

THE SKILL OF LEADERSHIP

What an elusive concept leadership is! To understand leadership we have to study the interactions between people and situation. There is a tendency in the literature to imply that leadership is a thing of a force that causes people to behave. It is neither; it is an outcome of an interaction. If it has any real existence it is the eyes of the beholders or in the imaginations of the managers who want to possess it!

LEADERSHIP AS A SKILL

All human skills are purposeful graded sequences of actions between a person and an object. The purpose of leadership is to influence behaviour. The purpose is influencing the behaviour of the individual, and even the behaviour of the manager and the organization, just as a skilled musician changes the behaviour of a silent instrument and a quiet concert hall into a glorious sound. The key objective of the leadership intervention is clear; the member of staff should leave the interaction able and willing to do their job better. It is a small conceptual leap to realize that this is exactly one crucial, if not the crucial, indicator of effective leadership behaviour.

Defining leadership as a skill has many practical implications. People who want to acquire them can only acquire skills. They can only be acquired by personal practice with feedback from a coach or tutor. Watching a video or another person may be necessary but is certainly not a sufficient way to acquire them. Then they can only be acquired by practice over time. It may come easier to some people because of some natural aptitudes (and it is precisely defining these that is the focus of leadership potential research) but even for those gifted people further practice is always required to realize their potential. But practice alone is not sufficient. For skill to be developed it has to be with feedback about the effects and effectiveness of the actions. If the practitioners are capable then self-feedback is possible, but having a coach or a tutor, as every serious sportsperson or musician know, is by far the better way to obtain insightful and powerful feedback.

THE COMPONENTS OF THE SKILL OF LEADERSHIP

The literature on human skills is vast, as they are a key factor in the economic and cultural success of a society. All skills have three components, cognitive, perceptual and motor. The structure of the skill of leadership can be set out as follows:

Cognitive: the knowing, thinking, being, deciding, component that encompasses such terms as 'qualities' 'traits', 'abilities', 'inclinations', 'values', and includes such things as 'purpose', 'determination', 'initiative', 'courage', 'trust', 'vision', 'strategic thinking', and many more.

Perceptual: the seeing, listening, responding, diagnosing component that involves interpersonal sensitivity to information, signals and cues; self-awareness and obtaining balance or alignment between the needs and aspirations of all members of the group or organization.

Motor: the looking, doing, sounding, moving, communicating component seen in interpersonal interactions at individual, group and organizational meetings.

It is putting all these together into a purposeful, integrated whole that is the objective of those who are striving for a model of leadership.

Many researchers are actively studying the cognitive component. A race is on to find the 'magic ingredient' or a 'formula' that explains all leadership. At the moment 'charisma' appears out and 'vision' is the front-runner and fame awaits the person who first explains exactly what it is and how, if at all, it can be inculcated or developed in managers! We gather those individuals who have been bestowed the mantle 'effective leaders' and listen attentively to their recollections of their experience and actions through out their career. It is hoped that from these preachings the 'magic ingredient' or the 'formula' will emerge.

The perceptual component would appear to have contextual, even sociological and political implications, for an organization, what and whose needs are to be balanced or aligned and how? For example, for a working group to be effective its leader needs to balance the four dimensions of work group processes: goal-setting, problem solving, participating and supporting. How best to do this requires a balance between the interactions of humanistic-encouraging and oppositional behaviour. Successful work groups, in terms of both their ability to make effective decisions and the satisfaction of the members, were those where the leaders used their verbal skills to gain roughly equal proportions of questions and statements amongst the four dimensions through using their own contributions to the discussions. Some kind of balance is an essential component of all skills. The task of obtaining *balance* in an organization amongst all the conflicting needs of the stakeholders is an under-researched area organizational management. It begins with discovering what members of an organization think and feel through meetings, surveys and just by listening and observing when walking about. Then taking in all this information and diagnosing what needs to be changed *next* to keep the organization in some kind of balance.

