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Subtle Leadership: When Referent Power is Subtly Powerful

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Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract

The following research presents the construct of “subtle leadership” in a conceptual discussion as a new way of perceiving and studying leaders of the twenty-first century. Its core objective points toward the conceptualization of “subtle leadership,” sharing a basic definition to provoke discussion and emerging theoretical framework in order to better understand the current organizational reality. Some leadership styles such as servant leadership, shared leadership, and authentic leadership are discussed to compare and contrast them with “subtle leadership,” emphasizing that leadership is viewed as a process and not only as styles or personal traits. Subtle leadership is primarily based on a high level of referent power and a holistic perspective of the personal and process factors essential for leading and influencing today’s workplace. Considering the potential of “subtle leadership” for further discussion in the academic world, it aims to generate provoking theory building.

Subtle Leadership: When Referent Power is Subtly Powerful

Introduction

Leadership is a never-ending discussion topic within the broad field of Organizational Behavior. On the subject, Warren Bennis (1959, p. 259, quoted in Betts & Santoro, 2007, p. 2) states that probably more has been written and less known about leadership than any other topic in the behavioral sciences. This makes the subject fertile soil for applying new interpretations and perspectives that attempt to make sense and serve as a valuable tool in the modern workplace. Yukl (2013) defines leadership as the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, as well as the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives. Influence is the essence of leadership, and helping others to understand and agree on what needs to be done requires a contextualized source of power beyond traditional ways.

According to Sandberg and Alvesson (2020), it is frequently argued that a key task for scholars is to develop theories that advance universal knowledge of social reality (i.e., Shepherd & Suddaby, 2017; Swedberg, 2014, cited in Sandberg & Alvesson, 2020). In conformity therewith, the well-known phrase “There is nothing more practical than a good theory” ostensibly applies and concomitantly inspires the search for an explanation of the “subtle leadership” construct. First coined by the author in 2007, it currently enjoys revived relevance – especially in the new workplace reality. Mainstream studies typically define

leadership in terms of “influence” (positive) and distinguish this from “power” (negative). In so doing, they fail to appreciate that the former may be one aspect of the latter (Collinson, 2009). “Subtle leadership” is presented as a contribution to further discussion on Leadership theory, as a new paradigm to understand with fresh perspective what subtle leadership based on referent power is about, and with the aim to build a provoking theory.

The core purposes of a better understanding of leadership — and its subtle aspect in today’s organizational context — is to provide a theoretical contribution to the study of leadership that leads to practical application for the achievement of two relevant outcomes: first, improved organizational performance (Gordon & Yukl, 2004, p. 360) and second, reaching it by providing a good dose of employee satisfaction (Fuller, Patterson, Hester, & Stringer, 1996; Lowe, Kroech, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996 quoted in Bono & Judge, 2004, p. 902). This combination of high performance and high employee satisfaction makes organizations effective, agile, and competitive. It is right there where leadership is essentially assessed and proved as effective or ineffective. A leader’s power of influence might make the difference in employee satisfaction and organizational performance. Organizations and their leaders count on different powers to reach their goals in the workplace — the referent power included — which is determinant for the successful impact of a subtle leader on those around him/her. Subtle leadership departs from the common perceptions of leadership where followers are “crippled” by powerlessness; leaders are inevitably successful in “seducing” followers; or leadership induces “massive learned helplessness” transforming many into mere “cheerful robots” (Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Calas & Smircich, 1991; Gemmill & Oakley, 1992 in Collinson, 2009). The discussion of subtle leadership provides a venue for further understanding and contextualization of the powerful and subtle influence of people over others. Despite history demonstrating that power and influence have been used for either good or evil, in the context of this discussion, by no means is subtle leadership associated with a hidden agenda to lure or harm others for personal advantage. Its core attributes are conceived far from any form of negative connotation. Subtle leadership is presented in this work as a positive influence of an informal leader on other peers, subordinates, or superiors, based primarily on referent power with the aim of collective benefit.

