

# The Psychology of Leadership

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## Introduction

The observation of the psychological makeup of leaders has taken place within organizations and groups of all kinds for several decades. What was considered a psychologically adapted leader at the turn of the twentieth century is now considered rigid, patriarchal, and unnecessarily oppressive. Different models of psychological attributes and characteristics have evolved just as the practice of leadership has evolved. Yet, despite the varying components of each model, from the early days of domination-submission configurations to a charismatic hero - attached follower to the empowering servant-leader mind-set, leaders have been assessed as psychologically distinct from the rest of the human population.

"Empirical approaches to leadership can be divided into three historical periods: the trait period, from the beginning of the 20th century to World War II, the behavioral period, from the onset of World War II to the 1960s, and the contingency period, from the late 1960s to the present," (Pratch & Jacobowitz, 1997, p. 1). Neither trait nor behavioral theories offered a solid enough foundation for understanding the psychological climate of successful leaders. Contingency theories came closer, in that they qualified that certain leadership styles, behaviors, and perceptions were appropriate in different contexts. Now, close to the twenty-first century, cognitive theories of leadership psychology have expanded on this.

The cognitive revolution in psychology has profoundly shaped modern leadership theories. These theories emphasize the role of cognitive mediation in influencing the contingencies that regulate relations between leaders and followers. "It is held that what individuals consciously experience and the ways in which they experience it are subject to the bias of tacit beliefs and assumptions about and perceptions of the world. Terms such as schemata, scripts, and knowledge structures have been used to refer to underlying patterns of mentation that influence how managers interpret internal and external stimuli, and how this information is transformed into action," (Pratch & Jacobowitz, 1997, p. 3).

Even so, trait theory still abounds to some extent, as illustrated by locus of control theories, and the study of characteristics such as self-reliance and self-confidence, ego strength, stress tolerance, affective regulation, self-direction, as well as conscientiousness, emotional stability, agreeableness, surgency, and intellect.

Effective leadership requires the capacity to respond in an adaptive manner to emergent, dynamic, and complex situations. This capacity in turn, depends on the readiness to acquire new skills and strategies for coping with complexity and change. Empirical research has largely overlooked the vital potentiality of self that seems necessary to engender and sustain effective leadership (Pratch & Jacobowitz, 1997).

"The term personality has two different meanings, and it is important to keep them separate. On the one hand, it refers to an individual's social reputation and to the manner in which he or she is perceived by others. This is personality from the observer's perspective, and it concerns the amount of esteem, regard, or status that the person has within his or her reference groups. On the other hand, personality may also refer to intrapersonal structures, dynamics, processes, and propensities that explain why a person behaves in a certain way," (Pratch & Jacobowitz, 1997, p. 1). An examination of the dynamics of leadership psychology will help to clarify the special process that occurs that makes one person a good leader to other people who remain followers.

## Self-Talk

"If you don't show your people how to see the world, you are leaving it up to them, and their view

probably won't satisfy you. The job of the manager, at whatever level, is to supply the self-talk," (Horn, 1997, p. 52). Recognizing the patterns of response and behaviors within followers is a crucial skill for leaders. "If you can recognize negative patterns in an employee's chatter, and you can label it, whether with a pessimistic label or just a generalizer label, then you can communicate your concern and help the employee to understand it and observe it in himself. And begin to change it," (Horn, 1997, p. 70). Communicating troublesome patterns has been a task left to leaders since the dimension of leader-follower began. It is a task that ideally should be done in a way that maximizes understanding. People are more successful if they are aware of themselves and their reactions to the world - they can more easily manage their reactions. They become aware and engaged simultaneously. A leader's encouragement of meta-level thinking - sets up a context for self-observation. "The self doing the observing is at a higher level: it can see the big picture. The agent who is doing the observing sees more than the single thing being observed - the agent sees the single thing in a broader context," (Horn, 1997, p. 75). The leader helps the followers to control their own patterned responses.

