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Optimistic Leadership for the 21st Century and Beyond

Abstract

This paper proposes a future-driven leadership theory — the optimistic leadership theory — suitable for leading global organizations in the 21st century and beyond. The author argues that a new leadership approach is needed for these organizations due to the complexities that come with globalization, including the high need for knowledge and experience, distance decay, and cultural amalgamation. Five leadership approaches (Visionary Leadership, Differentiated Leadership, Servant Leadership, Flexible Leadership, and Reflective Leadership) are identified as the components of optimistic leadership. Following a review of the rare literature on these five leadership approaches, they are found to constitute the best determinants of successful future-driven leadership. There is an overlap of some approaches and some are within other leadership theories such as transformational leadership. A model of optimistic leadership is suggested, and a test based on the variables is proposed.

Introduction

The need for effective leadership is more critical in today's organizations than ever before as globalization and technology have made 21st-century organizations more intricate. Most people in their adult lives are concerned about the type of leadership present. Accordingly, leadership has become a too complex function due to the tremendous wealth of variables in this age of globalization. A countless number of leadership theories exist in the literature, and new leadership theories are proposed each passing day. Yet, only a few leadership theories have gained substantial prominence in the leadership literature (Banks et al., 2018).

With the overwhelming amount of leadership theories and with an increasingly complex leadership arena, it becomes extremely difficult for practicing leaders to fully understand and apply the right type of leadership their organization needs. This difficulty in organizational leadership is far from over as we look forward to an even more complex leadership terrain of virtual leadership with the growing virtuality of global organizations (Schmidt, 2019). The current paper seeks to minimize the challenge of leading complex future organizations by proposing an ultimate leadership theory that is more suited to the nature of today's — and future — global organizations. The proposed leadership theory, *the optimistic leadership theory*, will be less of a theory and more of a theoretical guide for leading global 21st-century organizations and is composed of other leadership models.

The Optimistic Leader

As the number of leadership theories multiply, practicing leaders find it increasingly difficult to study profoundly and utilize a particular leadership theory in their leadership function. There is, therefore, a need to condense and make simple the body of relevant knowledge of leadership theories in a manner that makes it easy to effectively apply them to real organizations. The optimistic leadership theory is a future-driven leadership theory that fills the gap of the overwhelming multiplicity of novel leadership theories in the literature by taking from previous theories the best aspects that are suitable for the current age of information and experience overload.

Leadership continues to evolve, and the leadership styles suited for yesteryear organizations would not be suitable for inspiring the current and future generations (Anderson et al., 2016; Rudolph et al., 2018). Additionally, a particular leadership approach's success in one organizational setting does not guarantee success in another. Therefore, leaders must apply varied techniques to the same situation and maintain a psychological state of confidence towards goal achievement – leaders need to be optimistic. It has been found that optimism generates hope, leading to better productivity and greater vivacity in the workplace (Abid et al., 2021).

There are five components of optimistic leadership: Visionary leadership, Differentiated leadership, Servant leadership, Flexible leadership, and Reflective leadership. The totality of these components would envelop all other leadership theories. For instance, differentiated leadership, as will be discussed later, constitutes components of situational and contingency theories of leadership while visionary leadership is a characteristic of transformational and charismatic leadership (Kasanah, 2019).

Visionary Leadership (VL)

Visionary leadership is the first variable built into the optimistic leadership theory and is the most important contributor to optimistic leadership. The optimistic leader must first be visionary. Visionary leadership is the type of leadership in which the future image of the group or organization is envisioned and regularly communicated to followers in order to effectively mobilize and motivate the followers (Van Knippenberg & Stam, 2014). It is a commonly known fact in organization theory that leadership without a vision would amount to little or no results. Visionary leaders are usually perceived as transformational and charismatic because such leaders “inspire others to move beyond their self-interests to [seek] what is best for the group or organization” (Taylor et al., 2014, p. 566). Having a vision has been the sine qua non of effective leadership in the 21st century, but even more so would it be for the success of future leaders. Therefore, it is imperative for a future-driven leadership theory – such as the optimistic leadership theory – to have visionary leadership as one of its components.

