

21st Century Leadership Issues as They Pertain to a Small Private Liberal Arts University

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Each leader develops his/her unique style of leadership to fit the talents, maturity, and abilities of a given group of employees. This paper will address three important areas of leadership: (1) The author will define the term "leadership" as it applies to organizations and examine several types of leadership methods. (2) The paper also will discuss this author's views relative to successful leadership, including his personal leadership style. (3) The researcher will explain the importance of developing and employing quality leadership techniques at the researcher's place of employment, a southeastern private liberal arts university.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership issues and personal leadership styles have existed for hundreds of years throughout history. There are no definitive methods of leadership that work successfully in every situation; neither are there clear-cut answers to all questions concerning the application of various leadership styles. Each leader develops his/her unique style of leadership gradually over a period of time, tailoring decisions to fit the talents, maturity, and abilities of a given group of employees. This paper will address three important areas of leadership: (1) The author will define the term "leadership" as it applies to organizations and examine several types of leadership methods. (2) The paper also will discuss this author's views relative to successful leadership, including his personal leadership style. (3) The researcher will explain the importance of developing and employing quality leadership techniques at the researcher's place of employment, a southeastern private liberal arts university.

Leadership Concepts

The definition and understanding of leadership has been around since the beginning of time (Bass & Stogdill, 1990). Leaders must be able to influence people. A leader must be able to change the attitudes and actions of others. In doing so, leaders must be able to gain full support of the group members, guiding them in ideas and decision-making. It is important that the group goal is perceived by all group members as the best possible solution and that the group as a whole supports this conclusion. It is very important that a leader does not have an inflated opinion of his/her own importance as a leader of a group of subordinates, but rather considers himself as one integral member of a working group attempting to accomplish common goals.

A leader should try to motivate a group toward a certain outcome instead of forcing or manipulating the members. If individuals in the group feel that they have been manipulated in any way, the power of the leader is diminished (Pickett, William, 2002).

An ongoing problem at the southeastern liberal arts university is that many decisions are made by the administration, employing a top-down management style of leadership. It is the opinion of this researcher that the top-down method of management drives a wedge between the administration and faculty members. The faculty rarely understands the direction being taken at the administrative level, and various communication gaps exist throughout the institution. It is the opinion of this learner that the administration gets so little support for their ideas because they fail to explain the overall goals as they create specific plans for changes at the university. Employees are more likely to support change if they have been considered and involved during the planning stages of an activity.

To date, there seems to be no comprehensive, all-encompassing definition of the term “leadership.” There are, however, some universal ideas about leadership that this researcher feels are pertinent to understanding the concept. Leadership ability is the ability to influence a group toward the achievement of goals (Robbins and Coulter, 1999).

Leaders drive a group forward by diligent effort, dedication, careful preparation, and a final outcome. The most successful leaders move the group toward goal-accomplishment because they are enthusiastic about a project; they tend to lead by example. They develop and make use of an agenda, and keep the group true to that agenda (Robbins and Coulter, 1999). Good leaders are hard workers who are knowledgeable about group tasks—the more knowledgeable they display, the better their ability to analyze individual contributions. Leaders must be prepared to do outside work, plan the work sessions, and keep the group on task according to the agenda. When group members get off track, the leader must be able to pull the group back to the subject at hand (Robbins and Coulter, 1999).

Leaders should be visionaries. A good leader understands that without group participation, it is hard for a group to move forward (Buhler, 1995). Many managers are bound to steadfast rules. They know company policies and are responsible for following them, thus making it hard for them to accept other alternatives. Open-minded leaders, on the other hand, encourage group members to offer new alternatives and to keep generating new ideas (Buhler, 1995).

This is another problem that seems to be holding back progress at the southeastern liberal arts university. There is a board of directors that is responsible for making most of the decisions concerning the operation of the university. This board is largely made up of older individuals who have been on the board for many years. The southeastern liberal arts university was founded in 1842, and not many changes have been incorporated since then. It is apparent that the university must forge ahead into the 21st century, but it is hard to get the support from board members, who are comfortable with the status quo.

The university has had several different leaders in the past six years. There was an attempt to bring in an outsider for the position of university president, but he met with a great deal of resistance since he was not from the university “family.” Sensing that he lacked board cooperation and support, this president left the university. The current president was promoted from within; she is meeting resistance because although some staff members agree that there is a need for change, board members do not support this position. The feeling of this researcher is that the board has such tight control of the decision-making process that few changes and improvements will be made at the school until the members of the board of directors embrace a new attitude.

