

SUPPORTING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT BY EXPOSURE TO ROLE MODELS: TWO CASE STUDIES

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Abstract

The idiomatic expression “In Rome be a Roman” can be applied to leadership training and development as well. Leaders who can act as role models inspire other future leaders in their behaviour, attitudes and ways of thinking. Based on two examples of current leaders in the fields of Politics and Public Administration, I support the idea that exposure to role models during their training was decisive for their career paths and current activities as prominent characters in their profession. Issues such as how students should be prepared for community or national leadership as well as cross-cultural engagement are raised here. The hypothesis of transculturalism and cross-cultural commitment as a factor of leadership is presented. Based on current literature on Leadership as well as the presented case studies, I expect to raise a debate focusing on strategies for improving leaders’ training in their cross-cultural awareness.

Keywords

Leadership training, role models, cross-cultural engagement

*“Keep it simple:
if you don’t understand
what someone is saying to you,
they probably don’t understand it themselves”*

Susan Bloch and Philip Whiteley

1. Introduction

In my job as a teacher in a Polytechnic Institute, I daily face the challenges of training better the future leaders of tomorrow. I deal with marketeers, with agents of international commerce, with communicators, and conference interpreters. All of these, together with many others of their generation, will rule tomorrow’s world. As a leaders’ trainer, I usually worry about the best way to achieve excellence in leaders’ training – that is my motivation to continue working.

In this contribution, I shall argue that exposure to role models may be very important during future leaders’ training. It is in human character to imitate others, trying to mirror a reality or a model that we may follow or by whom we can organize our behavior as leaders. This leads me to defend that every future leader should be submitted to a program where she or he might get in touch with specificities and idiosyncrasies of leadership environments of tolerance, initiative, creativeness, assertiveness, and emotional intelligence – not necessarily by this order of importance.

For this purpose, I thought about the following research question: Is it true that exposure to role models is a direct cause to become a leader? In this paper, I will discuss the hypothesis, I will continue by proposing a methodology that has attempted to enlighten some connected issues. However, it is necessary to define beforehand what I understand by *leaders’ training* and *culture*. Two case studies will be described as illustrations and to tentatively confirm my thesis. In fact, “Today’s business school graduates need multicultural management skills even if they never work for a large global multinational corporation (MNC) or hold a position whose target market is outside the U. S.” (Egan, Bendick, 2007: 17) I will end with a conclusion where I focus on the confirmation of my initial hypothesis.

1.1. Defining a Research Question

As Cleenewerck (2006) has defended, and if I may bring in a quote in French, “...vous avez besoin d’aide. De quelqu’un qui vous inspire, qui vous challenge et qui vous stimule, quelqu’un qui vous a préparé pour mieux affronter l’avenir.” (Cleenewerck, 2006: 30). This means that motivation and inspiration are the keywords in any leaders’ training. My research question comes from the need for inspiration from role models. I do not want to make you believe that I trust all kinds of leaders to inspire my students; what I mean to say, is that only reliable, trustworthy, tolerant, open-minded leaders can serve as inspiration for others. So my research question is: “Is exposure to role models determinant in leadership training?”

1.2. Hypothesis

If my research question is valid, I might establish the hypothesis: If exposure to role models is determined in leadership training, then *all* recognized leaders should:

- a) have been exposed to leaders as role models;
- b) if they have not been exposed to leaders as role models, then they are not *true* leaders;

As DuBrin (2001) has stated: "Lead by example. Be a model of how you want others to perform. Ethical leaders breed ethical followers." (DuBrin, 2000) This applies also to leaders' trainers when the latter choose some leaders as role models for their trainees.

1.3. Methodology

The reading of specialized literature and observation of leaders' actions are the basic principles that preside the chosen methodology. I am aware of the fact that the analyzed case studies are not enough to be able to prove a theory or generalize and create a theory. However, I long to bring some light into this issue and above all, to raise discussion around leadership trainers, around leadership training, and around leaders.

