

The Impact of Symbolic Leadership Style on Followers in Organizations

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Leading an organization in a competitive environment requires leaders to have a clear vision and direction on how to maintain and develop the organization. It has been stated that the global geopolitical situation in the twenty-first century is changing and requires businesses to create new organizational paradigms to meet and thrive with changing circumstances, technology, and globalization. This paper intends to discuss the impact of symbolic leadership style on followers in organizations. Specifically, it describes what symbolic leadership is, discusses the impact of the practice of symbolic leadership style on followers in organizations, provides useful theoretical and practical implications for managers, and suggests directions for future research.

Keywords: Leadership, Symbolic Leadership, Symbolic Leadership Style, Followers in Organizations

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is the act of leading a group of individuals toward the achievement of a specific goal (Robbins, 1993). That said, it is the art of inspiring, influencing, supporting, and motivating individuals in order to bring organizational changes. Dubrin, Dalglish, and Miller (2006) emphasized that leadership helps employees to respond in a common direction when they are influenced by their leaders. Hasbullah (2008) stated that leadership is widely recognized as a critical factor in the success or failure of an organization. In this vein, to utilize leadership capabilities requires that leaders also develop the symbolic frame in which leaders see the organization as a system of shared meaning and values. The symbolic leader concentrates on the shared vision, culture, and values to influence followers and lead the organization. A leader is a person who selects, trains, and guides one or more followers and causes them to enthusiastically coordinate their efforts to achieve organizational objectives (Winston & Patterson, 2006). In addition, symbolic leaders use rituals, ceremonies, stories, and symbols to create and reinforce corporate culture. Symbolic leaders inspire followers to higher levels of performance and commitment. Symbolic leaders are effective when they articulate a vision that is widely shared and understood, and when they support the deepest concerns and values of followers.

Moran (1992) posits that to be successful, organizations need to transform the leadership style of their managers and their traditional skills should be replaced by cooperation, bargaining, and arbitration skills. Moreover, leaders should be more concerned about their followers' well-being. They should encourage those followers by providing their support, guidance, and coaching so that followers can participate in goal attainment while satisfying their own needs (Chemers, 2000). Furthermore, symbolic leaders see organizations as theaters, spiritual meanings, and dreams. They emphasize vision, culture, values, and

inspiration. They are more concerned about their followers. Therefore, their followers are their greatest resource.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the impact of symbolic leadership style on followers in organizations. This is important because entrepreneurs, policymakers, and practitioners around the globe could learn more about the impact of symbolic leadership styles on followers and use the knowledge to enhance their leadership abilities. To address this concern, first, this study will describe what symbolic leadership is. Second, it will discuss the impact of the practices of the symbolic leadership style on followers in organizations. Third, it will provide useful practical and theoretical implications for managers. Finally, it will suggest directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Symbolic Leadership

Neuberger (1995) stated that the approach of symbolic leadership embeds the understanding of leadership reality in a more comprehensive theoretical framework. Symbolic leaders are viewed as effective leaders. Symbolic leadership concentrates on studying values, meaning, interpretation, history, context, as well as other elements in the leadership process (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras, 2006). Symbolic leadership is described as leadership that refers to, and is based on, the category of meaning. Meaning becomes tangible and therefore can be experienced in the form of symbols (Neuberger, 1995). In this vein, Bartolke (1987) stated that the concept assumes that the reality created and lived by employees in companies is a social construction, with leadership being a part of this reality. Moreover, symbolic leaders follow a consistent set of cultural rules and practices — meaning that they lead by example — and use symbols to capture attention, frame experience, communicate a vision, tell stories, and respect and use history to inspire followers in organizations. Bolman and Deal (1997) stated that leadership requires activities involving the use of symbols and metaphors to capture attention, framing experience in meaningful ways for followers, and discovering and communicating a vision. Therefore, symbolic leaders use symbols in order to inspire followers in organizations.

In his rhetorical analysis of America's cowboy philosopher, Will Rogers, Brown (1976) explained that when a leader exemplifies the values of society rather than an organization, he or she becomes a mythic national hero. Such a figure is believable and manages to bridge any credibility gaps because he or she is "symbolically one with the national idol" (p. 10). In addition, Cutlip, Center, and Broom (1985) cited the British monarch as the quintessential symbolic leader. The Queen of England, they explained, symbolizes the country's family ties. This image of loyalty, common interests, and traditional institutional forms has helped hold together the independent nations of the British Commonwealth.