Formal and Informal Power Sources

Power is defined as the absolute capacity of an individual agent to influence the behavior or attitudes of one or more designated target persons at a given point in time. It has also been defined in more relative than absolute terms to the extent to which the agent has greater influence over the target than the target has over the agent (Yukl, 2013). Scandura (2019) adds that power is the potential of one person or group to influence another person or group, and points out that often power is best executed when it is accomplished in a subtle manner. French and Raven’s (1959) traditional taxonomy of power, specifically, “the source or basis for potential influence over another person or event” (Yukl, 2013), includes five types of power: expert, referent, legitimate, reward, and coercive power. These types of power are also classified in two main categories: position (or formal) power and personal (or informal) power.

Within the context of organizational leadership, and based on French and Raven’s (1959) taxonomy of sources of power (further explained in Yukl (2013)), legitimate power is the power stemming from formal authority over work activities. While it is most related to a downward flow of authority, Yukl (2013) recalls that it also depends on the agreement of an organization’s members to comply with direction from leaders in return for the benefits of

membership. This point might provide a connection and explanation based on Psychological Contract Theory, which, as defined by Rosseau (1989) and quoted in Quiñones-González (2016), emphasizes “an individual belief, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization.” On this matter, Rousseau (1995) adds that the individual voluntarily assents to make and accept certain promises as he or she understands them. Reward power is the perception by the target person that an agent controls important resources and rewards desired by the target person, and that the authority relationship is an important determinant of this power (Yukl, 2013). As posed by Yukl (2013), a leader’s coercive power over subordinates is based on authority over punishment, but there has been a general decline in its use by all types of leaders. Because mutual dependencies exist in today’s world of work, a lateral relation and the commitment with strategic organizational goals provide no space for this counterproductive source of power. These three sources of power – legitimate, reward, and coercive – refer mainly to organizational “position,” or formal powers (Bass, 1960; Rahim, 1998; Yukl & Falbe, 1991 quoted in Yukl, 2013; Kovach, 2020) that are granted to a leader or manager by his/her hierarchical, formal authority. However, power is manifested in other ways beyond formal authority. Those sources are identified as “personal power” or informal power, derived from attributes of the agent and the agent-target relationship (Yukl, 2013). This power is also referred to, by some researchers, as non-mediated power (Akhtar, Khan, Rao-Nicholson, & Zhang, 2019).

Referent Power: A Personal Power Source

Personal power comprises expert power and referent power. These two bases of power are categorized as informal power because they exist without any recognized formal authority. This essentially refers to a situation where either an individual can demonstrate referent or expert power without having any official authority or where employees can align under such individual’s authority in an organizational hierarchy (Kovach, 2020). Based on dependency of expertise, expert power is present when, as posited by Yulk (2013), task-relevant knowledge and skill constitute the most fortuitous way to perform a task or solve an important problem – all providing potential influence over subordinates, peers, and superiors. It is important to recall that this source of power exists outside the formal authority of a person, in other words, the leader does not necessarily have legitimate power and probably is not a manager.

Scandura (2019) defines referent power as the ability to influence based upon another’s identification with the individual and the follower’s desire to emulate them; invariably, it is based on respect and admiration. As defined by Yukl (2013), referent power is derived from the desire of others to please an agent toward whom they have strong feelings of affection, admiration, and loyalty. He stated that the strongest form of referent power involves the influence process called “personal identification” and that strong referent power will tend to increase the agent’s influence over the target person even without any explicit effort by the agent to invoke this power (French & Raven, 1959).

