

LECTURE 3: TRAIT THEORY APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP (Part 1)

Are true leaders born with specific traits and evolve into successful influencers or are individuals able to learn how to develop the skills to become effective leaders? This debate continues to prompt scholars to examine the psychology associated with leadership and the many different theories and contributing factors linked to the various approaches. This paper presents an overview of divergent perspectives on this “nature versus nurture” concept with the final conclusion that there is no consensus about this topic. Although there is no conformity surrounding the psychological theories on this subject, there is agreement that leadership among physicians is a key component for medical practices to cultivate for their future viability. Assessment tools and resources are available for identification of the characteristics and potential aptitude for physician executives to be instrumental within our industry. This leadership development philosophy begins with recruitment and remains an ongoing process for progressive healthcare organizations.

Keywords: trait theory, leadership development, leadership theories, leadership assessment

For centuries scholars have attempted to develop a consensus on a standard definition of leadership and yet there is still no single shared definition that is accepted by all factions (Northouse, 2016). The study of leadership originated during the age of Aristotle and is a topic that continues to challenge the academic researchers and business world (Northouse, 2016). Success in any industry, including healthcare, requires effective leadership to achieve the mission, goals and sustain a prosperous future. Effective leadership is essential to the framework of any flourishing healthcare organization. Whether describing a large multi-hospital network or smaller physician practice, the role of an efficacious leader is a necessity and an integral component for the entity’s success. Regardless of the size of the organization, there is a fundamental need for the leadership to maneuver through the complexities and provide guidance through the ever-increasing challenges in today’s healthcare environment.

The top executives within an organization are not the only leaders. There are many layers and levels of leadership. Leadership can be demonstrated and altered at every stage of career and life. Numerous theories describe leadership approaches, but the lingering quest is to determine if leadership is an innate trait that an individual is born with or is it possible to be trained to become a great leader? This paper represents a brief overview of the psychology of leadership and the many different theories and contributing factors associated with these approaches. Through the review of the literature, leadership publications and summary of research studies targeting the psychology of leadership, the significant characteristics of a great leader as inherent traits will be examined along with the skills and styles that can be taught to an individual who may develop into a worthy leader. There are vital leadership qualities that are not fully able to be acquired or learned; therefore, it is critical for healthcare organizations and medical practices to identify their future leaders for sustainability. Healthcare entities should begin this leadership evaluation upon the initial recruitment phase of the relationship. Many organizations hire individuals with extension education, impressive training and excellent credentials with the pledging intention to develop their leadership skills. This goal to cultivate a leader may not be attainable if the individual does not already possess significant principal traits.

Evolution of Defining Leadership

Through experience and training some leadership behaviors and approaches can be learned by an individual who may develop into an effective leader; however, the fundamental characteristics and qualities of a great leader are inherent traits that exist at birth and are further refined and enhanced over the years. The literature demonstrates that there is no consensus for a uniform definition of leadership among the academics, including the debate whether leadership can be studied and learned. One researcher analyzed the topic of leadership and found more than 200 different definitions of leadership (Northouse, 2016). History, world affairs, and the political climate are examples of factors that affect the viewpoints about leadership. The evolution of a

definition for leadership has transformed from the initial theme of dominance at the beginning of the 20th Century to the varied and expanded approaches that emerged in the 21st Century. The first three decades of the 20th Century emphasizes leadership as having the “ability to impress the will of those led and induce obedience, respect, loyalty and cooperation” (Northouse, 2016, p.2). This dominations perspective correlated the success of a leader to the strength and control he had over his followers. Power was synonymous with leadership during this era.