Neuberger (1990, 1995, 2002) stated that the concept of symbolic leadership implies two understandings. On the one hand, leadership is conceived as symbolized; this means that past leadership behavior resulted in structures, rules, and procedures, as well as organizational practices that guide the behavior of followers. It means that leaders can use past experience to resolve current issues by using symbolic and mythical forms. On the other hand, leadership is symbolic, as leaders change the meaning of existing aspects of the organizational world or offer new meaning for new facts. Therefore, leaders influence followers through their actions and reward systems, organizational principles and rules, work content, and practices. Moreover, a symbolic leader's behavior is concerned about work and people, and is idealistic, inspiring, transactional, and transformational as well (Sancar, 2013). That is to say, these leaders possess a sense of charisma and instill passion in followers for shaping culture to work for a common mission.

Practices of Symbolic Leadership

This paper explains the symbolic leadership practices that are used to influence followers in organizations. These practices are symbols (e.g., myths and metaphors, stories and tales, rituals and ceremonies). First, it will describe what symbols mean. Next, these practices will be used to characterize symbolic leadership in organizations.

Symbols

Wood (1982, p. 63) describes a symbol as “an arbitrary, ambiguous, and abstract designation of something else subject to a variety of interpretations by those who use it.” She asserts that such symbols may be an object, event, person, relationship, condition or process. Symbols communicate the culture through unspoken messages and consist of company logos, company colors, and even mental images held by employees. In addition, symbols can be described as simple or complex. Symbols should be meaningful, and they should arouse passion. For instance, to ensure influence on the behavior of followers, symbols must be interpreted in the same way by all members of the group/organization (Neuberger, 1995, 2000). In this regard, symbols are, in a way, storages of meaning that automatically stimulate a deliberate behavior if it is guaranteed that the meaning of a particular symbol is uniformly interpreted by all followers/members.

Myths and Metaphors

Jung (2011) stated that from a psychological approach, myths are considered elementary ideas. In addition, from a historical-ethnographic point of view, they are called ethnic ideas or popular ideas (Campbell, 1993). Organizational members recognize and respect myths and take them into account in their actions. Moreover, myths play a significant role in promoting commonly accepted values. Myths strengthen tradition and give value to the communication between generations. For instance, Campbell (1988) points out that myths operating at deep reaches of consciousness provide stories behind the story. Myths provide a narrative, anchoring the present in the past (Cohen, 1969). Myths create internal cohesion, a sense of direction, and confidence. Moreover, myths often originate in the launching of an enterprise because they help people to understand the message in order to achieve the organization’s objective.

Metaphor involves giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy (Lan, 2005). For example, Morgan (1998) believes that by creating certain types of realities within our minds, metaphors help us to contextualize the world in ways that we may not have imagined before. Furthermore, metaphors make things easy to comprehend, and individuals who know this acknowledge employing metaphors when communicating. Previous studies stated that the symbolic frame focuses on concepts, ideas, and feelings. Smircich (1983, p. 340) emphasized that organization theorists have used “a variety of metaphors or images to bound, frame, and differentiate a category of experiences referred to as (an) organization.” Metaphors of machine and organism have been most frequently used to facilitate the understanding and communication of complex phenomena of organization (Mitroff & Pondy, 1979; Morgan, 1980).

As Bolman and Deal (1984) noted, metaphors help people to understand unfamiliar things. Through carefully selected metaphors, leaders can communicate difficult ideas or future images effectively. Metaphors are useful and powerful communication tools that individuals use in their day-to-day activities. That said, they are conceptual tools that people use to make sense of the world and interpret meaning (Ortony, 1975; Oswick, Keenoy & Grant, 2002; Pepper, 1942; Smith & Simmons, 1983). Metaphors create mental images that help people to interpret the world. Morgan (1998) provides eight metaphors for organizations. These metaphors are machine, organism, brain, culture, political system, flux and transformation, psychic prison, and instruments of domination. These metaphors help to understand organizations, make sense of organizational structure, leadership style, management control, and behavior by associating meaning to them.

In addition, metaphors provide drama, cohesiveness, clarity, and direction to events that would otherwise be confusing and mysterious. That is to say, leaders who comprehend the power of symbols have a better chance of influencing their followers than leaders who focus only on other frames (e.g., political, structural, and human resource leadership). Leaders who use more than one metaphor are more effective than those who use just one metaphor. Thus, using a single metaphor is not effective for achieving goals.