Subtle leadership does not need any explicit effort to invoke this power, making the referent power subtly powerful. and one of the strongest attributes of modern leaders. However, due to the lack of legitimate power, subtle leader’s referent power depends on the extent of the target person’s loyalty and friendship toward the leader as shaped by his/her persona, life experiences, the respect received and given to others, and the emerging circumstances in internal and external environments within which the organization operates. It also requires emotional intelligence – a greater awareness of the emotional dynamics of leadership

processes — in order to be effective leaders (Goleman, 2002 in Collinson, 2009). A meta-analysis on social power bases (Carson, Carson, & Roe, 1993 cited in Scandura, 2019), found that legitimate power exerts little influence on either job satisfaction or performance. Additionally, with regard to personal power bases, it reveals that referent power most strongly influences satisfaction. New research (i.e., Akhtar et al., 2019) relates referent power to effective global collaborative partnerships along with emergent big data analytics; In this way, referent power is defined as a power of a business partner over other collaborating partners based on a high level of identification, admiration, and respect, all of which help to build an enduring innovative relationship (Putranam et al., 2006; Terpend & Ashenbaum, 2012 cited in Akhtar et al., 2019).

What is “Subtle Leadership”?

The construct of “subtle leadership” suggests that subtle leaders do not have the facade of other types of leaders traditionally associated with legitimate power. The construct may contain the notion of passive, indirect, or even silent leadership, accompanied by a high level of referent power. Such referent power — defined by French and Raven (1959) in Hersey & Blanchard (1979) — is based on personal traits; a leader high in referent power is liked and admired, and others wish to be identified with him or her. Personality traits are defined as enduring characteristics describing an individual’s behavior (Uhl-Bien, Schermerhorn, & Osborn, 2014). Those characteristics might be direct and easily observable or might be subtle and less perceptible. Still, subtle leadership encompasses much more than just personality traits, since the referent power, as stated by Kovach (2020), is based on respect and admiration an individual has earned from others over time. Subtle leadership combines traits with what a person already possesses as a result of his or her accumulated life experiences. Such traits span a broad spectrum of environments, cultures, and people as well as holistic development in terms of moral principles, integrity, and a spirit of service — without need of public reward, acknowledgement, or a dedicated following, and with no legitimate power granted by formal position within the organization.

Subtle Leadership and Subtle Acts of Leadership

A concept related to subtle leadership found in Leadership literature refers to “subtle acts of leadership” — coined by Norwegian writer, Tom Karp. According to his research findings (2015), “acts of leadership emerge as a result of processes of social interaction in organisations. These acts of leadership were rare and subtle, and seldom came as a result of planned interventions, motivational techniques, transformational behaviour or other means articulated by popular leadership theories.” Furthermore, Karp and Helgø (2009) state that “leaders emerge in the interaction between people as the act of recognising and being recognised, as well as the act of gaining the necessary trust, credibility, and respect to perform as a leader.” Thus, the persona of a subtle leader must interact with others in order for the action of leadership to be accomplished.

Karp (2013) affirms that leadership is a social process where one assumes leadership by taking and earning a right to lead. He also argues that the dynamics of processes leading to unstable or uncertain situations in organizations create a need for leadership and provide the context for leadership. Furthermore, the assumption of leadership is regarded as a function of a time-limited right to lead granted to those newly-formed leaders by others who have chosen to follow (Karp, 2013). This interdependence and subtle common agreement between leaders and followers is a part of the argument supporting the concept of “subtle leadership” as well. “Subtle leadership” and “subtle acts of leadership” might be connected in several ways; both

terms converge in the belief that they transcend traditional theoretical foundations that explain leadership – especially in the modern workplace marked by pandemics and other global events as well as by the expectations of younger generations just entering the labor market. As stated by Karp (2013), “acts of leadership” are far more rare, subtle, and fragile than frequently suggested by popular theories and concepts. This is exactly the rationale supporting the exploration, further understanding, and conceptualization of “subtle leadership” as an attempt to provide new ways beyond formal authority to deal with new internal and external environmental forces that currently affect organizations.