2. Defining Leaders' Training

In my training of future leaders, I always tend to advertise non-compartmental sections of peoples' lives organization, but a concrete distribution of interconnected sections in peoples' actions. In fact, "Real leadership development starts from a much broader place than 'career planning': it begins with a holistic vision of one's life, in all its richness." (Goleman, Boyatzis, McKee, 2004: 119) As far as career is concerned, we can only advise after analyzing the natural tendencies of the future leader. In other words, when people ask me for advice, I tend to ask them if it were them the advisors, what would they advise to me? And then, I give them the advice they would give me if I were them. In this sense, people end up doing what they think it is best and they even think that they were well advised.

When future leaders are being trained to become multicultural leaders, it is always advisable to create or develop in them a consciousness about different cultures and cultural awareness. Minorities have to be respected and never minimized or underestimated. That is the essence of respect for Otherness. The division between 'they' and 'we' becomes an adversative dichotomy that establishes a bigger gap than a harmonious congregation of different groups or entities with different cultural identities. I always tend to develop the awareness in the future leaders whom I am training that "A highly practical application of being a multicultural leader is that it enables you to motivate and influence people from different cultures." (DuBrin, 2000: 133)

The relationship between different cultural leaders by interacting deepens and broadens the awareness about cultural differences that connect more than divide. Future leaders have a lot in common in all countries of the world, being their creativity, ways of behaving and / or leadership strategies based on emotional intelligence; there are, of course, multiple differences and specificities according to the cultural group, but on the whole, we are basically stimulated by almost the same factors everywhere.

3. Defining Culture

It is essential to define culture as I understand it and for the sake of my argument. Egan and Bendick (2007) have portrayed culture in a way that very well fits my purpose: "Culture should be defined to reflect the multiplicity of influences which make individuals *unique, culturally complex*, and certainly not predictable based on their nationality alone." (Egan, Bendick, 2007: 19). As I see culture, we have to understand that the individuals participate actively in a culture, perpetuate it by living according to its standards and interconnections. What gives the dimension of diversity to societies all over the world is their cultural diversity. As Caroline Pauwels and others have pointed out, "Beginning in 2003, UNESCO members were invited to work on a draft Convention on cultural diversity." (Pauwels, 2006: 132). This fact only shows the importance of cultural diversity in human terms at a global scale.

There are also other ways to define culture: it is noticeable that Cultural Anthropology has developed in recent years extraordinarily, in such a way that culture has a different dimension – organizations are specific, and concrete human institutions are characterized in a special way. "Anthropologists and experts in organizational behavior use the concept of 'culture' to describe how members of groups understand their world and their place in it." (Able, 2007: 3).

However it is dangerous to define culture and cultural types according to stereotypes, which people build around other groups. "Stereotyping is a normal tendency in the thinking of all persons, who constantly seek mental shortcuts to summarize their experiences and cut through complexity. However, it leads to misjudgments and misperceptions..." (Egan, Bendick, 2007: 7). It is undoubtedly a fact that misjudgments and misperceptions can lead to wastes of time, inaccuracy of facts and divergent opinions.

4. Two Case Studies

To illustrate the thesis I proposed above, which is, I remind you "Exposure to role models may be very important or even determinant in leaders' training", I chose the case of two individuals, whose identity I will conceal, but whose stories I guarantee are true. I chose one leader in local politics and another one in the European public administration.

Let me start by analyzing the first case study. Let us call him Leader A. Leader A studied at the University in Porto and became, eventually, a local political leader. In his training path, he was selected to participate in a visit to the United States of America where he contacted directly with politicians at national or federal, state and local or regional levels. He followed a program that was not only informative but also formative. He went in his group to the local American institutions where these politicians usually work, he was personally welcomed by them and had the opportunity to interview them personally. He interacted, although very briefly of course, with political leaders who, I am sure, became role models for him.

