

BEHAVIORAL THEORY: APPRAISAL FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN THE DIGITAL WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic disruption has accelerated the shift to digital ways of working. Organizations find that their leadership development practice needs to develop leaders adept at leading effectively in the digital environment marked by virtual collaboration and delivery. The paper examines extant literature on the behavioral approach for leadership development. Behavioral leadership theories prescribe observing and evaluating a leader's actions and behaviors when they are responding to a specific situation. This idea that leaders can be made is conducive for contemporary research in leadership development. Being based on development potential- this approach can be suitably adapted to study the leadership behaviors best suited for the leaders in the post pandemic work reality.

Keywords: Digital leader behaviours, Leadership, Behavioral Theory, Traits, Digital Workplace

Leadership Development for the Digital World

Leadership development is concerned with ensuring the availability & readiness of effective leaders who can lead the workforce for continued business success of the enterprise. "COVID-19 has escalated digital initiatives into digital imperatives, creating urgent pressure on HR leaders to work with their CEO, CFO and CIO to rethink skills needs as business models change at light speed" (Gartner 2020). A Survey conducted on lack of digital skills reports that only 51 percent of business leaders are already prepared for talent management in a digital world (Brecher, Laurenceau & Sloman 2016). Studies also highlight that when the leadership style does not align with the digital transformation –"problems may emerge which could impact the organization in negative ways for many years to come (Allio, 2015)". Organizations have felt the acute need to develop leaders that can lead in the new normal. Leadership Development has shifted its focus to development of 'digital leaders'.

Behavioral Theories of Leadership: Perspective

Digital leader development entails developing two key areas—'one is digital and the second one is humanitarian' (Cortellazzo et al. 2019). These can be examined from the utilitarian and deontological lenses. To ensure the success of their digital transformations, organizations are

being compelled to discard legacy traditional, hierarchical structures and move to a flexible, decentralized organization. Digital leaders should be able to harness digital technologies and solutions, but also should also be contextually & emotionally aware and agile both for leadership behavior towards followers; and towards customers/clients. Thus the review finds that leaders have to do the right thing when dealing with followers and stakeholders; and also ensure success and competitive advantage.

Behavioral scientists have sought to discover what characteristics, talents, attitudes, power outlets, or situational factors decide how effectively a leader will control followers and achieve group goals. The reason some people emerge as leaders and the determinants of how a leader behaves are other important issues that have been studied, but the primary concern was leadership efficiency (Bansal, 2008).

A large number of existing studies in the broader literature have examined the theme of this preparedness to do the right thing. For instance, (Sattler, 2016) defines the future leader as "The future leader should be able to utilize the new technologies and solutions. The author also proposes certain behaviours of such leaders: able to quickly adapt themselves to and manage changes, to have a pioneer spirit and being a quick learner. Leader behaviours have also been elucidated in various studies and there is a general agreement that the desirous behavior are : "should also be contextual, emotionally intelligent and

trustworthy, and should lead democratically, share responsibilities, to be decisive and cooperative, control and promote networks, trust and motivate employees, and give them regular feedback”.

Behavior focused approach

Behavioral theories of leadership study the specific behaviors of a leader. As per the behavioral theory school of thought- the leader behavior is the best predictor of translation of leadership from theory to practice and the best determinant of success on ground.

This behavior-focused approach is of value to take theory to practice, and an ally for action-research. The leader behavior school has a large potential to be adapted as bedrock of leadership development strategies. This school of thought propounds that behaviours can be conditioned in a manner that one can respond in the most appropriate manner to a given stimuli. Votaries of behavioral leadership theory opine that leadership development should aim to facilitate the learning and implementation of certain behaviours by existing managers, and thus develop effective leaders. Some observers have viewed this as an efficient marketing tool for the L&D (learning & development) industry. When seen from a genesis and evolution perspective- we find that research on personality; and leadership in particular has gone from the precept that leaders are born, (Great Man Theory) to the immutable traits that are heritable, towards the measure-bility of a subject’s leadership potential (Trait Theory) using psychometrics instruments, and towards studies in neuro-plasticity and the current focus on positive psychology (founded by Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi). Behavioral Theories weigh on the side of the strong possibility that appropriate behavioral response can be imparted to potential leaders. Important Behavioral studies are the Ohio State University (1940s), and University of Michigan (1950s) led by the famous organizational psychologist, Dr. Rensis Likert. Thus from a practice point of view, behavioral leadership theory is highly relevant in a number of fields. Criteria developed using the tenets of the behavioral leadership theory can be employed to assess digital leaders. In turn,

