Leadership: An Ulterior Motive?

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The styles of leadership are as numerous as there are people. Although personality is a critical factor in choosing a style, external factors are not without their influence. The culture of an organization will often dictate the nature of relationships and influence the style used. Similarly, situations present a unique requirement for a particular leadership style. The two are directly impacted by the personality of the leader. These factors are directly influenced by the motives of the leader and will have a direct impact on the leadership style used. As these factors change, so will the motives of leaders. Therefore, it is critical for leaders to be aware of how these factors affect their leadership style.

W hile it might seem obvious that leadership styles vary from person to person, what is not so obvious are the motives behind those styles. "Leadership style is the manner and approach of providing direction, implementing plans, and motivating people."[1] What drives one individual to be transformational and another to form in-groups? Personality certainly plays a role in the style used. However, leadership style is also externally motivated and those motives affect the style used. The two are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are interdependent and function as a cohesive unit. Additionally, the culture of the work environment plays a pivotal role in the motive behind leadership style.

Leadership style is predicated on motives and those motives influence leadership style directly. One cannot exist without the other. They exist simultaneously in a duality that is predicated on culture, situation and personality. As these factors change, so do the motives. Correspondingly, the leadership style follows suit.

Culture

Culture sets the tone for an organization. "Culture is the set of values, norms, guiding beliefs, and understandings that is shared by members of an organization and is taught to new members."[2] The United States Navy, like all military organizations, breeds a culture of leadership that is ultimately based on a set of values, which is important because the "values of people can guide their behavior."[3] Because naval personnel come from a diverse demographic background, it is crucial to establish a set of values applicable to everyone. How well an individual's values align with the organization will establish how well he/she will 'fit.'[4] Urde notes, "The values rooted in the organization need to resonate with the values perceived and appreciated by the customers over time, and vice versa."[5] In the case of the Navy, the customers are the taxpayers.

New recruits are inculcated in the ways of naval leadership during boot camp, where they undergo nine weeks of indoctrination and military training. That training is firmly rooted in the Core Values of honor, courage, and commitment. "These values create an organizational culture that dominates the decision-making process, and makes it a cultural phenomenon within the institution."[6] The acceptance of these values within the culture demands the practice of coercion and for good reason.

Perhaps Jack Nicholson's character in *A Few Good Men,* Colonel Nathan Jessup, said it best: "We follow orders or people die."[7] Mission accomplishment in the military is based on the expectation of orders being followed. Therefore, a corresponding style of leadership is implemented. "Coercion is possible in situations where the threatener is in a threat-free position and so makes a 'take it or leave it' offer which can hardly be refused."[8]

While coercion may seem like an inappropriate leadership style, it is not without its benefits, which are based on a reasonable motive – staying alive! It is incumbent upon service members to follow orders explicitly, and the charge to ensure they do falls squarely on leadership. "Effective leadership is imperative to the achievement of military missions and the perception of the appropriate individuals, regardless of tenure, as leaders, is paramount to this effectiveness."[9]

The culture of the organization is the foundation upon which its leadership is built. It permeates the entire organization and influences its personnel. Morgan notes the extent of its influence on the lives of those within the culture as practically inescapable.[10] Such organizational influence is bound to shape and define the culture and provide motives for leadership style. In this instance, the motives are based on safely accomplishing the mission.

Situation

Leadership styles and motives are also based on situations. "Leaders bring a leadership 'style' set to situations. A style can be thought of as the dominant pattern of a leader behaving in a position."[11] Due to expediency, some situations, for example, might require a transactional approach while another may allow for a more caring approach. **"**The situation in part defines the leadership process; it influences the leader and interacts with the leader's attempts to influence his or her followers."[12]

Some situations are more critical and require more attention than others. Leaders must be flexible and adapt their leadership style accordingly. "The ability to switch from one leadership style to another to suit the situation is important in maximizing results"[13] Maximizing results might mean more profits, less turnover, employee satisfaction or quality improvement. What it ultimately provides for the leader is motive.

However, the motive is only one side of the coin. A leader must have cognizance of the situation in order to choose the best leadership style and approach to a situation. "Successful leaders are sensitive to the situation and their followers, are flexible, and able to adapt to the situation to ensure that the vision is achieved"[14] The successful combination of appropriate leadership style in a given situation will provide the means for success in any situation. Dulewicz and Higgs note, "Literature strongly suggests that the situation or context is highly relevant to leadership style."[15] Whatever the case may be, the situation will provide the motive, and the motive will determine the best leadership style.

Within any situation, one cannot escape one's character, which is a key determinant in choosing a leadership style. One's character provides the ulterior motive to lead a particular way. Ideally, as Aristotle envisioned, a leader was a "virtuous individual who cultivated these virtues [justice, self-control, courage and practical wisdom] and exercised them at the right time, in the right situation."[16] Therefore, a situation was the stage upon which one's character performed.

Personality

Leadership style is as individual as personality. "The personality of the leader plays an important part in the exercise of leadership."[17] The leader-member exchange (LMX) is a style of leadership that is subject to the wiles of personality differences because it allows for the formation of in-groups and out-groups by the leader. "Within an organizational work unit, subordinates become part of the in-group or the out-group based on how well they work with the leader and how well the leader works with them."[18]

In this case, the motive of the leader to use this style may very well be based on nothing more than how well he gets along with a particular subordinate. This motive, in turn, will directly affect the relationship the leader has with subordinates and dictate it as the preferred style. "Rather than focusing primarily on the innermost workings of one's personality or on one's values or beliefs, leadership style focuses on how one acts, i.e., on what one says and does."[19]

Personality and all its complexities provide the motive for leadership style. Individual character traits and nuances are the impetus for style selection. Good leaders "appear to be able to adopt [different] styles and perform at different levels."[20] The adaptation of different styles enables a leader to navigate through the maze of the human psyche to effectively influence many people, in effect becoming a leadership chameleon.

As ambiguous as it may seem, the collective personalities of leadership are paramount to success. "The success and failure of a company depends on the personality of the leader and of the composition of the personalities in the group of top leaders."[21] Therefore, knowing your personality and how it fits with others will be a motive for a particular leadership style within a group, something similar to "good cop/bad cop." In the case of leadership, though, it is more like transactional leader versus transformational leader.

Conclusion

Leadership style is predicated on motive. That motive may be the result of culture, situation or personality. Regardless of the motive, the style selected will have consequences. All leadership styles are not created equally and are not efficaciously applicable in all situations. A leader must first understand his motives and personality before selecting a style, and he must equally understand the impact of that style on his people. This is a matter of knowing the culture and situation.

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