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3

Ethical Challenges in the Leader-Follower Relationship

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Various streams of thought have converged on the concept of leadership as a process rather than a person or state. This process is essentially a shared experience, a voyage through time, with benefits to be gained and hazards to be surmounted by the parties involved. A leader is not a sole voyager, but a key figure whose actions or inactions can determine others' well-being and the broader good. It is not too much to say that communal social health, as well as achieving a desired destination, is largely influenced by a leader's decisions and the information and values upon which they are based.

The leadership process is therefore especially fraught with ethical challenges. Hodgkinson (1983) considers leadership to be "intrinsically valuational," as "philosophy-in-action." He says, "Logic may set limits for and parameters within the field of value action but value phenomena determine what occurs within the field. They are indeed the essential constituents of the field of executive action . . . If this were not true then leadership behaviour could be routinized and, ultimately, computerized" (p. 202). Gardner (1990), too, sees values as part of "the moral framework that permits us to judge some purposes as good and others as bad" in leadership (pp. 66-67). Rost (1991) stresses the place of ethics in leadership regarding both process and ends.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE LEADER-FOLLOWER RELATIONSHIP

Evidence continues to accumulate about the importance of relational qualities in the unity of leadership-followership (e.g., Hollander, 1992a,b). A major component of the leader-follower relationship is the leader's perception of himself or herself relative to followers, and how they in turn perceive the leader. This self-other perception implicates important ethical issues concerning how followers are involved, used, or abused, especially in a relationship favoring a leader's power over them. Within this dominance motif, followers are essentially seen to be compliant and manipulable in the extreme. An instance of this is a corporate CEO who said that "leadership is confirmed when the ability to inflict pain is demonstrated" (Menzies, 1980). Clearly such abuse of power runs counter to the idea of mutual dependency in a shared enterprise and the value of maintaining personal dignity. Hurting people is usually not the way to get the best from them. Further, abuse deprives a leader of honest information and judgments from cowed subordinates. This can fuel the self-absorption and self-deception that are pitfalls of arbitrary power.

Nevertheless, the leader role is still seen as preeminent, often as *power over* others, rather than as a stewardship, or even as a *service to* others (see, e.g., DePree, 1989). Not least there is the very real problem of what Drucker calls "misleaders" who are dysfunctional. From a ten-year perspective, DeVries (1992) estimates that the base rate for executive incompetence is at least 50 percent. Hogan, Raskin, and Fazzini (1990) found that organizational climate studies from the mid-1950s onward show 60 to 75 percent of organizational respondents reporting their immediate supervisor as the worst or most stressful aspect of their job.

Management performance decrements also can have calamitous consequences to the organization and to others, but not necessarily to the rewards given to these managers. Responsibility for performance is somehow detached from them. A corporation head like Roger Smith, chairman of General Motors from 1981 to 1990, is a good example. He presided over a phenomenal drop of almost 20 percent of his company's share of the U.S. market. For many there and elsewhere, Smith was considered to be rigid and unresponsive to the challenges of consumer needs and foreign competition. Asked by *Fortune* magazine to explain what went wrong, he replied, "I don't know. It's a mysterious thing." Commenting on this statement, Samuelson (1993) says, "As a society, we have spent the past decade paying for mistakes like Smith's" (p. 55). Yet the organization continued its reward pattern: on his retirement the GM board increased his already generous pension to over a million dollars a year.

This dysfunctional system contrasts with one that shows the discipline and unity of purpose represented in "teamwork" aimed at clear performance goals (see, e.g., Hackman, 1989; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). Achieving teamwork demands a concern for maintaining responsibility, accountability, authenticity, and integrity in the leader-follower relationship. Indeed, the often mentioned "crisis of leadership" usually reveals an absence of these elements (Hollander, 1978b). This normative position has distinctly functional value as a universal perspective applicable to the political *and* organizational spheres. Although this position comes out of a democratic ethos, its generality is evident in the organizational psychology literature on leadership (see, e.g., Gardner, 1990; Hollander, 1978a; Manz & Sims, 1989).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Followership is periodically rediscovered as important to leadership, despite a long tradition of usage. The term is variously employed by those who come upon it and declare anew that leadership cannot exist without followership. But the essence of the matter is to recognize that a leader-centric focus is inadequate to understanding the interdependence of leadership and active followership (see, e.g., Hollander & Offermann, 1990; Kelley, 1988; Vanderslice, 1988).