given the supporting argument from behavioral theory (leaders have the potential of adapting their behaviours) to the current situation of digitization - a customized leader behavior library can be crafted for use in the field.

Behaviours vs. Traits

In behavioral sciences- “traits” and “behaviors.” can be used to predict job performance and development potential. When we look at the fundamental difference between the two, we find that Personality traits are “persisting / lasting” characteristics that are consistently demonstrated even when the subject is placed in changing circumstances or environment. These are then seen as strong indicators of habitual patterns of thought and emotion, and can be used to guess the underlying drives.

Behaviors, on the other hand, are about the way we voluntarily conduct ourselves – it counts among itself the articulation, control over one’s impulses, public behavior and practicing emotional intelligence. Personality traits don’t easily change over time but we can alter behavior traits to a degree. This is an ongoing debate. While traits define underlying motivations and drives, their use in development seem limited beyond a point. Traits can be a very good lens to use for selection. Testing for traits offer a good job-fit and predisposition check. However, as the need changes to development of future leaders- the behaviours are an effective lens to view the world.

In the context of leadership development, or the quest to find the gaps in current models of leadership- investigations need to compare various approaches to personality. A subject could be methodical as assessed by personality trait, but could still be prone to impulsive behavior – the impulsive behavior being driven by involuntary forces / reptilian brain. It could also be seen via the lens of the para-sympathetic and sympathetic nervous system. Study of personality also examines the differences using extraversion/ extroversion, introversion or psychot-ism/ neuroticism. These lenses are a way of defining the response to stimuli in various ways. To elaborate this- extroversion is a trait, but an extrovert sitting quietly in a meeting is a type of behavior. This

behavior could be mastered via life experiences, aging, maturity, acculturation or vicarious learning. Organizations can also have an influence by positive reinforcement of certain behaviours and negative reinforcement of others.

Personality Traits and Types

In various approaches involving personality assessments and usage of psychometric tools-behavioural combinations are often measured independently, whereas traits are predominantly measured on scales. In type theory e.g MBTI, while responding to self-report questionnaires one prefers either one type or another, example -introvert or extrovert/extraversion. The practice literature around MBTI now amply cautions readers to not see the MBTI types as watertight compartment, but instead as dynamic energy boxes. In this mode- we can counteract the strong impulse to attach such fixed labels to subjects.

With such discretion in place, behavioral assessment is useful for the purpose of developing leaders for the current digital era. The study finds that trait-based measurements are useful to view complimentary skills in a team setting. Psychometrics measuring traits provide relative strength and “dimension” to one’s personality vis-à-vis either norms or other team members. A simple visualization to understand this is using a measuring tape to measure height of members of a sports team (rather than a cutoff point and either or descriptor). Using the MBTI example, the test results tell a subject that they are introverted relative to someone else.

A comprehensive review of leadership character traits across the leadership literature was put forth by Judge, Bono, Ilies, and Gerhardt (2002). This review reported that there exist inconsistencies in relating personality traits to leadership. The authors also found that upon scrutiny the results of such relationships were ‘strong support for the leader trait perspective only when traits are organized according to the 5-factor model’. The inference that can be drawn here is that the trait approach is highly conditional. In a later study Bono & Judge (2004), the authors cautioned against a deterministic approach. The

caution advised by the authors is mentioned here- “weak associations suggested the importance of future research to focus on both narrower personality traits and non-dispositional determinants leadership”. Other reviews of literature on the subject have also concluded that the trait approach has fallen out of favor among current leadership researchers due to its emphasis on determinism.