Stories and Tales

Parkin (2001) explains that storytelling is a “means of taking in and making sense of information is an interactive and sharing process, and is, therefore, more powerful than a passive means, such as the images one soaks up from television or computer” (p. 11). Storytelling can be an effective method of developing leaders of organizations. Ready (2002) stated that storytelling has emerged as a preferred approach for teaching leadership effectiveness in many organizations and companies today. Parkin (2001) indicates that past research has demonstrated personal storytelling to be the most notable and remarkable form of communication. Rhodes, Pullen, and Clegg (2010, p. 6) point out that “great leaders like Lincoln, Reagan, Churchill, MacArthur, and Hannibal were communicators and thus storytellers.” Organizational stories are powerful. Stories are rich carriers of organizational culture that give meaning and identity to organizations and help orient new employees. There are stories about the boss, stories about getting fired, stories about how the company deals with employees who have to relocate, stories about whether lower-level employees can rise to the top, stories about how the company deals with crisis situations, and stories about how status considerations work when rules are broken.

Gardner (1995, p. 9) observes that “leaders achieve their effectiveness chiefly through the stories they tell.” Stories are used to describe an organization’s life in more clear forms so that people can distinguish the traditional structure of the organization from the conventional structure. In this vein, stories and tales concerning an organization are very informative. In addition, Selznick (1957, p. 151) emphasized that organizational stories “are efforts to state, in the language of uplift and idealism, what is distinctive about the aims and methods of the enterprise.” For instance, an organization’s story could concentrate on a single, unified sequence of events seemingly drawn from the history of the institution. That said, the heroes and heroines of such stories are organizational members (Clark, 1970; Martin, 1982).

Pfeffer (1981) views the role of leaders in organizations as having influence on the meanings and values placed on certain ways of approaching goals. Similarly, Pondy (1978, p. 94-95) proclaimed that “the effectiveness of a leader lies in his or her capability to make an activity meaningful for those in his or her role set so that they do not change behavior but to give others a sense of understanding regarding what they are doing and specially articulate it so that they can communicate about the meaning of their behavior. Likewise, Pondy (1978, p. 94) emphasized that “if the leader can put it into words, then the meaning of what the group is doing becomes a social fact.”

For instance, Gardner (1995) was able to differentiate ordinary, innovative, and visionary leaders by their storytelling. The ordinary leader simply relates to the traditional story of his or her group as effectively as possible. The innovative leader takes a story that has been latent in the population, or among members of his or her chosen domain, and brings new attention or a fresh twist to the story. The visionary leader creates a new story, one not known to most individuals before, and achieves at least a measure of success in conveying this story effectively to others. The final effect of the leader depends most significantly on the specific story that he or she narrates or expresses, and the followers’ reception to it. In addition, the leader should see that the stories of the organization that are floating around are in sync with the values of the organization. In their work situations, leaders of organizations need to recognize and use stories and tales. Bolman and Deal (1984) suggested that through stories, stakeholders outside the organization get more lively and colorful information about the organization and its leaders. They admire an organization’s stories and develop more helpful attitudes toward that organization.

Regarding the term “fairy tale” there is no generally accepted or totally satisfying definition. For instance, for some, the term indicates a particular narrative form with simply well-known characteristics, while for others, it suggests not a singular genre but an umbrella category in which a variety of other forms may be grouped. So, the definitions of “fairy tale” frequently tend to include a litany of characteristics to account for the fact that the term has been applied to stories as diverse as “Cinderella,” “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Hansel and Gretel,” “Jack and the Beanstalk,” “Lucky Hans,” “Bluebeard,” and “Henny-Penny.”

Rituals and Ceremonies

Trice and Beyer (1984, 1985, 1993) described rites and ceremonies as discrete enactments that have a beginning and an end and give expression to a culture's values and beliefs. Rituals can be described as everyday practices that are repeated frequently in an organization. Usually not written, rituals send a clear message about the way things are done in an organization. Likewise, rituals can be defined as a form of symbolic expression that takes place within organizations, while Trice and Beyer (1984, 1993) use the term ceremonial to describe the contexts in which rites occur. For instance, ceremonies can be divided into organizational rites, including rites of passage, rites of enhancement, rites of renewal, rites of integration, rites of conflict reduction, and rites of degradation. They are relatively elaborate sets of activities that are enacted repeatedly on important events. A rite of passage (Van Gennep, 1969, 1909) is an instance of a ritual that takes place within a ceremonial context (Moore & Myerhoff, 1977). In addition, ceremonies are episodic, e.g., outstanding and more elaborate.