In sixth century B.C.E. China, Lao Tzu wrote about the "wise leader" in his *Tao Te Ching* (see Schmidt, 1975). His philosophy makes a major contribution to the theme of sharing leadership with followers: "The wise leader settles for good work and then lets others have the floor. The leader does not take all the credit for what happens and has no need for fame" (Heider, 1985, p. 162). Similarly, Hegel taught in the eighteenth century that the good leader must incorporate the experience and qualities of the follower, and demonstrate followership in leading.

The late nineteenth century European social philosophers recognized that leading involves a relational process with followers. Interest in crowd behavior, imitation, and the group mind were central to an ethos expressed most notably in the writings of Tarde (1890/1903) and LeBon (1896) in France. Both were influenced by the neurologist Jean Martin Charcot, who drew to Paris such later eminences as Freud and Prince to study with him. Indeed, Prince called his *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* by that name because he saw the two fields as inextricably linked, through his belief in Charcot's idea of the parallel between hypnotic states and the susceptibility of a mob to social influence. It was LeBon, however, who also reported the story of a man chasing after a crowd of protesters saying he had to catch them because he was their leader.

From otherwise different perspectives, Freud (1921) and Floyd Allport (1924) criticized LeBon's view of crowd behavior and, indirectly, Charcot's conception behind it. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), Freud developed his conception of the followers' identification with the leader as a shared ego-ideal. A significant disciple, Fromm (1941), extended this conception in personality terms, in his contention that, "the psychology of the leader and that of his followers, are, of course, closely linked with each other" (p. 65). Erikson (1975) made an associated point about this linkage in asserting that followers "join a leader and are joined together by him" (p. 153).

CHARISMA AND ITS EFFECTS

Contemporary with Freud's conception of the ego-ideal was the idea of the "charismatic leader," to whom followers are drawn by a special quality. Max Weber (1921), the German sociologist of bureaucracy fame, advanced the concept to account for the loyalty and devotion of followers who are emotionally tied to a leader, especially in a time of crisis (cf. House & Shamir, 1993).

Charisma is not an unmixed good. Hodgkinson (1983) says, "Beware charisma" (p. 187), and Howell and Avolio (1992) have observed the need to distinguish between ethical and unethical charismatic leaders. In the organizational sphere, they cite the dubious ethical standards associated with Robert Campeau, John DeLorean, and Michael Milken, all of whom were acknowledged to have charisma for many of their followers. Unethical leaders are more likely to use their charisma to enhance *power over* followers, directed toward self-serving ends, usually in a calculated manipulable way. Ethical leaders are considered to use their charisma in a socially constructive way to serve others.

When Burns (1978) advanced his concept of the "transforming leader," who changes the attitudes and behavior of followers, he regarded this as having a moral basis yielding beneficial ends. Yet, charisma is *the* quality often imputed to such leaders, although Burns says it "is so overburdened as to collapse under close analysis" (p. 243). Still, charisma has by now become a favored term of almost general approval. In the corporate world, as well as in politics, charismatic leaders are often sought as saviors. But they also may present difficulties, such as tendencies toward narcissism (e.g., Post, 1986) as well as unethical behavior.

Weber (1946) conceived charisma to be one part of acceptance by followers of a leader's various bases for claiming legitimacy, and said, "if his leadership fails to benefit followers, it is likely that his charisma will disappear" (p. 360). Barnard (1938) dealt with this issue in his

"acceptance theory of authority," stating conditions that permitted a follower to judge an order as authoritative, thus raising the issue of legitimacy of power (see Hollander, 1993).

