# LEARNING TO DIFFERENTIATE LEADERSHIP FROM MANAGERIAL POSITION

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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes a rationale for the development of individual leadership abilities and skills in manners contrary to traditional approaches to instruction in leadership theory. Traditional leadership perspectives reflect mechanistic and bureaucratic concepts that portray the organization as an authority hierarchy with influence flowing down from the top. Leadership is thus an executive function and prerogative. Although individual leadership theories often say, in passing, that anyone can be a leader, preoccupation is with authority-figure performance. However, educators need to become concerned with teaching students and members of organizations how to recognize and act on opportunities and responsibilities to exert influence without the benefit of managerial position. The paper also discusses an attempt to use these concepts at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater during the Spring, 1996 semester. Analysis of student performance indicated that teaching people to comprehend and experience leadership from a non-positional perspective may not be done easily for some types of individuals.

## BACKGROUND

Organizational theorists and practitioners strive unceasingly to categorize and define the qualities of managerial effectiveness, to develop means to identify and train people with managerial potential, and to select from applicant pools those most likely to exhibit superior performance in positions of hierarchical responsibility. Both the community of scholars and the general society believe that managerial effectiveness and organizational performance will be enhanced by selecting managers who possess superior leadership abilities-- in effect defining leadership as the ability of a person to behave in ways that more positively and effectively mobilize members of organizations to act for the greater good of all concerned.

The argument here, however, is that leadership is not simply a 'function of the executive." Rather, as influence, leadership can be exerted not only down, but also up and across the organization. More importantly, leadership theory is misrepresented in management education. Educators transmit to students the message that leadership will be done to them in the early stages of their careers. Then, upon assignment to senior positions, leadership apparently becomes something they will do to others. Thus, subordinate passivity tends to be inculcated. This educational strategy is inappropriate to the needs of modern organizations.

Mitroff and Pondy (1978) have noted that educators are comfortable with traditional position-oriented leadership and management theories because they are easily analyzed and decomposed into parts. Such theories are seen as being "scientific," "precise" and "rigorous." Academicians base their careers on years of training in objective analysis, and are comfortable in emphasizing traditionally accepted and tested theories. As a result of the emphasis on traditional theories, on the samples used to develop them, and on the examples used to explain them, students would naturally infer that leadership is a positional phenomenon. Unfortunately, reliance on traditional and comfortable theories fails students and organizations by not providing them with an understanding of the tools and flexibility necessary for greater personal effectiveness. Hidden is the idea that leadership in organizations can be a responsibility of all members.

The notion of leadership as a positionally defined concept finds its roots in the time-honored machine metaphor of organization. Built upon Weber's

(1946) bureaucratic theory, this model emphasizes precision, speed. clarity, regularity, reliability, and efficiency. These are achieved through creating fixed task division, hierarchical supervision, and detailed rules and regulations (Morgan. 1986. pp. 24-25). Within this context, 'leadership" consists of organizational function and institutional position, as identified by the "office' (the role of the office holder). Bureaucratic leadership thus requires persona! disengagement from process. Acting according to expectation consistent with specified policies and procedures defines effective performance.

Management educators have long understood (although not always acted on) the potential dysfunction of treating organizations as machines and people as their parts. Fixation with bureaucratic, positional leadership can and often does result in defensiveness, near-pathological obsession with control, and an ethic that encourages obtaining and using power for self-serving goals (Jackall. 1983; March & Simon, 1958; Morgan, 1986; Zaleznik. 1989).

Viewing the organization as a machine exerts a two-fold impact on member behavior and the organization. First, it suggests that people should merely conform to job descriptions wherein personal responsibility is fully described by formalized rules and procedures. Second, the machine metaphor defines leadership so that one must have a title to be a leader. An unfortunate and inevitable result is a rigidity that is often entirely inappropriate in uncertain, diverse and turbulent environments.

Reliance on this bureaucratic perspective creates a serious logical dilemma. Educators, who insist on labeling, as acts of leadership, the behaviors of those holding formal organizational positions, risk circular reasoning. If these behaviors define "leadership, then everything done by position holders must be leadership. If everything is leadership, then the term leadership has no meaning.