The 1930’s introduced the influential aspects of leadership and how an individual’s personality lent itself to be more meaningful to followers. A leader’s attitude and characteristics contribute to how the followers react and behave as a group. Similarly, it became evident that leaders are also influenced by followers. The group dynamic aspect of a leader became more prevalent in the 1940’s when the concept of “drivership” was distinguished from the leadership through the coercion theory (Northouse, 2016). This group theme expanded in the 1950’s with the inclusion of contributing ideas that leadership is related to the development of shared goals for a group and a leader’s effectiveness measured by the ability to influence others. These thoughts were concretized during the turbulent times of the 1960’s when scholars began to agree to describe leadership as “acts by persons which influence other persons in a shared direction” (Seeman, 1960, p.53). Leadership to achieve organizational goals was a crucial component in the 1970’s. This period of time stressed the need for both leaders and followers to share the same goals for a group’s success.

The late decades of the 20th Century opened up the study of leadership and creation of several theories, including the focus of the trait orientation theory. Additional leadership approaches emerged during the 21st Century; however, the researchers appear to focus on the process of a leader influencing a group to achieve a common goal versus a specific description of leadership characteristics through a fixed definition (Northouse, 2016).

The Foundation of Leadership

Researchers claim that over the past 60 years approximately 65 different classification systems have been established to help delineate the elements of leadership (Fleishman, Mumford, Zaccaro, Levin, Korotkin & Hein, 1991). The trait perspective on leadership suggests that individuals are born with specific characteristics that differentiate them from other non-leaders. Statements such as, “She is a natural leader” support the trait theory that this person’s effectiveness is an innate quality that separates her from other people. These distinct features may be evident upon physically meeting the person while other leadership merits are not as noticeable until there are interactions at which time the qualities of a born leader become more pronounced.

Leaders do not exist unilaterally without followers to influence. This confirms the mutual need for both to synchronize for the full leadership process to entirely transpire. Influence and the ability to steer others towards a vision is an essential element of leadership. Leaders use their passion and energy to engage others to also believe in a common goal for the group. This common goal requires that both the leader and followers target their efforts to work together in the same direction and for the same purpose. Again, this highlights that leaders and followers are involved with the leadership process. The four common foundations shared among the diverse philosophies conclude that leadership is a process and encompasses influence of others, occurs within a group and entails attaining the same goals (Northouse, 2016).

Management and leadership are process concepts that may overlap, but they are not the same and are frequently used interchangeably. Both are crucial for any successful organization, but management is leadership put into action (Mohler, 2012). Like leadership, followers are required for the management process to exist. Leadership, however, creates a vision, initiates constructive change and seeks continuous improvement in reaching a goal while management is responsible for organizing the implementation and securing stability to accomplish the common strategies. Not all managers may develop into leaders, but all effective leaders must also be able to manage (Mohler, 2012). If a leader stops managing then the ability to lead also ceases.

Leadership Theories

Having certain personality traits is one of the early and most common concepts surrounding leadership theories. The “great man” theory supports the belief that leaders are born and not made to be leaders during their lifetime (Spector, 2016). The trait theory supporters feel that these born leaders possess the attributes to set them apart from others. These leaders serve in positions with authority and power because they have these natural attributes that thrive when the need arises.

Studies show that the five dominant leadership traits consist of intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability (Northouse, 2016). Intelligence is defined having the ability to assess issues, possess complex problem-solving skills and demonstrate social judgment competences. This type of intelligence produces a positive impact on one’s capacity for effective leadership. Self-confidence allows a leader to influence others and to portray his belief in his decision, even when others do not agree. Steve Jobs is an example of how his self-esteem kept him pursuing the development of his devices when others doubted his products. Through the commitment to an idea or goal, leaders can engage others to follow the same path. When obstacles continue to hinder a plan, a leader depends on his determination to keep striving and reach the goal. A leader’s perseverance is critical for followers to observe while facing challenges. Integrity is a core quality of honesty and credibility. These qualities allow people to believe that a leader is worthy of their trust and to follow their direction. Lastly, friendly social skills permit a leader to establish stable relationships among groups. The interactive ability of an engaging leader is another classic qualitative leadership trait.

