A Journey into Leadership – or making sense of what I already do!
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Introduction

I have held positions of responsibility from an early age. Joining the Cub Scouts aged 6 I became a “Sixer” responsible for six people in the “Pack”, followed by the Scouts where I became a “Patrol Leader” responsible for several people in the “Troop”. As a second year apprentice aged 17 I was given two apprentices to train. By 21 I was a Foreman and 23 a Site Manager responsible for people in multiple construction sites. During this time I also volunteered as a youth leader at the YMCA, before joining Operation Mobilisation aged 28.

During my first year with OM I was asked to lead our evangelism teams in Romania and Bulgaria with the Soviet Union added the following year, giving oversight to a team throughout the year and several hundred people during the summer. I moved to St. Petersburg to lead our full-time multi-cultural teams in Russia and The Ukraine. I moved to the UK becoming Head of Personnel for British people in OM followed by accepting the post as UK Office leader and in 2004 UK Director responsible for all our teams and partnerships in the UK.

I realise not all of these positions are leadership in nature; some were managerial with overlapping characteristics but different core outcomes. ‘Management seeks to avoid chaos by pursuing order and stability; leadership, however, seeks adaptive and constructive change’ (Knes, 2007). My first questions of reflection are; why have I continually found myself in positions of responsibility for people? Was I born a leader?

Leadership Traits

i. Characteristics

Research by Stogdill (1948 & 74), Mann (1959) and Lord, DeVader, & Alliger (1986) have tried to identify traits explaining the make-up of a leader. Early research concluded that ‘the search for leadership defining traits was futile’ (Carpenter, 2009), as no one could agree on the same list of characteristics. However a limited number of consistencies in the research did emerge identifying five traits central to being a leader. These are ‘intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity and sociability’ (Northouse, 2010 p19). This research has been augmented by the development of what is known as “The Big Five Personality Framework” with Carpenter et al (2009) arguing these ‘researches have had more success in identifying traits that predict leadership’, like Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism.

So am I a born leader? I am continually thrust into leadership positions. I have made mistakes however in most situations I just seem to intuitively know the right thing to do. Am I an example of Trait Leadership? When you look at some of the more physical characteristics of trait leadership, including some of the definitions of extraverts I do not have these as strong traits so the answer must be no. Other traits in the list would be high in my make-up, including the area of intelligence known as Emotional Intelligence demonstrating a high level of ‘self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills’ (Goleman, 2004).

If I look at the opposite end of the argument that leadership is a learnt behaviour I also have a problem as so much of my leadership has been intuitive. I agree with Buckingham and Coffman (2005) that there is such a thing as talent which you cannot teach but are born with and enables people to rise to a different level in their abilities. However I am not a classic
trait leader and I do not believe all leadership ability is natural. That would be folly on a number of accounts including the messiness of human nature and the changing dynamics of life around us. Kendra Cherry (2005) argues that ‘traits are often poor predictors of behaviour. While an individual may score high on assessments of a specific trait, he or she may not always behave that way in every situation’. She goes on to state ‘another problem is that trait theories do not address how or why individual differences in personality develop or emerge’ (Cherry, 2005).

ii. Personality

In my role as a youth leader I struggled with not being as outgoing as a number of others, until the main leader observed that the very fact that I was not as outgoing helped me relate to some of the people we were leading who would be put off by the brasher leaders. I realised he was correct, an important lesson to learn, leading out of who I am, drawing on those strengths rather than trying to lead like someone else. However I still struggled with the label “introvert”.

I have completed several personality questionnaires including Inspirational Leadership: Insight in Action and Myers-Briggs which helped me understand a different perspective of introvert / extrovert. I am an introvert, but I love to speak to large crowds of people and in certain situations I am highly outgoing. However as an introvert I know I am drained by people and need to be on my own to recharge; knowledge which has been crucial for survival in leadership. Although this was helpful I still struggled with other aspects of being put in the personality box of ISTP until I did Myers-Briggs Step 2. This showed the areas I was out of preference for in my ISTP type. Although I am Introversion, I am also expressive. I am Sensing but I am also original. I am Thinking but I am also accepting. I am Perceiving but I also have a number of border-line Judging traits.

