

Know Thyself and Your Followers

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Whether credited to the Oracle of Delphi or to Greek philosophers such as Plato et al., the importance of *knowing oneself* has been emphasized over the ages (Classics, 2008). Mirvis (1982) applied this axiom to research endeavors by proposing that in order to have any hope of meaningful and ethical research, researchers must adhere to this admonition with the variation, “know thyself and what you are doing” (p. 184). Correspondingly, the premise of this paper is that leaders must not only know themselves, but also must know their followers to be successful. Knowing oneself and others might appear metaphysical, in that such knowledge seems relative in a world where objective truth is viewed as an unanswerable question posed by Pontius Pilate (John 18:38), juxtaposed with the embodiment of truth in Jesus who stood questioned before the procurator (Lynch, 2005). The topic for discussion here, however, is focused on how a leader can leverage knowledge of oneself and others as related to the relationship between leaders and followers. In such a practical discussion, questions arise such as: How can leaders choose followers that match or “fit” with the organization that the leader leads? How can followers be placed in jobs that best suit their knowledge, skills and abilities? What research instruments can a leader use to “know” these things? How do leader styles fit with follower styles? This article will attempt to answer these questions and lay a foundation for an approach to knowing oneself in a practical manner, as well as knowing followers and their behavior in a real world organization.

For a leader to know oneself and followers, it might be helpful to investigate human behavior. Lewin (1951) proposed that individual behavior was a function of both the person and the environment. Terborg (1981) defined the study of this person-environment function as, “interactional psychology,” which “emphasizes the importance of considering both the person and the situation as joint determiners of behavior” (p. 575). Kristof (1996) outlined a broad field of study namely, “person-environment (P-E) fit” that encompassed two main focuses: person-job (P-J) fit and person-organization (P-O) fit (p. 2). P-J fit is related to the compatibility between a person and a specific job, whereas P-O fit is related to the match between a person and an organization.

Edwards (1991) defined P-J fit as, “the fit between the abilities of a person and the demands of a job” (p. 283). Kristof (1996) defined P-O fit as, “the compatibility between people and organizations that occurs when: (a) at least one entity provides what the other needs, or (b) they share similar fundamental characteristics, or (c) both” (p. 3). In general, P-J fit and P-O fit represent two different approaches in accessing P-E fit which in essence, “embodies the premise that attitudes, behavior, and other individual-level outcomes result not from the person or environment separately, but rather from the relationship between the two” (Edwards, 1996, p. 292).

Person-Job Fit

When comparing the capabilities of a person with the demands of a specific job (P-J fit), both the capabilities of the individual and the requirements of the job have to be understood. To accomplish this task, researchers such as Chatman (1989) devised the Knowledge, Skills and Abilities Profile to collect information on the, “knowledge, skills and abilities” (KSAs) of individuals (p. 341). On the organizational side, O’Reilly (1991) used a structured interview analysis with job experts to develop a, “comprehensive set of competencies required for successful job performance” (p.490). Together, the data from these types of collection efforts are compared in a profile matching process to assess person-job fit (O’Reilly, 1991). According to O’Reilly (1991), “studies have shown that person-job fit predicts performance, satisfaction, and turnover across a variety of jobs” (p. 491). Caldwell (1990) defined P-J fit as, “the overall match between the individual’s strengths and weaknesses and the job requirements” and found that P-J fit, “was positively related to performance” (p. 654). Perhaps one of the first documented examples of the use of the P-J fit approach was during the commissioning of artisans for the construction of the Jewish tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant in Exodus chapter 35.

And Moses said to the children of Israel, “See, the Lord has called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; and He has filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom and understanding, in knowledge and all manner of workmanship, to design artistic works, to work in gold and silver and bronze, in cutting jewels for setting, in carving wood, and to work in all manner of artistic workmanship. “And He has put in his heart the ability to teach, in him, and Aholiab the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. He has filled them with skill to do all manner of work of the engraver and the designer and the tapestry maker, in blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and fine linen, and of the weaver—those who do every work and those who design artistic works. (Exodus 35:30-35, NKJV)

The success of this approach was documented in Exodus 39 in that, “according to all that the Lord had commanded Moses, so the children of Israel did all the work. “Then Moses looked over all the work, and indeed they had done it; as the Lord had commanded, just so they had done it. And Moses blessed them.” (Exodus, 42-43, NKJV)

Person-Organization Fit

On the other hand, P-O fit has been much harder to assess than P-J fit and the efficacy of P-O fit has been debatable. Chatman (1989) defined P-O fit as the, “congruence between the norms and values of organizations and the values of persons” and developed the Organization Culture Profile (OCP) to assess person-organization fit (p. 335). The OCP leverages a Q-sort methodology that asks interviewees to sort a group of 54 value statements into nine different categories ranging from *most desirable* to *most undesirable*. The OCP includes value statements related to such things as, “autonomy,” “tolerance” and “enthusiasm” (Fields, 2002, p. 222). The interviewee Q-sort is then compared to the average of the Q-sorts of veteran organization members, based on the same 54 value statements sorted into categories on a range of *most characteristic* to *most uncharacteristic*. Organization categories that correlate highly (with an alpha of .70 or above) are considered highly crystallized, whereas categories that correlate to a lesser extent are considered as low crystallization and may warrant caution when used in assessing P-O fit (Chatman, 1989).