THE CONTRAST BETWEEN POWER AND IDENTIFICATION

In his classic conception of power holding, Kipnis (1976) identified four corrupting influences of power affecting the power holder and those in a relationship with that individual. Briefly these "metamorphic effects" are: (a) power becomes desired as an end in itself, to be sought at virtually any cost; (b) holding power tempts the individual to use organizational resources for self-benefit, even illegally; (c) power creates the basis for false feedback and an exalted sense of self-worth; and (d) a corresponding devaluation of others' worth, with a desire to avoid close contact with them. Mulder (1981) has extended the last point, especially in his concept of "power distance." Such distance heightens the gap between leader and followers that exists because of disparities in available information or resources. This gap will be smaller where processes of identification and sharing occur.

Because well-being is at stake, other important features of this relationship are equity, equality, and need, with the potential for perception of injustice (see Deutsch, 1975). These issues are especially salient in a condition where one person depends on another with a great power difference between them. On this point, Emerson (1962) said that the explicit recognition of *dependence* by a lower power person on one of higher power can promote resentment by the former. This effect can undermine mutual efforts, although it has not received as much attention as more tangible rewards, such as markedly different economic benefits (see Bok, 1993). Clearly, the element of trust may be undercut by a leader's self-serving activity, especially the lack of accountability when he or she is manifestly failing.

SELF-SERVING BIASES

Given their traditional superordinate role, leaders may be prone to self-serving biases beyond those that exist in other social relationships. In his analysis of some key psychological processes involved, Greenwald (1985) has presented an interpretation of how the leader's ego or self incorporates several distinctive cognitive biases. These include the self as focus of knowledge; "benefactance" as the perception of responsibility for desired, but not undesired, outcomes; and resistance to change.

These tendencies are further enhanced by power over others and a sense of being different, with accompanying social distance, and potential manipulation of them as objects. A necessary corrective is for the leader to be attuned to the needs of followers, their perceptions and expectancies. However, the narcissism associated with leaders who draw on the affection of followers, as in "charismatic leadership," often deprives them of this corrective (see Post, 1986). As a counterpart, followers may be vulnerable to perceptual distortions as a feature of the self-serving bias and identification with the leader that can bolster the self (see Hollander, 1992b).

MUTUAL IDENTIFICATION

An alternative view, more in keeping with responsive participation, considers the leader-follower relationship within a mutual identification motif. This includes the prospect of two-way influence, and the perception and counterperception of leader and followers. Cantril (1958) has said that the leader must be able to perceive the reality worlds of followers and have sensitivity to guide intuitions, if a common consensus and mutual trust rather than "mere power, force, or cunning" are to develop and prevail (p. 129).

Identification with the leader is exemplified in Freud's (1921) concept of the leader as a shared "ego-ideal" with whom members of a group mutually identify. They have a common bond on which life itself may depend, as in the military. For instance, according to military historians Gabriel and Savage (1978), inadequate and inattentive leadership were responsible for the failure to maintain "unit cohesion" in the U.S. Army serving in Vietnam. They say,

... the officer corps grew in inverse proportion to its quality. . . [and] could be described as both bloated in number and poorer in quality. . . One result was My Lai. Even the staunchest defenders of the Army agree that in normal times a man of Lieutenant Calley's low intelligence and predispositions would never have been allowed to hold a commission . . . The lowering of standards was a wound that the officer corps inflicted on itself. (p. 10)

They also detail the way that the senior officer corps successfully managed to put themselves farther to the rear of action than before.

By contrast, this identification process is enhanced in those production firms where managers have closer contact with their workforce on the shop floor, and in the cafeteria, often wearing the same company uniform. This pattern illustrates the opposite of distancing employees.

