The Organization as a Reflection of its Followership: Servant Leadership as a Model for Leading in the Upper Echelons

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This paper will look the upper echelon perspective and compare this view of leading with the servant leadership model. The focus will be on the role of the leader within the organization from each style. This will suggest that servant leadership provides a broader and more comprehensive understanding of leadership. In the comparison of the two styles the point will be made that while servant leadership seeks to minimize management issues within the organization, the upper echelon perspective may inadvertently encourage problems.

Introduction

Perhaps one of the most demanding yet coveted positions in any organization is that of leading at the very top. Whether it the president of a company or a seat on the executive board, the responsibility for strategically maneuvering an organization is, at best, overwhelming. Many scholars and theorists have sought to distill the mystery surrounding the impact that leadership has on the organizations that they lead. One such attempt was made by Hambrick and Mason (1984) in which they sought to explain the impact top leadership and their decisions had on the culture of an organization. Over the course of their study they identified what they believed were key characteristics held by the leadership that reflected in a particular action or attitude held by the organization.

This paper will analyze the upper echelon perspective authored by Hambrick and Mason (1984) and propose that this theory falls short in two particular areas. First, using the lens of servant leadership, the argument will be made that effective, healthy organizations are not simply reflections of the upper echelon, but instead reflect both the leadership and the followership. Secondly, this paper will illustrate that the Hambrick and Mason perspective looks at leadership from a far too elitist albeit simplistic viewpoint.
The Upper Echelon Perspective

Hambrick and Mason (1984), in their upper echelon perspective, suggested that leadership matters. Although they were not the first to offer this insight, they did supply explanations as to just how and why leadership varies across organizations, particularly within the same industry. This perspective claims that the, “executives' characteristics serve to filter and distort information in a three-step process: executives' experiences, values, and personalities affect their field of vision, selective perception, and interpretation” (Hambrick, 2007, p. 337). This theory is based on two parts that are interdependent. First, this theory suggests that top executives respond to situations based on their own interpretation and secondly, the executive composes the interpretation of the situation through a mixture of their own experiences, personality type and personal values (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Hambrick, 2007).

The factors in which the decisions are made involve an executive’s cognitive base, values, limited field of vision, selective perception, interpretation, managerial perception, and finally the strategic choice (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). “Strategic choices stand in contrast to operational choices such as inventory decisions and credit policies, which lend themselves a more calculable solution” (Hambrick & Mason, 1984, p.195).

Each element of the strategic choice process plays an equally important role in determining just how the leader will react and in turn, impact the behavior of the organization. First, a leader’s cognitive base may be thought of in terms of “givens” that are an individualized set of how one gains and processes knowledge about a particular situation. One’s cognitive base is formed and based on experiences from both inside and outside the organization (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Working in conjunction with the leader’s cognitive base are their values. These values are “principles for ordering consequences or alternatives according to [one's own] preference” (Hambrick & Mason, 1984, p.195). Although one’s cognitive base and values are capable of changing throughout the course of one’s life, they are difficult to change as they represent the foundation for how a leader’s own knowledge shapes their perceptions of a given situation. The third factor that is foundational to how a leader will respond to information within the organization is one’s own personality type. In other words, these are the factors that remain relatively stable regardless of the situation at hand.

The limited field of vision is defined by Hambrick and Mason (1984) as, “those areas to which [the leader’s] attention is directed” (p. 195). This perspective suggests that no leader is capable of viewing every aspect of an organization and tends to scan the areas that match with the “givens” described above (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). The selective perception process is connected to the field of vision in that the leader only sees that which their scope of vision allows and then out of those things that she or he sees, selects only those issues that seem important from their own perspective (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Hambrick, 2007). The situation is then interpreted only within the scope of the leader’s cognitive base as well as personal values. “The manager’s eventual perception of the situation combines with his/her values to provide the basis for strategic choice” (Hambrick & Mason, 1984, p.195).
In addition to the strategic decision making process, the upper echelon perspective suggests that the main focus in determining a leader’s behavior, which in turn becomes reflected within the organization, is what is referred to as “observable managerial characteristics [which become] indicators as to the ‘givens’ that a manager will bring to an administrative situation” (Hambrick & Mason, 1984, p.196). This perspective suggests that certain characteristics such as age, education, socioeconomic roots, tenure within the organization, among others can be used as a determining factor as to identify how a leader will respond within particular situation. “More at the heart of this theory is the portrayal of upper echelon characteristics as determinants of strategic choices and through these choices, organizational performance” (Hambrick & Mason, 1984, p.197).

