

LECTURE 6: SKILLS LEADERSHIP THEORY APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP (Part 2)

The need for a skills leadership theory positioned in post-modernism

While modernism includes all things behavioural, scientific, logical, empirical, and male-dominated, post-modernism stresses the deconstruction of modernism (English, 1999) and the critique of truths applied to all humanity (Lyotard, 1984). Cannella (1998) stated that post-modernism encourages the creation of “openness to the unexplained, the ambiguous, the hidden” and constructs such questions as, “What are the messages that underlie institutionalized educational systems as they are applied to diversity?” Post-modernism challenges:

- the hegemony of modernism to center and marginalize, creating positions of privilege, dominance and exclusion, silencing alternative views and voices (English, 1997); and
- the ideas of “progress” inherent in the presentation of the development of a “field” (English, 1997).

Additionally, post-modernism:

- examines regimes of truth, language, and power that have dominated thought (Slattery, 1995, as cited in Cannella, 1998);
- socially critiques institutionalized systems and the truth assumptions underlying those systems (Slattery, 1995, as cited in Cannella, 1998);
- recognizes that those who have been identified as different have been labeled the “other”, especially related to gender and racial perspectives (Slattery, 1995, as cited in Cannella, 1998); and
- promotes a discourse that both accepts and critiques diverse cultural practices (Slattery, 1995, as cited in Cannella, 1998).

Modernism fails to take into consideration new ideas transformed from old and presents a case for the construction of discontinuities as a series of shifting centres, or paradigms, each with a new constellation of revolving facts (English, 1999). From a post-modern perspective, the shifts come to resemble “continuities”, and there is no paradigm shift (English, 1999). In other words, post-modernism does not advocate a binary “either/or” criteria for the existence of new theories over old theories, but merely a co-existence or continuity of theories that are mutually co-dependent and, thus, suspended one in the other. This, then, is the reasoning behind constant theory analysis: not to replace the old, but merely to continue the dialogue.

The synergistic leadership theory is positioned in post-modern thought in that it addresses the challenges and promotes the views of post-modernism. Additionally, we do not advocate that

a new theory replaces old ones; rather, that the new theory be accepted into the discourse of leadership development issues.

The synergistic leadership theory development

Theory, herein, is defined as “any general set of ideas that guide action” (Flinders and Mills, 1993, p. xii), including “everyday explanations of a particular event or characteristic” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 31). The SLT theory development approach employed was qualitative. According to Morse (1997), there is a difference in quantitatively (QNT) and qualitatively (QLT) derived theories. QNT is “invented” or created by investigators through processes of reasoning and deduction using available knowledge, the wisdom of personal experience, and responding – a process known as “theorizing.” The theory is created apart from empirical data, but the results of previous empirical research may comprise some components of the theory. QLT is constructed from the empirical world during the process of inquiry and is as accurate as possible, representing the empirical world. Data analysis consists of organizing reality with inferences that are subsequently systematically confirmed in the process of inquiry. Theories developed through QLT are rich in description, and the theoretical boundaries have been derived from the context and not from the researcher’s arbitrary goals for delimiting the scope. QLT produces a theory that resembles reality.

Development and initial validation and procedural fidelity

Triangulation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) was used in this qualitative theory development to address questions of validity. Denzin (1978) identified four basic types of triangulation; we employed three of these:

1. data triangulation – the use of a variety of data sources in a study;
2. investigator triangulation – the use of several different researchers or evaluators; and
3. methodological triangulation – the use of multiple methods to study a single problem.

Data triangulation occurred by using multiple sources of data – current books regarding females’ realities, current research reflective of women’s voice, and data from interviews with women school executives and scholars in the field of educational and management leadership preparation programs. As conceptualizations emerged, interplay of the data occurred in recursive discourse and investigation. Investigator triangulation occurred using three principal investigators in the coding and interpretation of data. Methodological triangulation occurred with document content analysis of textbooks and research studies, interviews of female school executives, and open-ended surveys.

Procedural fidelity was monitored by recording times and processes of major changes in the database, providing a history of our analysis processes.

- Data were gathered from an exhaustive review of the literature, books and research studies related to females in leadership or management positions. Both educational and trade books were used.