Leaders need to manage their own self-talk as well. Self-talk occurs in the cerebral cortex. "Chatter is like a program that is always mulling over whether the events in the outside world are serving us well or not," (Horn, 1997, p. 81). Deeply ingrained self-talk phrases are difficult to override and reprogram. How long a leader or follower reinforces self-talk phrases partially determines how easily they can change them. People spend their lives developing new perspectives and reinforcing old ones. The effective leader recognizes and controls their negative self-talk before it reaches the limbic system, center of the emotions. Horn tutored leaders on how to control their self-talk by telling them, "As soon as you have replaced the phraseology, you will probably notice some dwindling of emotional verve; once your cerebral cortex intervenes with a rational perspective, the limbic system relaxes. The next challenge is to embed the new, healthy chatter as deeply as you can. Repetition is key," (Horn, 1997, p. 87).

Horn described eight behavioral stimulus-response patterns relevant to leaders. The four patterns presented from a "self-oriented" perspective were the impulse to: a) fulfill the self-concept; b) avoid shortage; c) avoid negative consequences that the person predicts will occur if certain conditions exist; and d) to pursue goals. "Other-oriented" patterns included: a) the herd instinct; b) compliance with peers with whom one has developed rapport; c) feelings of indebtedness to people who have helped them; and d) people tend to comply to the proposals of people they respect, (Horn, 1997, p. 94-5).

### **Psychological Maturity**

Gitlow (1992) named psychological maturity as a critical necessity for effective leadership, especially in these swiftly-changing times. Gitlow described the leader who harbors some sort of psychological insecurity as one who would likely choose to lead in a "traditional, hierarchal, pyramidal, top-down way" with an emphasis on authority of position. On the other hand, the leader who is emotionally secure and mature, would choose a more horizontal, diffused, participative paradigm. He explained that the combination of authority of leadership with the authority of position could inspire self-discipline in followers. This would generate voluntary self-actuation, "so that the urge to perform at the peak of one's ability is aroused from within as self-motivation rather than imposed from without. Gitlow (1992) summarized that an insecure, immature leader was doomed as far as follower cooperation goes.

### **Attachment**

Graubard and Holton (1961) theorized that a process of attachment needed to occur for effective leadership to manifest. "The leader has to possess real or alleged superior qualities which the potential follower wants to possess. The follower's wish for a changed self-image, one of greater strength, can be fulfilled only if the leader appears as an idealized alter ego, which then can become a part of the follower. In order to permit this idealization, a selectivity of perception is

necessary, and this is often instigated and maintained by the leader's choice of self-revelation. Sometimes equally important is what he keeps secret about his own person," (p. 76-7). The authors went further to describe the leader-follower relationship as akin to a romantic alliance, where the follower "fell in love" and was in awe with the successful leader. Alternatively, a parent-child relationship might develop, where the leader became the all-powerful father, or glorified provident mother.

## **Change**

The massive changes occurring in modern society have produced a new breed of humans, the futuristics (Bennis, Benne, Chin and Corey 1976). This new wave encourages the effort to envision and build a viable future for the earth and its inhabitants. Bennis et al introduced the concept of "learning communities" to describe an evolved way of communicating between leader and followers. "Information is a source of power to determine our own lives and the culture of our communities. Co-intentional learning will be rediscovered, ...working in a new way with old skills. It is within the learning communities that the capacity for transcendence is being reborn," (p. 442). Peter Senge in Roberts (1991) wrote that "people are born with intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, dignity, curiosity to learn, joy in learning." (P.91). Senge supported the notion of learning organizations where the focus was on the acquisition of balanced psychological profiles mixed with generative and adaptive learning. Leaders of these learning organizations have a strong psychological handle on the pulse of the group. "Leaders are designers, teachers, and stewards. These roles require new skills: the ability to build shared vision, to bring to the surface and challenge prevailing mental models, and to foster more systematic patterns of thinking," (p. 94). Leaders use creative tension to make clear the process of where they want to be and where they are.

Bennis (1969) predicted the changes which the world is in the throes of in the 1990s. He described the leader of the future having the mental and behavioral capacities to be an efficient change agent. "The change agent must possess the operational and relational skills of listening, observing, identifying and reporting; ability to form relationships based on trust; and a high degree of behavioral flexibility. The change agent must be able also to use himself, to be in constant communication with himself, and to recognize and come to terms with (as much as is humanly possible) his own motivations. Particularly, in the diagnostic stages of the work the change agent must observe how the client system deals with him. In short, the change agent should be sensitive and mature," (p. 49).