JOINING OR DISTANCING FOLLOWERS

In April 1992, the first page of the *New York Times* Business Section (Hicks, 1992) featured a story about the CEO of U.S. Steel, Thomas Usher. He took the unusual step of unexpectedly going to the offices of the United Steelworkers at the company's largest mill in Gary, Indiana. What he said there was not as interesting as the *fact* of his being there. While acknowledging that, Usher commented that "Our long-term interests are exactly the same. Whether you are a manager or a member of the union, everyone wants to do a good job . . . I think there is a growing realization that we are not going to make it without the union and the union . . . without us" (p. D3).

The Usher view is evidently uncommon among corporate executives, or it would not be so newsworthy. Indeed, the founder of total quality management (TQM), W. Edwards Deming, believed that the enormous financial incentives they receive have destroyed teamwork at many American companies (1992).

Some leaders have become so removed from followers' perceptions and needs that they may cease to be aware of how their actions affect the "team" they wish to foster. A pertinent example of this is seen in the issue of high compensation packages given to American CEOs (see Byrne et al., 1991; Crystal, 1991). *Business Week*, *Forbes*, and *Fortune* are among the major business publications that recently featured articles on this issue.

Criticisms have centered on how these sums greatly exceed the pay of the average worker, as compared to foreign competitors, despite manifestly poor outcomes for some American firms.

In Japan, the compensation of major CEOs is 17 times that of average workers; in France and Germany, 23 to 25 times; in Britain, 35 times; in America, between 85 and 100-plus times. In 1990, CEO pay rose 7 percent while corporate profits fell 7 percent . . . United Airlines' CEO . . . received \$18.3 million (1200 times what a new flight attendant makes) [though] United's profits fell 71 percent. (Will, 1991)

Such disparities may produce even more alienation of followers from their leaders. Although leaders are recognized as needed, they also may be resented for having a position of authority that accords them special benefits, as seen now for instance in the contempt many hold for members of Congress. Least of all, leaders whose performance is substandard, but who remain well rewarded, are unable to encourage good followership by gaining and retaining loyalty and trust. Indeed, it is quite to the contrary, in part due to the inability to show concern for equity to followers.

On the same day that the *New York Times* (March 31, 1993) reported major layoffs of even long-time employees at IBM, it also indicated the pay package for IBM's new CEO. It included \$5 million as a bonus for signing, a basic annual salary of \$2 million, plus other incentives that would be worth millions more. The article revealed the personal devastation of the employees leaving the company, and the likely psychological toll on those who survived this round of cuts.

Signs of off-the-scale executive compensation exist not only in the private sector, but also in the political realm. Congressional salaries have grown from \$30,000 in 1967 to \$130,000 in 1991, when they were most recently raised. In that same interval, the average private sector salary has increased from \$5,296 to \$18,425 (*USA Today*, June 12, 1992, p. 1). Based on the salary differential between the Congress and the public, the distance gap (expressed in absolute dollars) increased disproportionately from \$24,704 to \$111,575 in less than twenty-five years.

This pattern is observed to extend widely (see, e.g., Bok, 1993). It is even seen in some charitable and nonprofit organizations, and among some university presidents. In the first category is the well-publicized case of the President of United Way of America whose annual salary and benefits, apart from other perquisites, approximated half a million dollars (Hevesi, 1992). Not long after these revelations, he reluctantly agreed to resign, at his Board's urging. Other disclosures were made about his self-dealing activities, including the appointment he created for his son as president of a spinoff firm to market United Way products. Then came word that the most recent president of the largest affiliate of United Way, the Tri-State (New York, New Jersey, Connecticut) division, had resigned in 1989 with a \$3.3 million pension payment from that affiliate's funds. Its constituent groups voiced considerable displeasure when that fact surfaced, but much after the payment was made.

