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Subject

Date

Determining the Most Effective Leadership Style

Over the years, the concept of leadership has been the subject of numerous studies because of the growing recognition of its effect on the optimal performance of groups. Thus, it would be of paramount importance for management practitioners to acquire a fundamental understanding of the concept especially in today's work environment where there are continually increasing levels of competition as well as diversity.

A leadership style which has gained greater popularity in recent research literature is called transformational leadership. Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, and Fetter (107) defined this style as involving unifying members in order to achieve a common objective in the future, but at the same time still establishing a nurturing work environment where the needs of individuals would not be simply overlooked.

In one study on the effects of transformational leadership Braun, Peus, Weisweiler, and Frey (270-283) attempted to establish its association with factors that included trust levels, job satisfaction and team performance within an academic work environment. Utilizing almost 400 respondents that formed 30 teams, it was established that transformational leadership would not only be associated with positive effects on the performance of the group, but also the level of job satisfaction of members. At the same time, the amount of trust that the members possessed towards their leaders was found to have influenced assessments on transformational leadership at a personal level, while the perceived level of trust within the team was found to affect evaluations of transformational leadership within the level of the group as well as job satisfaction. On the other hand, establishing trust in the team using transformational leadership was not seen as a factor that enhanced team

performance. Rather than focusing on this aspect, leaders were advocated to instead leverage knowledge sharing as a mediator between group performance and transformational leadership.

Boies, Fiset, and Gill (1980-1994) studied how utilizing transformational leadership would be able to affect the level of creativity in teams. Their research had made use of leaders who were assigned a particular approach that they would utilize in communicating with team members such as intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation or control conditions. Intellectual stimulation was seen as the key factor for fostering creativity, while the accomplishment of tasks would be achieved through the use of inspirational motivation. At the same time, the trust which existed among the members of the team also led to the sharing of knowledge and open communication which further enhanced creativity. In order to increase the level of trust among members, activities which focused on finding demographic similarities as well as increasing the amount of knowledge about each other were seen as critical.

Another aspect of transformational leadership was explored by Zhang, Cao, and Tjosvold (1988-1993) who set out to study how this style would be related to group performance as well as their approach to conflicts. In a study where over 100 groups from a government-owned telecommunications organization from China served as respondents, transformational leadership was found to have been strongly linked with a cooperative rather than a competitive conflict management approach. However, the researchers also clarified that a competitive conflict management approach would not adversely affect the performance of the group. This situation was attributed to the distinct traditions of Chinese culture where a person's honour or "saving face" for other members of the group had been perceived as being of paramount importance, especially in terms of establishing lifelong relationships.

Although transformational leadership has received considerable attention in studies, other leadership styles have also been explored in the literature. Daft (45) stated that the autocratic style can be categorized as part of the behaviour theories of leadership. A leader would be classified as being autocratic if he or she prefers to centralize authority, along with exercising power based primarily on one's formal position, compulsion and control of rewards. This particular leadership style was explored in the study by De Hoogh, Greer, and Den Hartog (687-701) which involved more than 200 respondents who worked for a multinational financial services firm located in the Netherlands. Rather than being established as immediately being detrimental to group performance, autocratic leadership was seen as being affected by the presence of power struggles within a group. When power struggles were absent, autocratic leadership was seen as a way for establishing a dependable and stable group environment. On the other hand, when power struggles were present, members would be more inclined to see autocratic leadership as the attempt of leaders to exercise absolute power. Based on these findings, the performance of the group would likewise be affected, as the psychological safety fostered in the former scenario would lead to positive performance outcomes, while the perceived inequity in the latter scenario would lead to adverse outcomes for group performance.

Daft (45) emphasised that effectiveness of utilising a democratic or autocratic approach to leadership would be influenced by the decision-making capability of followers as well as the extent of the skills gap that exists between leaders and members. Each approach would also have its own distinct benefits and disadvantages, such as when autocratic leadership would be more favourable when time constraints would require decisions to be made immediately. A democratic approach may be more favourable when there is sufficient time to get the inputs of members, which can lead to higher levels of commitment.

Another type of leadership called shared leadership would share similarities to the transformational and democratic leadership approaches, although in a more general sense. Shared leadership would utilize the distribution of different leadership roles among the different members of a group. D’Innocenzo, Mathieu, and Kukenberger (1-28) conducted a review of past research studies where they were able to conclude that such an approach would be beneficial to the performance of the group. However, it was also seen that shared leadership would actually decrease in relation to the level of task complexity.

The concept of shared leadership was likewise explored within an e-learning environment by Lee, Seo, and Choi (47-56) where it was found to have been positively associated with creativity. Diversity in terms of the courses and gender of respondents were seen as factors that also enhanced the levels of creativity in groups.

While the studies included in this paper would hardly be exhaustive, it can be readily inferred that leaders must practice due diligence before fully subscribing to any particular leadership style. Aside from a leader’s personal preferences, the idiosyncrasies of particular groups, especially those arising from cultural differences, must be given due consideration prior to choosing what leadership style to utilize.

People in management or leadership positions should not feel constrained to continually apply a particular leadership approach because of its current level of popularity among academic or professional circles. Rather, leaders may choose to apply various leadership approaches until they discover not only what concept they would feel the most comfortable with, but also what would be quantitatively proven as being beneficial for their organization. This is especially true in the case of businesses where maintaining a profitable bottom line that assures various stakeholders of fair returns must not be taken for granted. Leaders would thus be responsible for assuring that their approach would make their teams responsive to shifting industry conditions and even changing their group composition.

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