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Leadership Theories: Application in the University Setting

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Abstract. The paper discusses the application of three major theories of leadership in the education field. The paper starts with the trait theories and the possibility of its application in the education system from the highest position down to the teacher classroom. The second theory this paper sheds light on is the situational leadership theory. It looks into the literature regarding its application in the same system, i.e. education. The last theory this paper discusses is the contingency theory. It showcases the definition of the theory and the literature around its application in the educational system. The paper finally concludes that all theories are applicable according to the literature and research made on the topic.

Keywords. Leadership Theories, culture, education field, education system, situational leadership theory, contingency theory, a leader, social network, Structure, theories, intelligent people, characteristics, trait theory

Introduction

Leadership has many definitions but in general, leadership can be defined as a multifaceted process of identifying a common goal for a specific group and providing motivation, influence and support in order to reach the mutually-negotiated goals of the group (Giltinane, 2013). Through the years, various studies have been done about leadership. In fact, numerous theories have been formulated by scholars and sociologists in an attempt to understand and thoroughly explain this multifaceted concept.

It should be noted though that the concept and nature of leadership is dynamic and highly dependent on the culture of the group, the general communities and organizations. Nevertheless, scholars agree that leadership is universal phenomenon that creates order among humans and animals alike. Being a universal phenomenon, leadership affects all fields of profession including education. This paper will focus on relating leadership theories' application in the school setting, specifically in a university setting.

Discussion

Leadership can be defined in terms of the relationship of the leader and the follower. It is the process of interaction between the two, and it is also the effect of the interaction (Bass & Bass, 2008). Today, leadership studies no longer focus on the characteristics of the leader alone, but on all the other aspects that compose it namely, the followers, work or group setting, culture and other shared features of groups of people (Avolio, Walumbwa & Weber, 2009).

The concept of leadership is often related to organizations, creating an impression that managers are leaders and employees are the followers. In truth, leaders do not necessarily have to be managers. There is such a thing as non-manager leaders in groups and communities that do not share the structure of organizations. From this, a leader is someone who can stand as a symbol of his organization or group, and represent it from outsiders (Bass & Bass, 2008).

As in any organization, administration and policy in schools need affective leadership in order to grow and flourish (Elmore, 2000). The issue on whether leadership in education can be considered as only one of the fields where leadership in management can be applied or if it needs a different set of approaches has been a long-standing debate among researchers. Education leadership may slightly differ from management leadership because the main aim of education is to promote learning among students and to unite all members of the student body and teaching body as one. Leadership in education has students as additional followers. However, it should be noted that the process of leadership still calls for administration and management by leaders (Bush, 2003).

According to Hallinger and Heck (1999) in their 20-year study, leadership affects the effectiveness of schools in three aspects. These aspects include: (1) people, (2) structure and social network, and (3) purposes. In essence, school leaders affect people by administering and managing the workforce as well as the student body. The performance of teachers and students are greatly influenced by their principals and higher leaders through the rules and regulations setting and application (Hallinger & Heck, 1999).

This connects us to the second aspect where leadership plays a role in education, structure and social network. Structure and social network refers to how an educational institution is run and how it relates to other schools. Leaders should set the policy of the school and apply it to everyone as a form of discipline and order. As for the social network, school leaders should establish and maintain oneness within the school. The leaders should then promote and encourage good relationships between students and teachers (Hallinger & Heck, 1999).

Lastly, leadership affects school effectiveness through its purposes. A school's set of purposes is determined through the institution's vision and mission, whereas a good leader makes futuristic and attainable vision and mission and is able to formulate plans to attain them. The growth and effectiveness of the institution always starts with a good leader and good followers.

From these, the three major leadership theories including the trait theory, situational leadership theories, and contingency theories, will be discussed and related to their applications in education, specifically tertiary education as in the case of the proponent of this study.