Organizations use various resources to measure an individual's traits. The Leadership Trait Questionnaire (LTQ) in Appendix A is an example of a tool that is intended to assess one's leadership characteristics (Northouse, 2016, p.38-39). This survey is used as a guideline to help with managerial self-awareness and personal development. The results allow the individual to gain better insight into their strengths and areas of improvement to enhance their leadership skills.

Making decisions is what leaders must do and what others expect them to do (Hewlett, 2014). Leaders cannot avoid making decisions, but effective leaders stand out because they are both courageous and skilled at making the right decisions, especially when the stakes are high and the fate of others are at risk (Mohler, 2012). If a leader does not make the right decision, the group's support may not diminish. The fact that a decision is made when necessitated is expected of a leader. Those in authority need to show their leadership courage and confidence when faced with difficult decision-making situations.

One researcher, Fred Kiel, uses the phrase "Keystone Leadership Skills" to include vision, strategy, executive team development and accountability as supporting the decision process (Kiel, 2015). A leader must define and present a clear vision to move forward which requires participation at all levels of an organization. The top executives are not the only people to understand a new vision; it must be embraced by everyone. Similarly, the strategic plan to reach the objectives of the organization's vision must also involve all levels within all departments and divisions. The strategic plan must be communicated with the leader engaging all the staff to join in the joint commitment. These principles and goals are only able to be achieved through an executive team show also portrays the same passion as the leader. These team members need to be able to articulate the same message and demonstrate the same level of cooperative commitment in their roles. Lastly, leaders must create a culture that enforces accountability. The expectations and boundaries need to be clearly defined and disseminated within the organization. The following excerpts from Warren Buffet's memo (Kiel, 2015) to his management teams explain his own boundaries and accountability and behavior:

As I've said in these memos for more than twenty-five years, we can afford to lose money – even a lot of money. But we can't afford to lose reputation – even a shred of reputation... Sometimes your associates will say, "Everybody else is doing it." This rationale is almost always a bad one if it is the main justification for a business action. It is totally unacceptable when evaluating a moral decision..." (p.98)

There are creative leaders who may not appear to be the obvious stereotypical leaders. Natural leaders may project their influence through unconventional means. Since leadership is a process it is not limited to a position (Maxwell, 2011). No matter what position or level one serves within an organization, it is possible for that individual to serve in a leadership role if they influence outcomes and inspire others. Nontraditional creative thinking by diverse groups is recognized as a need for contributing to productivity (Mueller, 2017). These individuals may not have the title within a company structure, but they are influential in helping to move the culture and achieve the strategic goals.

The style and skills approach focuses on the behavior of a leader which can be learned through training. Skills are what leaders can accomplish, whereas traits are who leaders are (Northouse, 2016, p.44). Robert Katz originated the three- skills approach to offset the difficulty in finding people with all the right traits for leadership. Katz believed that there are three basic skills that leaders needed: 1) Technical - The knowledge and technical ability; commonly called the "hands-on" approach, 2) Human - The ability to work well with all levels of people; referred as the "people skills" and 3) Conceptual: This skill refers to the ideas to help the organization to state the mission and move forward (Katz, 1955). It is perceived that these three skills apply to middle management who could develop into lower-level leaders. Unlike the trait approach, the skills approach does assume that leadership behaviors can be learned, rather than just inherited via genetics. The skills and experience of an individual could continue to develop and enhance his leadership abilities.

Through their years of experience and outcomes, the skills approach is relevant to law enforcement and military leaders. After facing difficult scenarios on a daily basis, the ongoing experiences allow these law enforcement officers to learn from each situation. In addition, law enforcement officers use these experiences to identify the best methods for dealing with similar situations. They trend their case experiences to determine the most effective behaviors and procedures to use depending on the circumstance. Parallel to law enforcement, the military training incorporates strong leadership skills among all soldiers. The United States Marine Corps provides leadership training to all the ranks and not just the top positions. Through repetition and continuous experiences, the military utilizes the skills approach for leadership development. The leadership concepts were applied to all roles and never changed. The application of these skills concepts expanded as the rank responsibilities increased (Morgan, C. Lynch & S. Lynch, 2017). By learning from experiences and outcomes, the skills approach deems that an individual can successfully acquire leadership skill.

