

Contextual Leadership: Context as a Mediator of Leader Effectiveness



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Introduction

Leadership has become a mainstream fascination for our society, and for good reason. This focus and fascination has led to many different interpretations of the concept and social phenomena of leadership. Burns [1] stated that “Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth”. Fleishman et al. [2], corroborate the claim by noting that “In the past 50 years, there have been as many as 65 different classification systems developed to define the dimensions of leadership”.

Much of the leadership literature has historically focused in the areas of traits, behaviors, and at times, situations to explain the nature of leadership and its impact on organizations and people. However, this historical view has largely overlooked the impact of context on leadership disposition and effectiveness. In fact, it appears the extant literature is relatively agnostic to the implications of context as a relevant variable for consideration. Context can provide the framework through which we might understand how individuals influence one another within relationship - relationships that are process oriented and socially constructed.

I propose here that to fully understand the underpinnings of effective leadership behavior, we must understand the contextual nature of influence, recognizing that all environments have unique characteristics that mediate how we experience the social phenomena known as leadership. The foundation of a contextual and fluid view of leadership lies in social psychological theories that illuminate the nature of group-life and its impact on individual perception and subsequent behavior. Theories related to social cognition and attribution, self-categorization and identity are relevant to a conceptualization of a contextual leadership.

The Scholarship of Leadership

A literature review of all the theories of leadership can certainly generate significant material for consumption and

discussion. From a broad-stroke perspective, some of the more popular theory categories would include:

Trait Theory: an early 1900’s construction of leadership theory, often described as “great man theory”, because these studies focused on identifying the innate qualities and characteristics possessed by what were described as “great social, political, and military leaders”.

Style Theory: whereas the trait approach emphasizes the personality characteristics of the leader, the style approach emphasizes the behavior of the leader.

Situational Approach, Contingency, and Path-Goal Theories: the assumption underpinning this model or theory is that unique situations or experiences will require different kinds of leadership.

Leader-Member Exchange Theory: the focal point of leader-member exchange is the relationship aspect of leadership: leader-member exchange works by focusing our attention on the special, unique relationship that leaders can create with others.

Transformational Leadership Theory: transformational leadership is a process that changes and transforms individuals. It is concerned with values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals. Transformational leadership involves assessing followers’ motives, satisfying their needs, and treating them as full human beings.

Psycho-dynamic Theory: important concepts in the psychodynamic approach to leadership include the family of origin, maturation and individuation, dependence and independence, regression, and the shadow self.

Cultural Theories: mental models, or the process by which we engage in meaning making, are held by individuals, organizations, communities, geographies, etc.

While these theories of leadership hold significant relevance in our historical attempt to understand the social phenomena

of leading, as noted earlier, they fall short of accounting for the implications of being environmentally embedded.

Social Cognition and Attribution

“Reality” is a multifactorial construct containing the physical world, our mental models of this world, our historical iterative experiences of human interaction, our desires and motivations for a yet-to-be-experienced future, and our physiological inputs [3,4].

We develop over time “lenses of experience” that inform our view of reality. These lenses impact the nature and operation of our social categorization process. By utilizing various social cues - language, action, and culture - our cognitive capacities process filtered data for meaning making. These social cues are many times contextually relevant products, creations, and catalyst. Our cognitive capacities and processes are bounded by issues related to motivation and capacity. At the core of attribution is the process whereby individuals attempt to discern the nature and reason, and subsequent explanation, for individual behavior. Social cognition and attribution have important implications for understanding leadership from a contextual perspective.

Social cognition frameworks focus on how people perceive themselves and others in certain social settings. They also examine how people make attributions regarding certain behaviors. A social cognitive, social psychological frame seeks to understand the dynamic, reciprocal nature of relationships influenced by the individual’s social cognitions, the individual’s behavior, and the social context within which they are collectively embedded.

A Contextual Model of Leadership

Through research leveraging grounded theory, situational analysis, and dimensional analysis, that explicated the relative conditions, processes, and outcomes captured within influence-based relationships, a model of contextual leadership emerged. The model accounts for the nested micro, meso, and macro interrelated social forces that combined to influence perceptions and expectations for the social phenomena known as leadership. The relative domains can be described as:

Environmental: what is presently occurring within the broader environment in which the organization is embedded, i.e., specific industry dynamics, geo-political factors, etc.

Organizational: what behaviors, social expectations, and/or ways of interacting have been normalized over time as the acceptable ways of being; what are the institutional archetypes that represent the history of the organization, and how do these metaphors influence behavior; how does one describe the organizational arc of maturity

Intra-Interpersonal: how has “fit” impacted depersonalization; how have people self-categorized based on communal norms around diversity, inclusion, acceptance, etc.

Summary

In general, historical theories of leadership have made certain assumptions regarding the nature of reality. They have focused primarily on trait-based perspectives that address interpersonal dynamics outside the influential realm of situational forces. The situation is a part of the taken-for-grantedness for these models of leadership. In contrast, a contextual model of leadership embraces the role of leadership as a framing force of our individual and collective perceptions in relation to the broader influential situational setting.

This approach to understanding leadership employs a socio-cognitive approach, where social cognition is understood as both the perception and mental processing of social phenomena and the effects of social factors on perception and mental processing. Within this model of leadership, reality is no longer a set condition within nature, but rather a perceptual outcome influenced by our relationship with each other. Leadership effectiveness, to a very large extent, is now dependent upon context. If you change the relative context, what is experienced and seen as effective leader behavior will also change.

References

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