Leadership Theories

i. Behavioural Approaches

‘When researchers failed to identify a set of traits that would distinguish effective from ineffective leaders, research attention turned to the study of leader behaviours’ (Carpenter, 2009). The theory is based on research by Ohio State University and the University of Michigan in the 1940’s measuring behavioural characteristics with performance effectiveness. In its crudest form this approach can be interpreted as almost akin to Pavlov’s famous dogs conditioning experiment (Atkinson, 1990 p 248-250) as Ford (2009) argues ‘Our behaviour is the product of our conditioning, and our reactions are caused by stimuli, rather than a conscious act’ (Ford, 2009). My reflection in leadership behaviour is I need to learn and adjust but there isn’t one set of stimuli in training that can condition my behaviour for all situations. I have also seen the pitfall of someone thinking they are a leader just because they attended a course. I need to be aware and engage in the conscious act of change at all times.

During my first year with OM I was confronted by a South Korean accusing me of stopping him fulfilling his calling in mission because I had not put him on a team going on outreach to Romania. There were a number of reasons for this; however the lesson learnt related to the pressure this Korean felt from his home church and culture to succeed as a missionary. The lesson also related to communication. There had been a language breakdown (his English was poor, my Korean non-existent) however it was the way I had communicated and my lack of understanding of Korean culture which had really led to the difficulties. We talked and I learnt to change my behaviour to match those I was leading.

The point here is that although a high percentage of my leadership has been intuitive there are core issues which must be learnt and behaviour adopted, especially as I have moved
more into Global Leadership. I would have benefited, as would my Korean brother, from
communication studies like 'The Geography of Thought: How Asian and Westerns Think
Differently And Why' (Nisbett, 2003).

Today I lead an experienced team of senior leaders whom I expect to be better than I am at
leading their divisions. My strengths include holding together the big picture and turning
vision into reality, weaknesses include quickly being bored with detail and finishing projects.
I have learnt to find leaders whose strengths complement my weaknesses and never be
threatened by this. I have found it is crucial to lead each of my senior leadership in different
ways, adapting my behaviour and gauging their responses depending on their personalities
and abilities. For example one leader is from Switzerland, a culture with high 'uncertainty
avoidance' (Hofstede, 1980), he always sees the problems and reacts to these long before
he sees the opportunities and in this way he balances out some other members of my team.

ii. Situational Approaches

It is also true that my leadership behaviour can be impacted by the situation I find myself in.
Isolation is a word sometimes attributed to leadership as the leader bears overall
responsibility for the people and ministry. As I reflect on my leadership development within
OM I can honestly say this has only happened to me twice. The first time was 1989 leading
my first every short-term outreach team in Hungary. It had been hastily put together and
nothing had been pre-arranged, no church contacts, no programme. I remember
feeling isolated when things went wrong, feeling it was my fault; I was the leader. However
when things went well I remember the team (rightly) praising God. When it went wrong it
was my fault, when it went right God did it! I have since learnt in leadership especially with
the Spiritual dimension that just because things seem to be going wrong doesn’t mean they
are, and the situation I am in often needs deeper discernment to understand than just a
surface appraisal.

The second time I felt isolated was when I moved to Russia. I was responsible for many
people new to OM. I was new to Russia, the language, the culture, the harsh living
conditions and there was a lack of a strategy. But I had the support of a senior OM leader
based in Austria. That was until his son tragically died the month after I moved to Russia.
My support had been removed. I was on my own.

I have found in these situations the answer apart from total reliance on God is the building of
ownership and leadership. My way of doing this has been intuitive however as I reflect back
I can identify key aspects of Situational Leadership and in particular the Hersey-Blanchard
Model of Situational Leadership as cited by (CliffsNotes.com, 2011). A model based on the
amount of direction a leader needs to give in relation to the maturity of the followers and how
the changing amount of direction leads eventually to greater ownership.

When I moved to Russia with an inexperienced team, my initial leadership style had to be
directional, spelling out the task of ministry focus and how we needed to operate together in
policy, procedure and structure including leadership and management. After about a year of
developing the team and ministry I will never forget the leadership meeting where I presented
a possible addition to our ministry strategy. Two members of the group disagreed resulting
in us not adopting the proposed strategy. After the meeting they expressed concern about
the disagreement. It was the defining moment in the maturing of leadership in Russia, the
situation had changed and I could lead in a different way with greater engagement and
spread of ownership. I was so encouraged they had disagreed with me, one of them I
appointed to a more senior role on the team, the other I mentored to take over from me as
the leader of OM Russia. A role he did for a further ten years after I had left.