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership offers a broader, more comprehensive view of leadership compared to the upper echelon perspective. Unlike the upper echelon perspective, servant leadership does not view the leader as the only force that shapes an organization. Greenleaf (1977), authored this approach to leading after spending a number of years in the upper echelon of management at AT&T. Greenleaf offered that leadership really has very little to do with leading in the traditional sense and everything to do with serving. The only prerequisite for the leader in this model is that one has a desire to serve first and foremost, not lead. Greenleaf described the difference between a servant leader and traditional leader:

It begins with a natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. That person is sharply different from one who is a leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. For such it will be a later choice to serve- after leadership is established. The leader-first and servant-first are two extreme types. (p. 29)

The upper echelon perspective only considers the leader as an influential force in shaping an organization. While Greenleaf (1977) does not disagree that the leader does play a role in forming the organization, servant leadership recognizes that one of the leader’s main roles would be to encourage personal and professional growth within their followers as well as ensuring that their needs are filled. Yukl (2006) suggested that the role of servant leader is to empower one’s employees as opposed to using their power to control the workers. The more the servant leader invests in their employees, the more the organization will reflect the talents and gifts of the employees as well as the humble attitude of the leader. In the servant leadership model there is no room for the leader to shine as the single bright star of the organization, but rather the organization becomes a community of competent workers serving each other in order to accomplish goals.

Winston (2002) suggested that the first step in leading an organization is loving the members within the organization. Winston used the idea of agapao love to define how love should look and feel within an organization. “This Greek word refers to a moral love, doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason” (Winston, 2002, p.5). This idea of a leader loving their followers does not allow the leader to remain focused on themselves or their own perceptions of a situation, as the upper
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Echelon perspective suggests. Instead, the servant leader is forced to view every situation within the organization through the lens of their followers.

Weaknesses within the Upper Echelon Perspective

Although the upper echelon perspective has served as the basis in many areas of research, particularly regarding the connection between a leader’s decision making style and their characteristics, it still remains a relatively simplistic view of a leader’s relationship to their organization. The idea that one’s age, education, and length of time within the organization somehow reflects one’s ability or inability to react to certain situations within a organization, as the upper echelon perspective suggests, is not assumed by all scholars. Winston and Patterson (2006) cautioned leadership researches and scholars alike that while on the quest to define and distill the true meaning of leadership; perhaps the full meaning of leadership has become too fragmented. Winston and Patterson defined leadership as, “A leader is one or more people who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s) who have diverse gifts, abilities, and skills and focuses the follower(s) to the organization’s mission and objectives causing the follower(s) to willingly and enthusiastically expend spiritual, emotional, and physical energy in a concerted coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission and objectives” (p.7).

Gabrielsson, Huse, and Minichilli (2007) in their study of executive boards found that past theories which explained how the upper echelons lead are becoming less applicable to the boardrooms of today. Gabrielesson et al. pointed out that many scholars of late seem to suggest that board members and other top leaders tend to perform in a “black box”, cut off from the rest of the organization. This idea, of leaders acting in a vacuum, is in line with the principles found within the upper echelon perspective and proving to be a problem for a number of corporations. The ideas found within the upper echelon perspective seem to excuse this behavior by simply chalking it up to the leader’s limited field of vision. The perspective does nothing to help the leader overcome this hurdle, or even label this as a problem.

In contrast, Greenleaf (1977) pointed out that one of the key characteristics of a servant leader is the ability to listen to one’s followers and then empathizing with them. Yukl (2006) echoed Greenleaf and stated that, “servant leaders must listen to their followers, learn about their needs and aspirations, and be willing to share in their pain and frustration” (p. 420). When addressing the issue brought up by Gabrielesson et al. (2007) servant leadership would prove a sufficient solution for the executive “black box” issue. By listening to the followers within the organization, as well as other top managers, executives would no longer be performing in a vacuum, but would be more in tune with the organization and needs of its members.