## **Psychopathology**

Sadler (1997) described challenges in a leader's early life that appear to be a pattern present in the majority of leaders. These challenges included a) childhood isolation; b) a stressed relationship with the parents fostering a strong sense of self-reliance and a strong drive to achieve. He points out that often, highly effective leaders are "not exactly rational, logical, sensible, and dependable human beings, (p.54). Many have unconscious psychological processes that fuel their fervor for achievement and results. Followers too, react to leaders using transference, displacing feelings toward their parents or other significant figures onto the leader. Narcissism and leadership are often simultaneous, coupled with a drive to prove themselves to the world.

Most empirical approaches to pathological leadership, however, do not account for irrational and unconscious motivational factors. Conscious thought is often seen as simple and obvious activity, resulting from a state of full self-awareness and full self-control. Less rational, frequently pathological and antisocial sides of behavior, such as neurosis, narcissism, exploitation of others, and sexuality, are minimized or ignored, (Pratch. & Jacobowitz, 1997).

Ket De Vries (1993) studied the psychopathology of leaders in depth. He looked at the human

world as made up of either leaders or followers, and asserted that those most comfortable with following looked to their leaders for a shining example of what a developed person should be like. Leaders were heroes, mirrors of the best within each person, if only they were not so fearful to let these qualities shine. "Leaders, as authority figures, easily reactivate historic responses from our childhood and turn into mirrors, helping us to integrate our perceptions of ourselves and helping us to consolidate a shaky sense of identity - particularly in times of crisis," (p. 19).

Since leadership is an exercise in power, the quality of leadership depends on the individual's ability to use it. A sense of individual potency was identified as important for a leader's domain of power. "This feeling of potency is the result of the resolution within us of the archaic feelings of impotence and omnipotence that remain with us from the period of our earliest development," (Ket De Vries, 1993, p. 22-3).

The author mused that narcissistic personalities often made their way to leadership positions, with pronounced needs for power, prestige, and glamor. "Their sense of drama, their ability to manipulate others, their knack for establishing quick, superficial relationships serve them well in organizational life," (p. 33). Their dark side reflected uninhibited behavior, self-righteousness, arrogance, inattention to organizational structure and processes, and inability to accept a real interchange of ideas. "Leaders driven by excessive narcissism typically disregard their subordinates' legitimate needs and take advantage of their loyalty," (p. 35). They may become exploitive, callous, and over competitive, causing followers to become submissive and passively dependent.

### **Habits of Mind**

Theorists are becoming aware of a growing need for certain "habits of mind" in order to lead well in our current, changing times. "Embracing change, testing assumptions, shifting paradigms, thinking holistically, tolerating ambiguity and paradox, trusting intuition, taking risks, seeking synergies, and modeling values," are crucial, (Napolitano & Henderson, 1998, p. 36). Quigley (1993) asserted that values and beliefs were the fundamental elements of vision. Wright and Taylor (1994) focused on the importance of sound interpersonal communication skills in influencing and empowering the psychological adjustment and maturity of followers. They emphasized the need to attune to the perceptual worlds of followers, in order to communicate in a real and trustworthy way.

Effective leaders know how to identify essential knowledge, and ensure that they and their followers are in touch with this (Hitt, 1992). In essence, the fully functioning leader is a fully functioning person.

### **Strength of Character**

Dilenschneider (1992) supported the notion that a leader had to be strong - a hero. "The secret to great leading is rallying a great following," (p.65). In order to gain such a following trust must be existent and visible within the leader-follower configuration. To sustain trust, leaders must be continuously visible in their leadership. Groups quickly become demoralized if a leader is not acting out of leadership.

### **Empathy**

Empathy involves the notion of identification (Horn, 1997). It means one can identify with another, can see the world from their perspective, and identify with the feelings they are having. Empathy is like a healing agent. The key for leaders is to be empathetic and focused simultaneously. "We can authentically listen to people from what once might call foreground consciousness while sustaining our goal-orientation in background consciousness," (Horn, 1997, p. 18). "Empathy is a tool for making a person feel heard. It is an other-oriented gesture that

creates a sense of commonality between you and the other person," (p. 37). Leaders tend to be more effective when they move between the two poles of empathy and focus.

### **Emotional Intelligence**

First coined by Daniel Goleman, emotional intelligence is a person's ability to "read" other people empathetically and perceptively (Horn, 1997). Well-developed emotional intelligence enables a leader to be empathetic with followers yet still focused on the goals and tasks involved. Empathy helps employees relax and drop their defenses. By envisioning their "self-talk" and responding to it, a communication channel can be opened, and the leader can relate to and fuel his or her followers' perspectives.