Trait Theory

The first theory and perhaps one of the most basic and oldest leadership theories is the trait theory. The trait theory believes that leaders should have certain characteristics of "the great man" and that leaders were born and not made. There are three categories of characteristics that a leader should possess namely physical features, ability characteristics and personality traits. Physical features include appropriate height, appearance, physique and age. Ability characteristics should be knowledge, fluency in speech and intelligence. Lastly, a leader should have personality traits such as dominance, introversion or extroversion, emotional control and expressiveness (Hartog & Koopman, 2005).

The theory has evolved through continuous study and effort of various researchers. At present, they have come up with the major character traits that define a leader. These are

intelligence, self-confidence, sociability, integrity and determination (Northouse, 2013). These are the traits that people who want to be leaders should cultivate.

1. **Intelligence.** Studies show that intelligent people make good leaders because of their reasoning power, strong verbal ability and perceptual ability. However, the level of intelligence of the leader should not be far from that of his followers because a major difference in intelligence may result to difficulty in two-way communication.
2. **Self-confidence.** It is the ability to be sure of one's abilities and competency to lead that makes leaders believe that they can make a difference. Their power to influence and motivate their followers comes from this trait.
3. **Sociability.** Leaders should be able to reach out to their followers to make them feel that they can count on them. Also, if people react positively to leaders who are approachable and ready to interact with followers.
4. **Integrity.** It is the ability to always tell the truth and do what is right for the common good. Leaders with integrity earn the respect of their followers.
5. **Determination.** Leaders should be determined in order to provide a good example for his or her followers especially in times of difficulty. They should also be determined to push through with the steps in making a difference in the lives they touch.

These leadership characteristics are also applicable in the academe, from the highest administrative position up to the teachers in the classroom. Students value these characteristics to be present in their leaders in order to get their cooperation and respect. The interaction between students and educational leaders is leadership in itself, and the effect also depends on this relationship. How students perceive their leaders affect how they follow policies. Therefore, educational leaders must possess the major traits expected of them in order to successfully apply their influence among their followers.

Situational Leadership Theory

The situational leadership theory, on the other hand, was formulated by Hershey and Blanchard in 1988 as they examined the relationships that exist between task behavior, level of maturity of the subordinates and the relationship behavior. Task behavior is a leader that defines work roles and responsibilities clearly to the members or followers to insure task clarity. Relationship behavior, on the other hand, is the development of personal relationships, and emotional and psychological contracts between the leader and followers. The level of maturity of the subordinates shapes the first two dimensions. This dimension has three criteria which are the level of motivation exuded by the followers, their willingness to perform responsibilities and their experience and educational level (Deckard, 2011).

According to this theory, the leader modifies his or her style as the followers grow in terms of knowledge, abilities and skills. The leader directs, supports, and delegates responsibilities until the followers are able to do more responsibilities. Hershey and Blanchard identified that when the level of maturity of the follower is low, the leadership style should be high-task, low-relationship (Deckard, 2011). This means that the leader tells the follower what to do, making the approach focused on the task than on the relationship. As the follower masters the task, the leader no longer tells him or her what to do. Instead, he or she is told about the importance of his or her task in the group. The focus shifts to high-relationship, low-task style as the level of maturity of the follower increases. Once the follower already mastered the task and the level of maturity is very high, the style becomes low-task, low-relationship. By this time, the leader is already ready to delegate certain tasks to the follower and allows the follower to use his or her own way of doing the task.

The situational leadership theory, like the trait leadership theory, is also applicable to the academe setting, both in administration and in the classroom. It all starts when new tasks or activities are given to students. The teacher or administrators tell them what to do and how to do it. As students learn their lessons or tasks, they are then told to keep it up and continue their good work to get more grades. As they show superior mastery in learning their lessons or doing their activities, students are then given the freedom to find their own solutions or ways of doing them, as long as the output is correct. However, this is only applicable to students who excel and consistently improve. Sometimes, the teacher gives these exceptional students the delegated task of supervising their classmates when the teacher is out.