- A purposive sample of 30 women, nationally, from education and business were selected for inclusion in the study. Included were: ten women school executives from urban (three), suburban (four), and rural (three) school districts (must have been in this position for three years); ten women executives of corporations (must have been in the position for three years); five women from educational leadership programs and five women from business leadership programs at senior level professorships.
- Data were used from books and research studies regarding women's ways of leading.
- In browsing of documents or the coding of data, the researchers created categories (each investigator separately at first, then combined in consensus, after discussion).
- As new understandings developed, 20 women leaders were asked to review the data and provide feedback.
- Explorations of meanings were further explored through open-ended interviews (transcribed and entered as additional data for further exploration) with ten female scholars – school executives – and with ten women who were teaching in leadership preparation programs. These explorations of meanings, linking them with wider data, were reflected upon in context.
- Notes were made and discussed, furthering the development of the data.
- Data discussions illuminated the concept and provided clarification, exploration, and “dimensionalizing” of concepts.
- Additional annotations were added to the concept formation.
- All results became the basis of further questioning and further in-depth recursive dialogue.

These processes support the principle of qualitative research and grounded theory method in which inquiry is interactive, building on the results of previous inquiries and constructing new ideas out of old ones.

Description of the synergistic leadership theory

Based on a systems theory approach (Banathy, 1992; Senge, 1990; Von Bertalanffy, 1976) and inclusive of women's voice, yet applicable to both male and female leaders, the synergistic leadership theory [1] is relational and interactive, rather than linear, with four factors interacting in substantial ways:

1. leadership behavior;
2. organizational structure;
3. external forces; and
4. attitudes, beliefs, and values.

The tetrahedron, Fuller's (1979) interpretation of the minimal system with the fewest possible points, is the basis for the model of the theory. The four factors of our theory are identified in four stellar points with six interaction pairs. Among these complex interrelationships, or interaction pairs, are situated experiences related to each other in some way. These related experiences are thoughts defining insiderness and outsiderness of the tetrahedron – insiderness being the events within or the interactions present within the defined planes and outsiderness being the all the rest of the experiences or events outside the defined or considered set. The model can be rotated around any axis and still retain its shape – any corner can become the apex and, therefore, no structural hierarchy exists. All elements in the considered set are interconnected. We place on the inside both male and female leadership behaviours, a range between closed and open organizational structures, and infinite possibilities of external forces and attitudes, beliefs, and values.

This theory has multiple vantage points, taking a macro perspective of the interactions among beliefs, external forces, people, and organizations. Such perspectives are critical in creating complete pictures or realities. For example, if Michaelangelo had focused only from the one vantage point of a hand in painting the Sistine Chapel, he would not have created the masterpiece depicting interaction between heaven and earth. Just as the artist's rendition of reality must be from multiple vantage points with the interplay between subject or object and environment, so must ours.

In considering the reality of schools, if we were to focus only on leadership behaviour, we would lose sight of the broad canvas and the nature of the interactive system of organizations, external forces, beliefs, attitudes, and values and leadership behaviour. Bolman and Deal (1997) advocated that successful leaders consider the broad view of the context in which they work. When determining success or effectiveness of leaders, if we were to focus only on the leader who may be perceived as ineffective, overlooking the many tensions and dynamics interacting to create this perception of the "ineffective leader," we would not be considering all pertinent information and we would not have taken the broad view of contextual factors into consideration.

The four factors of the synergistic leadership theory

The synergistic leadership theory includes four factors and advocates multiple perspectives. More than a way of framing and reframing concepts of the organization or of leadership, SLT emphasizes the dynamic interactions of the four stellar points (four factors) of the tetrahedral model (Figure 1).

Factor 1: attitudes, beliefs, and values

The first factor of the theory is attitudes, beliefs, and values. According to Wolff and Ball (1999), personal, community, and organizational perceptions and decisions are influenced by beliefs, attitudes, and values. Daresh (2001) recognized the interconnectedness of attitudes, Values, and beliefs with the leader, others, and the organization.

In the theory, as shown on the model in Figure 1, attitudes, beliefs, and values are depicted as dichotomous, as an individual or group would either adhere or not adhere to specific attitudes, beliefs, or values at a certain point in time. Dichotomous examples include:

- believes in the importance of professional growth for all individuals including self or does not believe that professional development is important;

- has an openness to change; does not have an openness to change;

- values diversity; does not value diversity; or

- believes that integrity is important for all involved in schooling; does not value integrity.

