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LEADERSHIP AND POWER, AN INCOMPATIBLE MIX?

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Abstract:
Leadership is rarely defined by researchers purporting to debate the subject and the word and concept is used freely within academic discourse. This article avoids this issue by providing a new definition of Leadership and explores the concept of leadership in relation to the use of power. Management and Power are also defined and discussed to enable a discourse on the subject in question. It is argued that the term Leader is conflated with the term Manager (or supervisor) which leads to a miss-application of the concept of leadership. The article argues that Leadership is within the domain of the subordinate to ascribe and is not necessarily associated with management or a manager due to the fact that within an organisation, management incorporates and requires the use of power, particularly legitimate and coercive power as defined by French and Raven(1956). Management power is shown to be positive correlated with stress and so it is concluded that it is unlikely that leadership would be ascribed to management by a subordinate and so leadership cannot be compatible with power.

Keywords: new leadership definition, leadership, power, management

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INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to challenge what might be regarded as conventional thinking about leadership and the use of power in organisations. Barker (2001) has written a most enlightening paper designed, "…to distinguish the phenomenon of 'leader- ship' from the activities, functions, and relationships often labelled as leadership by those who have not carefully considered that there should be a distinction". This paper, in a similar vein, proposes the notion that for modern organisations the association of power with leadership is an incompatible combination. It is argued that the use of most types of power has little to do with leadership in any specific sense and more to do with command, control and a misunderstanding of a realistic comprehension and use of the term leadership. In order to make this argument, definitions of leadership, management and power are provided in order to reduce the possibility of variation of interpretation.

1. A COMMON VIEW OF LEADERSHIP AND POWER

It has been suggested, inferred and stated in the academic literature that leadership involves the use of power; for instance, in an iconic article Zaleznik (1977) relates the use of power to leadership stating, "Leadership inevitably requires using power to influence the thoughts and actions of other people" (p. 74). Flynn, Gruenfeld, Molm & Polzer, (2012 p.495) argue, "To be effective leaders, managers must be able to diagnose who has power, how it is obtained, and when it can be wielded effectively in order to advance their political goals and, in turn, benefit their constituents", so are actually claiming that power is required for effective leadership. Patrick (2012 p.102) argues that, "Leaders use power as a means of attaining group goals" and is another example of many which can be found without looking too hard. The point of stressing this is that the word 'leadership' has become firmly associated with the use of power and so it is possible to presume that a 'leader' is expected to wield power and yet Pfeffer (2010) argues, one of the barriers to achieving power is leadership literature that proposes the demonstration of the inner self and avoiding bullying and abuse, implying that leaders who reach the top apply all of these negative behaviours to reach their position. This article evaluates the concept of leadership and power and argues that in business:
1. True Leadership and exercising Power are incompatible.
2. The exercise of power is, potentially, a failure of leadership and that the belief that exercising power is related to anything valuable in leadership is at best questionable and at worst a misunderstanding of leadership.
3. Organisations and individuals need the use of power to survive, but hide behind a romantic vision of what is, in fact, a management tool which is largely unrelated to true leadership.
4. The exercise of power should be a course of last resort as it is, more likely, a sign of failure in managers and those that would consider themselves leaders.

To steal an old Chinese proverb, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."(Anon), and then distort it, it is possible to argue that, "Tell a man to do something and he may do it, allow a man to own and believe in the action and he is far more likely to do it and to do it well." The use of power in a hierarchical situation is coercive; coercion is management, thus the use power is not leadership and it is delusional to assume that managers are exercising good leadership skills when using power. In these situations, as Lumby (2013) argues, the use of the word leadership is just a cosmetic alteration to make management seem more attractive and as such is simply misleading and holds back the advancement of good practice in management or leadership because it creates more of an illusion than any reality.

2. DEFINITIONS

2.1. Leadership

One of the reasons there is so much confusion and misunderstanding of power and leadership is that academic literature rarely defines terminology in this area as witnessed by all the references made in the previous paragraph because none of them define a leader, leadership, management and power. Work by leadership scholars almost never seeks a fundamental understanding of what leadership is (Rost, 1991) an argument also made by Barker (1997) and suggests that a definition is required. So, in order to avoid making the same mistake, some discussion about the definition of leadership is required to provide a basis for the following debate. An interesting notion to consider is that the

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theories of leadership are many and varied; to name but a small minority, there is 'shared leadership', 'distributed leadership', 'situational leadership', 'transactional leadership' and so on. It is important to the theme of this article to note that it would seem that very few of these theories actually get to grips with what is meant by the word leadership. A common feature of all these and others, is that they all place some descriptive word prior to the word leadership and ignore what leadership may be in the first place. The result of this is to leave the reader to assign meaning to the word leadership which must, therefore, leave each theory open to a significant variation in interpretation.

