

Leadership from a Virtue Perspective

An introduction

The subject I have chosen to focus on in this course thesis regarding "Frontiers in leadership research" concerns the leadership issue from a virtue approach. My reasons for this choice are primarily due to my doctoral dissertation will contain studies of the leadership phenomenon from different perspectives why I thought, in connection to this leadership course, it might be a good idea to have a deeper look at it from a mere virtue perspective. As it seems, the virtue perspective of leadership is a rarely focused angle of the field among leadership researchers in spite of the fact the leadership research field being a quite visited one among contemporary scientists. So, my humble ambition here is to discuss and combine knowledge I have received, partly within this course, partly from literature or other media outside the course but relevant to the subject in mapping out how leadership and virtue connect.

The thesis begins with a description of three major ethical approaches and the definition of the domains *conduct* and *character*, which is another dimension to understand ethics. It continues with a discussion about different definitions of the leadership construct and the importance of the influence factor and how that connects to ethical behavior. The thesis continues further with describing how virtue leadership can be defined, and completes with a summary where I present my views of how the virtue issue can be integrated in a future more ethical leadership style.

Three Ethical Approaches

Northouse refers to three approaches of ethical theories, the three teleological ones; *ethical egoism*, *utilitarianism* and *altruism*, further *the deontological approach* and finally *the virtue-based theory*. In addition, he makes a distinction of these three approaches into two broad domains; the one of *conduct* and the one of *character*. With conduct he means how the individual behave or act, and with character the individuals' way of being as a person. (2010, pp. 378)

Domain of conduct

Two major ethical approaches, frequently considered among scholars in the recent past but also of today, are based on individuals' behavior. Firstly *utilitarianism*; utilitarian supporters view moral worth of actions as actions determined solely by its contribution to an overall utility, which is interpreted as the total sum of contributed happiness and pleasure among all people. This form of consequentialism, also entitled teleology, originates from the idea that moral actions only are determined by the results of the actions. It can also be seen as actions to give "the greatest good for the greatest number of people", or "the greatest happiness principle". Secondly *deontological ethics*; persons who are adherents of the deontological ethics look at the rightness or wrongness of an action irrespective of the rightness or wrongness of the consequences of the actions. What decides the rightness or wrongness of an action is whether or not adhering to the duty to obey general rules, legislation, regulations or business manuals. (Wikipedia, 2009.)

Ethical egoism, one of the teleological approaches, reveals a high degree of concern for the self-interest and a low degree of concern for the interest of others or with Northouse's words "that a person should act so as to create the greatest good for herself or himself" without considering the consequences of others. Altruism, one other teleological approach, on the other hand, demonstrates the quite opposite behavior, i.e. actions of moral are conducted in the interest of others without considering the bad or good effects for the self-interest. (Northouse 2010, pp. 379.)

Concerning the utilitarianism, the third teleological approach, it seems to me Northouse can be traced back to the early works of J. Bentham and J.S. Mill, both of them having made important contributions to the development of utilitarianism, and furthermore inspired a lot of later researches of ethics to create a broader approach of the subject, preferably viewed as consequentialism. Northouse suggests, as I understand it, that consequentialism is the mean between ethical egoism and altruism, i.e. conduct a medium concern for the self-interest as well as medium concern for the interest of other persons in order "to create the greatest good for the greatest number" (2010, pp. 379).

Domain of character

The third ethical approach, a classical theory of contemporary regained interest, is the *virtue ethics theory*, which focuses, not on individuals' behavior, but on their character in forms of virtues and vices.

The virtue ethics tradition goes back to ancient Greek philosophy, preferably to the work of Plato and Aristotle and above all to the latter's book; *Nicomachean Ethics*. The contemporary virtue ethics philosophical concepts derive a lot of its thinking from Aristotle's work. Those concepts include *arête* "excellence / virtue", *phronesis* "practical / moral wisdom" and *eudaimonia* "flourishing". (Wikipedia, 2009.)