Contingency Theory

Lastly, the contingency theory was proposed by Fiedler in 1967 and it states that the efficiency of the performance of the group depends on the leader's style of interacting with his followers and his or her degree of control and influence over the circumstances (Da Cruz, Nunes & Pinheiro, 2011). Fiedler observed that people have dominant leadership characteristics which are generally inflexible. He believes that leaders would improve their leadership effectiveness if they are put in situations that are in line with their orientation, may it be task-orientation or human relations orientation (Da Cruz, Nunes & Pinheiro, 2011).

The theory was based on his Least Preferred Co-Worker Scale (LPC) which examines leadership style and situational favorableness. Leadership style is either task-oriented or human relations-related. Situational favorableness was based upon three contingency dimensions related to effectiveness of leadership. The first one is the leader-member relation which refers to the degree of trust, respect and certainty between the subordinate and the leader which is rated good or poor. The second one is position of power which is the degree of influence and control a leader has over organizational tasks which is rated strong or weak. Lastly, the third one is the task structure which refers to the extent of clarity of assignments through implementation of formalization and policy which is rated high or low (Da Cruz, Nunes & Pinheiro, 2011).

Interpretations may show that the leadership style determines the situational favorableness through the effectiveness of the style based on the group's performances. If the leader is mostly trusted and accepted by the subordinates, if the tasks are clearly given and understood by subordinates through formalizing and directing, and if the leader's power is highly recognized by the superior management, the summary of all these results means the situation is very favorable. On the other hand, the situation is very unfavorable if the leader is not trusted and accepted by his subordinates, if he or she gives unclear tasks to individuals due to lack of formalization and policy and if the superior does not recognize and support the power of the leader. If the results show uniformity either negatively or positively, that is if the result is either very favorable or very unfavorable, the leader with a task-oriented style will be most effective in dealing with the group. However, if the results are mixed or only favorable or unfavorable, the effective leadership style is human relations-oriented (Deckard, 2011).

Leaders can either find positions that fit their leadership style, modify their situation to fit their leadership style or change their behavior to fit within the situation. However, according to Fiedler's Contingency Theory, it is easier to change the situation to fit the style of the leader. Because of this, the organization should not choose a leader to fit the situation because a leader's style is not likely to change (Deckard, 2011).

This theory also applies to the field of education because in schools, teachers are not fired when they get low evaluations from students regarding their teaching styles or relationship

with the students. They are, instead, reprimanded by the administrators or dean to improve by changing their teaching methods and approach towards students. When the problem is their relationship with students, teachers are transferred to another department or given another set of students to teach. When the problem is their knowledge on the subject matter they teach, they are advised to take-up further education or graduate school degrees. Sometimes, the subject they teach are changed and they are assigned to teach topics that are within their expertise. It means that it is nothing personal and purely professional. Teachers do not have to change as persons but only have to change their methods to improve their effectiveness as teachers. It is always never about the teacher's being the person that he or she is but about his or her proper place in the academe. This theory is somehow related to the trait theory which states that leaders are born and not made. The reason is that the leader in this theory cannot be changed, as well as his or her style, so it is only the situation that is changed in order to suit the leadership style.

Conclusion

From the discussion, it can be concluded that, in one way or another, the three major theories of leadership are all applicable to the field of education. This only proves that there is no such thing as the best leadership approach or the best leadership style. There is only the use of appropriate approach or style in a certain situation.

The thorough research on the trait theory, situational leadership theory and contingency theory makes it clear that leadership is dynamic and researchers continuously find ways to explain it better. The importance of this research is the realization that leadership is not focused or all about the leader alone. It is also about the relationship of the leader and followers and how they cope with the situations presented to them in order to reach their common goal.

Moreover, leadership should be effective regardless of the leadership style or approach used. The effectiveness can only be based on the achievement of the common goal, because doing such will satisfy both leaders and followers. In the field of education, the common goal is for the students to learn and this can be achieved through the leadership of the teachers as well as the administrators who make the learning policy. The best way to evaluate the success of leadership in an educational institution is by looking at the school's over-all scholastic performance, which is its end-result.

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