LEADERSHIP THEORIES
AN INTRODUCTION TO TRAIT AND SKILLS APROACH
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TRAIT THEORY OF LEADERSHIP

DESCRIPTION: Trait is the distinguishing quality of a person. Trait theory is the most famous of all the leadership theories and the oldest theory as we have research evidence of nearly 100 years. It is called as "great man" theory as researchers focussed on the finding the qualities of great social, political and military leaders. The focus of the researchers was to find the qualities or traits of people which differentiated them from their followers. Amongst the traits of leadership are Visionary and Charismatic Leadership. Barak Obama, the former President of United States was a leader with Charisma, amongst other traits.

R.M.Stogdill, S.J.Zaccaro, S.A.Kirkpatrick, E.A.Locke, S.J.Kemp and P.Bader, R.G.Lord, C.L. DeVader and G.M.Alliger are some of the famous researchers of trait theory of leadership.

R.M.Stogdill is the first researcher who identified leadership traits in year 1948, and subsequently in his next research in 1974. He said that an Individual in a leadership role exhibited the following traits: intelligence, alertness, insight, responsibility, initiative, persistence, self-confidence and sociability. His second survey in 1974 validated his original trait theory idea in 1948.

S.A.Kirkpatrick and E.A.Locke in the year 1991 said that leaders are different from others (non-leaders) on six traits: drive, motivation, integrity, confidence, cognitive ability, and task knowledge. They said that some individuals are born with some of all of these traits, they can learn them or both.

Research in the 1990s focussed on traits associated with social intelligence, which is an ability to understand one's own and other's feelings and behaviour's and take the appropriate action. A number of other empirical studies later proved that this is an important trait for effective leadership.

From the research done by the above scholars since 1948 till today, the following is a central list of traits:

1. Intelligence
2. Self-confidence
3. Integrity

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4. Determination
5. Sociability

Intelligence: Strong Verbal ability, perceptual ability and reasoning ability are indicators of intelligence. Researchers have evidence through their research that these the traits of a good leader. An example of a great leader with high intelligence is Steve Jobs, founder and CEO of Apple Computers.

Self-confidence: Self-confidence is an individual's ability to be sure about his/her competence and skills. An individual self-esteem drives this. The higher the self-esteem the more the individual beliefs in himself/herself to make a difference as a leader. An individual with high self-confidence assures himself/herself that his efforts to influence others are always correct.

A good example is Steve Jobs. Jobs wanted to create products which people around him never believed that they are possible, but Jobs created products the way he thought was best.

Determination: Determination is the ability to get the job done, even in the face of adversity. An individual who has characteristics such as initiative, persistence and drive tend to be assertive and can show perseverance when they are facing obstacles. Cricket Player Yuvraj Singh is good example. Yuvraj not only demonstrated his determination as Cricket Player but also demonstrated his determination to fight cancer.

Integrity: This is one of the most important leadership traits. Individuals who develop a set of principles and values and stick to their principles in organizational decision making tend to develop trustworthiness amongst their followers. These individuals also take responsibility for their actions and also demonstrate to others through their actions that they can be trusted. Followers start believing these leaders who have integrity.

Sociability: Sociability is the inclination of an individual to seek and build relationships. An individual who is outgoing, demonstrates initiative and is friendly is sociable person. Leaders who demonstrate sociable characteristics tend to develop good interpersonal relationships and develop cooperative relationships with their followers. Good examples are: Former President APJ Abdul Kalam and Politician Venkaiah Naidu.

How can this trait theory of leadership be applied?

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Trait approach focusses exclusively on the leader, and ignores the follower and the situation in which the leader is operating. This theory is only concerned with the traits leaders have and how they exhibit these traits.

This theory says that leaders with certain traits can become effective leaders. Therefore, organizations can consider developing these traits for people in managerial positions. Organizations can also specify the traits that are important for certain position and then administer personality tests to find out whether the individual fits their needs. Traits theory can also be used by Individuals for personal development. Managers can know their strengths and weaknesses and also know who their organizations see them as leaders.

