

Women in Leadership and Decision-Making: Understanding Different Styles of Leading

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Women in leadership and decision-making roles influence the policies and directions of organizations (Ahuja, 2002). Women in leadership value supports from their organizations. Pro-social outcomes of relationship competence are mediated by the development of empathy, collaborative approaches to conflict, self-disclosure, and social interest (Jogulu & Wood, 2006). Decision-making perspectives have uncertainty as the sole reason for organizational leaders to search for additional relevant information to solidify or clarify the information at the leader's disposal. A phenomenological qualitative research study which explored the preferred style of leadership based on three leadership and decision-making styles is presented in this paper¹. The researcher gathered insights into the lived experiences of like-minded sample of respondents from the research population as they described their leadership and decisionmaking experiences within their organizations.

Keywords: leadership, decision-making, organizational management and leadership, transformational leadership

Introduction

Women in leadership and decision-making roles influence the policies and directions of organizations (Ahuja, 2002). Women in leadership value supports from their organizations. In contrast, the negative stereotypes and perceptions of women as leaders and their leadership abilities may be a factor for the disparity between men and women in decision-making positions (Catalyst, 2006). Although the number of women in leadership position has increased in recent decades, the proportion of women compared to men in leadership position is still very low (Paustian-Underdahl, Walker, & Woehr, 2014). "Leadership is the process whereby one individual influences other group members toward the attainment of defined group or organizational goals" (Dubois, 2006, p. 62). Leadership philosophy is conceptualized as the leader's values, behavior, and attitudes (Evans, 1996), examining gender differences in the characteristics of executive leaders in regarding management style, strategic behavior, work-related values, family, and work conflict (Fuchs & Hofkirchner, 2005).

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Communication styles are predetermined by societies, because a secure sense of awareness develops positive models for engaging in exploration and risk taking (Gallivan, 2004). A self-efficacy process could have a positive impact on individuals before they choose to initiate their efforts. Leaders have tendencies to weigh, evaluate, and integrate information about their perceived capabilities before they make decisions. The subsequent sections present an overview of some of the different leadership styles that exist (Frize, 2005).

Leadership and Decision-Making Styles

For an organization to flourish, leaders must often act selflessly and put organization's needs before their own. One of the downfalls to the success of an organization is the shortage of dedicated qualified talents who are willing to make the necessary personal adjustments to bring forth success. The leadership skills necessary for management to possess are rooted in the elements of judgment and decision-making. These leadership skills lead to wisdom in managerial practices. One can measure a leader's wisdom by the way in which he or she appropriates judgment and decision-making to the right situation. Wisdom is an action-oriented construct and many organizational decisions are highly complex because of the intricate nature of some decisions. Kennerly and McGuire (2006), posited that a broad knowledge base facilitates understanding, interpreting, and integrating the information for better decisions or outcomes.

Traditional decision-making perspectives have uncertainty as the sole reason for organizational leaders to search for additional relevant information to solidify or clarify the information at the leader's disposal (Kedia, Nordtvedt, & Perez, 2002). Leaders acquire additional information by scanning the environment for useful data and synthesizing all information for better decisions (Kedia et al., 2002). In order to acquire the skills necessary to maintain a competing enterprise, decision makers need to immerse themselves in the current of information flow and real-time engagements which will in turn lead to improved personal skills and knowledge in the respective skills. No major differences on why leaders seek additional information when he wrote, "When decision makers immerse themselves in real-time information, they acquire deep personal knowledge of the enterprise" (Eiserhardt as cited in Kedia et al., 2002, p. 26).

Autocratic Leadership

The autocratic leader is also referred to as an authoritarian leader. Autocratic leaders do not communicate with employees beyond what is minimally required, they prefer definitive structures, dictate commands, and orders that followers are expected to comply (Bass, 1990). Likert (1967) developed a "four systems" typology of leadership style which extends the dichotomy between task and relationship orientation to consider the degree of employee involvement in decision making and the nature of communication with the leader. He furthermore explained that authoritarian leaders do not welcome input from followers and are not concerned with followers' personal well-being, and his type of leader was preferred in historical leadership of despotic rulers. The impact of an autocratic leader resulted in dependent and submissive followers acting more productive in the presence of the leader and less productive when the leader is absent (Lewin, Lippitt & White, 1939).

Today, the autocratic style is not a preferred leadership approach because it does not encompass social dynamics and the building of relationships within a group. The autocratic leadership style may not be preferred, however, there are organizations in which practicing this leadership style is necessary to achieve positive results (Marques, 2006). When leaders exert autocratic behavior it may serve to avoid conflict in instances

where employees are submissive but it may also create resentment and resistance against leadership and management, it may also lead to a fight for control between employees and management. The autocratic style of leadership can be useful when the organizational environment lacks new ideas (Rotemberg & Saloner, 1993).