### **Mindfulness and Consciousness**

Chatterjee (1998) emphasized the need for awareness and holistic thinking for successful leadership in this era. Most problem-solving activities occur using the left hemisphere of the brain: the analytical, logical, verbal, linear, sequential and quantitative side. Few use the right side of the brain: their intuitive, nonverbal, holistic, relational and synthesis side. "The crisis in leadership in today's organizations can be ascribed to a crisis in thought," (Chatterjee, 1998, p. 21). He presented the phenomenon of leadership as a field of awareness rather than as a personal trait or mental attribute. Becoming a leader was an exercise in self-mastery that was continuous and lifelong. The four states of mind described in classical Indian psychology included: a) kshipta or an agitated mind; b) vikshipta or a scattered and fragmented mind; c) ekagra or one-pointedness, the state of energy where the mind begins to focus on a single object or idea; and d) niruddha, a state of pure awareness. A state of transcendence where one has an intuitive grasp of reality was the goal that Chatterjee (1998) outlined for twenty-first century leaders. Through the culture of emotion and of intellect, leaders can master the process of directing the mind toward greater perfection. Emotions need to be balanced for the mind to work most effectively since they are intrinsically involved in all decision making.

What Chatterjee (1998) calls "cultivation of emotion" involves regular periods of self reflection where one's mind is stilled and emotions and thoughts are simply observed. The benefit of self-remembrance is a state of mind called equanimity. A state of mind where the mind remains what it is - a state of being calm with a spontaneous presence of mind. "Equanimity gives the mind purity of perception, clarity of vision, and effective decision making capacity," (Chatterjee, 1998, p. 28). He elaborates by writing, "Personal mastery is the ability to differentiate what we desire and what is desirable for us. Desire, like fire, is a source of natural energy and power. We may either be consumed by desire or harness it for the purpose of what is desirable," (p. 28). In other words, leaders can live the goal, become the vision, and realize the dream. While followers idealize the real, the leader realizes the ideal. Kaizen, or continuous improvement in Japanese, extends the ethic of success to a higher point, the ethic of perfection.

"Although balanced personalities tend to perform and behave in a predictable manner, their balance often degenerates into static masks of conformism and conventional approaches to problem solving. Equilibrium calls for creative responses to the demands of the moment. Leadership is not an outcome of a balanced personality but the evolution of an integral person," (Chatterjee, 1998, p. 30).

Integral people are those who integrate the energy of their entire being with their visions. They perform to realize their full potential, and are self-empowering. Integral beings realize the oneness of themselves and the universe and act from the wholeness of this realization. There is a harmony and unique synchronicity between their beliefs and their actions. Integrity is a spontaneous expression of consciousness, not a conditioned behavior.

The psychology of Vedanta and Buddhism tells us that mind and matter are two poles of pure

consciousness. In the process of manifestation, the mind emerges as the subjective, invisible polarity while matter assumes the objective, visible pole of consciousness. Matter is nothing but mind made visible. Heroes transcend the limitations of the intellect to attain the power of nature from which our minds have separated us. The power of leadership must be felt, not just observed or recognized. It suspends the calculations of the intellect at times to the convictions of the heart. Consciousness is the edge that separates the mediocre from the heroic, meaning a center of bliss and absolute peace (ananda) is possible. Heroism is nothing more than a heightened awareness of our Self. A great leader reaches the middle path of right perception by balancing his or her active and contemplative life. The cultivation of the emotions in the light of truth and objectivity, not first impressions was advantageous for persuasive leadership. . Maintaining a middle ground between attachment and animosity is important. "A leader develops an innate ability to negotiate paradoxes," (Chatterjee, 1998, p. 51). Chatterjee (1998) goes on to explain that leaders need to move from being an egocentric person to a cosmocentric one, in harmonious relation with the laws of Nature - our natural state. Leaders are, or should be, in touch with the rhythms of cosmic consciousness. "Their spontaneity comes from the experience of oneness with their followers, through whom the same consciousness runs its course. The leader-follower relationship is one of unity of consciousness," (p. 54).