In addition, there are two fundamental reasons for the inappropriateness of the positional-dependency notion. First, it is unusual for new bachelor's degree recipients to assume immediately positions of significant authority. Second, there is the need to inculcate a sense of individual responsibility for and engagement with organizations.

The typical leadership chapter in organizational behavior and management texts presents three theoretical perspectives: trait, behavior and situation. Although the leadership definitions commonly presented in such texts focus on interpersonal influence, the context of theory presentation teaches a different lesson. The general focus of the research that underlies these theories has been on the behavior of executives and supervisory personnel in relation to subordinates, and the thrust of argument is the improvement of managerial decision-making and supervisory skills.

Many organizations experience a reality inconsistent with a 'boxed" perspective of leadership, and they commonly assert the need to empower all members of the organization so as to liberate, nurture and engage their positive energies. Yet business educators teach that engagement in influence processes is a right of higher position. They cannot teach leadership with authenticity until and unless they divorce it from the boundaries of organizational hierarchy.

Empowering anyone, in the classroom, the workplace or society, requires doing more than developing a better understanding of how to be a leader. Educators must identify how an individual can develop a sense of personal obligation, an awareness of opportunity, and relevant influence skills. Educators should transmit to both students and managers the obligation of all organizational members to exert positive forces through constructive interpersonal action.

Organizations must be convinced of the need to make leadership opportunities available to all

members, and individuals need to learn how to identify those opportunities. Business educators need to define and transmit skills that will make individuals both capable and successful when they attempt to influence organizations. They need to form and communicate new concepts of both organization and leadership to make these things happen. The old machine was fine in its day, but its day has passed.

More than twenty years ago, Livingston (1971) excoriated management education for failing to teach students what they really need to learn to be effective in organizations. His words ring no less true today. He said that management students must first learn about themselves and develop important skills, not by immersion in theory, technique, or case analysis, but firsthand through personal experience.

New business undergraduate degree recipients are rarely given immediate positions of significant supervisory responsibility. How then can they aspire to become self-discovered and self-invented leaders? Livingston gave us several answers within the context of management education. He argued for assessment of the motivation to manage (to accept responsibility for the performance of others) and the motivation to hold power (to exercise authority humanely). He also pointed out the need for students to develop the ability to find problems and the skill to communicate problem presence and importance. Thus, motivation, self-assessment, diagnostic skills coupled with vision, and the ability to communicate are fundamentally important if one aspires to be a force in the organization. Perhaps organizational experience is best for assessing and developing motivation but the classroom is a fruitful place to discuss these ideas, to test their strength and potential, and to plant the seeds of introspection and willingness to explore. Educators can and should make their classrooms places to begin the self-discovery and self-development processes.

Developing such abilities and skills requires no position of authority but does require commitment to self commitment to the organization and its employees, action, and thoughtful, on-going self-assessment. Such a program of personal development, ideally begun as a part of the formal education process, can fundamentally assist a person in learning how to influence others, up, down, and across the organization.

## CRITERIA FOR A NEW PARADIGM

Business educators can and should take positive and significant roles in developing a more realistic perspective, and associated skills, in students preparing for entry-level positions where they will not likely have traditional managerial powers over others. In an effort to begin this process, Washbush and Clements (1994) have proposed that leadership education at the college level contain eleven characteristics. Following is a list of those recommended characteristics with commentary on an attempt to employ them in the inaugural offering of "Leadership in Management" at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater during the spring semester of the 1995-96 academic year.

### Implementation and Assessment of the Criteria

**Criterion** 1: Require that students thoughtfully identify and articulate a sense of personal vision and mission by determining what is important to them and what goals they must achieve to view their lives as successful.

A theme in the course was asking the student to develop a sense of being engaged in a process of self-assessing and growth. The course included, as a final project, a self-assessment paper that specifically asked the student to respond to that criterion. Furthermore, the instructor emphasized that they must learn to identify their own styles and the course was a good place to start.

**Criterion 2:** Clearly distinguish leadership from position incumbency and give far greater attention to non-positional leadership perspectives that are already part of the established literature.

