Synthesis Paper Assignment

EDUC 5201G Foundations of Leadership - Dr. Diana Petrarca

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Abstract

This paper reveals my journey, during the last few weeks since the beginning of this course, through the leadership topics, readings, lectures, and discussions in the Foundations of Leadership course. The journey has led me from a confused, incoherent state to a questioning, open-minded state, eager for more learning to occur. The synthesis of ideas occurred when I was able to piece together my own experiences, readings, lectures, other people's comments, and questioned the direction that all of these are leading us.

I find that my learning, up to this point in the course, slightly confusing and not very coherent. I hope that by reviewing the reading notes and thinking through some of the terms used in the readings and the lecture, that I may achieve a better understanding of the information covered in the course to-date. The readings on the evolution of leadership helped me to organize the historical changes on the leadership thought process over the last century and beyond – connecting all the way back to Aristotle! However, as the evolutionary chart shown in Day and Antonakis' (2012), *The Nature of Leadership*, in figure 1.1 - A Brief History and Look into the Future of Leadership Research (p. 7), these changes were not linear in progression, nor in any coherent order. Many theories and ideas were represented at various times sometimes in tandem with two or more theories recognized during the same time frame. What I find interesting about the leadership theories is the diversity and the large number of leadership theories currently recognized in literature as Fairholm and Fairholm (2009) mentioned, "There are about as many different understandings of what leadership is as there are writers on the topic" (p. 1).

Given the complexity and the diversity of thinking on the topic of leadership, it's surprising that the leadership theories have survived although there was a point in time during the late 1970s, also known as the Anti-leadership Era (Van Seters & Field, 1990), where skeptics questioned the validity of research methods (Day & Antonakis, 2012), and the leadership research and interest seemed to have waned during that time. It was suggested by Miner (1975) that "we should give up and abandon the concept of leadership altogether?" (Van Seters & Field, 1990, p. 37) Nevertheless, given the serious consequences of leadership to our society

and to each one of us, it's understandable that we, as members of an evolving intellectual society, keep returning to define and better understand leadership in all its qualities. As mentioned by Warren Bennis (2012) in Day and Antonakis' (2012), *The Nature of Leadership*, "it is important to remember that the quality of all our lives is dependent on the quality of our leadership … By definition, leaders wield power, and so we study them with the same self-interested intensity with which we study diabetes and other life-threatening diseases" (p. 259). This was the clarifying statement that validated the study of leadership, the raison d'être, and opened a pathway for me to muddle through. I suppose it's the practical side of me that appreciates this statement, and makes it relevant.

My mind is swirling with one theory after another, none of them really sinking in yet. This is probably where the confusion lies. I would need to digest some of the theories well, in order to organically grow my own thoughts in a connected tangible way. Van Seters and Field (1990) have made an attempt to categorize some of the central ideas from well-known theories during the last 100 years to better understand the underlying themes and interests by creating the Evolutionary Tree of Leadership Theory, identifying nine eras and the recognized theories, which were acknowledged during those eras (figure 1, Evolutionary Tree of Leadership Theory, p. 33). Another revealing connection that Van Seters and Field (1990) drew with their unidirectional arrows was the convergence and integration at the Transformational Era.

This Transformational Era seems to have drawn the qualities from the diverse theories and put together a number of dynamic, interactive, creative, visionary qualities labelled as the Charisma Period and the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy Period. The Transformational Theory appeals

to me because it identifies the leader to be proactive, intrinsically motivated, innovative, creative, and open to new ideas (Van Seters & Field, 1990). I feel that any organization today would be very fortunate to have a leader who has these qualities: a vision, willing to take risks, highly adaptable to change, willing to delegate authority, emphasize innovation, exemplify the values, goals and culture of the organization, leading by empowering others, energises people to action, develops followers into leaders, and transforming organisational members into agents of change. These are the qualities that Van Seters and Field (1990) have listed as meeting part of the definition of the "new leader" (p. 41).

