



Leadership Theories ;an Analysis of Traits and Gender Differences

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The world has witnessed great leaders time and again from the days of Julius Ceasar to the former South African president Nelson Mandela. In the past we had kings as great leaders like Julius Ceasar, Alexander The Great, Ashoka The Great, Changez Khan, Akbar The Great. In the modern era Napoleon Bonaparte, george Washington, Winston Churchill, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and so on. The distinction lies not in their traits but role they assumed. During the Ancient period the monarchs acted as great leaders and in the modern era politicians assumed the mantle of leadership. And now with the birth of nation-system the political leaders are steering the fate of national and international affairs.

The pertinent question raised is what, precisely is leadership? For a common man it is something that can be felt but lacks precise definition. But social scientists have a clear focus 'influence'. Many experts on this topic agree that leadership is the process through which one member of a group (its leader) influence other group members towards the attainment of specific group goals.¹

The leadership process is confronted with several issues. First we can consider the question of who, precisely becomes a leader. why some persons but not others rise to positions of authority. Second we might attempt to examine the evidence concerning the possibility of gender difference in leadership.

THE TRAIT APPROACH: ARE LEADERS BORN OR MADE ?

Are some people born to be leaders? common sense suggests that this is so. Eminent leaders of the past such as Alexander The Great, Queen Elizabeth-I, Abraham Lincoln and Mahatma Gandhi do seem to differ from ordinary human beings in several aspects. Such observations led early researchers to formulate the 'great person theory of leadership' according to this approach, great leaders possess key traits that set them apart from most human beings. Further, the theory contends that these traits remain stable over time and across different groups. Thus it suggests that all great leaders share ;these characteristics regardless of when and where they live or the precise roles they fulfill. We will probably be surprised to learn therefore, that they have not been confirmed. Decades of research most conducted before 1950 failed to yield consensus, but agreed upon list of key traits shared by all leaders.²

Although a few consistent findings did emerge e.g. leaders are slightly taller and more intelligent than their followers, these were hardly dramatic in nature or in scope. Indeed, the overall result of this persistent search for trait associated with leaders were so disappointing that most investigations gave up in despair and reached the following conclusion: leaders simply do not differ from followers in clear and consistent ways.

Until quite recently this conclusion was widely accepted as true. Now, however, it has been called into question by a growing body of evidence indicating that leaders do actually differ from other persons in several important and measurable respects. After receiving a large number of studies concerned with this issue, Kirk Patrick and Locke (1991) have recently contended that (in business settings at least) traits do matter that certain triats-drive, honesty and integrity, leadership motivation, self confidence, cognitive ability, expertise, creativity and flexibility, together with other factors, contribute to leader's success.

Most of these characters are ones we will readily recognize (drive, honesty and integrity, self confidence) others however, seem to re-

quire further classification. According to Kirk Patrick and Locke the term leadership motivation refers to leader's desire to influence others in essence to lead. Such motivation, however, can take two distinct forms. On the one hand, it may cause leaders to seek power as an end in itself. Leaders who demonstrate such personalised power motivation wish to dominate others and their desires to do so is often reflected in an excessive concern with status. In contrast, leadership motivation can cause leaders to seek power as a means to achieve desired shared goals. Leaders who evidence such socialised power motivation co-operate with others, develop networks and coalitions, and generally work with subordinates rather than trying to dominate or control them. Needless to add, this type of leadership motivation is usually far more adaptive for organisation's personalised power motivation.

With respect to cognitive ability, it appears that to be effective, leaders must be intelligent and capable of integrating and interpreting large amount of information. Mental genius, however, does not seem to be necessary and may in some cases, prove detrimental.³

While the trait approach presented is quite comprehensive and provides a good overall summary of recent evidence concerning. This issue, we may note that one particular characteristic seems to play an especially crucial role in effective leadership. This trait 'flexibility', refers to the capacity of leaders to recognise what actions are required in a given situation and then to act accordingly. The evidence for the importance of flexibility is provided by an ingenious laboratory simulation conducted by Zaccaro, Toti and Kenny.⁴These researchers investigated the role of flexibility in leader emergence in small task performing groups. It can be said that flexibility-the ability to match one's style and behaviour to the needs of followers and the demands of the situation-may be an important trait where effective leadership, is concerned. In sum recent evidence seems to require some revision in the widely accepted view that leaders do not differ from other person with respect to specific traits as noted by kirk Patrick and Locke⁵ (1991, p.58).

"Regardless of whether leaders are born or made it is unequivocally clear that leaders are not like other people. Leaders do not have to be great men or women by being intellectual geniuses of omniscient prophets to succeed but they do need to have the "right stuff" and this stuff is not equally present in all people.⁶

GENDER DIFFERENCE IN LEADERSHIP

Do male leaders and female leaders differ in their style or approach to leadership?, the authors of many popular books suggest they do.⁷ But the systematic research on this issue suggests that, in general, they do not.⁸ While female and male leaders do appear to differ in a few respects, these differences are smaller in magnitude, and fewer in number than widely held gender role stereotypes suggest perhaps the most comprehensive evidence on this issue is reported by Eagly and Johnson.

These investigatorsexamined potential differences between male and female leaders with respect to two key dimensions generally viewed as playing a crucial role in leader's behaviour or style: (1) Concern with maintenance of good interpersonal relations (often known as showing consideration) Versus concern with task performances (known as initiating structure) and participative versus autocratic decision making style. Gender role stereo types suggest that female leaders might show more concern with interpersonal relations and tend to make decisions in a more participative manner than male

leaders. Results however, offered only weak support for such beliefs. With respect to showing consideration and initiating structure, there were few significant findings. In laboratory studies (in which participants interacted with a stranger), female were slightly higher than male on both dimension. In organisational studies (in which leadership behaviour in actual organisations was assessed) no differences on these dimensions were observed.

Turning to decision-making style, female did appear to adopt a more democratic or participating style than male more over, this was true across all three groups of studies namely laboratory, organisational and assessments (in which measures of subjects's leadership were obtained.) One possible reason accounted for this difference is that female leaders are more concerned than males with interpersonal relations and realise that permitting subordinates to offer input to decisions is one way of maintaining good relations with them. Another possibility, suggested by Eagly and Johnson involves the fact that women are higher than men in interpersonal skills. Such superiority, in turn, may make it easier for them to adopt a decision making approach utilising considerable give and take with subordinates, what ever be the precise basis for this difference the overall findings of the meta analysis conducted by Eagly and Johnson suggests that female and male leaders may indeed differ in some respects.

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