Tests and Assessments: By taking a variety of tests available individuals can find out whether they have certain traits that are important for leadership, and they can then initiate a development initiative to work on improving their weaknesses.

SKILLS APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP

DESCRIPTION: Skills approach to leadership explains that skills and abilities play a significant role in leadership. Even though personality plays an important role in leadership, the skills approach says that abilities are needed for leadership.

Social Psychologist Robert L.Katz was the first person to do research on skills approach and he first published a paper in Harvard Business Review in the year 1955 titled "Skills of an Effective Administrator".

The perspective of this leadership is leader-centred, and it emphasises that skills can be learned and developed, unlike traits which are largely fixed. By 1990s many studies emerged on leadership which were published that explained that leader's effectiveness depends on the skills of the leader and how he was able to solve complex organizational problems. In the year 2000 Mumford and his colleagues published a skill based model of leadership.

In this article I will explain the Three Skills Approach of Robert L.Katz and the Skill based Model of Mumford and his colleagues (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman, 2000).

The Three Skills Approach: Based on extensive research Robert L Katz suggested that effective leadership requires three basic skills: Technical, Human and Conceptual.

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Technical Skill: Technical skill is the knowledge and proficiency in a particular activity. For example: In a software development company technical skill is the ability to use programming language and other software tools to make a successful product/software. For a person working in R&D department in a Pharmaceutical company technical skill is the ability to understand the different chemical formulations and comprehend the outcome of each of these combinations and also the ability to safely experiment with new chemical combinations. Technical skill is most important in lower and also middle management. Top Managers depend on the skilled middle managers to manage technical issues.
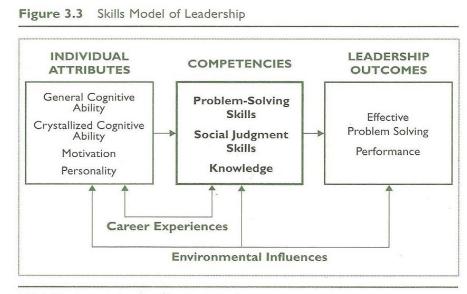
Human Skill: Human skill is "People Skill". Human skills is the ability of a leader to work effectively with subordinates, peers, superiors to achieve company goals. Leaders should have the ability to create a work environment that is trust worthy and also ensure that all employees are comfortable working with each other. Leaders should ensure that all employees should be involved in the planning process as the work affects each one of them. Human skills, Katz says is also being empathetic to other co-workers and being able to motivate all employees is also an important human skill.

Conceptual Skills: Conceptual skills is the ability of a leader to work with ideas. Example: The ability of the CEO of a start-up company to articulate and communicate a new product idea and his vision to his employees make the company a success is a conceptual skill. Conceptual skills are required and are very important at the top management. Lack of conceptual skills to top managers (upper levels) can negatively jeopardize the success of the organization.

Summary of the 3 skills approaches: All the three skills are important for leader, but it depends on where they are in the management structure. This work by Robert L.Katz set the stage for further research on leadership study in terms of skills and it was in 1990s that another skills based approach of leadership was published by Mumford and others.

SKILLS MODEL: Mumford and colleagues published a skill based model of leadership. This model looks at the relationship between the leader's skill and the leader's performance. Mumford and colleagues believed that leadership skills can be developed by training and experience. This model emphasises that skills and knowledge makes a leader successful and effective.

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There are five components in Mumfords skill model: competencies, individual attributes, leadership outcomes, career experiences, and environmental influences. Figure illustrating these components is given below.

Figure 3.3   Skills Model of Leadership

SOURCE: Adapted from "Leadership Skills for a Changing World: Solving Complex Social Problems," by M. D. Mumford, S. J. Zaccaro, F. D. Harding, T. O. Jacobs, and E. A. Fleishman, 2000, *Leadership Quarterly, 11*(1), 23.

Let us understand these competences in detail:

Competencies: From the figure we can see that problem solving, social judgement and knowledge constitute the core of this model. Their leadership outcomes can be effective only if leader is good at these competencies.