Personality assessments are available to assist with leadership development. A Marine Corps' top leadership principle is: "Know thyself and seek self-improvement." (Morgan, C. Lynch & S. Lynch, 2017, p.23). To help improve leadership proficiencies, an individual may devise a Learning Plan as a tool for self-development. The template in Appendix B is a format for an individual to document how to apply what is learned and apply it to real life practice (Barsh & Lavoie, 2014). This template can be used for multiple purposes and is intended to help one to become a better leader whether it is for personal growth, team leader development or high-level positions.

The situational leadership approach requires leaders to be flexible and adjust their styles based on circumstances. Circumstances prompt leaders to employ different behaviors to achieve desired results for a specific set of followers in a particular situation. The situational approach

triggers leaders to change their style to accommodate the needs of the followers or situation. One type of leadership style is not always practical for every circumstance. A leader needs to adjust the style to balance his directive and supportive behaviors according to the situation. Directive behaviors include telling people what to do, how to do it, when to do it and who is to do it. They give specific instructions on how to achieve common goals. Supportive behaviors involve the two-way communication skills set. These include listening, encouraging, facilitating, clarifying and giving emotional support.

Not all leaders who have an impact are the obvious choice. The following is a transcript from a decision-making meeting, adapted from an actual business situation. Mueller (2017) states in his book that those in attendance were charged with choosing an electronic health care system.

Rick: Our goal is to make a decision today. We have four options to choose from. We can either go with what exists, Option 1, which is not our mandate, or we can choose Option 2, Option 3, or Option 4.

Jim: Before we start, it's essential that we keep in mind the feasibility constraints we face. We need to coordinate among multiple institutions, states, and across many kinds of technological platforms. We also need to choose a solution we can implement relatively quickly without spending our entire budget in case we need to tweak it later.

Tom: Thanks, Jim, but I think the feasibility issues are secondary to patient privacy concerns. If we get this thing wrong, we could have a bioterrorism situation on our hands or we could dismantle the entire health network as we know it.

Susan: I agree – patient privacy is key. If we lose that, we have no solution. We are in an Internet security war with hackers from China and elsewhere. What happens if the security in place now fails to handle the security issues we already face? I understand option one isn't advisable, but until Internet security improves, I don't see us having any other choice.

[The group is silent for a moment.]

Jada: Let me ask you something Susan. Why is Option 1 a good solution? What problem are we trying to solve?

Susan: Well, I think it's pretty obvious that Option 1 doesn't solve a problem, but it keeps us from having another kind of problem.

Jim: I see the problem is multidimensional. The ultimate goal is to reduce costs in the system. This would also help patients and physicians quickly access data, and that would improve the quality of healthcare. So I guess the point of the solution is to bring value to the patient and the hospitals.

Rick: I agree that the whole point of this committee is to do something. If we do nothing the entire system suffers. Personally, I think Option 4 is really way off in the future. We would have to ramp up the entire system, and that simply isn't feasible. Option 3 is also a stretch, but I don't think Option 2 is enough. Option 2 will simply not allow for a wide enough impact. So I don't see a clear solution here.

Tom: I agree. All the solutions we face have some benefits, but huge downsides. I believe our role is to minimize the downsides. None of the solutions on the table allow us to do that.

Jada: So how do we make this work? Have you discussed how it doesn't work? How can we use what we have to make it feasible and impactful?

Jim: I suppose one option could be to combine solutions. What if we combined the best of Option 2 and Option 3? We can think of this as a progression – we could even add Option 4 a future final step in the chain of progression. That way, our plan would have a short-term implementation strategy, with a long-term trajectory.