Servant Leadership and Subtle Leadership: Comparisons and Contrasts

In order to differentiate subtle leadership from other leadership styles in the literature, servant leadership, shared leadership, and authentic leadership are briefly described and compared and contrasted with the construct of subtle leadership. As previously mentioned, the subtle leader has no need to be publicly rewarded or acknowledged. Rather, subtle leadership can be perceived as a normal state of servanthood. The concept of servant leadership appeared in leadership theory in 1977, led by Robert K. Greenleaf (Riverstone, 2004). Servant leaders transcend individual self-interest, serving others by helping them grow both professionally and personally (Greenleaf, 1977; Lussier & Achua, 2007). Cunningham (2002 in Rivestone, 2004) states that leadership success is judged by whether the one served grows as a person; as servant leadership rejects dependence and independence as possibilities for the workplace, interdependence is instead chosen. Laub (1999, p. 83 quoted in Humphreys, 2005) defines servant leadership as an understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader...and the sharing of power and status for the common good of everyone, the total organization, and those served by the organization. Servant leadership differs from most other leadership approaches for its focus on personal integrity and the formation of strong, long-term relationships with employees (Bambale, 2014).

There is a principle of service for a better welfare for the subtle leader’s peers, group, organization, and society as a whole. There is a genuine desire of the subtle leader to help others grow, to share knowledge and experience, to facilitate the learning that allows the construction of new knowledge. The subtle leader does not feel threatened by the followers. On the contrary, he/she provides all the necessary support and tools for the followers and peers to develop their potential to the maximum and to celebrate when they reach a higher level of knowledge and performance than the leader. In that sense, the subtle leaders can be viewed as a leader in a natural state of servanthood.

Although servant leadership possesses some similar attributes of subtle leadership – e.g., interdependency and the genuine desire to transcend individual self-interest – subtle leaders are not necessarily created through legitimate power nor are they given a formal position in organizational hierarchy. They might not have direct or identified followers, as they are not in search for followers, not in the modern world of work of collaboration and lateral relations. Instead, they emerge (*see*, Griffin, 2003). Their peers acknowledge and accept them, listen to their reliable advice, and trust in their accumulated life experiences and display of ethical behavior. As mentioned, their power of influence is earned over time. Those elements add value to the new workplace context of agile structure, diversity awareness, teamwork, self-managed teams, virtual teams, and emphasis of collaboration over internal competition. Regarding the point that subtle leaders are not necessarily looking for followers, Giddens’ structuration theory (1984, 1987 cited in Collinson, 2009) argues that human beings are

knowledgeable social agents who, acting within historically specific (unacknowledged) conditions and (unintended) consequences, always retain a capacity to “make a difference.” No matter how asymmetrical, power relations are always two-way, contingent, and to some degree, interdependent. Moreover, the claim that subtle leaders are not necessarily looking for followers in an intentional way is supported by Maslow’s (1971 in Wong, 2016) concept of self-transcendence; this represents the most holistic level of higher consciousness – relating to oneself, significant others, human beings in general, nature, and the cosmos. Transcendence might add clarification to this argument. Hence, the mentioned elements – i.e., interdependence, the capacity to make a difference (with or without direct followers), and self-transcendence as a motivational step beyond self-actualization (Koltko-Rivera, 2006) – might explain the relevance and subtle power of the subtle leader.

Shared Leadership: A Comparison with Subtle Leadership

Acknowledgement of subtle leadership and its positive influence might help organizations to overcome the challenges of current competitive forces, including the willingness to share leadership according to the new demands. Theorists (i.e., Bedeian & Hunt, 2006; Collinson, 2005; Gronn, 2002; Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007 cited in DeRue & Ashford, 2010) conceptualized leadership as a broader, mutual-influence process, independent of any formal role or hierarchical structure and diffused among the members of any given social system. Shared leadership entails the serial emergence of both official and unofficial leaders as part of a simultaneous, ongoing, mutual influence process (Yukl, 2013). According to DeRue and Ashford (2010), all leadership is shared leadership. It is simply a matter of degree – sometimes it is fully shared while at other times it is not shared at all. At its most extreme, shared leadership is just what it sounds like: all the social actors in an organization or group are involved in the process of leading one another toward productive ends. Shared leadership rests on the notion that nearly every human is capable of sharing the burden and responsibility of leading, at least to some extent, in nearly all types of organizational circumstances (Pearce & Conger, 2003). This contrasts with the traditional paradigm of top-down leadership literature (Yukl, 2013). It is proposed as a rejection of heroic or hierarchical structures in favor of “leaders who can design a culture in which leadership is distributed as an emergent and benevolent way – so the community can engage in robust dialogue, in an evidence-informed and experience grounded manner” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2008, p. 232).