Thus the definition of Leadership developed in conjunction with the writing of, and used in, this paper is:

> *Leadership is a mutual process, most often transient in nature, by which one person, being ascribed or chosen by another or others as the Leader in any set of circumstances, influences another or others to act knowingly, willingly and with ownership in accordance with a shared or agreed purpose.*

This definition is designed to incorporate three fundamental concepts with regard to leadership:

- Leadership implies followership and no person can be a leader without at least one follower (Kellerman, 2007).
- This article proposes that followership is in the pro-active domain of the person following. That is, in a leader-follower relationship the final action is within the domain of the person choosing to follow and not the leader. A leader cannot choose an individual to follow them unless that individual makes a choice to follow (hence the words ascription and choose in the definition).
- Compliance as a result of the exercising of power is not, and never can be, willing followership, it is merely part of an accepted, agreed, tolerated or suffered transactional process.

2.2. Management

Fundamental to the arguments made in this paper, management, as a process distinct from leadership is also defined. Griffin & Van Fleet's (2014) definition of management is, "…a set of activities (including planning and decision making, organizing, leading, and controlling) directed at an organization's resources (human, financial, physical and information) with the aim of achieving organizational goals in an efficient and effective manner." (p. 8). Certo & Certo (2014) view management as, "…the process of reaching organizational goals by working with and through people and other organizational resources." (p. 33). Whilst, clearly, there are many more definitions, the latter presented here is used for its simplicity and reference to a process. It is argued here that both management and leadership are the 'processes' of 'doing something', not an end in themselves.

2.3. Power

Now, to move on to the definition of power in an attempt to set the parameters for the argument to follow. Power is defined by Weber (1947, cited in Coleman, 2013 p.31) as "…probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests"; by Rahim (1989 p545) as "…the ability of one party to change or control the behaviour, attitudes, opinions, objectives, needs and values of another party"; and by Keltner, Gruenfeld & Anderson (2003, p265) as "…an individual's relative capacity to modify others' states by providing or withholding resources or administering punishments." From these definitions alone, it is argued that use of power involves an imposition of the will of one individual over the will of another and that there is some element of enforced compliance associated with the individual who is subject to the application of power. As Fiske (1993, p. 624) argues, "…power is essentially control…",so the contribution or otherwise this makes to leadership is discussed.

3. APPROACHES TO POWER

The use of power in relation to the interactions between people both in and outside organisations has been studied and written about by many authors, but the main approaches discussed here are by French &Raven (1959), Lukes (1974) and Foucault (1977). The focus of the current discussion will be, as mentioned previously, within an organisation. The variety of approaches to power are important to debate because the main proposition made in this article is that when power is used within an

organisation, the prospect of any claims to leadership becomes virtually impossible; in other words, the use of power severely limits the possibility of an individual exercising that power to claim that they are leading. They are likely, when using power, to be managing and there is no criticism implied, in making this argument, against the use of power 'per se' in this article.

Another parameter to set out prior to further discussion, is that power debated is power 'over' rather than 'to' as discussed by Hearn (2012). Power 'over' relates to domination whereas 'to' relates much more commonly to all people as the power to 'do' things such as walk, talk, take a job and so on (ibid).

Central to the arguments made in this article is the concept of management and hierarchy in organisations in which any manager has the authority and power to impose and enforce conditions on those subordinate to him or her. The commonly observed association of power with leadership could be likened to Lukes (1974) argument that the pluralist (or one-dimensional) view of power involves the notion that the locus of that power is determined by an individual, "…who prevails in cases of decision-making…" (p11) and as such, is too simplistic. To take this argument further, Lukes (ibid.) goes on to discuss a two-dimensional view and presents the work of Bachrach and Baratz (1970, cited in Lukes, 1974) who define power as, "a set of predominant values, beliefs, rituals and institutional procedures ('rules of the game') that operate systematically and consistently to the benefit of certain persons and groups at the expense of others." (p17) The two-dimensional view entails the concept that power does not have to be exerted to be effected because if it is inherent in a hierarchical position, a person potentially subject to that power may act or avoid acting in anticipation of the exertion of that power. This is a key argument because whether or not a manager uses power actively there is a latent or passive power implication within the role. It is important at this point to discuss the use of power as both a negative and positive enforcement process and the argument made above applies in either case. Power can be used negatively and can also be used positively for pleasurable purposes (Foucault, 1977), however, this is still a coercive process. Foucault (1981 p 94, cited in Townley, 1993) argued that, "Power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared, something one holds on to or allows to slip away", but this ignores that fact that in organisations, the appointment to managerial responsibility entails bestowing power upon the recipient of the position. This means that within an organisational setting, the ascription of power is not really a subject of choice and such power is applied by the organisation through the hierarchical structures and as Coleman (2013 p33) argues the use of even legitimate power is never a, "neutral or benign process".