It is the motor component of the skill of leadership that involves the muscles of the larynx, face, eyes, and practically all the skeletal as well. It results in saying the right thing in the right way at the right time. This is where timing is critical, not the time taken for an interaction, nor the speed of reaction.

THE VERBAL BEHAVIOUR OF LEADERS

What managers actually say when interacting with their staff is critical in achieving their objectives and what they write in memos and emails as well. How it is said is also important, but unless this non-verbal behaviour is outside the range of what is usually socially acceptable it is the verbal behaviour of the managers that determines whether or not they will be seen as an effective leader. Verbal behaviour seems to be divided into four components: gathering information, giving information, influencing behaviour, and handling emotion. All of these can be achieved by the appropriate use of questions and statements.

This can sound simple and obvious, but this is often the outcome of scientific research. It is frequently said that research in the behavioural sciences is making more precise what most people already know, and few would dispute that. It is the implications of these findings that are complex and important. When observing and listening to managers interacting with their staff the effects and effectiveness of different kinds of questions soon becomes very apparent. Much has been written about styles of leadership, most of it not very useful for management development. However, when the different kinds of questions used in managerial interactions are counted, it is quickly noticed that a relationship exists between:

- Open question and democratic participative transformational leadership
- Probing questions and concerned leadership
- Closed questions and detached/transactional leadership

- Leading questions and authoritarian leadership
- Multiple questions and inept leadership

So a simple practical implication is that if an authoritarian style of management of an organization is required to be reduced and the participative style increased, and even to create empowerment, then what needs to be done is decrease the proportion of leading questions used by manager when interacting with their staff and increases the proportion of open ones. This is rather easier said than done, old habits die hard, and there are also cultural complications. In society where authoritarianism is the custom, members of staff may feel very uncomfortable when asked open questions rather than the closed and leading that they have grown to accept. But what is the alternative for changing the managerial style of an organization and even a whole culture? Also, what is the starting point for turning an ailing organization into a healthy one? Working on how managers talk with their staff is a relatively painless way to administer a “dose of leadership” to star the process of organizational change.

SKILL TRAINING

Unlike a concept or belief a person can only acquire a skill if they want to acquire it. A skill cannot be taught, it can be demonstrated but then it has to be learned. It seems that if only managers put as much effort into learning how to interact with people as many of them do when learning how to interact with a golf ball, then many of our management problems would not exist today. The unwillingness to do this, unlike learning golf, may be due to the ‘loss of face’ that a manager may experience when owning up to needing some further training in how to talk to people. Unless and until the owning up is done, interpersonal skill development, and therefore leadership development will not happen. A start to applying this notion that leadership is a skill in an organization can be made with working on the growth of self-awareness and self-analysis in the managers. Encouraging them to accept feedback about their interpersonal behaviour from their staff and colleagues can do this. Some organization have found a scheme of formally arranged ‘learning partners’, from different departments in the organization, to be useful in bringing about the giving and receiving of feedback. This gets around the sensitivities of discussing interpersonal behaviour with close colleagues.

LEADERSHIP AS AN OUTCOME

Defining leadership as a skill is a necessary but not sufficient factor in explaining it. The outcomes of sporting or musical skills can be observed and assessed through winning and audience reaction. The criteria for observing and measuring leadership are far less exact and more subjective, and this bedevils all leadership research. The macro indices or economic and organizational success are suspect as people often work well despite the leadership they experience or suffer! The micro ideas of motivation, commitment and job satisfaction are notoriously difficult to define, let alone, measure. The full understanding of a phenomenon does not usually emerge until measures of it have been developed, and leadership is along way off having any. In the meantime, much work needs to be done on the components with the hope that it will be not too long before they can be put together into a coherent whole, and integrated skill. With the bits that can be developed having effective training courses for them and the bits that cannot have valid selection devices available.

Human skills are magnificent things. How better the world would be if everyone could be managed skilfully. The search for a magic formula for leadership will continue. In the meantime much can be achieved through the somewhat slow, laborious, sometimes painful, growth of skilful interpersonal interaction.