Shared leadership can be associated with subtle leadership in its basic definition of “the serial emergence of both official and unofficial leaders as part of a simultaneous, ongoing, mutual influence process,” especially regarding the “unofficial” leaders, comparable with those using referent power and not legitimate power. Furthermore, they are similar in the influence that the person may have with others. Nevertheless, the subtleness is not present in the official position due to its contradictory connotation. Once again, subtle leadership does not depend on the position that a person maintains. It does not necessarily refer to the joinder of official co-leaders nor is it the product of mergers, co-funding, or the sharing of jobs as referred to in O’Toole, Galbraith, and Lawler (2002). It is manifested by the personalities, experiences, principles, and a general sense of solidarity with its coworkers and the organization as a whole. It dwells in the persona and emerges at the right moment, either sought by their peers who consider them leaders or by a continuous way of subtly and positively influencing people and environment with their presence and reference power. Subtle leaders’ voices – even without legitimate power – are heard, respected, and followed. People trust and believe in them.

Authentic Leadership and Subtle Leadership: Similarities and Differences

The idea of “being true to one’s word when dealing with others” has manifested itself as behavioral integrity, the perceived alignment between an actor’s words and actions (Simons, 2002). People tend to look up to those who possess moral authority and guide with their example. In other words, they respect authentic leaders — those who understand others, possess social skills and empathy, and in essence, walk the talk. This highlights the relevance of the development and application of emotional intelligence in the modern world of work. According to Newcombe and Ashkanasy (2002 in Grandey, 2008), the congruence of leaders’ expressions with their message and the followers’ affect is also an important contingency; if they are incongruent, the expressions may seem manipulative. Being authentic leaders helps people believe in them and follow them. Similar qualities are presented in authentic leadership. This style of leading has been demonstrated to drive affective organizational commitment, performance, and structured citizenship behaviors through both trust in and identification with the leader (Walumbwa et al., 2008, 2010, 2011).

Walumbwa et al. (2008) identified and validated four components to describe authentic leadership: self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and internalized moral perspective. Self-awareness refers to demonstrating behaviors that indicate that leaders are aware of personal needs, preferences, motivations, and wants. Balanced processing refers to leader behavior that shows the leaders are attempting to analyze relevant data before coming to a decision and that leaders are not afraid to solicit opposing views from followers. Relational transparency refers to presenting the leaders’ authentic selves, their true feelings, and their thoughts to followers. Lastly, internalized moral perspective refers to self-regulation that is guided by internal moral standards and values, and results in behaviors and decisions consistent with these internalized values.

Authentic leadership can be traced alongside subtle leadership because both involve integral formation in terms of moral principles and integrity and a spirit of service. However, authentic leadership seems to be a desirable personal trait associated with formal organizational leaders who use their power in a transparent way for the well-being of their employees. This does not coincide with subtle leaders, whose influence does not necessarily depend on the position they occupy, but who are respected and trusted by others for being themselves and for being the genuine emerging leaders as a result of their sincere interaction with others. This consistency between words and actions is supported by Rousseau’s (1995) perspective on psychological contract, where she states that people who make and keep their commitments can anticipate and plan because their actions are more readily specified and predictable both to others as well as to themselves. It is a matter of trust — a trust that people have toward subtle leaders who are not looking for followers and who do not possess the authority or legitimate power of formal leaders, yet have the ability to subtly and positively influence others around them.

The Consideration of Values in the Discussion of Subtle Leadership

Subtle leadership is characterized by qualities developed by the person as a product of his or her experiences and interactions; it encompasses both emotions-strong positive and negative feelings directed toward someone or something as well as values-broad preferences concerning appropriate courses of action or outcomes as defined by Uhl-Bien, Schermehorn, & Osborn (2014). This point is supported by the new paradigm of postmodernist leadership (Russell & Kuhnert, 1992b; Fisher & Torbert, 1991 cited in Kuhnert, 2001, p. 189-202) which includes the study of emotions and personal values that leaders hold and pursue, rather than

focusing on skills and task performance. Those traits and values are embedded in the persona as a product of interactions, decisions, and experiences. In other words, they are developed with life experiences, not just inherited.