It is certainly true that “Only leaders who are highly motivated themselves will motivate others.” (Adair, 2007: 82) In the case of Leader A, he was undoubtedly motivated beforehand, you may argue; he certainly had a *natural* tendency for that, you may also argue – but I consider that that visit to the United States during his academic path certainly made an impact on his choice to become a political leader at regional level in Portugal.

The second case study I chose (let us call him Leader B) is also based on observation as well as reading of the literature. Leader B is today a prominent official at the European level. During his training at Porto Polytechnic Institute, he participated in a visit, a field trip to the European Parliament, where Leader B contacted directly with the institution and several officials who worked there. In his talks as a guest speaker among university students nowadays, he usually focuses on the importance of the inspiring tendencies that the referred field trip had on his career choice. The influence that contacting role models had on the impact of his path is notorious.

As a topic for another discussion, I might choose the case of a woman leader.

4.1 Women Leaders

In the article “The ‘Masculine’ and ‘Feminine’ Sides of Leadership and Culture: Perception vs. Reality”, it is stated that people attending a program should “brainstorm a list of words describing female leaders” (Wharton, 2005: 1). Apparently, much of the traditional view was pointed out in spite of all women’s liberation movements. Sadly enough, I should add, many of the traditional prejudices concerning women’s and men’s roles appeared in this study showing that many of the efforts that conquered women’s achievements are cyclically forgotten.

In another study by Eagly and Carli (2007), it is suggested that there might be a good metaphor to characterize women leaders’ paths, and that is the maze: “A better metaphor for what confronts women in their professional endeavors is the labyrinth.” (Eagly, Carli, 2007: 64). It is no wonder that women leaders have it even more difficult to impose themselves in their professions than men – they have to prove to be better, to prove themselves competent and accepted by their male colleagues. Also, they are said to underestimate networking, which is one of the biggest causes for promotion. There is “Women’s under investment in networking. When time is scarce, this social

activity is the first thing to go by the wayside.” (Eagly, Carli, 2007: 70) Eagly and Carli continue by arguing that “Even in culturally feminine settings, such as nursing, librarianship, elementary education, and social work (...), men ascend to supervisory and administrative positions more quickly than women.” (Eagly, Carli, 2007: 65) And due to family expectations, which still demand more from women than from men, “Women’s promotions become progressively less likely than men’s at higher levels within organizations.” (Eagly, Carli, 2007: 65)

Women are said to lead more emotionally and have an interpersonal approach when they are leading, whereas men are said to be more active and goal-driven in their approach. According to Wharton’s study, “men tend to be more task-oriented while women take on a more interpersonal style of leadership.” (Wharton, 2005: 2)

Also when women leaders in training are exposed to role models, they tend to acquire characteristics of those role model leaders, such as assertiveness, goal orientation, and interpersonal style with emotional intelligence.

5. Conclusion

Indeed, role models offer inspiration and exposure to other leaders during own training can be a cause for reinforcement. However, this constitutes no recipe to train future leaders; this continues to be one of the biggest dreams – to train responsible leaders, for this is a cause for healthy evolution: “Positive employee perception of leaders is crucial to successful change.” (Able, 2007: 4) All leaders should be role models because of their honesty: “Honesty and accountability are fundamental to building trusted stakeholder relationships.” (National Australia Bank Limited, 2004: 12) It is only when everything is in its place that it can work productively: “A good fit between employees and culture is important” (Wharton, 2005: 3). In one of his most recent works, in 2007, Bossidy, has proposed a Performance Evaluation, which seems to be highly convincing when we come to results assessment. (Bossidy, 2007: 58).

I do not resist concluding with a quote by Okri (2000):

“They are only the exhausted

Who think that they have arrived

At their final destination

The end of the road

With all their dreams achieved

And no dreams to hold.”

Ben Okri, one of Africa’s most famous playwright and writers.

We continue to have many other dreams.

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