Multiple studies have found that visionary leadership results in 21st century organizational effectiveness in all kinds of organizations. In a study of nonprofit organizations, Taylor et al. (2014) found a significant relationship between visionary leadership and the perception of effectiveness in the organizations. Nwachukwu et al. (2017) conducted similar studies in the leadership of micro financial institutions and found that visionary leadership positively mediated different facets (organizational atmosphere, corporate social performance, employee satisfaction, and community and customer satisfaction) of the organizations, though at an insignificant level. In no other sector is visionary leadership more imperative than

it is in the education sector of all global economies. To meet up with the current efforts to improve the quality of education worldwide, visionary leadership researchers such as Prestiadi et al. (2019) argue that visionary leadership should be integrated into total quality management (TQM) of education in order to improve the quality of education in the current era.

Differentiated Leadership (DL)

Differentiated leadership constitutes the second most important component of optimistic leadership. Differentiated leadership constitutes leadership in which the leader treats subordinates differently depending on their individual situations as well as their developmental levels. This conception falls in line with the situational leadership theory where leadership styles are changed to match the developmental levels of followers (Northouse, 2019). *Figure 1* provides a schematic illustration of the Situational leadership model. As the figure shows, a leader uses different leadership approaches (Directing, Coaching, Supporting, and Delegating) depending on the follower's developmental stages (D1, D2, D3, and D4, respectively). As a follower moves from D1 through D4, the leader must also change from Directing through Delegating leadership styles. Followers would not move through the developmental stages simultaneously. Therefore, the leader cannot use the same leadership style on all followers at the same time. Thus, the Situational leadership approach depicted in *Figure 1* is a representation of one form of differentiated leadership.

Figure 1 - The Situational Leadership Model as Differentiated

Source: Northouse, P. G. (2019). *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (8th ed), Sage

Differentiated leadership is a conception brought into the leadership arena from the field of education. As common sense dictates, the global education sector is currently undergoing the fastest evolution compared to all other sectors as education has been deemed to be the key to global development. Only through knowledge and understanding by education and information can any advancement be possible now and in the future. It therefore makes sense for an education theory to be applied to leadership. Differentiation in education is an instructional method in which different instructional approaches are utilized in the teaching of students with different abilities, likes, dislikes, personalities, etc., in the same classroom, but which ultimately leads to all students meeting the same learning standards (Tomlinson, 2001).

In the area of leadership, differentiation can similarly be achieved by employing different leadership approaches to lead followers with different characteristics. These characteristics could include task developmental level, educational level, age, gender, cultural background, beliefs and norms, etc.

There appears to be mixed outcomes to the practice of differentiated leadership. Two studies in the Chinese organizational context have found positive effects of differentiated leadership on organizational performance. A study by Tung et al. (2019) found a positive association between differentiated leadership and group social bonding, leading to high performance of groups. Li et al. (2017) found a similar relationship on follower trust. When differentiated leadership is not properly practiced, however, it could result in the perception of a lack of organizational justice. In groups, this could lead to decreased group effectiveness when group members' morale decreases due to the perception of divergent treatment from the leader (Wu et al., 2010).

Servant Leadership (SL)

The third facet of the optimistic leadership model is Servant leadership. Whichever leadership approach a leader uses, the new age of leadership demands that leaders be like servants; the leader is there to serve and not to be served. Servant leadership, as defined by Eva et al. (2019), is a "holistic leadership approach that engages followers in multiple dimensions (e.g., relational, ethical, emotional, spiritual), such that they are empowered to grow into what they are capable of becoming" (p. 111). With the servant leadership approach, the leader prioritizes the growth and wellbeing of followers, thereby increasing their engagement and effectiveness. Gandolfi and Stone (2018) argue that servant leadership meets all the criteria necessary for effective leadership.

It has been argued that servant leadership was the key to the success of many renown historic leaders. Mahatma Gandhi and Jesus Christ are two best examples of admirable leaders whose admiration was a result of their servant leadership approach. While they were religious leaders, many lessons can be learned from their leadership and applied in the business and political contexts. A key element that attracts admiration of servant leaders like Jesus and Gandhi is their adherence to ethics and values (Russell, 2001). Thus, servant leadership is the value-based ethical leadership style most required to save organizations in this age of globalization. Any corporate leader in a socially responsible corporation must incorporate these values and ethics into their leadership.