Rick: That is a great idea, Jim!

Tom: I think it's reasonable.

Susan: I still think we need to be very careful with respect to security concerns.

Rick: Great. Let's talk about exactly what this new option would look like... (p.177-178).

Most readers would identify Rick or Jim as the leaders of this discussion; however, there is an alternative way to view leadership. Enforcing the agenda of the meeting may be considered the leader's role, but Jada was responsible for the creative direction of the discussion. Her questions opened up the thought process and disrupted the status quo of the conversation. Her prompting to ask the reasons behind the questions permitted the committee members to think "outside of the box" and identify another solution to this issue. Jada is not the obvious choice for the leader in this scenario, but she is the indirect leader who influenced others to come to a conclusion. Society needs to overcome the prevailing biases about the typical leader and accept the standpoint that any person in an influential position is a leader. Conversely, anyone in a leadership position holds considerable influence over others (Pittampalli, 2017) and has the responsibility to use their role for the group's purposes and goals.

Unlike situational leadership, the contingency theory is based on the circumstances changing versus the leader's need to adjust his style. It assumes that the leader cannot change his behavior/style and will not be useful in all situations. Instead, the contingency theory recommends finding the right leader for the right situation. This theory is founded that situations are different and leaders need to be matched to appropriate situations to respond to the issue adequately. The issue may require a leader who has a style that is more directive, supportive, participatory or is purely goal-oriented. This approach is limiting as it is difficult to determine the most appropriate style indicated before the situation entirely unfolds. This theory may apply when prospectively identifying an effective leadership style for an anticipated project, but would not be feasible during a crisis or unplanned emergent occurrence.

Transformational leadership represents a process that results in changing or transforming people. It appeals to the followers' values and sense for a higher purpose and unified goal. Charismatic leaders are similar to transformational leaders as they think about others and their concerns. Charisma is considered a unique personality trait that allows the leader to connect with others and spark movement towards their cause. Energy motivates, but charisma inspires (Sinek, 2009, p.134). Charismatic leaders arouse others into action through their infectious passion, firm conviction in their beliefs and clarity of their purpose. John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. are examples of charismatic leaders who prompted change through their ability to express their purpose and earn loyalty and support.

Although most deem charisma as a born trait that imparts persuasiveness while others believe that this distinguishing feature can be developed. Studies indicate that charisma can be learned by perfecting the ability to engage others. By extending oneself, others will feel that you are present for them and mindful of their needs (Ben-Shahar & Ridgway, 2017). Trait theorists state that specific characteristics are not able to be learned because they are innate and primarily stem from their genetics. Behaviors, however, are observable actions that can be evaluated and modified with appropriate training. Although an individual may not be born with specific personality qualities, researchers believe that the behaviors of a charismatic leader can be developed, thus inducing desired results in followers (Maxwell, 1999).

The servanthood theory is founded on the premise that a true leader serves the best interest of the people and puts their needs first, before their own (Maxwell, 1999). Similar to the charisma training, an individual can be sensitized to project the servanthood approach. Listed below are the ten core characteristics of servanthood leadership identified by Peter Northouse, (2016):

1. Listening – the interactive process of communication with followers
2. Empathy – understanding what followers are thinking and feeling
3. Healing – helping followers with their personal problems
4. Awareness – viewing oneself and the impact on others
5. Persuasion – convincing others to change
6. Conceptualization – visualizing the long-term goals
7. Foresight – predicting future needs
8. Stewardship – taking responsibility for leadership actions
9. Commitment to the growth of people – helping each person in the organization to grow personally and professionally
10. Building community – fosters the creation of a secure community (p. 227-229)

By focusing on these servanthood philosophies, an individual can cultivate the skills set to become a more effective leader.