Democratic Leadership

Organizational democracy states "...democracy concerns the manner that organizational participants define and come to terms with the principles of social justice, equality, diversity, and empowerment" (Tierney, 1989, p. 125). The democratic leader is someone who prefers to establish direction based upon the opinions of the majority (Marques, 2006). Conflict resolution within an environment led by a democratic leader can be described as follows:

Democratic leaders come to understand that conflict is a normal part of any team effort. Every individual has a different type of personality, knowledge, and experience. It is perfectly normal for people to be in conflict. Democratic leadership allows conflicts over issues and personalities to be resolved instead of denied. Conflict over control tends to disappear. (Dew, 1995, p. 53)

Learning a new leadership role is a process that begins with thinking and reflecting on how to challenge already established culture or beliefs about what an effective leader is. Dew (1995) posited that through empowerment, one can turn an autocratic leader into a democratic one. By encouraging autocratic leaders to change their leadership styles to a democratic one can create empowerment, a key to the democratic style of leadership.

Laissez-Faire Leadership

The laissez-faire leadership style is related to autocratic and democratic leadership styles. The study determined that autocratic leaders demonstrated more control over the laissez-faire leaders. Laissez-faire leaders adhere to the status quo and rarely interfere or cause conflict by introducing new strategy or organization direction (Lewin et al., 1939).

In a laissez-faire approach, the leader has a more stand-off approach to leading and allows subordinates to manage themselves. This approach works best in organizations in which leaders have a strong sense of self-direction and highly skilled workers can manage themselves (Marques, 2006). The productivity, satisfaction, and cohesion of organizations led by laissez-faire leaders are hindered by those who are unable to provide sound direction (Bass, 1990).

Transactional Leadership Theory

Transactional leadership indicates an emphasis on maintaining the status quo of the organization and maintaining organizational practices and resources (Brownlee, Nailon, & Tickle, 2005). The view in a transactional leadership theory is that leader and follower use each other to fulfill goals and objectives through the exchange of goods and services. In a transactional leadership, leader-follower relationships develop on a series of exchanges between leader and follower. Transactional leadership involves a leader rewarding or disciplining followers based on performance. The inherent qualities in women are said to be of nurturing and supportive appeal to collaborative leadership concepts rather than a transactional style of leadership (Lemons & Parzinger, 2007).

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leaders typically nurture personal and group improvement, are inspirational, provide clear organizational vision, foster commitment, and motivate subordinates toward achieving set goals (Manning, 2004). A transformational leader helps people see value in their contributions to an organization by increasing his or her level of motivation (Hautala, 2005). Transformational leaders inspire and motivate others to do more than followers originally intended to do or thought possible. Leaders ought to strive to engage all members of the team in the decision-making process. He suggested transformational leaders create a workplace in which followers consider placing group interests above individual interests for the good of the organization (Bass, 1990).

Methodology

A phenomenological qualitative research study explored the preferred style of leadership based on three leadership and decision-making styles—Autocratic, Bureaucratic, and Transformational. Capturing the perceptions of populations and participants' inductive answers to the research questions assisted with the analysis of the phenomenon under study. The goal of this study was to fill this gap in literature. In a qualitative research, a small population sample increases the understanding of the participants studied (Kruger & Welman, 1999; Creswell, 2005). The research was conducted amongst a group of 50 women, ages 30 to 50 years of age in leadership positions in an organization working to increase the number of women in management and leadership positions in Nigeria.

An open-ended questionnaire was appropriate for the proposed research study because it allowed participants to describe their day-to-day lived experiences. The researcher gathered insights into the lived experiences of like-minded sample of respondents from the research population as they described their leadership and decision-making experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Limited research had been conducted specifically to explore the preferred leadership styles and their usage on a day-to-day basis on organizational leaders practicing the key conceptual ideas of transformational, autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles and the effects on their leadership capabilities to increase the productivity of their religious organizations.

Results

Based on the age range of participants, the ages of 30 to 34, five of them selected the democratic style, three of them selected the situational style. The other five selected the transformational style of leadership while none of the participants between the ages of 30 to 34 selected the autocratic or bureaucratic styles of leadership. Out of the 10 participants between the ages of 35 to 39, one selected the bureaucratic style, three selected the democratic style, and four selected the situational style, while two selected the transformational style. Of the two participants between the ages of 40 to 44, none of the participants selected the bureaucratic, situational, or transformational styles of leadership but they both selected the democratic style of leadership. Out of the five participants between the ages of 45 and over, none selected the bureaucratic or situational styles of leadership but three of them selected the democratic style while the other two selected the transformational style of leadership. Below is a chart depicting the preferred leadership style of participants according to their age and a description of why they selected a specific leadership style.



Figure 1. Leadership and decision-making style by age group.

Democratic Style

In a democratic workplace, a leader exhibits vision, adjusts to present circumstances, and makes decision that allowed in meeting organizational mission, vision, and objectives. The democratic approach to leadership is the most selected by the research participants because of the team building aspect. This approach is said to be inclusive and promotes the understanding of a diverse group of people from various cultural backgrounds. Some respondents answered that this approach provides subordinates a sense of belonging, and feeling of responsibility, because they take part in decision-making processes of the organization. They feel committed to the job when they know that one is not just forcing the decisions on them.