According to Dean (2008), values-based leadership can be defined as leading by example, that is, doing the right thing for the right reasons and not compromising core principles. It encompasses styles that have a moral, authentic, and ethical dimension (Copeland, 2014). Values-based leaders create followers by enabling them to see clearly, and to achieve effectively, that which they hold dear (O'Toole, 2008). The subtle leader who is not looking for followers, is acclaimed for his/her referent power and genuine interest in others as well as for acts based on values, integrity, and ethical principles. Hence, it is worthwhile to recognize values as an element that helps to form and guide the character and actions of any leader – especially the subtle leader whose indirect yet powerful influence over others is evident.

An Asset for Paradigm Reconfiguration

As organizational environments shift quickly from stability to volatility, and from predictability to unpredictability, there are always new ways to analyze and study leadership. Companies converge in a diverse workforce (*see*, Arsenault, 2004) with three or four generations working together to address global crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic (*see*, Chong & Duan, 2022; Țiclău, Hinteă, & Trofin, 2021); knowledge organizations (*see*, Currie & Spyridonidis, 2019); and continuous global competition (*see*, Ahmad & Saidalavi, 2019; Maranga, Kennedy, Madison, & Denise, 2017). On generational diversity in the workplace, Arsenault (2004) argues that in the 21st century, generations are working together more than ever before, thanks to the demise of the bureaucratic organization in favor of a horizontal style, new technology, globalization, and a more information-friendly atmosphere.

Regarding adapting to global crises, Chong and Duan (2022) state that organizational structures are not only defined by a hierarchical allocation of authorities and responsibilities, they can further be described as organizational processes for controlling and coordinating the facilitation of tasks. They emphasize that organizations need to redesign their organizational structures to adapt to uncertain business environments for survival, as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the topic of knowledge organizations, Currie and Spyridonidis (2019) explain how changing configurations of shared leadership support diffusion and adaptation of innovation, arguing that while managers remain important actors for the mandate and resourcing of innovation, over time, powerful professionals – specifically doctors (and nurses) – come to the fore, to engage their peers and influence resource allocation. Likewise, Bartlett and Ghoshal (1995) state that unlike capital, knowledge is most valuable when those on the front lines control and use it. Lastly, concerning the global challenging competition, Ahmad and Saidalavi (2019) state that globalization demands new leadership competencies in order to interact effectively with followers from different cultural backgrounds. Further, they highlight that global leaders need to master various aspects of knowledge, such as cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural intelligence.

Many global challenges and technological advancements increase business competition. Only the most enlightened businesses anticipate that those transformations will successfully remain. Global societies evolve at a fast pace, thus, theoretical explanations and interpretations in the field of Organizational Behavior add understanding to leadership issues. Leading in a specific moment or influencing others in a subtle but positive way might be a desirable quality for modern leaders to pursue in today's diverse and changing workplace. Thomas (2002) affirms that departures in structure from a traditional organizational hierarchy to a project or self-

managed team orientation require shifts in the style of organizational leadership from positional power to personal power. Additionally, referent power, as an aspect of personal power, becomes particularly important as organizational leadership is increasingly about collaboration and influence rather than command and control. Furthermore, Manz and Sims (1995 in Thomas, 2002) state that work can be accomplished just as well – actually much better— if workplaces were to jettison the old concept of “boss.” Society has reached a stage where there is no longer a need for hierarchical figureheads who have absolute control over those within a work system. Here is the fundamental relevance of a deeper understanding and exploration of a leader able to influence others in a subtle yet powerful way in the realm of today’s tumultuous world of work. That new reality forces practitioners and scholars alike to find new ways and paradigms to understand and explain suitable approaches that contribute to a more agile and adaptive style of management. This can be achieved through a direct or indirect, formal or subtle, type of leadership. As found in recent studies on the global context of business collaboration (Akhtar et al., 2019), collaborative partners who rely on unmediated sources of organizational powers – such as referent power – positively influence relationship innovations.