Reflective Leadership (RL)

The optimistic leader needs to be reflective. Being reflective would permit the leader to evaluate and adjust their behaviors to meet organizational objectives. Only when a leader identifies their weaknesses and strengths, and their past mistakes, would they be able to fine-tune their leadership towards the desired direction of the company's vision. In this light, the optimistic leader becomes the leader with a high degree of emotional intelligence. Although the leader may not initially be emotionally intelligent, through reflection, they can increase their emotional intelligence and create high performing organizations. Therefore, reflective leadership requires that the leader engages in the practices that are associated with emotional intelligence, to wit: self-awareness, self-reflection or mindfulness, and personal wisdom (Castelli, 2016).

Castelli (2016) conducted a thorough review of the literature on reflective leadership as one of the leadership behaviors being increasingly prevalent in the leadership literature recently. The researcher's survey indicated that a reflective leader is the leader who is always thinking about their own thoughts and deeds. Most leadership theories attribute external characteristics, such as charisma, to the leadership function. This is usually not the case with the reflective leader. The reflective leader would listen to their inner self, and by so doing would base their leadership on "internal characteristics such as critical thinking, long-term planning and finding innovative ways to solve problems with an equal focus on people and profit" (p. 218).

The literature indicates substantial outcomes for reflective leadership. When a leader practices reflective leadership, it would result in increased employee motivation, improved interest and effort, and enhanced performance of employees (Castelli, 2016). These are all results that would make a leader be regarded as a highly effective leader. Any leader would be satisfied when their organization has a highly motivated workforce where people are enthusiastic and work at optimal performance level since such a work environment would imply that followers trust and perceive their leader as a person of integrity; thus, the leader is perceived as a role model by followers (Schwartz & Castelli, 2014).

Practical implications of reflective leadership also abound. First, by practicing reflective leadership, the leader creates an environment that is safe and trusted, thus resulting in the high motivation that has been identified as a critical skill for effective leadership (Sarros et al., 2014). Second, being reflective results in open communication being valued in the organization. People communicate more carefully when the communication is open, and the leader empathizes better with subordinates. According to Cameron (2012), the performance of employees would be better in a work environment where communication is open and emotionally supported. Third, through reflective leadership, the level of confidence and subordinates' self-esteem will grow, which motivates employees to act towards expected results (Schoel et al., 2011). Lastly, reflective leadership respects the different global cultures and norms and gives avenue for organization members to challenge beliefs and assumptions.

Flexible Leadership (FL)

The fifth component of optimistic leadership is flexibility. Flexibility ensures that the leader easily changes their approach when and where appropriate. By being flexible, the leader can find different approaches to solve the same problem — thus, the leader acts in a transformational manner. A flexible leader would understand when a behavior or an action

deviates from the path towards the organizational goals and would quickly take corrective action to get things back on track. It is by being flexible that the leader would be able to employ a differentiated approach to leadership. Because of the many characteristics, flexible leadership may also be referred to as adaptive leadership, agile leadership, or versatile leadership (Yukl, 2008; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010).

According to Yukl (2008), flexible leadership applies to flexibility in the leader's behaviors, yet the use of flexible leadership does not limit itself to behavioral flexibility. The researcher opined that flexible leaders can use "tough love" (p. 4) skills to balance between relationship and task attainment values, thus flexible leadership can solve the Blake and Mouton's relationship-orientation versus production-orientation conundrum of the Michigan Studies. The researcher also indicated that flexibility in leadership could be a way to balance between stability and change through a process called "practical vision" (p. 4). Through behavioral flexibility, the leader can be able to effectively resolve conflicts of interest that oftentimes exist in the managerial position. Thus, flexible leadership is essential for all leadership levels but is more so in the current global technological age of organizations.