Subordinates have ownership and more commitment when they are included as part of a team. They have freedom to come up with views on subjects and suggestions without feeling within the organization which the respondent answered that they take back and discuss with the management team and that every experience is important. Democratic leaders allow subordinates, and team members to make contributions, and suggest ways of achieving goals, because while carrying out assignments we meet different people and have different approaches to problem solving. One can only tap into other people's knowledge base when you let them know that their contributions, ideas, and suggestions are important to the organization.

One person answered that the democratic leadership style approach gets the full cooperation of everyone in getting the job done on time. This respondent selected this style of leadership because they believed that the ability for this participant to understand that working with different personalities from diverse backgrounds,

who, speak, behave, and reason differently from theirs, are potential assets to their organization in that they have something to offer everyone in the team environment. This approach some participants responded assists in making immense contributions to realizing organizational goals because everyone has something to offer in a collective and in an all-inclusive environment. Team members can offer solutions in problem areas if needed, from their own perspective when leaders are at loss. Exhibiting this leadership style approach notwithstanding, the leader is still able to apply disciplinary measures if needed, without fear or favor so everyone is on the same page.

The democratic method allows one respondent to learn constantly. They believe that just because they are in a position of power which does not mean that their subordinates cannot teach them something new. By asking questions and engaging subordinates and colleagues in the decision-making process, different perspectives come to the surface and provide a richer work environment. As a team player, one respondent answered that “leaders need the support of their subordinates otherwise; the job will not be done as they are not capable of performing the job alone”.

The need to respect the ideas of others within a team of people means the ability to collaborate, and communicate feedback before a final decision can be made about anything we do in the organization as every member of the team has valuable input. “Two good heads are better than one” responded one participant. Staff is employed based on different competencies so that they can work as a team. “Nobody knows it all and allowing others to make input, makes them more responsible and productive.”

Situational Style

Some participants selected the situational style of leadership based on their work with different people of different educational and social backgrounds and those who have different needs; therefore, changing the leadership style from time to time was the perfect choice. One participant responded that in their place of business, customers are never sure until the last minute, so one needs to go with the flow, and tries to adapt to the customer’s request because they believe that the customers are always right. Adapting to the changing environmental and business needs of stakeholders allows many of the participants to change from one leadership style to the other.

Because of the dynamic nature of another participant’s job, and their subordinates are not as skilled or as highly educated, therefore, their leadership style is situational because this participant adapts to the changing needs, and people in the organization up to a level that their decision-making and leadership styles are accepted by their constituents. Flexibility was another reason why some of the participants selected the situational style of leadership. Many respondents believed that they work better with bosses who are flexible, and considerate of their needs, therefore, they in turn have been considerate and flexible towards the needs of their subordinates.

By actively listening to what staff had to say, one can determine what the mood in the organizational environment is. One participant believed that if one goes a particular way, then that means there is no room for growth. As a leader, one must delegate duties to the right people, and lead by example. People are different and one is bound to see new things, therefore, one should adapt or change things as they come. One respondent answered that “no man is an island, so you need other people’s idea to function as a leader and giving enough room for change in the organizational by being flexible”.

Transformational Style

The transformational leadership style is the most sustainable, in some of the respondent’s view. They

engage this style not only because it gets the job done in the immediate, but because it changes people there by, affecting a lasting change in lives. It is important to mentor and inspire subordinates and get them to deliver effectively. Leading by example, encouraging, motivating, inspiring showing personal examples through stories were some of the reasons why respondents selected the transformational leadership style. Team work in a target and goal driven organization is important to many of the participants. Therefore, they ensure that their team members clearly understand the goals. Together they develop and implement strategies on how to achieve those goals. Some of these respondents are also responsible to ensure that all limitations towards meeting those goals are resolved within the organization.

Conclusion

Women in leadership and in decision-making roles influence the policies and directions of organizations (Ahuja, 2002). Women in leadership value supports from their organizations. In contrast, negative stereotypes and perceptions of women as leaders and their abilities may be a factor for the disparity between men and women in decision-making positions (Catalyst, 2006). In determining the leadership and decision-making styles of women, they vary from transformational, autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire, all well-known leadership styles widely used in organizational leadership. Literature referencing the effectiveness of organizational leaders attempting to lead change and motivate their subordinates to achieve higher productivity is plentiful.

From the data conducted, it was concluded that there was no universally accepted classification of decision-making style, and that decision-makers differ with respect to the information available, alternatives considered, experiences, and the integration of multiple inputs (Bradberry, Eberlin, Kottraba, & Tatum, 2005). From the research, it was also concluded that out of all the leadership and decision-making styles presented, the transformational leadership style was the most sustainable, according to several of the respondents. Since they engage this style not only because it gets the job done in the immediate, but because it is used in as a medium in which people's lives are transformed as leaders, thereby, affecting a lasting change. Leading by example, encouraging, motivating, inspiring showing personal examples through stories were some of the reasons why respondents selected the transformational leadership style. The fundamental consideration should not be the decision-making style but the type of decision reached. Leaders can distinguish that effective actions are the foundation of sound decisions and sound decisions originate from the understanding of all controllable matters, that could affect the result of the decisions making made with the preferred leadership style (Rausch, 2005; Bradberry et al., 2005).

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