Beliefs can change as new information is processed, while attitudes and values are more enduring. Daresh (2001) defined attitudes as “clusters of individual beliefs that survive the immediate moment” (p. 31). Attitudes are powerful, and as Daresh (2001) pointed out, “we can certainly have incorrect attitudes based on false beliefs; this does not make the potency of the attitude any less real” (p. 32). Values become more permanent realizations of beliefs and attitudes. Furthermore, Daresh (2001) emphasized the importance of a leader’s recognition of values and acknowledged that leaders must develop the capacity to examine their own values because they must also be able to examine the values of those with whom they work.

Values, attitudes, and beliefs are the foundation for guiding principles, and Covey (1992) indicated that “principles apply at all times in all places. They surface in the form of values, ideas, norms, and teachings that uplift, ennoble, fulfill, empower, and inspire people” (p. 19). The theory asserts that these manifestations of principles will be tensional if interactions between the attitudes, beliefs, values, and principles and the other three factors are not congruent.

Factor 2: leadership behaviour

The second factor of the theory, leadership behaviour, derives directly from the literature on male and female leadership behaviours and is depicted as a range of behaviours from autocratic to nurturer. Many reports ascribe specific leadership behaviours as more masculine or more feminine (e.g. Avila, 1993; Chaffins *et al.*, 1995; Durgin, 1998; Grogan, 1996, 1998; Gupton and Slick, 1996; Helgeson, 1990; Hurty, 1995; LeCompte, 1996; Loden, 1985; McCreight, 1998; McGrew-Zoubi, 1993; Palmer, 1983; Pigford and Tonnsen, 1993; Reardon, 1995; Ropers-Huilman, 1998; Shakeshaft, 1986; Shakeshaft, 1989; Sheehy, 1997; Smith and Smits, 1994; “The Top 500,” 1998; Valentine, 1995). The range of behaviors include those ascribed to female leaders, such as interdependence, cooperation, receptivity, merging, acceptance, and being aware of patterns, wholes, and context; as well as those ascribed to

male leaders, including self-assertion, separation, independence, control, and competition (Marshall, 1993).

Factor 3: external forces.

External forces, as depicted in the model, are those influencers outside the control of the organization or the leader that interact with the organization and the leader and that inherently embody a set of values, attitudes and beliefs. Significant external influencers or forces relate to local, national, and international community and conditions, governmental regulations, laws, demographics, cultural climate, technological advances, economic situations, political climate, family conditions, and geography. Additionally, Norton *et al.* (1996) include “parents, taxpayers, business, professional community, and so on” (p. 339). External forces within Getzel’s (1978) social systems model are the local community, administrative community, social community, instrumental community, ethnic community, and ideological community. Getzel’s model of community, in our own interpretation, includes existing hegemonic structures that also interact with other factors within the theory. These examples of external forces, as well as others, including those listed in the model, interact in significant, non-trivial ways with the other factors in the synergistic leadership theory.

Factor 4: organizational structure

Organizational structure refers to characteristics of organizations and how they operate. The synergistic leadership theory model (Figure 1) depicts organizational structures as ranging from open, feminist organizations to tightly bureaucratic ones. Bureaucratic organizations include division of labor, rules, hierarchy of authority, impersonality, and competence (Lunenburg and Ornstein, 1996), whereas feminist organizations are characterized by practices such as participative decision making, systems of rotating leadership, promotion of community and cooperation, and power sharing (Koen, 1984; Rothschild, 1992; Martin, 1993).

Feminist researchers examine and critique organizational bureaucracy and hierarchy and contest the impersonal, role-based, and instrumental social relations characteristic of bureaucracy (Morgan, 1994). Feminist organization theory asserts that organizations of any kind should pay attention to the personal needs of members, not just the instrumental needs of the organization (Morgan, 1994).

The feminist organization is simultaneously a workplace, a site of political engagement, and the social center of employees’ lives. In contrast to the bureaucratic model where employees are expected to leave their personal problems at home, here personal problems are often shared. Feminist organizations are driven by the ideas, actions, sentiments, and values of the current staff. As a result, the staff tend to feel highly invested in these types of organizations and to sense a high congruence between themselves and the organization because they participated in shaping its rules, goals, and practices (Morgan, 1994).

Studies of feminist organizations have rarely surfaced in the well-known leadership and management literature (Ferguson, 1994; Feree and Martin, 1995), nor have they surfaced in mainstream leadership theory (Irby *et al.*, 1999). There exist organizational theories[2] which depict a contingency approach to organizational structure and which embrace some feminine leadership behaviours; however, no leadership theory, other than the synergistic leadership theory, openly acknowledges the feminine organization as a major component.

