Leadership is in the eye of the beholder

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Teaching & Learning

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Co-editors

Organization
Management
Journal

Leadership has been a topic of scholarly interest for millennia. Over 2000 years ago, ancient Greeks such as Sophocles and Aeschylus explored leadership in their plays, and historian, Thucydides, looked at leadership in the Peloponnesian wars drawing some interesting conclusions for leadership that are sometimes repeated today. For example, "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" and "it is a general rule of human nature that people despise those who treat them well, and look up to those who make no concessions."

Leadership keeps coming in and going out of fashion and, at the moment, it is one of the hottest topics in business and leadership. Perhaps it is a reaction to the failings of corporate and political leaders that has left people seeking a new vision for the age. Perhaps it comes with a realization that taking a personal lead is crucial for growth and development. Or maybe, it is just leadership's turn for its 15 min in the spotlight. However, there is no denying that people are fascinated by people that make a difference and consequently leadership is currently attracting much attention and a huge amount of scholarly interest.

"Huge" hardly does justice to the vastness of writing on leadership. Every year, hundreds of books and thousands of articles are published on the topic and there always seems to be a new leadership journal being launched. However, despite this, leadership is a concept in crisis. It is a concept that defies definition. As Bennis and Nanus (1985: 4) comment, "never have so many labored so long to say so little." This is illustrated by Grint (1997) who looked at the leadership literature and noted its enormity. To make sense of leadership, he wrote down the characteristics of a good leader as identified by leadership writers. He says that he rapidly abandoned this approach because he "ran out of space on one side of paper after I had passed number 127 on the 'necessary-aspects-of-leadership' list" (3). He tried other methods as well and found that none yielded a convincing definition.

During his attempts to define "leadership," Grint noticed that two divisions seemed to appear throughout the literature. The first of these is the significance attributed to the individual or to the situation or context within which the leader operates. Some leadership theories seem to center solely on the characteristics of leaders regardless of the situation (e.g., trait theories), whereas others do the opposite (e.g., situational theories). Still other theories involve an interaction between these two domains (e.g., contingency theories). The second of the divisions lies in the traditional split between objective and subjective assumptions about reality. Translated into the leadership environment, he

realized that some writers assume that the characteristics of the leader or the situation are "knowable." For example, contingency theorists assume that some people can accurately assess themselves and their environments and make adjustments to suit, whereas others do not.

Grint's analysis is particularly useful because it underpins a socially constructed approach to leadership. In effect, he gives us the tools to understand leadership afresh. From his perspective, leadership is not a quality of leaders; not in the sense of traits or behaviors. Instead, leadership is like beauty and in the eye of the beholder. The focus is on how peoples' views about who is and is not a leader form. Why do some people's voices have more influence in determining who is regarded as a leader than others? Why and how do perceptions of leadership crystallize over time? When people talk about leadership does it tell us more about the speaker or the leader?

From a teaching and learning perspective, the social constructionism approach to leadership is a godsend. There are several problems with the traditional approaches to understanding leadership. It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine all the factors driving leadership. There are frustrations in trying to assess what sorts of actions are suitable for a particular environment and whether it is possible or advisable to change one's behavior to suit a situation. Finally, trait theory offers neither support nor explanation for all who have the undesirable traits. However, the social constructionist approach offers hope. Quite simply, almost everyone can improve their image or actions and thereby influence the perceptions of followers and/or observers. Moreover, rhetoric – the ways in which people discuss and debate – becomes a crucial skill and this can be the medium through which people learn leadership. Our contribution as academics may be to blend teaching and learning to provide integration between outcome and process in leadership studies.

The three papers in this section look at the way in which leadership is taught and they sit comfortably with the social constructionist approach. In the first paper, James Burton introduces us to a new approach for teaching called "The Great Leader Project." In essence, this approach involves teams of students competing in debates, very much harking back to the way the Greek scholars used to engage in competitive argument, to persuade that their own leader is the greatest of all. Through this process, the students learn about leaders and leadership in a manner that develops their own leadership.

In the second paper, Joan Gallos also advocates a method of teaching leadership that is grounded in public debate. Her approach to leadership is to view creativity and innovation as core elements. In this paper, she proposes a design for a "Creativity Forum" project that asks students to stretch their own creative expression while exploring the lives of creative others.

Although the third paper is situated in a different field, appreciative inquiry (AI), it fits with the others in the sense that the tables are turned. AI is a process of organizational change and transformation grounded in social constructionist thought and dialogue. In this paper, it is applied to the involvement of learners in the design of their teaching. In particular, the students are asked what aspects of teaching have an impact on them. In this paper, the authors, Thomas Conklin and Rama Kaye Hart, advocate exploring the perceptions of those on the receiving end of teaching and giving their views prominence in terms of the design of future teaching interventions. In effect, the followers (the leadership students) shape the leaders (the leadership instructors), and in doing so, demonstrate leadership themselves.

References

Bennis, W.G. & Nanus, B. (1985). *Leaders: The strategies for taking charge*. New York: Harper & Row.

Grint, K. (1997). *Leadership: Classical, contemporary, and critical approaches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.