeable, charisma reflected in a positivity, and compassion or caring toward followers. Other characteristics were more often identified by the participants including the characteristics of good communication which was identified by six participants, and understanding and treating followers as individuals by four. Individual consideration in understanding and treating followers uniquely is inherent in contemporary leadership theories such as transformational leadership (Bass) and servant leadership (Yukl). The characteristic of "walking the talk" was also considered important by the participants and is consistent with the idealized influence or modeling described within transformational leadership theory (Bass) and the transparent nature inherent in authentic leadership theory (Walumbwa, Avolio and Gardner). Honesty and values based characteristics also reflect the internal moral perspective of authentic leadership theory (Walumbwa, Avolio and Gardner). One participant identified an openness to ideas as critical in a leader which describes the balanced processing pillar within authentic leadership as well (Walumbwa, Avolio and Gardner). So while much of the data collected in response to the first interview question aligned with both prior work in implicit leadership theory and contemporary leadership theories, the importance of effective communication appeared to be more prominent as a desirable leadership characteristic and was highlighted by six of the participants. Communication may be an inherent mechanism within many contemporary leadership theories especially charismatic leadership (Yukl), but the importance participants' assigned to communication in conveying goals, expectations, caring, and purpose may suggest that the specific ability to effectively

communicate deserves more attention as a key leadership characteristic within leadership theories.

What values, ideals, or principles does an effective leader need to demonstrate?

The second question in the interview was focused on collecting participants' perspectives on what values or principles were important in an effective leader. Prior implicit leadership research identified a set of factors that described desirable values such as compassion, understanding, and sympathy. Participants' responses were generally consistent with the implicit leadership theory of Offermann, Kennedy, and Wirtz although there was more of an ethical focus than suggested by the prior research of either Offermann, Kennedy and Wirtz or Epitropaki and Martin. The following are representative responses that reflected participants' values-based implicit leadership theory factors:

- " … Primarily around integrity, honesty, trust. Those who want to be treated with honest & integrity will trust and develop respect and loyalty."

- "Leadership has to be … primarily centered around integrity, honest, trust."

- "Integrity and loyalty are huge pieces that leader must have"

- "Someone with integrity… have to have someone they can trust. No one wants to follow someone who is going to take credit for something or blame them for something or not going to be honest with them. Someone who is honest."

- "Someone who is just a good principled person, someone who has character. If you have someone with character, you will follow them almost anywhere. If they are shady or shaky morale character ... no one is going to want to follow them because they don't know if they can trust them."

- "Honesty, integrity, stand beside and have the back of … just because things don't go the way they were intended to go, they aren't going to throw you under the bus."

- "Honesty and loyalty would be good values to have."

- "Honesty is a very good value to have … dependability. Trustworthiness"

- " … self-respect and respect for others around you, considerate, servant or selfless."

- "To me one of the biggest things is honesty … real honest and believe in what you are trying."

- "If you have certain values in your business you should have the same values in your personal life, consistent values."

- "Honesty shows in your eyes, in your face, in everything."

All eight participants identified honest as a key attribute for an effective leader and comments relating to integrity and the resulting trust suggested that the ethical, values-based elements of leadership were critical components. Such an emphasis varies from the focus of prior implicit leadership theory work (Epitropaki and Martin; Offermann, Kennedy and Wirtz), but may reflect the increasing interest in ethics and values resulting from corporate scandals (Yukl). What was deemed important from the interview responses was that leaders must reflect integrity as a necessary element to create trust. Recent contemporary theory work including ethical leadership (Yukl) and internalized moral perspective of authentic leadership (Walumbwa, Avolio and Gardner) have also incorporated those values based elements of leadership. The trust resulting from honesty and integrity is critical in leadership effectiveness as was shown in studies such as the Goodwin et al. research where trust was found to fully mediate the relationships

between transformational leadership and desired outcomes. Participants also widely identified loyalty or a concern not with self, but with the followers' well-being. Such a follower focus reflects a wide range of leadership theories including transformational leadership (Bass), servant leadership (Yukl), and authentic leadership (Walumbwa, Avolio and Gardner) although the specific mention of "loyalty" suggested that in current uncertain economic times, such loyalty may be a more significant leadership factor and illustrated the theorized adaptive nature of implicit leadership theory which reflects an individual's environment or culture (Epitropaki and Martin; Hamedoglu, Kantor and Gulay).

How do effective leaders encourage, or motivate followers?

This question was intended to draw insight into how followers viewed the motivational and encouragement efforts of effective leaders including the implicit leadership factors of inspiration, charisma, and understanding (Offermann, Kennedy and Wirtz). Participants most reflected the theoretical leadership principles of transformational leadership's individual consideration (Bass) and positive forms of recognition (Avolio and Gardner) as important elements of effective leadership. Representative comments include:

- "Different people respond to different things so one of the things you have to do is you have to find out what someone responds to and what drives them and motivates them, then use those specific things to try to encourage and motivate."
- "The majority of people within an environment (that I've found), typically want to be recognized and they will thrive on the leader identifying, recognizing, and communicating the things that they are doing well. Another segment just soaks up knowledge, they want to be taught, they want to learn more... the more you share with them the more effective and thankful they are."