Bolman and Deal (1984) point out that ceremonies and rituals play a role in promoting unity and enable people to express their shared values and vision. For instance, nations, provinces, and organizations have rituals and ceremonies associated with certain activities and events. These rituals are valued by the members of the entire entity. Moreover, Turner (2016) describes rituals as a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests. In her study of the uses of ritual, Bell (2009) attempts to separate ritual use from a need for social control or solidarity. Ritual is viewed as a mechanism for meaning and transformation that can be separated from specific beliefs or belief systems. Furthermore, rituals, like other forms of symbols, play a powerful, vital, and complex role in the life of any group or organization. Rituals encode an immense variety of senses and messages into economical and emotionally robust forms. In a nutshell, rituals consider and express an organization's culture, the forms of beliefs, values, practices, and artifacts that describe its members, who those individuals are and how those individuals do things in the workplace.

In times of organizational transition, merger, or even death, organizational ritual and ceremony can be used not only to transition individuals into new roles but to also, more generally, move the organization into a new phase (Harris & Sutton, 1986). Examples of rituals and ceremonies are a formal speech, a graduation ceremony, and a dinner for new employees.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Leaders of organizations need to recognize and use myths and metaphors, stories and tales, and rituals and ceremonies in their workplace to inspire their followers. In order to fully motivate followers in organizations, the so-called symbolic leaders must use myths and metaphors, rituals and ceremonies, and stories and tales to convey messages. Daft (1983) points out that symbols associated with leadership along with other symbols in an organization help members to define and understand their role within the organizational reality as providing information about status, power, commitment, motivation, and control. In addition, in symbolic leadership, leaders must realize that leadership is embedded in language, artifacts, and social institutions in order to guide followers' behavior. Leaders view symbolic leadership as a sense-making process where different understandings of both leaders and followers meet. Bolman and Deal (2008) claimed that leadership frames are the ways leaders interpret what is happening and how they should determine the appropriate action in different situations. The responsibility of leaders is to take care of their followers, to involve them in discussions, to motivate them, to build team performance, to make decisions, to guide, and to direct those followers.

Leaders must recognize that single metaphors are inadequate for accurately investigating organizational change and organizational realities. Leaders should use multiple metaphors in their practice, possibly combining them to minimize bias or misapplication of any number of heuristics (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1992; Palmer & Dunford, 1996). Moreover, metaphors build organizational commitment, inspire individuals, convey a philosophy of management, rationalize and legitimate activity, motivate employees, and facilitate socialization.

In terms of stories and tales, Parkin (2001) posits that throughout the Middle Ages, storytellers were powerful because they communicated vital information and knowledge. Organizational leaders should know that storytellers are well respected and admired. Senior members in today's organizations must share their experiences and educate new employees through their corporate stories. Leaders must use stories to either clarify their viewpoint or influence their followers. Furthermore, Quong, Walker, and Bodycott (1999) believe that the power and place of storytelling in organizations have been well established in relation to learning, communication, and socialization. Further, these authors think that life experiences, values, and beliefs are stored in the form of stories in individuals' minds. Storytelling is a symbolic behavior. It shapes the organization and members' understanding of it. Boyce (1996) suggests that storytelling is critical in organizations for articulating experiences, confirmation and socialization of organizational culture and history, as well as creating vision and strategy. Leaders must recognize that telling stories motivates and inspires followers in organizations. Likewise, leaders should use storytelling in training, coaching, and mentoring to communicate with followers. Therefore, stories are important because they tell individuals about the storyteller's knowledge, values, and understandings from his or her perspective.

Ritual has a deep meaning that gives identity to a group of individuals. Rituals reflect and express an organization's culture. Therefore, the pattern of beliefs, values, practices, and artifacts describe for its followers who they are and how they do things. In addition, individuals express their joy and feeling when they celebrate. Organizational leaders should provide rewards and promotions for followers in order to motivate them to work hard to achieve organizational goals. Consequently, leaders should create and maintain organizational ceremonies that reinforce the values of their organization.

CONCLUSIONS

Symbolism constructs and sends meanings, evokes emotions, affects perceptions and beliefs, and impacts actions. Northhouse (2010) stated that the concept of power is related to leadership because it is part of the influence process. In the symbolic frame, leadership focuses on vision and inspiration. Leaders must use myths and metaphors, stories and tales, and rituals and ceremonies to symbolically inspire followers in organizations to get things done. The symbolic frame is vital in communicating a sense of mission and identity, frequently in the form of values, which can help build cohesiveness and a common vision. That said, these values are strengthened by myths and metaphors, stories and tales, and ceremonies and rituals. Leaders might come to visibly consider the key processes by which individuals make sense of their attitudes and behaviors. In addition, leaders might choose specific communication strategies in order to intentionally create shared meanings. Research is needed on the power of symbolism in enhancing shared meanings and commitment of employees, which will enhance organizational effectiveness and contribute to a better understanding of the type of symbolic leadership style adopted in organizations.

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