Chatman (1989) also found that P-O fit was beneficial in that it increased the likelihood that people would, “feel comfortable and competent in organizations that have similar values” (p. 343). This may be of particular interest to religious organizations and other groups that put a premium on individual character as opposed to a narrow short-term focus on the bottom line. These organizations may follow the Biblical warning that, “a double minded man is unstable in all his ways” (James 1:8, NKJV) and believe that workers that share organizational values are thus more stable employees. Kristof (1996) cited P-O fit as predictive when considering individuals for long-term employment, however also emphasized that structured interviews designed to assess P-O fit may be more influenced by interviewer preferences (perceived fit) than actual P-O fit (Kristof, 2000). Winfred (2006) found that although, “P-O fit may predict work attitudes,” it must be said that, “P-O fit may not display direct relations with performance” (p. 786). Furthermore, Carless (2005) found that P-J fit was related to career satisfaction, whereas P-O was not and that P-J fit was more closely related to recruiter hiring recommendations than P-O fit. Carless (2005) also found

that practically speaking, organizations should provide and leverage both P-J fit and P-O fit data to and from prospective employees to access both the person-job fit, as well as the person-organization fit. This two-way assessment may help organizations predict performance outcomes and may help individuals evaluate congruence with personal goals and values.

How to Better Know Yourself and Your Followers

Armed with tools such as the KSA Profile and the OCP, leaders can begin to “know” new followers, but only in a superficial way. One example of how leader/follower relationships can fail, even between capable and motivated teams, is that of Paul and Barnabas:

Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing.” Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. (Acts, 15:36-40, NKJV)

Thus, to better know themselves and followers, leaders might need to evaluate their leadership style after a consideration of followership styles. Much research into leadership styles has been accomplished, but often the study of follower styles has been neglected, especially with respect to the leader-follower relationship. One approach might be to assume that leaders can use knowledge of their own follower style as a template for what they subconsciously expect from their followers. Ultimately, by understanding follower styles, the leader gains insight into both sides of the leader-follower equation. Kelley (1992) identified two primary dimensions of follower styles, namely an independent-dependent thinking dimension and an active-passive dimension. Followers tend more toward independent critical thinking or they rely on such thinking from their leader. Followers also are more active in their approach to followership taking independent initiative or they are more passive waiting for instruction. Followers are defined by these two dimensions as passive, conformist, alienated, pragmatic or exemplary (Kelley, 1992). Kelley (2008) later updated this taxonomy by labeling specific follower styles as: “sheep,” “yes-people,” “alienated,” “pragmatics”

and “star performers” (Riggio, 2008, p. 7). Sheep are passive and allow the leader to think for them and motivate them. Yes-people are active but let the leader do the thinking. The alienated follower displays independent critical thinking and is active, but always in a negative direction. Pragmatics sit on the fence and wait to see where things are going and never move out on their own. Star performers, “think for themselves, are very active, and have very positive energy (Riggio, 2008, p. 8).

Help Followers Become Star Performers

Once the leader understands his or her own style as well as the style of their followers, they can empathize with and help followers move toward being more exemplary star performers. Alienated followers can become more exemplary by being upfront and open with their leader about their feelings. Leaders can nurture this move by encouraging frank, clear communication with this type of follower. Conformists can become more exemplary by confronting their insecurity and leaders can aid this process by encouragement and solicitation of inputs from this type of follower. Pragmatist can overcome uncertainty concerns by developing a goal that transforms them and gives them focus. Leaders might try to challenge these followers to get off the fence to accomplish a new goal. Passive followers might benefit from an “all the above” strategy. Leaders may need to communicate, encourage and challenge these followers to be star performers (Kelley, 1992). Exemplary star followers are known as the leader’s “go-to person” and leaders might want to expend extra energy and resources to keep these followers with the organization (Riggio, 2008, p. 8).

Conclusion

In conclusion, leaders can know themselves and their followers by using instruments such as the KSA profile and the OCP profile to investigate the person-job fit and person-organization fit of current and prospective followers. P-J fit has been found as a potential way to predict individual performance and job satisfaction. P-O fit has been found to predict long-term membership and commitment to organizations, but has had less success in predicting performance. A practical approach to using such tools could be to collect and provide individual and organizational P-J and P-O fit information to establish a two-way process of assessment. Leaders should also consider a continuous post-hire process of assessing leader and followership styles in an attempt to move followers toward exemplary followership and star performer status. With such a comprehensive

effort to know themselves and their followers, leaders may not need to rely on guidance from the Oracle of Delphi for success.

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