A determined effort was made early in the course to identify and clarify this point. As an exercise, the class built a list of managerial versus leader behaviors to prove to them that leadership and position are not the same thing. Continually in the course, students were reminded that they will not likely be in charge of many, if any, subordinates early in their working careers, and thus they will need to learn to exercise leadership across and even up the organizational structure. Skill building in leadership should not be deferred until one gains position power. Evaluation of student self-assess-ment reports revealed, however, that, for some the concept was difficult. It appears that some students, whose personalities predispose them to be bureaucratic maintainers, often had difficulty seeing leadership from other than the perspective of position power (this issues is discussed in more detail later in this paper).

**Criterion 3:** Promote a positive, integrated understanding of leadership and management as complementary organizational activities.

This was a clearly stated theme in the course and was repeatedly emphasized through exercises and discussion. The distinction is difficult to maintain and must be addressed often.

**Criterion 4:** Identify and describe the importance of key components of organizational influence including diagnostic skills, vision rooted in insight, communication skill, and evidence of commitment to the common endeavor.

One way to address this point was through the choice of text. Hughes, Ginnett, and Curphy (1996). This text avoids a number of difficulties in current leadership books. It is not merely a lengthy recitation of theories and critiques. It is not written for senior executives. It is not a summary of an approach to the subject nor a volume written to augment a training program. This text presents leadership in an organizational behavior context, and works within a leader-group-situation model that is fundamentally sound. In addition to reporting on theory and research, the text provides a strong and broad experiential skill development emphasis.

**Criterion 5:** Encourage and coach students in developing personal competencies of influence though supervised practice and constructive feedback from both instructor and peers.

Each student was required to maintain a journal as the primary means of addressing this criterion. The journal was designed to document the individual's progress in the course. Entries were required weekly. Each student was asked to identify important issues and ideas raised in class, state important concepts gleaned from reading, document developing and changing opinions and insights, and discuss leadership behaviors attempted and results (students were encouraged to try to perform at lease one leadership action each week). The journal was collected and evaluated twice during the semester. Grading was based on three criteria: effort, thoroughness, and insight. While students received direct feedback on the journal, there was no precise mechanism for peer feedback (except as students might get through thoughtful attention to reactions of others to leadership attempts). The journals revealed that, where students did make leadership attempts, they were usually sensitive to feedback. However, in future the course should include a class peer-group mechanism that would require students to share experiences and critique each other.

Criterion 6: Develop and implement methods that will require students to perform processes designed to promote self-awareness and establish a basis for self-assessment.

Student self-assessment was a major component throughout the course. In addition to the journal, students completed a number of self-assessment instruments and performed a comprehensive leadership self-assessment at course end. The objective was to develop a sense of self and a commitment to on-going self-assessment as a component of post-course behavior. A number of student comments reflected quite favorably on the use of these tools.

Criterion 7: Incorporate course activities that encourage team building and development of a sense of shared purpose by developing and using group experiences of substance.

When appropriate during class, students formed small groups to discuss or perform a variety of exercises. The majority of these were selected from a substantial body of exercises provided by the authors of the text in the instructor's manual. Topics ranged from discussions of behaviors, values, and attitudes to group problem solving and decision making. While no group exercise demanded out-of-class work, and none was of great significance, the students generally entered into them with enthusiasm. A number of journal entries indicated that these were well received and were useful. However, students also indicated a preference for action exercises over discussion exercises. This needs to be addressed directly in the next offering of the course.

**Criterion 8:** Actively promote the concept that leadership can only result when one has the willingness, courage, and ability to intervene for the sake of influencing others.

Students were encouraged to try to make at least one leadership attempt per week. A number did and often reported on them in their journals. The most popular situation was the group project context of other classes or the work setting. For some students, just trying to be more assertive in classes was a significant challenge. The idea here was to try to have influence and to be sensitive to how others reacted to the attempt. Most students responded positively to this challenge.

**Criterion 9:** Provide students with opportunities to seek, identify, and act on opportunities to attempt influence.

The response to Criterion 8 applies here too. In asking students to attempt at least one leadership action each week, the instructor suggested to them that they should seek them in the normal situations of their day-to-day lives. The point is, leadership opportunities are constantly around us. Leadership does not have to mean extraordinary behavior in extraordinary situations. It is most often seen in influencing others in the situations of everyday life. Practice at the ordinary may become the basis for having the ability and the courage to act in life's bigger moments.

**Criterion 10:** Require that students do written and oral self-evaluation of their behaviors and effectiveness when they have attempted influence.