J. Thomas Wren states “leadership has been conceived as the focus of group process, as a matter of personality, as a matter of inducing compliance, as the exercise of influence, as particular behaviors, as a form of persuasion, as a power relationship, as an instrument to achieve goals, as an effect of interaction, as a differentiated role, as initiation of structure, and as many combinations of these definitions” (Wren, 1995).

It is important to understand the various roles that leadership has played in the past; however, it is even more important to understand leadership and its importance to organizations of the 21st century. It is the belief of this researcher that leaders should be able to utilize different leadership styles according to different situations as well as perpetuate leadership throughout the organizational hierarchy. This writer believes that leadership is not simply an innate quality; people who study and practice can improve their ability to lead others. It is the belief of this learner that if organizational leaders involve more people within the organizational structure, greater things can be accomplished.

Leadership also can be disseminated throughout an organization within peer ranks. An individual within an organization may have no specific administrative power but may possess strong informal political power within the organization. The leaders of the post-modern era must try to include as many people within an organization without losing the integrity of the organization's agenda. It is important for the leader to develop leadership at all levels within the organization. These leaders should strive to create necessary change that is responsive to the long-term needs of the organization and to understand the needs of their followers while energizing and directing them toward a common goal (O'Toole, 1996).

It is this writer's opinion that the southeastern liberal arts university could benefit from hiring a leader who possesses these qualities. There are many very competent, intelligent professors on the university staff. Almost all the professors teach and are involved with students every day. This researcher feels that the administration could benefit greatly by encouraging these employees to take part in decision-making, to express themselves, to present new ideas, and to assume a proactive role in the development of the university.

The department chairs act as somewhat of a buffer between the administration and the faculty, but there is still a feeling that staff members are ignored and are not included in establishing goals. They are seldom consulted on matters that directly concern them. Recent literature acknowledges that one of the most important skills needed by department chairs is the ability to orchestrate the functioning of departments that have varied disciplines and orientations. If there is a safe haven for faculty against threats from the administration it should be the department chair (McArthur, 2002). From this writer's experience the administrators of this school do not consider it necessary or important to include professors in the decisions of the university. It would benefit the universities administrators to adopt a more "middle-up" management style in which they respect professors by including them during the decision-making process, particularly when those decisions affect staff members directly.

Leadership Defined

Leaders must understand the human element of their subordinates. Most people have personal agendas. It is the role of the leader to figure out what each of its subordinates has to offer the organization. The better relationship that leaders form with their subordinates, the more integrated leadership can become. This author's definition of leadership is founded in the belief that the more a leader disseminates power throughout his/her organization, the greater feeling of involvement in the decision making process will occur, thus more support for decisions will be evidenced. A true gauge of leadership is the trust that others show towards a leader because of the belief that the leader has everyone's best interest in mind. Leaders are able to develop performance-oriented organizations utilizing a leader's greatest source of power, the trust that he/she derives from followers (O'Toole, 1996).

This researcher served as the chairman of the faculty senate for the past year. The support of the present administration from the faculty wavered throughout the year. It is still very apparent that many faculty members exhibit feelings of distrust toward the administration. It is the opinion of this writer that if the administration would give more power to its employees throughout the organization, large amounts of information and excellent new ideas could be gleaned.

CONCLUSION

There seems to be no perfect type of leadership that works without fail in all situations. It is the opinion of this writer that leadership in the post-modern era should use a methodology of inclusion. It would appear that the more inclusive the decision-making process is throughout an organization, the more people are willing to accept change and adapt to it. It will be the responsibility of post-modern leaders to seek to understand the needs of their subordinates and try to fulfill those needs. A leader who is in touch with the needs of co-workers will create a more harmonious work environment.

It will be the responsibility of leaders in the post-modern era to not be afraid to relinquish part of their own power to find other leaders throughout an organization and bestow responsibility on them. They also will have to develop trust in others and truly believe in the capability of the new leaders who emerge.

By seeking out team members who have leadership ability and by encouraging all employees to develop their unique talents, an organization is bound to become more successful in setting and reaching far-reaching, practical goals.

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