The foregoing arguments hold true when considering the work of French & Raven (1959) who associate power with influence and define power in terms of the ability of a person to influence defining the social bases of power to be Referent, Expert, Reward, Coercive and Legitimate. Examining each of these in relation to a person in a management position within an organisation, such an individual has the power of the organisation to call on and so must have Legitimate power. Being in a management position will mean being able to exert Coercive power, or the power to command and control employees; and Reward power, or the power to mediate and influence levels of pay and benefits.

Taken at face value referent and expert power would seem to contradict some of these arguments in that they may be considered a personal power derived from being likeable or knowledgeable (Daft, 2011). This suggests that within an organisational context, a subordinate perceiving a superior as likeable or knowledgeable is an expression of, "consensual authority" (Lukes, 1974 p32) in which there is no conflict of interest and is therefore, as Lukes continues to argue, "…not…a form of power" simply because the subordinate is exercising an autonomous choice. Referent and expert power in these terms are not sources of power that can be applied voluntarily or by reason of position by the person seen as having these particular attributes.

Commonly, the appointment of a manager includes the notion that the manager instantly becomes an organisational leader however minimal the managers' hierarchical level may be (Patrick, 2012; Pfeffer, 2010; Erkutlu & Chafra, 2006). It is apposite to note that at the point of a manager's first appointment to a supervisory position, particularly if promoted within an organisation, it is highly likely that in terms of French and Raven's power descriptions, he or she will, of necessity, have to relymainly on coercive power and legitimate power to be able to do the job required. As already argued, there is no possibility of being able to use referent and expert 'power' as these are attributes which cannot be applied by the person to which they are ascribed.

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4. LEADERSHIP AND POWER INCOMPATIBILITY

One of the issues to deal with in relation to this subject is that the word 'Leader' is conflated with the process of 'leadership', both in general parlance and in many academic articles (e.g. Lunenburg, 2012; Liu & Fang, 2006; Subašić, Reynolds, Turner, Veenstra & Haslam, 2011). The word 'manager' has become synonymous with the word 'leader' and so has become a commonly accepted word for a person with positional power over one or more people. This does not automatically mean, however, that a manager can be assumed to exercise leadership skills and demonstrate leadership qualities. It is debatable whether the latent power possessed by a manager, i.e. legitimate power in French & Raven's (1956) terms, could ever mean leadership is possible because of the threat of coercion. If an employee acts as a result of coercion, even in its mildest form, this is not a process of following a leader, it is a process of compliance with a managerial command or request and as Meindl (1995) argues, it is within the domain of the subordinate to ascribe leadership, not the manager.

Thus, a subordinate who is managed is subject to the power of the manager which alone makes it implausible for that subordinate to ascribe leadership to the manager. Exerting power in a manager subordinate role is more likely to cause stress for the subordinate and as Karasek's (1979) job-demands control model shows, there is a positive correlation between subordinate stress and supervisor power. Elangovan & Xie (1976 p. 399) show, "…that perceived legitimate power and coercive power of the supervisor were major predictors of subordinate stress" and so it is argued that as power is related to stress in subordinates, the possibility of the subordinate wishing to follow and ascribing leadership to the supervisor is unlikely.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has provided definitions for management power and crucially leadership, a definition so often missed by writers on leadership. It has argued that the use of power is coercive within a hierarchical organisation and as such belongs within the confines of management. Power whether legitimate or coercive is shown to be positively correlated with stress in the subordinate. Leadership is a process within the domain of a follower to ascribe and as such it is unlikely that managers will be ascribed as leaders when they use the power or the organisation. Thus, leadership and power are an incompatible mix.

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