### **Empowerment**

Empowerment is the act of energizing and developing the source of power that another person already possesses. Empowerment leadership is a conscious process of capacity building or recognizing capacity and developing it. Conscious leadership follows three fundamental processes: a) recognition of potential; b) empowerment of potential; and c) unfolding that potential through collective action. "Recognizing potential requires an eagle's eye for details; empowerment of potential requires a lion's heart for sharing power; and the capacity for collective action requires the perseverance of an ant," (p.56).

### **Consciousness**

Bennis, Parikh and Lessem (1994) supported the notion of continual growth and development. You can, at any stage in the cycle of your life, be "reborn" psychologically. You can realize the possibility of perpetual renewal in virtually every aspect of your life through a perceptual process of rebirth. The researchers encouraged a new-paradigm way of thinking that conceptualized the human as a "seed" with a tremendous amount of dormant growth, rather than as a specific personality type or category. They saw that the capacities for intuition, entrepreneurship and creativity are endless and largely untapped. The master leader has learned to draw on these inner resources which foster vision, commitment, and a deep insight into reality.

The new-paradigm, master leader has general insights about people and events, and specific know-how in the management of an organization or group. They also have insight into environmental forces and trends, as well as a deep self-knowing of their own inner dynamics and states of consciousness. Their thoughts, feelings and actions are proactive and self-reliant. Their creative thinking skills are well-honed, imparting the capacity to envision and trust their intuition; to widen their perception; to see deep significances and connections; and the skill to apply synthesized data and information into concrete applications. As well, a deep inner connection to consciousness is evident, with the ability to shift into different levels dependent on the tasks and situation at hand. In order to achieve this level of leadership, a leader needs to reform and transform the self through relevant education and meditation, in their inner and outer space.

### **Learning Leaders**

Fritts supported the notion of learning leaders in the roles as collaborator, innovator, producer, and integrator. Personal self development , motivation, and good communication both interpersonally and of the vision were crucial to these inherent roles. Hooper and Potter (1997)

stressed the importance of foresight and vision in creating a successful psychological environment. "They have mental skills to create a compelling vision, a sound awareness of the present situation, together with trend lines, and the practical ability to carry out certain actions which will lead to the vision becoming reality. It is this mix of leadership attributes rather than personality qualities which holds the key to effective leadership in the future," (p. 46).

## **Summary**

The ability to lead a group or organization through demanding, changing, and unprecedented conditions requires a personality structure that is both relatively stable and open to change. Stability, refers to the ability to withstand external pressure long enough to assess the situation and consider appropriate actions. Openness to change assumes the ability to adopt new behaviors or strategies when old ones are no longer viable.(Pratch & Jacobowitz, 1997). Conceptually, active coping is a characteristic of a psychologically healthy personality structure. Such a structure has the capacity to tolerate the tension inherent in openly perceiving internal and external events that may be threatening, challenging, or conflict arousing. As well, this healthy structure maintains the ability to formulate and carry out strategies to meet, overcome, or resolve the threats, challenges, and conflicts it experiences. These strategies, whether conscious or unconscious, are designed to optimize the adaptive balance between environmental demands, regulations, and constraints, on the one hand, and a person's psychological aspirations, needs, and morals, on the other hand.

Active coping contributes to healthy personality growth and development by optimizing adaptation to a specific problem and by fostering continuing psychological complexity, differentiation, self-confidence, and resourcefulness. Success creates an expanded experiential knowledge base that makes possible future coping activities. Active copers "feed" on experience; they not only store their experiences and their reactions to them; they also synthesize these experiences into their psychological organizations. This integrative activity contributes to the structural complexity of the psychological system, which, in turn, becomes more competent in its capacities to tolerate tension and devise new strategies for adaptation and growth.

Combining active coping with specific motives and abilities provides a glimmer of the process of the development of a leadership style. "For example, if we assume a base level of high intelligence, we can expect that active copers with high needs for power, affiliation, and nurturance will learn to relate to others with empathy, tact, and persuasiveness. The resulting leadership styles may resemble the more democratic and participative styles. Conversely, active copers with high needs for achievement and autonomy may develop more authoritarian styles, which may correspond to more task-oriented and autocratic styles. The trend in academic psychology, as in most corporate settings, has been to focus on fragmented behaviors, traits, and decision styles" (Pratch & Jacobowitz, 1997).

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