The written assignments covered this criterion in part. However, students were not asked to perform formal oral self-evaluation. The use of semi-permanent groups, in which students will plan, report on, and evaluate leadership attempts, would be a valuable course component.

**Criterion 11:** Within the context of ethical behavior caution students repeatedly that leadership has

both the power to effect good and the potential to create disaster.

In a number of instances in the course the instructor presented examples of the use of power and charisma that resulted in poor or even horrendous consequences. Nevertheless, the ethical dimension of leadership needs more prominent play in the course.

TEMPERAMENT AND PERFORMANCE

**Temperament Classification**

Thirty-five business undergraduates were enrolled in the course. As a component of self-assessment each student completed the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey and Bates, 1984), a proxy for the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. Student scores were used to classify students into each of four temperaments as shown in Table 1.

### TABLE 1
### TEMPERAMENT CLASSIFICATIONS

| Temperament | Number | Percent of Class |
|---|---|---|
| NF | 4 | 11.4 |
| NT | 8 | 22.9 |
| SJ | 21 | 60.0 |
| SP | 2 | 4.0 |

Keirsey and Bates categorize the organizational-behavior propensities of these temperaments as follows: NFs are people oriented, act as catalysts for others, and communicate well NTs are problem oriented and are comfortable with complexity and change; SJs are natural bureaucrats and are structure oriented; SPs are experience oriented and work well in problem situations.

**Analysis of Student Performance by Temperament**

Content analysis of the required self-assessment papers suggested that some students did not easily accept the concept of non-positional leadership as

emphasized in the course. Accordingly, student scores on graded elements of the course were analyzed using Oneway Analysis of Variance with Temperament as the independent variable. Score categories examined were:

First Journal Submission
Second Journal Submission
Class Participation
Written Self-Assessment
First Examination
Second Examination
Total Performance Composite

Although no significant Fs were found, in five of the seven categories (First Journal. Class Participation, Written Self-Assessment. First Exam, and Total Performance), SJs received the lowest category scores. The F score of 2.10, p=0.12, for ANOVA on Total Performance approached significance at the 0.1 level. A review of written instructor comments provided to students with their self-assessment grades indicated specific concerns regarding understanding of non-positional leadership concepts as shown in Table 2.

### TABLE 2
### CONCERNS NOTED BY TEMPERAMENT

| Temperament | Concerns Noted | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| NF | 1 | 1 of 4 (25%) |
| NT | 0 | 0 of 8 (0%) |
| SJ | 9 | 9 of 21 (43%) |
| SP | 0 | 0 of 2 (0%) |

A Chi-Square analysis on these data yielded chi-square = 6.125. df = 3, NS (approaches significance at the 0.1 level). Thus, 10 of 35 students (29%) enrolled in the class indicated in their end-of-term self-assessment papers the problem of equating (or confusing) leadership with management. Nine of those 10 students shared the SJ temperament (the natural bureaucrat).

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has described a rationale for the construction of an undergraduate course in leadership and has assessed initial delivery under a set of proposed criteria. The basic themes of the course were that leadership is behavior that influences others, is not the property of holders of authority positions, can be learned and practiced in non-positional settings, and is important to developing and enhancing managerial potential. The use of the eleven criteria assisted the instructor in creating and delivering a course that was relatively successful. Student feedback was generally favorable, positive, and constructive. Throughout the semester, the instructor maintained a comprehensive journal, which was instrumental to this paper. It can and will be provided to anyone who will be involved in teaching this or similar courses in the future. The course is far from perfected but its first offering was a realistic and valuable beginning.

This paper also presents an assessment of the course experience and student performance. These results indicate that psychological characteristics of students may play an important role in student comprehension of leadership as a non-positional phenomenon. It appears that some students, whether because of their own perceptual set or because of emphases presented in typical business and management courses, may have considerable difficulty in separating leadership behavior from managerial position and power. This paper also indicates that the experiential aspects of this approach to leadership instruction require stronger emphasis on doing than on discussing. While this paper has obvious limitations, including the choice of instrumentation, instructor bias, and use of data ex post facto, there is evidence that continuing research, use of a stronger experience set, and discussion among those who aspire to teach leadership may enhance improved student understanding arid leadership ability.

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