In 1991, the president of the University of Pittsburgh retired with a pension plan that included a multimillion dollar package plus a guaranteed annual salary of \$309,000 for life. When members of the Pennsylvania legislature, the primary funding source for the University, learned about this through the press, they expressed outrage at the scale of these payments and at having been bypassed by the trustees who approved this package (Reeves, 1991). More pointedly, the campus community was understandably upset over the considerable sum of money given up from institutional funds, which engendered a great loss of confidence in the trustees and their judgment.

LEADER PERFORMANCE

As Drucker (1988) has long noted, leadership *is* performance. The central question is: What earns a favorable judgment on a leader's

performance? Obviously one important answer has to do with success in achieving group goals. But such goals may be set by the leader who thereby defines—and may redefine—the criteria for judgment within the system. In the political sphere, notably the macro-leadership of the presidency, this is “setting the agenda,” and frequently involves a process of “getting on the right side on an issue.” This usually requires *value expression*, particularly in what the leader says about what is desirable and to be sought. The element of trust also contributes to allowing the leader latitude for action (see Hollander, 1992b).

Other things being equal, positive or negative outcomes are more likely to be attributed to the leader, so that when things go wrong, he or she is more readily faulted and even removed. In Pfeffer’s (1977) causal attribution terms, leaders are symbols who can be fired to convey a sense of rooting out the basis for the problem. For Sartre, “To be a leader is to be responsible,” but the reality too often is that responsibility and accountability are lacking.

One effect of the attributional view is to make even more explicit the significance of how followers and others perceive the leader, not least regarding expectations about leader competence and motivation. A pointed example of this effect is shown in the work on “derailment” by McCall, Lombardo, and Morrison (1988) with 400 promising managers, seen to be on a fast track. Those who failed to reach their expected potential were more often found to lack skills in relating to others, but not a deficit in their technical skills. Other research by Kouzes and Posner (1987), with a sample of 3400 organizational respondents, dealt with qualities they admired in their leaders, and also found the relational realm significant. Renewed interest in charisma, and now in transformational leadership (Bass, 1985), makes the followers’ view even more appropriate for understanding these phenomena.

Hollander and Kelly (1990,1992) used critical incidents, open-ended questions, and rating scales to study responses to good and bad leadership. This research was done with 280 mainly organizationally based respondents, half male and half female. It affirmed the major point that relational qualities were emphasized in reports and evaluations distinguishing good from bad leadership. Most notably, these included providing personal and professional support, communicating clearly as well as listening, taking needed action, and delegating.

Although this research is organizationally based, it has larger implications at the societal level, and resonates with ideas about the effects of power and distance. One point clearly is that leader characteristics have an effect on followers by shaping their perceptions and responses. Indeed, this link between perceptions and behavior tests the ethics of a leader’s actions and other attributes as perceived by followers, and their response to those attributes (see e.g., Lord and Mahar, 1990).

How the leader's self-presentation is perceived by followers has broader ethical and performance consequences. These include obvious instances of unfairness, self-seeking at others' expense, weakness, vacillation, and outright misconduct, all of which detract from the leader's standing with followers, as has been previously described. Emler and Hogan (1991) say,

There is no inbuilt tendency to use power responsibly. You cannot randomly allocate leadership responsibility and expect the interests of justice or society to be well served. Those in charge have a responsibility to make moral decisions greater than those they command . . . [and] those differences become more consequential the further up the hierarchy one goes. (p. 86)

CONCLUSIONS

Clearly there are ethical challenges in the use of authority and power. Among these are the destructive effects on the social contract between the leader and followers. Being a leader allows more influence and power over others' outcomes and events more broadly. The leader also has many benefits and privileges, including higher financial rewards and the freedom to keep at a distance, if desired. But these benefits come at the price of responsibility and accountability to followers (see Hollander, 1978b). Where the leader is seen to be power-oriented, exploitative, and self-serving, especially in the face of failures, the goal of mutual identification is hardly attainable. Instead, followers may feel alienated and ultimately take their allegiance elsewhere. That prospect poses an essential challenge today.

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