The trait approach is the most consistent concepts reinforcing that leaders are a special type of people who do extraordinary things. Royal family members who are born into their ruling position through their country's monarchy may have the biological lineage, but do not always exemplify the same regal traits to be an effective leader. Due to genetic factors, the positive leadership qualities that make an individual a great ruler are not automatically bestowed to their children. Conversely, descendants of a weak leader may become a great leader who creates a memorable legacy. History reveals that the inherent leadership gene may also present a negative force with the potential for disastrous outcomes. As with any subset of a group, there is a risk for destructive leaders to expose the dark side of trait leadership. These individuals exemplify the toxic side of leadership that is unethical and used for personal reasons. The same trait characteristics of a distinguished leader can, unfortunately, be used by an immoral person to adversely influence followers producing devastating consequences (Conger, 1990). Adolph Hitler

is an example of a self-centered leader who exploited his ruthless leadership capabilities for his controlling and disturbing intentions.

The issues of morality and ethics are well-regarded factors contributing to leaders who are highly esteemed and respected by others. The qualities of ethical leadership encompass respect, service, integrity, trust, and community (Northouse, 2016). For leaders, integrity is of particular importance as it is considered the bedrock of a leader's foundation (Sinek, 2014) and allows followers to trust in the leader's code of values. Integrity is not an isolated characteristic but integral to the entire leadership process which earns the trust of others. Without trust, followers will not believe in the same vision, and the mission of the organization is abandoned. Similarly, morality plays a central role as a virtue that a leader demonstrates through his important interactions with his followers. Albert Einstein professed that "The most important human endeavor is striving for morality in our actions..."(Michelli, 2014, p.69). Although ethics and morals are regarded as personal, there are instruments devised to help evaluate the perceptions of a leader's moral barometer. Craig and Gustafson (1998) developed the Perceived Leader Integrity Scale (PLIS) questionnaire. The PLIS survey shown in Appendix C provides feedback to employees as part of leadership training and development.

Leadership Development in Healthcare and Conclusion

Healthcare organizations need to be cognizant of the leadership potential during their recruitment efforts. There are various evaluation tools available for human resource professionals to incorporate as a component of the interview process. Larger organizations have the resources to implement a more comprehensive assessment mechanism with extensive steps that are intended to determine the leadership aptitude of an applicant. Most health systems have implemented programs that utilize evaluation tools for their leadership team members. Medical

groups, in particular, should incorporate the examination of a candidate's leadership potential during the initial recruitment and interview process. The American Association for Physician Leadership (AAPL) is an example of a valuable resource to utilize for continued training via online courses. This entity offers levels of coursework and certifications for physician leaders to pursue throughout their career.

The psychology associated with leadership and its impact on a practice should not be minimized. Succession planning is the key element for the continued viability of a successful medical group practice. Succession planning embodies a proactive strategy to begin grooming others to take the leadership roles of the group. This succession planning identification and mentoring begin at the recruitment stage of employment during the interview discussions.

Comparable to the "nature versus nurture" debate, there is no universally accepted response or conclusive finding related to the inquiry to determine if the core elements for an effective leader are innate traits or skills and qualities that are learned. Upon review of the literature, theories and research studies, the characteristics associated with a great leader are inherited traits that can be identified but may vary among individuals and the level of the leadership role. These innate characteristics are continuously enhanced, refined with ongoing development throughout a leader's life. There are selective skills and behaviors acquired through experience and specific leadership style approaches that can be developed with appropriate assessment tools and training programs. Even though there is no one clear response to answer the question concisely, the healthcare industry needs to become more aware of the evolving research on the psychology of leadership. Today's medical groups and organizations would benefit from the integration of methodologies to assist with the early identification of viable leader prospects within their organizations. Leadership carries the responsibility to make an organization better than it is today. Recruiting and mentoring the next generation of qualified and talented leaders is essential for the viability of any organization. The sustained success of any entity is dependent on this constant transitioning of effective leadership for future years.

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