- "You just have to identify what those motivating factors are and then not try to make one approach for everyone ... Sometimes it means a custom approach."

- "Encouraging feedback - positive feedback, show interest."

- "Acknowledging how hard we work."

- "… learning what motivates them; what different things motivate that individual, it is important to know what does that for each person."

- "Verbally would be how a leader would be encouraging me. Giving me confidence in whatever we are trying to do. Be able to talk to me and give me confidence. Address issues in positive way. Also talk to me and tell me the things I am doing wrong or things we could change in a positive way. ... would make me eager to change even more and accomplish the goals we were trying to accomplish."

- "Making them feel like they are invaluable to the company… to encourage the employee to do better, …"

- "Definitely praise them and their strengths … because I do believe that everyone wants to be praised ... and it gives them confidence to be open to new ideas and they do feel confident"

- "I believe the positive attitude is what is being more effective than yelling session. Positivity"

The participants' responses were widely concerned with positivism which is consistent with positive psychology based leadership theories including authentic leadership (Avolio and Gardner), and individualized recognition and encouragement as is also encompassed within transformational leadership's individualized consideration (Bass). The positivism participants

identified is also consistent with the enthusiasm, inspiring, understanding and sensitive factors within Offermann, Kennedy, and Wirtz factor structures of implicit leadership. In terms of motivational influences, the participants'' responses were consistent with the prior work on implicit leadership theory and contemporary leadership theory.

What other factors, characteristics or behaviors, besides those identified in the prior questions, are important for a leader to be effective?

The final interview question allowed the participants to add any additional items that they considered as important in an effective leader. Participants further expanded on the themes of loyalty, perseverance, and humility, often using this final question as an opportunity to repeat or reinforce the key factors identified in the previous three questions. Representative comments for this final open-ended question included:

- "Give sense of security, to feel like all is stable, let followers know what to expect."
- "Integrity and loyalty are huge pieces that leader must have."
- "Resilience and perseverance, when everyone is broken down and doesn't think you can go on any further, you have got to be the one to say 'hey, we only have 5 more steps to go or we are halfway there or we are almost there ....' If they are good at everything else (we discussed) but when times get rough they are the first to break, that is not leadership. A leader in the most dire circumstances is pushing everyone forward. You have to be the one to hold everybody else up when they are falling down, that is what they need you for!"
- "An effective leader has to be approachable, they have to listen, they have to want to, desire to learn from the people in the trenches doing the job. They have to

demonstrate some level of humility. If they are arrogant, no one will want to follow them. They have to be relatable to the people that are working with them to achieve the common goal."

- "Always make time to be available …"
- "We should all be able to step down, no matter what our level, to help someone if that is what is going to help them."

The participants' focus on loyalty, persistence, and security reflects the dedication and sensitivity factors of Offermann, Kennedy and Wirtz's prior research, but may also reflect the uncertain nature of current economic conditions. Because of such temporal reflections in implicit leadership theory (Hamedoglu, Kantor and Gulay), all leadership theories may necessarily need to consider the changing environment within which they operate. Responses also suggested the growing importance of humility and reduced power-distance lending support for such leadership theories as servant leadership (Yukl).

CONCLUSION

The results of this eight participant qualitative research was that most characteristics identified were consistent with both prior implicit leadership theory research (Epitropaki and Martin; Offermann, Kennedy and Wirtz), and aligned with many contemporary leadership theory concepts including transformational leadership (Bass), authentic leadership (Roof; Walumbwa, Avolio and Gardner), ethical leadership, servant leadership (Yukl), and trends in positive psychology. Of interest was the increased emphasis on honesty and integrity as the most mentioned characteristic of effective leadership. The references to honesty and integrity were typically connected to discussion of trust which has been shown to be a key element in transforming leadership behavior into results (Goodwin, Whittington and Murray). Effective

communication and humility were also highly mentioned by participants and such factors are consistent with current trends toward more humble, lower power-distance leadership trends contained within theories such as servant leadership (Yukl).

While prior research into implicit leadership theory reflected some differences in factors between researchers, most implicit leadership traits tended to align with contemporary theories such as transformational leadership (Epitropaki and Martin). The results of this research with participants reporting an increased emphasis on honesty, integrity, individual consideration and communication raises the question of implicit leadership factor stability which Epitropaki and Martin suggested needed further study. The data from this study would suggest that the current environment and cultural dynamics may indeed effect effective leadership factors, or at the very least, influence the relative importance of effective leadership factors. Additional focused, longitudinal research is recommended to explore such implicit leadership theory dynamics.

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