Barnett (2008 citing Fiedler 1967) argues that ‘leaders with different leadership styles would
be more effective when placed in situations that matched their preferred style’. I would agree
as I saw the need in Russia required a greater level of consolidation going deeper into
partnerships following a number of years of tremendous change and innovation. The innovation and building of something new had been suited to my leadership style and personality, the consolidation was more suited to the ability and style of the new leader. This was the primary reason why I handed over leadership.

iii. Transactional to Transformational

Six months after joining OM I was asked to form and lead a new department responsible for all outreach teams in Romania and Bulgaria. A Dutch chap in my department accused me of being too hard on him. As I reflected on this I was puzzled as several months earlier while working as a construction site manager I had been accused by my business partner of being too soft on the men. What had changed?

In construction my partner saw the relationship with employees as transactional. They were there to do what they were told, do it well and get paid for it (Bass, 2006). Although the accusation of being too soft was due to the fact that I was concerned about the lives of the people in our business even at the expense of profit I realise in one way my business partner was correct. I had the wrong balance in a transactional environment.

My move into mission working with volunteers also left me with an incorrect balance as the leadership style desired by the Dutch team member was transformational. He was not there for the money, he was not there for my benefit, he had a calling and as Bass (2006 p15) explains the leadership required needed to have the four elements of Idealised influence, Inspirational motivation, Intellectual stimulation and Individualised consideration. ‘Taking followers to the next level, inspiring them to transcend their own self-interests in achieving superior results’ (Babou, 2008). Although I had come from an environment of transactional leadership, I had moved into an environment requiring transformational leadership and was caught between the two.

In my current role I lead a group of senior leaders, some responsible for divisions with 50 to 100 people in them. My style has to be highly transformational but sometimes I think too close to the laissez-faire end of the empowerment continuum in decision making; transactional control being at the other end. Bass (2006 p207) argues ‘leaders are empowering rather than laissez-faire when they set the boundaries within which subordinates are given discretionary opportunities’. He argues that this is only effective when the main leader also follows through with resources, support and caring. This is the area I give most attention to in my leadership.

iv. Power-Influence Approaches

Two sources of power a leader uses to influence and attain goals are ‘the power of position and the leader’s personal qualities’ (Leadership, 2007). Within positional power are opportunities to control through intimidation or reward. There is also the legitimate acceptance of positional authority by the group which in religious circles can also mean Spiritual authority. Within the personal qualities we have elements of specialist skills or “Expert Power” along with strong trait elements of “Charismatic Power”, winning the hearts and minds of the followers.

I have had positional power in business; however in the environment I worked I knew respect came not through the position but the skills I had. Even in my transactional world of business I had to be good at what I did in order to lead the rest of the team. This doesn’t mean that I did not have power. I did and I have sacked a number of people over the years for not doing what was required of them. In OM I have found that although I also hold positional authority my role is primarily to empower and support those I am responsible for to be the best they can be.

Power and position when mixed with the fatal aspect of low-self esteem in a leader or a leader in the wrong situation for their skill set can lead to toxic leadership.
My Conclusions

Although I am now able to put labels like Transformational or Situational onto behaviour or reactions, this is retrospective and my leadership as mentioned before has by-and-large been intuitive. This has its strengths but is also a weakness and through further study and reflection I am learning to be more intentional in my leadership.

Another area of weakness has been the blind spot of believing others are also intuitive to the same level in their leadership resulting in my surprise and dismay that their leadership in a situation has not produced the correct results. This is an area I must become more intentional in; leadership training and mentoring, ensuring those I am in a position to empower into leadership are equipped for the task, understanding their own leadership styles and how to exercise the correct responses in leadership to the situation and people they are responsible for.

Although not fully adhering to Trait theory I do believe there are key areas of trait or personality which leadership needs. My leadership experience would put the following at the top of the list. Self-esteem; or more importantly, ensuring those you put in leadership positions do not suffer from low self-esteem as they will end up damaging themselves, the ministry and more importantly those attempting to follow. I have found in leadership you need courage to deal with the hard issues, compassion to deal with them fairly, conviction or drive to deal with them decisively, integrity to communicate consistently, intelligence to get the timing right, discernment to see beyond the obvious, a willingness to admit mistakes and humility for the trust those you are leading have given to you. One day I may get it right.

References


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