Leader-Follower Theory and the Transformational Organization.
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Abstract

Leaders often seek the secret formula of leadership theory in their pursuit of effective organizational transformation. They desire a method that will aid them in efficiently moving their organization towards specified goals and objectives with the least amount of resistance. The goal of this paper is to address the leader-follower theory and its use in the transformational organization. This paper will address the attributes of humility and servant leadership and its contribution to the effectiveness of the leader-follower theory towards organizational transformation.

Introduction

It has been said that to lead one must know how to follow. The Bible says, “Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave to all” (Mark 10:42-43). This concept of the first becomes last to be first conflicts with the contemporary understanding that leadership is a “process by which a person influences others to accomplish an objective.” Unfortunately, the idea of leadership by influence has been abused over time. Leadership by its very nature presumes that there are followers to lead. Yet one may conclude that leadership is far more complex than a simple theory and any attempt to sum up leadership may fall short of an all-inclusive definition. One can note that it is mono-cultural to believe that the American definition of top-down leadership is the universal end-all to such a complex matter. One viable solution against this belief system may come through the leader-follower theory.

A leader-follower is simply where “at any one time, leaders assume followers’ roles and followers assume leadership roles.” Pitron says that the leader-follower implies a system of “two or more persons working together.” This is certainly in conflict with the contemporary leadership approach which appears to have historically relied upon a top-down or even the great man model of leadership. These models approach leadership as a “do as I say” and typically benefit only the leader. Bennis, as quoted by Gilbert and Matviuk said, “the academic circle of society still tends to focus on leadership as positions contained by one person within the organization [yet] some researchers and scholars began to question if traditional top-down leadership theory is still relevant.” Gilbert and Matviuk state that within a leader follower relationship “followership escapes the box of simple subordination and obedience of organizational tasks and opens up opportunities for innovative followership that generates and enhances growth within their leader.” Such a reciprocal relationship would not only benefit the leader, but also the organization and the subordinates within. Higher job satisfaction and greater efficiency have been observed as such benefits.

To build a transformational organization one must understand that change is directly tied to how one views their employees as well as self. One option towards transformation is that of servant leadership. A servant leader will put others before self. This is certainly in contrast to the top-down and great man theories. Miller points out that with a servant leader, “strong organizations are more important to them than egoistic reputations.” Winston illustrates this notion with the Beatitudes of Matthew 5:3-12 which encourage us to avoid “pride and to see yourself as being empty.” Miller further states, “no one is really
eager to be managed, but the entire world is hungry to be led.” Miller’s statement underscores the need for a humble spirit within leadership. Winston states that a “humble leader shows respect to all, whether they are superiors or subordinates, because the leader who is poor in spirit recognizes that many people know more than he or she does and, as such, shows respect to everyone.” A leader’s humbleness can be observed by their level of confidence. Traditionally “confidence in leadership is primarily considered something positive and beneficial.” However, too much confidence may limit the leader’s ability to see “deficiencies and expectations of positive outcomes – and their effects on the leader’s performance.” According to Schings, overconfidence leads to performance issues and for “those who were overconfident – generated the worst plans and visions.” In a top-down leadership, an overconfidence scenario would view ones employees as “costs to be reduced.” However, Pfeffer suggests that with the “right perspective and mind set, leaders can determine how to implement high performance management practices.” Miller reminds us that “tradition walks looking backwards. It has for a major _aw its ability to keep us from seeing all the wondrous possibilities of the moment.” To best become a transformational organization, one could argue that we must break from the traditional state of “this is the way we’ve always done it” and look to other possibilities.

Based on research one may conclude that a transformational organization should embrace the leader-follower concept. The leader-follower will be someone who puts their needs last as they seek to humbly serve those around them. A leader-follower understands that they don’t know it all and that deferment through followership is an effective method to getting the job done. Evidence has shown that organizations where the leader-follower methodology is in use will yield individuals who desire investment in their jobs and the organization as a whole. One could argue that a servant-hearted leader-follower will generate the most effective plans and visions for the transformation of their organization.

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