Another weakness found within this perspective is the fact that it completely leaves out of the equation the most valuable asset housed within its walls; the employees. In fact, when recognizing this gap it brings some understanding as to why some organizations fail and why it seems that in recent years the unethical behavior of top executives within some major corporations have ruined
these firms and left many employees devastated. Not acknowledging the impact or roles the followers play within any organization is the biggest weakness within this perspective.

The focus of servant leadership is set on the interaction of the leader and her or his followers. Northouse (2007) recognized the importance of a positive leader-follower connection as it relates to a more productive work environment and contentment within the workforce. Spears (2004) also acknowledged the significance of the leader-follower relationship. Spears condensed the ideas of servant leadership into the hallmarks of this style. Among which are, listening to one’s followers, showing empathy toward them, create a peaceful, healing environment, community building, and growth. Servant leadership stands in direct contrast to the idea that it is the leader that is reflected within the organization.

Another area of weakness found within this perspective is that it creates a sense of elitism surrounding leadership positions. The fact that the upper echelon perspective simply uses a set of seemingly arbitrary characteristics to measure how a leader will or will not respond, signals that if a leader does not belong to the “correct” educational group, socioeconomic group, or age group, he or she may not make the right decision. This suggests that only those that hold the “right” characteristics are able to lead well, thus encouraging an elitist view of leadership. The focus of decision making revolves only around the background of the leader and leaves their followers as less than valuable objects that are simply at the mercy of the whims of the leader’s perspective and personal interests within the organization.

The entire upper echelon theory even sells the leader short. It sums up the leadership process by simplifying good or bad leadership into a certain background they may or may not have. When the leader makes an effort to connect with their followers, all of their followers, it would open up their view of the organization. The upper echelon perspective is built on the principle that a leader has limited vision within the organization and what they choose to pay attention to can be determined by their characteristics (listed earlier) they posses (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). In no way does this perspective require the leader to be accountable for their role in shaping the organization. It excuses the leader from only being able to understand and see certain aspects of the organization from their own perspective. By not addressing the idea of accountability within leadership it reinforces the elitism and self-centered focus of leadership.

Wood, Jr. and Winston (2005) suggested that the scope of leadership is more complex than the upper echelon theory implies and offered that:

Leader accountability assumes the need to engage constituents in understanding the leader’s goals, motives, and decision-making process. Accountability also assumes controversy, misunderstanding by others, human errors, and the need for decision makers, especially leaders, to provide an explanation, justification, or satisfactory apologies for previous decisions (even if they have made similar explanations before). Accountable leaders distinguish themselves from unaccountable leaders in that they are prepared post decisionally to offer what is at best an explanation, or at worst a justification for the choices.
they make and the values they live by. However, as stewards of a trust relationship with the organization they lead, accountable leaders recognize that self-justification may risk following bad decisions with failed policies. (p. 91)

Spears (2004) supported this idea of leader accountability and suggested that a servant leader is one that has an awareness about themselves and their surroundings. “Awareness also aids one in understanding issues involving ethics and values. It lends itself to being able to view most situations from a more integrated, holistic position” (Spears, 2004, p. 9). This idea is in contrast to those found in the upper echelon perspective which concludes that leaders only make decisions based on their own conclusions. Servant leadership challenges the leader to truly outside of themselves to see the organization for the viewpoint of all involved- the followers.

Conclusion

The upper echelon perspective views leading from a leader-centric vantage point and places the leader as the sole individual responsible for the culture and success of an organization. This perspective fails to provide ways in which the leader is held accountable to the followers. The leader is also seen as only being able to make decisions based on their own values and cognitive base as well as their own background, including age, education, and professional experience.

Servant leadership on the other hand presents a more balanced definition and acknowledges that leadership should be focused on caring and investing in their followers. Servant leadership does not recognize that a leader must have a certain education or years on the job, just a desire to serve and see others grow. As Greenleaf (1977) pointed out the only prerequisite for being a leader is that the individual is a servant first.
References