



Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

The reference for understanding government action

LEADERSHIP

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Leadership is the capacity to create a genuine emotional relationship with the members of a group in order to bring them to transcend their individual needs in favour of common objectives.

The concept of leadership has been studied in a range of fields, including psychology, education, management and, applied in different domains such as the armed forces and medical services (Cummings et al., 2009, p. 2). A certain interest in the concept began to develop in the early 1900s, coinciding with the advent of the “Great Man theory”. According to this approach, leadership is a kind of innate talent or gift reserved to certain individuals. However, “the concept of leadership entered the academic literature in the 1930s, when researchers associated with the Human Relations Movement [Mayo, 1933, and Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1933] proposed to further explore the role of human factor in industrial organizations” (Blais-David and Hall, 2005, p. 4 (our translation)). The movement gave birth to three major approaches currently used in the study of leadership – namely, the personalist, situationist and interactionist approaches (Guimond, 2006). In turn, these approaches spurred the development of new theories of leadership, including transformational leadership and charismatic leader, which continue to be topical.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), leadership relates to a position or office of leader – i.e., someone who commands or directs. As such, it is a rather complex concept to define, owing in part to the multitude of authors who have tackled the subject (accounting for more than 10,000 studies to date) (Schermerhorn et al., 2006). Notwithstanding the volume of descriptions, it is possible to discern three essential characteristics: 1) leadership is a skill that develops over time; 2) it is a process of interaction between a leader and his/her collaborators; and 3) it is a process of influence towards the achievement of common goals (Maltais, Leclerc and Rinfret, 2007). From these main components, leadership thus emerges as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2007, p. 3).

Concerning the first characteristic, it is worth recalling that leadership is a term often used to differentiate between leaders and non-leaders on the basis of their individual traits. Stogdill (1948) defined a good leader as one who was “intelligent, insightful, vigilant, responsible, enterprising, persistent, confident and sociable” (Northouse, 2004, quoted in Labelle, 2004, p. 2). As Vroom (1959, p. 322) has pointed out, however, leadership cannot be considered a unique feature of personality but must be assessed according to a number of variables, which include the attitudes,

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needs and expectations of collaborators. As such, it is interesting to go beyond personality traits and conceive leadership as an action-centred competence. In the approach proposed by Katz (1955), leadership is conceived of as a skill, which he defines as “an ability which can be developed, not necessarily inborn, and which is manifested in performance” (Katz, 1955, quoted in Moore and Rudd, 2005, p. 23). Effective leadership is an individual competence – that is, a “setting into motion, a mobilization, a putting into play of a set of distinctive, evolving parameters” (Le Boterf, 1994, quoted in Dejoux, p. 151 (our translation)). Some authors refer to emotional intelligence to describe leadership in terms of competence. According to Goleman (2000), each style of leadership has one or more emotional components. This author has identified six basic styles of leadership, and more importantly, he asserts that the most effective leaders switch their leadership style with flexibility when needed (Goleman, 2000, p. 11). Emotional intelligence is thus today at the center of the effective leader's portfolio of competencies (Gond and Mignonac, 2002, p. 12).

Secondly, the leader manifests his/her leadership as much in his/her interpersonal relationships (i.e., behaviours centring on relationships or others) as in the tasks to be accomplished (i.e., behaviours centring on tasks or activities). Graen and Schiemann (1978) carried out a study to verify the processes by which a leader and his/her collaborators develop relations of interdependence. This study served to bring out the importance of expectations and interactions between the leader and his/her collaborators, implying that the attainment of organizational objectives is closely linked to the expectations of the latter. This leads to the conceptualization of leadership in terms of transactional interactions (goal-oriented rewards/punishment) and transformational interactions (which cause the situation to evolve by increasing the efficiency of collaborators). In other words, “the best leadership is both transformational and transactional. Transformational leadership augments the effectiveness of transactional leadership, but cannot replace it” (Waldman, Bass and Yammarino, 1990, quoted in Bass and Steidlmeier, 1998, p. 3). Consequently, leadership is linked to the quality of the relationship between the leader and his/her collaborators that is, the higher the quality of the interaction, the more the latter will be satisfied and productive. Obviously, such interaction unfolds within a number of other frameworks – i.e., situations, behaviours and contexts – which must be taken into account. This consideration cannot be neglected as it can cause the quality of interaction to vary.

Thirdly, leadership is the “process of influencing an organized group to accomplishing its goals” (Roach and Behling, 1984, quoted in Hughes, Ginnet and Curphy, 1996, p. 5). But however important interaction may be, leadership cannot exist without influence (Northouse, 2007, p. 3). Several authors use the term “power” as a synonym of influence; however, power relates primarily to principles involving force, whereas influence is defined in terms of the capacity to change attitudes and ways of thinking. In the leadership process, influence is exerted by an individual who formulates a common goal and in whom there appears to exist “a fusion of collective and individual destiny. By engaging in the common task and demonstrating incomparable energy, the leader is able to subjugate group” (Guimond, 2006, p. 516 (our translation)).

In short, leadership can be viewed from a variety of angles, each time taking into consideration its three - main components. Leadership cannot be reduced to a single personality trait or a process of interaction or influence. It is defined by all these characteristics taken together. A leader cannot exercise leadership without the assistance and the stimulation of interaction with his/her collaborators. This amounts to saying that collaborators play an essential role in this relationship. If

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they follow their leader, it is because they are motivated and harbour expectations toward him/her. The relationship is interwoven with strong emotions which develop and change over time and from which the leader draws his/her capacity to project leadership competency. Through contexts, situations, interactions and events, this competency evolves and undergoes transformation. Ever goal-minded, the leader possesses the skills and attitudes required to lead the group toward the accomplishment of common objectives.

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