I've observed such a leader in one of the organizations that I was a part of. I made an effort to attend events and speeches where this leader would be presenting because I felt renewed, or energized after listening to the leader speak. In my daily job in the front lines, where I come in contact with many people, it's easy to lose sight of the purpose, goals, and visions of where the organization is heading, and in what way I contribute towards the organization. I found that the communication style of this particular leader was so effective that I felt included; I got a sense of where the organization was heading (the vision), and I wanted to cheer the leader/ organization on to continue to improve and progress to meet its goals. I understand that this type of leader is rare, and in over 25 years of work experience, I feel that it's my one and only experience of a "real" leader. More importantly, I felt that I can relate to and agree with the values that the leader was trying to instill in the organization. These values included inclusiveness, respect for one another, and celebrating diversity, among others. The leader was able to empower the people of the organization to meet the mission of

the organization by proactively creating an environment that would provide the right

conditions to thrive.

Reflecting on this experience with a leader, it seems that some of the values that I hold

seem to have matched up, or relate to the values that the leader felt were important. This may

have been the influencing factor that as a constituent, I was able to define my role beyond the

daily grind, and felt empowered to make a difference in my work. Fairholm and Fairholm

(2009) stated that the "leader must act and influence at the level of values, because values are

more powerful than plans, policy, procedure, or system. They define the person of the leader

…" (p. 3). Fairholm and Fairholm (2009) also introduced the Leadership Perspectives Model

(LPM), which focus on "rethinking leadership in values terms." They felt that "our core values

define us, determine the goals we seek and the methods we will use to attain them, and dictate

our measures of success" (p. 3). The "values-set" of a leader also determines the "mind-set" of

the leader in the role of the leadership (Fairholm & Fairholm, 2009, p. 3).

This brings to mind a comment that one of the classmates brought forward in the class

last week about the values being different in many cultures around the world, especially from

the Western cultural values. Would this mean that a "great leader" in a different culture would

have a very different set of values? To some extent, a first instinctive response to this question

would be a "yes"; however, if we were to look at internationally well-known and respected

leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Bill and Melinda Gates,

Steven Lewis, Nelson Mandela, and etc., we would also find that there are many shared values

for human rights, and concerns for leading man-kind to a more equitable future among other

values. Fairholm and Fairholm (2009) define leadership as a "values transfer" process,

facilitating this task

> "(1) through the leader's example, (2) through forming cultures within which followers
> can come to trust their leaders enough to follow them, and (3) by reflecting their
> authentic core self, their soul or spirit – in their relationships within the group and with
> all stakeholders" (p. 4).

I feel that the above mentioned well-known leaders fit Fairholm and Fairholm's (2009)

definition of Leadership Perspectives Model, which seems broad enough to fit many leaders in

our global world today. However, this train of thought makes me wonder if leadership models

were created partially to categorize leaders into a definable type? What is the purpose of a

leadership model? Would it be for expanding understanding by analysing, categorizing and

researching, or is there another purpose? By understanding leadership well, would we be able

to help shape next generation of leaders through various educational and experiential learning

strategies? "How can Leadership Be Taught" (Lagace, 2010, p. 2). What would our society be

like filled with leaders? These are some questions going through my mind at this point in my

reflections when synthesizing the ideas generated through the readings, class discussions,

lecture notes, and personal experiences.

It seems that I may be on the verge of deviating into a very different topic at this point –

looking into a crystal ball for the future. However, as an individual, and as a leader, I feel that

envisioning a future for our society is also a part of each one of our responsibilities. It would

help us to lead our lives with purpose, with enthusiasm, and with conviction when we feel that

we all have a role in making our world a better place to live. I feel that writing this synthesis

paper has helped me to go on a short journey into my thought process because looking back at

how I began this paper, confused and incoherent, I feel as though I've arrived at a new place in

concluding this paper. I feel better prepared to learn more about leadership. My mind is open

to absorb and to better filter and question as though I've been given a new direction to travel.

References

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