Better predictor of leadership effectiveness- Leadership Traits or Behaviours

Despite decades of research on traits and behaviours, this continues to be debated among researchers. For instance, DeRue & Wellman, (2009) assert that that leader behavior tend to predict more variance across a variety of effectiveness criteria than do leader traits. Further, other studies (Day, 2000) have also explored the question of effectiveness of traits vs. behaviours. Research by (Dragoni, Tesluk, Russel, & Oh, 2009) recognizes that though there exist certain traits that may predispose individuals to certain behaviors, behaviors are the more important measure for predicting leadership effectiveness. We see here that a number of studies maintain that behaviors can be learned and developed. Extending this further, behaviours should take precedence over traits when it comes to research towards leadership development.

Many studies have investigated this topic further. Multi-year research accredited to Avolio (2007) reports that that “there are some universal characteristics and traits that leaders possess, offering that these are associated with effective leadership, including persistence, tolerance for ambiguity, self-confidence, drive, honesty, integrity, internal locus of control, achievement motivation, and cognitive ability”. Extensive review of mention of traits across literature on leadership was carried out by Judge, Bono, Ilies, and Gerhardt (2002), and the results of their examination of existing body of work reported that linkages to personality traits to leadership have been ‘inconsistent and often disappointing’. The contemporary view argues that after the advent of the knowledge economy, globalization and waning of the industrial work- the trait approach finds itself losing favor among leadership researchers. Judge et al. (2002) offer

that while there is renewed interest in dispositional explanations associated with attitudes and behaviours, some researchers are still pessimistic in regards to the personality variables in leadership". Studies conducted in the post internet world by researchers such as Conger and Kanungo (1998) assertively state that the replicability of the trait approach in follow-on studies has been found to be low due to it being "too simplistic". Authors such as House and Aditya (1997) concluded by stating "It appeared that the search for universal traits was futile".

A study by Fleishman, (1991) identified 65 distinct classifications of leader behavior. Further studies have pointed out that leader behavior typologies and theories find currency among contemporary research (Avolio et al., 2003; Pearce et al., 2003). This affirms that leadership behaviours remain the relevant lens to examine leadership effectiveness in recent times.

An integrative Approach

However, the existing research has also caution against rejection of one approach over another. It is best summed up in "The leadership literature suffers from a lack of theoretical integration" (Avolio, 2007, *American Psychologist*, 62, 25–33). An analytical article by Derue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey (2011) examined developing an integrative trait-behavioral model of leadership effectiveness. This study advises that "Leader behaviors tend to explain more variance in leadership effectiveness than leader traits". This study goes on add the path forward with a note of caution –"integrative model where leader behaviors mediate the relationship between leader traits and effectiveness is warranted."

Current Theorists

The study finds considerable agreement of the idea that leadership is not simply inherited or assumed but developed through learning and experience. Theorists, such as Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber (2009), emphasize the vicarious learning and the nurture over nature argument in "life context a person grows up around is more influential than heritability in showing career leadership success". According to DeRue and Myers (2013), success in being a leader is linked to there must be development

past knowledge and skills. They weigh in on the side of vicarious learning on the job training and post that "Leadership development occurs primarily through action-based learning and experience". DeRue, et al. (2011), behavioral theory research needs to be compared to previous research. The current behavioral theorists are in broad agreement that behaviors can be categorized into: task-oriented, relational-oriented, change-oriented, and passive leadership.

Recent theorists such as Goleman (2015) and Sahyaja and Sekhara Rao (2018) propound that digitalization calls for new variables. These new constructs affect and determine the leadership styles and characteristics to better suit the digital era. These are intellectual quotient (Q), emotional quotient (EQ), digital quotient (DQ), personal quality (PQ) These are best situated in the leader behavior category as Goleman's work on emotional intelligence in practice also weighs heavily on the side of teaching leaders and managers to develop E.I as a learnt behavior.