Aspects particular to the synergistic theory of leadership

Six aspects particular to the theory are:

1. female leaders were included in its development;
2. female leaders may be impacted by external forces, organizational structures, and beliefs, attitudes and values in ways male leaders are not, and vice versa;
3. female leadership behaviours may interact with the factors in ways unlike the leadership behaviours of males;
4. the theory acknowledges a range of behaviours and organizational structures inclusive of those considered “feminine”;
5. leaders at various positions or levels, i.e. teacher leaders to superintendents, may be impacted by the factors of the theory in different ways; and
6. the interaction of the factors can cause harmony or tension for the educational leader.

Purposes and applications of the synergistic leadership theory

The purposes of the synergistic leadership theory are to:

1. add to existing leadership theory to include:
 - a theory situated in post-modernism;
 - a theory reflective of females’ leadership experiences;
 - a theory applicable to both male and female leaders; and
 - a theory that addresses gender, cultural, and political issues;
2. enhance relevancy of theory presented in leadership training programs; and
3. create a framework for describing interactions and dynamic tensions among leadership behaviours, organizational structures, external forces, and attitudes and beliefs.

The synergistic leadership theory can be practically applied to educational settings in a variety of ways:

(1) The SLT is not focused on just the leader or just the organization; rather, the theory calls attention to a number of interconnected behaviours, beliefs, values, structures, and forces that impact the leader, the people within the organization, and the structure of the organization. As a result, one can analyze and describe particular interactions that may account for tension, conflict, or harmony at specific points in time or over time. If an analysis of all factors is conducted and it is found that tension exists between even two of the factors, then the effectiveness of the leader or the organization itself can be negatively impacted.

(2) Descriptive of the holistic environment of leading and of those lead within an organization, the SLT can serve to build an understanding of that environment to aid in decisions made by the leader. For example, leaders cannot make decisions in isolation, failing to take into account the impact their decisions will have upon the organization (the people within) and external forces.

(3) The SLT is beneficial in determining why or why not an individual is perceived as successful within the organization. For example, if an individual's leadership behaviours are more inclusive of the feminine dimensions of leadership, but the organization is a closed bureaucratic one, with external forces also supporting such, then the tetrahedron, with the SLT's four factors as shown in the model in Figure 1, will be distorted, out of shape, and inharmonious, and the leader will not be perceived as successful. If the leader can determine the specific tension or breakdown in the four factors of the SLT, then he/she is better positioned to alter those negative perceptions by:

- trying to change the organizational structure and/or the external forces;
- attempting to accommodate and adopt another set of leadership behaviours; and
- realigning personal values and belief structures to that of the organization and/or the external forces. It is possible that the individual will determine that he/she does not "fit" within the organization or that the change effort is too great – subsequently, exiting the organization may be the best decision.

(4) Not only is the SLT beneficial in determining "fit" while an individual is working within an organization, it can also be of assistance in job selection. The theory can be used in organizational and personal leadership analysis prior to accepting a particular leadership position. Once the individual analyzes his/her own leadership behaviors, the prospective organizational structure, the external forces, and his/her own values, beliefs, and attitudes, as well as those held by key people in the organization, the individual can then predict whether he/she can be successful and whether he/she can maximize the organization's success. The lack of congruency among the four factors would indicate a lack of "fit" for the specific position.

(5) The SLT fosters reflective practice, as it encourages the individual to engage in self-assessment. Specifically, the SLT requires the individual to assess his/her leadership behaviors in relation to the organizational structure, external forces, and attitudes, beliefs, and values. Constant vigilance in the engagement of reflection on whether or not the four factors are harmonious or contentious is critical to leadership and organizational success.

Validation of the theory

In bringing a new theory to the forefront, validation is essential. To some extent, the theory development itself, through QLT, is a means for doing so. Combining QLT with empirical validation, the synergistic leadership theory:

- possesses explanatory power across a range of positions and by gender (generalizability) (Trautman, 2000);

- is practical and useful in understanding interactive systems (Trautman, 2000);

- is parsimonious (simply integrates a large number of variables) (Holtkamp, 2001); and

- promotes dialogue around a model that is cognizant of female, as well as male, realities (Trautman, 2000; Truslow, 2001).

Reliability has been established *in situ* in the context of the leader, the external forces, the organization, and values, beliefs, and attitudes (Trautman, 2000; Truslow, 2001). Synergistic leadership theory has been validated across American ethnic cultures and geographic locations (Holtkamp, 2001; Trautman, 2000) and is currently being validated internationally (Schlosberg, 2001).

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