Recent studies have found an association between flexible leadership and organizational success. Hantoosh (2021) tested this hypothesis on education leaders and found that education leaders who practice flexible leadership mostly succeed. This result is a breakthrough given that education leadership is one of the most difficult in the current age and time (Techo, 2016). In the political leadership arena, a study by Lees-Marshment and Smolović (2018) explored the leadership of ministers and suggested flexibility as an added component that could improve on their effectiveness. Baron et al. (2018) conducted a similar study on leaders from varied sectors, including student leadership, and concluded that effective leaders today need to acquire skills that can enhance their flexibility.

Measuring Optimistic Leadership

Measurement of optimistic leadership would entail measuring each of its individual components. There are already tests for each of the variables that constitute optimistic leadership. A thorough and complete test for each component will ultimately result to a test for the optimistic leadership theory. A test should commence by testing for visionary leadership. A leader without a vision will by no means fit in the category of an optimistic leader. Therefore, only after a leader passes the visionary leadership test should a test of other variables be conducted. An empirical test of the theory could be quantitative or qualitative. In measuring optimistic leadership, an instrument could be designed that seeks to answer questions about each category, such as the following 12 questions:

Visionary leadership

1. Do all organization members of the collective (e.g., team, organization, nation) know the collective's vision?
2. Does the leader communicate their leadership vision to followers?

Differentiated leadership

3. Does the leader use a variety of approaches in the same situation?
4. Does the leader change their approach to match the situation and the evolution of followers?
5. Are followers treated differently (in line with status, qualifications, personality, age, etc.) by the leader?

Servant leadership

6. Does the leader take charge in solving every problem that followers encounter?
7. Does the leader empower followers?

Flexible leadership

8. Is the leader approachable?
9. Does the leader engage in continuous communication through which they exchange knowledge, ideas, and trends in order to achieve set goals?

Reflective leadership

10. Does the leader value open communications?
11. Does the leader build self-esteem and confidence in followers?
12. Does the leader respect the different cultures and customs of the collective?

The above questions cover the dimensions to be measured in a test and they may be rephrased and expanded on by the researcher. The leader and their subordinates must answer all the questions in the affirmative for the leader to be classified as optimistic. The categories above are arranged in order of the importance each contributes to optimistic leadership – visionary leadership being the most important contributor. Thus, the order of the questions is important in administering the test.

Discussion

The proposed optimistic leadership model, drawing from its components, is a global theory of leadership for the 21st century and beyond. Although there is a multiplicity of leadership theories in the literature, each theory has been conceptualized to work well in a particular cultural setting but not necessarily in other cultures or contexts (Dickson et al., 2012). The

Figure 2:
A Model for
Optimistic
Leadership

optimistic leadership theory envisions a future where cultures come together to constitute a global culture as distance decay dictates.

Whatever the society and the cultural background of an individual, they would be satisfied and motivated by a leader who is visionary, reflective, flexible, and modifies their leadership approach to suit the situation, and the group and individual characteristics. Every organization and individual would find interest in a group where success is evident.

A model for the optimistic leadership theory is presented graphically in *Figure 2*. The graphical representation shows the composition of optimistic leadership with each node made up of the five variables describing optimistic leadership. The figure shows that optimistic leadership begins with — and is centered around — a leadership vision. The leader's vision for the group and organization drives their leadership approaches. The foundation of optimistic leadership is composed of three leadership styles (Servant leadership, Flexible leadership, and Reflective leadership) while leadership is differentiated to reach the vision.

Conclusion

The degree to which globalization is affecting our communities and organizations has made the need for effective leadership more critical today and in the future. While earlier leadership theories remain relevant, there is a need for a universal theory of leadership that is better suited for leading global teams in the age of information and experience. The current paper proposed the optimistic leadership theory that is an approach for successfully leading the interconnected global society we live in today and in the future. It has been argued that leadership optimism can only be realized when the leader leads in a manner where success is guaranteed. Therefore, five variables determine optimistic leadership: Visionary leadership, Differentiated leadership, Servant leadership, Flexible leadership, and Reflective leadership. Optimistic leadership is rooted on these five variables; however, visionary leadership constitutes the cornerstone for optimistic leadership. In this light, optimistic leadership may be regarded as a subset of charismatic leadership though they are completely two distinct constructs.

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