Strengths

Behaviour theory supports the idea that leadership is a skill that can be learned through development, on-the –job training and experience. It allows us to step away from the limiting beliefs imposed by the "Great Man" theory (leaders are born with innate immutable traits). Examining leadership as a verb rather than a noun also opens up the possibility that one can practice and get better at the art of leadership. As organizations of today are more inclusive, leadership selection as well as development hinges on the belief that given the right investments, talent will respond to leadership development leading to emergence of leaders equipped to lead in the digital era.

Weaknesses

Earlier work in behavioral theory (Kouzes and Posner, 1988) research suffers from the limitation that translating theory to practice is fraught with challenges. Subjects that have learnt the practices and behaviors may not perform them in day to day tasks. Research on leadership development using the behavioral studies does not sufficiently address the open question of the mediating effect of cultural

contexts and situations on leadership behaviours. A study of extant literature suggests that this research area has not been sufficiently delved into. This review would like to report that contemporary research has been more promising. Kouzes and Posner, (2001) have posited leadership as a relationship that is measured by credibility. Thus, recent research asserts that behaviours must be practiced, observed and improved upon to see benefits as underlined by the leader behavior school of thought. Other agreements observed between various studies are that behaviors can be categorized into: task-oriented, relational-oriented, change-oriented, and passive leadership. Research has closely followed these developments in the business world and investigated these leader behaviours that have a direct impact on productivity and profitability of organizations. We find that comprehensive detailing of these behaviours present themselves in the body of knowledge on the topic. 'Leadership behaviours are composed of task-oriented behaviors, relational-oriented behaviours, and change-oriented behaviors' (Derue, Nahrgang, Wellman, and Humprey, 2011). These behaviours have been further discussed in the literature as: Task-oriented behaviors that include 'contingent reward, directives, and initiating structure'. Relational-oriented behaviors include 'consideration, empowerment, developing and enabling others'. The Change-oriented behaviours which are relevant for digital transformations include 'transformational and exhibit charisma'.

Behavior Theory: Appraisal

The pandemic accelerated digital ways of working. It is an evolution of the sweeping changes that were already in place in the nature of work. To address this shift, studies were already in progress and behaviours have been studied with an aim to decipher the impact and effectiveness of decision making capability of leaders regarding organizational issues (Northouse, 2013). The role of leaders has become very important in this disruptive era. Different leaders could facilitate different outcomes and results purely on the dint of their leadership behaviours, thus making other factors secondary. 'Overall, behavior theory provides a map for how to conduct effective

leadership in organizations' (Northouse, 2013)". One of the tough challenges for all researchers in this domain is to get fixated with taxonomies and miss out on the praxis of leadership. Avolio's (2007) observations of leaders in various studies state that there are some universal characteristics and traits that are seen often when leadership effectiveness is investigated. Some of them being: persistence, tolerance for ambiguity, self-confidence, drive, honesty, integrity, internal locus of control, achievement motivation, and cognitive ability. It is easy to see that these are not stand-alone constructs. These encompass traits as well as behaviours. Thus the delineation of nature-nurture / Traits-Behaviours is a complex question that cannot be easily resolved in binaries but calls for an integrative approach.

Other reviews of the literature have observed that the trait approach is currently not in favour among leadership researchers. Review of leadership character traits across the leadership literature by Judge, Bono, Ilies, and Gerhardt (2002) notes that results of investigations relating personality traits to leadership have been inconsistent and often disappointing. Other researchers such as Conger and Kanungo (1998) explicitly mentioned the trait approach is 'seldom replicated in studies due to it being "too simplistic" '. Judge et al. (2002) stated: "It appeared that the search for universal traits was futile". The utilitarian perspective has been outlined by (Northouse, 2013, p. 58) in "behavior theory provides a map for how to conduct effective leadership in organizations". It is observed that the academic literature weighs in more on the deontological aspects of leadership, while the practice literature on digital leadership has been found to adopt a more utilitarian line of examination. The current study finds that literature on this topic is well researched and informative simultaneously offering avenues for further investigation and thought. Digital leader development using the behavioral theory approach offers a clear path forward for leadership development in the post pandemic work reality. There also exist opportunities for further study from both basic and applied perspective as digital forces further shape the future of work.

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