Strategic Leadership Competency Development

Paul G. Putman
Cleveland Foundation, USA & Cleveland State University, USA

INTRODUCTION

The most dangerous leadership myth is that leaders are born - that there is a genetic factor to leadership. That's nonsense; in fact, the opposite is true. Leaders are made rather than born. – Warren Bennis

In the past, inherent leadership traits were used as a way to predetermine who could and could not be a leader. "Great man" theories (leaders were almost always deemed to be men a century or more ago) were filled with traits or qualities possessed only by (in the United States, at least) men lucky enough to be born with the physical or societal traits generally determined to be connected with leaders. As Warren Bennis notes, however, this thinking is outdated and over the past 100 years has evolved into a new conceptualization of leadership competencies, which can be practiced and developed by anyone. This democratization of leadership theory has opened up leadership development to an expanded and more inclusive audience of leaders. Most recently, strategic leadership perspectives are placing responsibility for leadership development in the hands of leaders themselves who are tasked with seeking out resources to help them improve specific leadership competencies.

This chapter provides an overview of leadership competency theory and its use in leadership training and education. After providing background on the trait theory of leadership and its evolution into leadership competencies, this chapter will provide examples of several leadership competency models including a widely used strategic leadership model. In order to best assist leadership educators, trainers, and leaders themselves who wish to utilize leadership competencies, underlying adult education theories and related leadership development concepts are included.

BACKGROUND

A major debate in leadership education/training has focused on whether leaders are born or whether they can be developed. Early conceptualizations of leadership focused on the traits of a leader, who was often believed to have been born with the innate ability to lead. This Trait Theory of leadership was one of the first ways that leadership was studied. Thurstone (1934) factored his list of 60 adjectives into five independent common factors that became known as the "Big Five Personality Traits" (p. 8). These five trait dimensions are Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness (Deinert, Homan, Boer, Voelpel, & Gutermann, 2015). While trait theory has been criticized for over-simplifying personality, within the complex concept of leadership, breaking it down into more digestible morsels is a helpful approach.

Trait theorists work to identify a set of traits related to leadership such as intelligence, initiative, and persistence. In one of the earliest studies, Terman (1904) divided various "qualities" of leadership into

13 groups. These groups included items ranging from good looks, neatness, and dress to tact, honesty, and originality – they even included surprising traits such as musical ability, use of slang, and wit (Terman, 1904). Stogdill, another early leadership researcher, in 1948 "analyzed and synthesized more than 124 trait studies conducted between 1904 and 1947" (Northouse, 2015, p. 20). In a second review of mid-20th century leadership research, he looked at 163 more studies conducted between 1948 and 1970. Bennis (1989) posited that vision, passion, integrity, maturity, trust, curiosity, and daring are all traits valuable to leadership. Although other ways to conceptualize leadership have been put forth by various theorists and researchers, trait theory is still being researched today. For example, Joyce, in his text exploring strategic leadership in the public services sector, notes the importance of the personal quality or trait "an orientation to learning" which requires that leaders be "perpetual learners" (Joyce, 2012, p. 17).

While the study of traits is appealing in that it helps differentiate between leaders and followers, researchers have not been able to come to consensus on a single list of traits (Niehaus, O'Rourke, & Ostick, 2012), and an important limitation is that this approach does not take into account the leadership context. Stogdill (1948) was one of the first to question the trait approach, stating that leadership is not "a mere possession of some combination of traits" (p. 66). Mann (1959) also completed a significant review of trait studies. Researchers in the 1980s questioned the work of Stogdill and others, stating that "these reviews have often been misinterpreted" and "there are both theoretical and methodological reasons for reconsidering the relations between traits of potential leaders and their tendency to be perceived as leaders by others" (Lord, De Vader, & Alliger, 1986, p. 404)

Limitations to the trait approach include the lack of a single, agreed-upon list of leadership traits and the lack of accounting for the timing or setting of leadership. According to leadership scholar Northouse (2015):

In prior research, many studies have focused on leadership as a trait. The trait perspective suggests that certain people in our society have special inborn qualities that make them leaders. This view restricts leadership to those who are believed to have special characteristics. In contrast, the approach in this text suggests that leadership is a process that can be learned, and that it is available to everyone. (p. 16)

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in this type of thinking, but with more of a focus on skills or behaviors, or skills needed to successfully perform certain behaviors, or even as "a series of strategies and personal skills" (Fernando, 2016) as opposed to inherent traits. Most researchers and authors now prefer to focus on leadership "competencies" (Pomeda & Casani, 2013; Richards, 2008; Wilson Burns, Smith, & Ulrich, 2012).

As detailed above, early trait theorists believed that leaders were born with inherent qualities or traits. More recent conceptualizations of trait theory still focus on various aspects of good leaders, but they use the terminology of leadership skills or competencies instead of traits (Pomeda & Casani, 2013). These theorists believe that leaders are not simply born, but they can be made and improved through study and practice of various leadership competencies or skills. This concept continues to enjoy popularity today with current researchers including those focusing on strategic leadership development. As Krupp and Schoemaker (2014) note, "every leader can become more strategic (p. 8)."

There are numerous authors who have explored this area. Martin and Ernst (2005) point to collaboration, managing relationships, change management and resourcefulness. In a trait-based exploration of leadership linking skills or competencies to the concept of Emotional Intelligence (EI), Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) state that "these EI competencies are not innate talents, but learned abilities, each of which has a unique contribution to making leaders more resonant, and more effective" (p. 38).

Related Content

Adoption of Design Thinking in Industry 4.0 Project Management
Ebru Dilanand Mehmet N. Aydin (2019). *Agile Approaches for Successfully Managing and Executing Projects in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (pp. 80-98).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/adoption-of-design-thinking-in-industry-40-project-management/223379

Operations Research in Healthcare Supply Chain Management Under Fuzzy-Stochastic Environment: Operations Research in Healthcare
S. Priyanand R Uthayakumar (2016). *Stochastic Processes and Models in Operations Research (pp. 271-314).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/operations-research-in-healthcare-supply-chain-management-under-fuzzy-stochastic-environment/148476

Managing Human Resources as a Business Strategy in Times of Disruption
Javier Ospina&Bermeo (2021). *Handbook of Research on Management Techniques and Sustainability Strategies for Handling Disruptive Situations in Corporate Settings (pp. 300-324).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/managing-human-resources-as-a-business-strategy-in-times-of-disruption/285881

The Competitiveness of Polish Apples on International Markets
Pawe Jakub Kraciski (2017). *International Journal of Food and Beverage Manufacturing and Business Models (pp. 31-43).*
www.irma-international.org/article/the-competitiveness-of-polish-apples-on-international-markets/185529

Regulatory Requirements and Financial Inclusion in FinTech Companies
Lilian Gichuruand Juliana M. Namada (2022). *International Journal of Applied Management Theory and Research (pp. 1-13).*
www.irma-international.org/article/regulatory-requirements-and-financial-inclusion-in-fintech-companies/300345