Internal and external changes provoke organizational reactions and decision-making to adapt and survive in this turbulent business world. In the context of organizations and organizational formal structure, power is not inherited. Authority is not perpetual. On this matter, Brooks and Dunn (2010) point out that many executives forget that an organization’s stakeholders change over time – as does the power they wield. Internal and external factors may cause a shift of power and authority among organizational leaders. This thought is related to Rowley’s (1997 in Brooks & Dunn, 2010) suggestion that a set of stakeholders might be considered as a “dynamic network” which evokes union, collaboration, strength, and power in the hands of other stakeholders beyond top management. Employees and informal leaders could be a powerful component of that dynamic network, equipped with a subtle power to influence others.

This work does not pretend to merely add a new leadership style. It goes beyond categorizations by presenting a new paradigm of studying and practicing leadership in the new world of work. Old position powers are not necessarily compatible with the expectations of the new workforce and with the many new challenges that drive business and organizations to adapt to unimaginable changes such as COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences to Human Resource Management, globalization, and even a new war of Russia in Ukraine in the 21st century, with all the social, economic, and geopolitical implications it brings to business and global leadership. Nevertheless, universal values in action, such as trust, respect, authenticity, and spirit of service provide a fertile soil to identify, admire, and follow those with a high level of earned referent power, regardless of their lack of legitimate power.

Today, organizations must adopt new agile structures and leadership approaches in order to survive and compete with a holistic vision and concrete sustainability goals that take into account all the internal and external stakeholders, including the subtle leaders. Those leaders manifesting their commitment in their daily work and in an authentic manner, are not in search to use, prove, or even explain what other authors (i.e., Bennis, 1989) termed as “subtlety” of a traditional leader or manager’ actions because it is not something that needs to be manipulated or purposely sought. In the context of this work, subtle leadership does not refer to Bennis’s (1989) combination of subtlety and complexity. As mentioned, the referent power of subtle leaders transcends organizational hierarchy and they do not necessarily hold

a managerial position. Accordingly, such a leader does not purposely focus on the use of subtlety as a tool to fulfill his/her role as an “effective leader.” Conversely, he/she has referent power which is powerfully subtle to solve problems, encourage, and positively influence peers as new situations arise, especially in the challenging, turbulent, and diverse global scenario in which the only constant is change. A subtle leader is effective as long as his/her referent power is recognized by others and applied in circumstances of the new world of work where subtle influence are welcome and respected for the collective well-being of the organization, communication is open and transparent, diversity in the workplace is accepted, and organizational design and structure are adapted to agilely respond to new realities. In those instances, traditional sources of power like legitimate and coercive, or managerial styles like autocratic, no longer fit in modern organizations. On the contrary, they might be the cause of most of the problems that hinder business in achieving success.

The Subtle Leader: Persona, Experiences, and Followership in Action

As posited in this discussion, subtle leadership dwells in the persona, but is accompanied by circumstances that provoke the referent power to be positively and subtly activated. Those circumstances cause leaders to emerge and grow outside the legitimate power with a commitment to listen, to solve problems, and to positively impact others in the pursuit of organizational goals, without abandoning employees’ or peers’ individual needs to feel valued and appreciated. In other words, influence is wielded by interacting with others, focusing on a greater collective goal. As a role model, the subtle leader leads, convinces, and helps peers, subordinates, and superiors in decision-making – without intentionally looking for followers.