Problem solving skills: Problem solving skills means being able to define and generate solutions to the problem in an organizational context. In doing this the leader should also be able to be conscious of the time frame for design the problem, implementing the solution and the organizational goals. Skills to deal with a wide variety of novel and ill-defined problems is a highly required skill for leaders.

Example: If you are the Director of Marketing and Customer Service for a large FMCG company and your team has found out that there is significant drop in customer satisfaction which led to a very high drop in sales and profits during the last 2 quarters. This is an alarming situation. Your ability to develop a plan to bring back the lost confidence to your customers

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and increase the sales and profits demonstrate your problem solving skills. First you identify the full impact of this situation on the organization in the long term, then you find a way to reach and inform the employees about the change needed and ensure that it is clearly understood, and finally implementing the plan and how this implementation can immediately turn around the situation for the better.

Social Judgement Skills: Mumford and his colleagues have identified three different skills in social judgement: perspective taking, social perceptiveness, behavioural flexibility and social performance.

Perspective taking is empathy applied to problem solving. It is to understand other peoples point of view about problems. Social perceptiveness is to understand what motivates others, how others react to change, and also understand the different needs and goals of all constituents of the organization. Behavioural flexibility is to adapt one behaviour based on understand of others views in the organization. Social performance is having a broad range of skills from understanding employees perspectives to communicate the leaders vision to others. Persuasion skills are needed to communicate changes. Social performance is broadly about the communication skills of the leader.

Knowledge: The amount of knowledge the leader has directly influences the effectiveness of his solutions to problem solving. The more experienced the leader is the better the mental structures called schema. The leader's ability to organize information into schemata or categories depends on the leaders experience. Leaders with lot of knowledge have complex organizing structures than leaders with less experience. These leaders become experts.

Example: Let us assume that there is an experienced Project Manager for a large Metro Rail Project. This expert knows lot about the construction of the Metro Rail Lines, the equipment, the skills, the different stakeholders the relationship between different stakeholders and much more. This person's knowledge about metro includes knowledge about the construction technicalities, the dependencies with other agencies, the challenges, the risks, the stakeholders and their varying interests, and so on. This expert understands the complexity of these projects. All this is a complex mental structure in the mind of this expert which is knowledge. This knowledge will have a positive impact on how leaders solve problems.

Individual Attributes: There are four individual attributes that will have impact on leadership. They are: general cognitive ability, crystallised cognitive ability, motivation and personality.

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General Cognitive Ability: In psychology this is called as "fluid intelligence". Fluid intelligence liked to biology and not experience. This aspect of intelligence increases with age and is grounded in brain development. This can generally be thought of as a person intelligence.

Crystallized Cognitive Ability: This is the intelligence that increases throughout life because it consists of learned skills and knowledge acquired through experience. This intelligence is learned through experience and becomes stable over time and does not diminish with ageing. Motivation: The three aspects of motivation this model suggests which are essential for leadership are: willingness to lead and tackle problems, dominance and social good. Dominance means leaders should be willing to exert their influence. Social good is broadly about a host of outcomes, but essentially advancement of human good.

Personality: Personality is influenced by Biological, Psychological and Environmental factors. Personality has a big impact on leadership skills. Personality traits like honesty, openness, extraversion, helpful, agreeableness, sociability, tolerance to ambiguity are some of the traits that significantly influence leadership.

Leadership Outcomes: Effective problem solving, and performance are the outcomes of leadership, and these are influenced by the competencies. The better these competencies the higher the chances of leader achieving overall performance.

Effective Problem Solving: Problem solving is the core of the skills approach. Problem solving is a capability. There are leaders who are good in problem solving and some others who are not. Problem solving depends on the leader's ability to formulate a solution that is logical and effective, solutions that are not just information but much more.

Performance: The outcomes show the result of the leader. It demonstrates leader's ability and his/her evaluation is positive. Positive evaluation for a leader brings him/her praise and also appreciation from superiors.

Application of this Skills approach: The skills approach can be used as a template to develop Leadership development programs as this approach can be provided as evidence for training aspiring leaders the important aspects of problem solving, conflict resolution and many other skills. Aspiring leaders can also take skills inventory to know their own leadership competencies and seek training to enhance their contribution to organizations.

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