A subtle influence that a person may have over another person or group is not projected only by his other personality, but also through the sum total of his other experiences, moral principles, integrity, and a sense of solidarity with those surrounding them while concomitantly being nurtured by them. It is an interdependent relationship of sharing and growing and does not depend necessarily on a managerial position or legitimate power. Subtle leadership is unobtrusively gaining ground in organizations and – regardless of the presence or absence of direct followers – is having an impact on people inside and outside the organizational formal structure. No matter where in the hierarchical level subtle leaders are positioned, they have the power to positively influence others’ behavior in an indirect, passive, or even silent way. It is consonant with studies directed to the growing interest in followership which argue that followers are a precondition for high-performing organizations, and view “effective followership” as particularly important in the contemporary context of greater team-working, “empowered” knowledge workers and distributed leadership (Shamir et al., 2007; Chaleff, 2003; Kelley, 2004; Raelin, 2003, quoted in Collinson, 2009). That perspective emphasizes an understanding of the complex interactions between leaders and followers (Collinson, 2009). Subtle leaders are not necessarily managers or supervisors. They could be followers with a remarkable dose of referent power that enables them to emerge as informal leaders. Although referent power is sometimes associated with charismatic leaders (i.e., McShane & Von Glinow, 2000 in Soleman, 2017), that is not the case in the conceptual development of subtle leadership since the idea of subtleness is not compatible with charismatic leaders. These leaders who, as described by Rupert et al. (2000 in Soleman, 2017), often provide an exciting future vision for subordinates who can give more meaning to their work and feel a heightened sense of enthusiasm. This definition evokes a vivid, loquacious, or even narcissist person, while subtleness evokes calmness and an almost imperceptible, yet meaningful influence.

The concept of subtle leadership represents an opportunity for further research. A basic definition is presented here as “a process of influencing peers, subordinates, and superiors counting mainly on referent power. In times of change, crisis, pandemic, global turbulence and competition, and convergence of diverse generations in the workplace, each one with different expectations, it is there when referent power is subtly powerful to positively impact decision making with emotional intelligence, integrity, and authenticity, but with no need of legitimate power or intentional searching for followers.” This new approach converges with the post-modern paradigm of leadership theory and with other scientific approaches including the “social exchange” theory, which defines leadership as a group process, and “behavioral finance,” which depicts people as normal and irrational, imperfect or faultless human beings. Beyond this truth of acknowledging human imperfection, there is a principle of service and desire for improving the welfare of the subtle leader’s peers, group, organization, and society as a whole. This is a point that deserves further discussion and understanding in the study of Leadership with the potential for the development of a new paradigm of leadership for the modern workplace.

Concluding Remarks

Leadership theory has evolved through different approaches that have emerged as an attempt to understand and explain leaders’ and followers’ behavior, as the world and workplace have also evolved and adapted to new realities. This work introduces the construct of “subtle leadership” as a contribution to further discussion on Leadership theory. It is a new paradigm to understand what subtle leadership based on referent power is all about, with the aim of constructing a provoking theory.

A summary of leadership perspectives such as servant leadership, shared leadership, and authentic leadership were discussed in order to compare and contrast them with subtle leadership. Power and source of power were discussed with an emphasis on referent power as the main source presented in subtle leaders, according to the conceptual discussion of this work. “Subtle leadership” is a new construct introduced by the author of this research paper. It is much more than just a combination of contemporary and inspirational leadership styles. Subtle leadership has a more holistic meaning and refers to the indirect, but powerful and positive influence that people may have on others regardless of their position within an organization. Emphasis was given to referent power as the most relevant component of a subtle leader.

This work shows that Leadership theory continues transforming itself as global changes call out for new paradigms of studying and understanding human behavior in organizations. Change management is defined by Moran and Brightman (2001) as “the process of continually renewing an organization’s direction, structure, and capabilities to serve the ever changing needs of external and internal customers.” There is a fundamental re-alignment of power occurring in this digital age where old expectations of governments and business leaders no longer apply (Dalmau & Tideman, 2018). As explained by Karp and Helgø (2008), it is necessary to evolve from change management to change leadership by paying attention to how people form identities in organizations.

A new way of leading a whole new generation of workforce is suggested through the discussion of “subtle leadership.” Thus, research must continue the pursuit the development of the construct. After all, leadership is much more than managing people; it is about influencing people in a positive way that contributes to a collective success obtained from flexibility, adaptation, and effective management of change.

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