In the ancient and medieval eras most of the western countries had adopted the virtue ethics as the one prevailing approach to ethical thinking. However, the Aristotelian way of thinking lost its importance in early modern era in the western world but was reactivated in the ethical philosophy during the 20th century, and is today one of the three dominant approaches to normative theories. Contemporary virtue ethics include normative ethical theories that lay emphasis on "being" rather than on "acting". With other words: the virtue ethics degree of morality rightness or wrongness depends on the acting persons' character, and not on any rules or the consequences of actions. The current discussion among adherents of the virtue ethics concerns what specific virtues are morally praiseworthy, although there is a consensus in opinions that morality is a result of intrinsic virtues of individuals. (Wikipedia, 2009.)

Leadership

Definition of leadership

The word leadership is incorporated into the scientific disciplines from our common language without having been exactly redefined. Several definitions of the term have been suggested over the past decades. Having done a comprehensive review of leadership literature Stogdill concludes that "there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept" (1974, p. 259).

Yukl (2006, p.3) describes ten versions of the definition of leadership:

- Leadership is “the behavior of an individual...directing the activities of a group toward a shared goal.” (Hemphill & Coons, 1957, p.7)
- Leadership is “the influential increment over and above mechanical compliance with the routine directives of the organization.” (Katz & Kahn, 1978, p.528)
- Leadership is “exercised when persons...mobilize...institutional, political, psychological and other resources so as to arouse, engage and satisfy the motives of the followers.” (Burns, 1978, p.18)
- Leadership is “realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeed in attempting to frame and define the reality of others.” (Smircich & Morgan, 1982, p.258)
- Leadership is “the process of influencing the activities of an organized group toward goal achievement.” (Rauch & Behling, 1984, p.46)
- Leadership is “about articulating visions, embodying values, and creating the environment within which things can be accomplished.” (Richards & Engle, 1986, p.206)
- Leadership is “a process of giving purpose (meaningful direction) to collective effort, and cause willing effort to be expanded to achieve purpose.” (Jacobs & Jaques, 1990. p.281)
- Leadership is “the ability to step outside the culture...to start evolutionary change processes that are more adaptive.” (Schein, 1992, p.2)
- Leadership is “the process of making sense of what people are doing together so that people will understand and be committed.” (Drath & Paulus, 1994, p.4)
- Leadership is “the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organization...” (House et al.,1999, p.184)

Northouse suggests, after having considered the multitude of ways to conceptualize leadership, that it contains four central components: 1) being a process, 2) involve influence, 3) occur in groups and 4) include common goals. Based on these components he construes the following definition of leadership: “Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.” (2010, pp. 2.)

The opinions among scholars on how to define leadership vary. K. Grint, for instance, considers the leadership issue being too complicated to reach a consensus definition about, even in the long run, and describes four different ways of understanding what leadership is: 1) It is how leaders are that makes them leaders. 2) It is what leaders achieve that makes them leaders. 3) It is where leaders operate that makes them leaders. 4) It is how leaders get things done that makes them leaders. These statements of Grint boil down to four dimensions: 1) *The Person* 2) *The Result* 3) *The Position* 4) *The Process*. It is through these four dimensions he means that leadership can be understood. To me it is obvious that he considers leadership being an act of an individual, the leader, even though he states “that the role of individual

leaders is very limited, even if the significance of leadership should not be underestimated". (2005, p. 1.)

One conclusion to draw from the above definitions of the leadership concept is that leadership can be conducted by one single person or by a group of persons, although most people in our contemporary society, I would say, associate leadership with one single individual, the leader, executing leadership as is the case in most western business enterprises; the chief executive officers, in governing most of the world's countries; the prime ministers, in leading the catholic church; the pope and in commanding the armies; the supreme commanders.

A second conclusion to draw from the above is that the influence factor is the central factor in the leadership construct, which means that an individual's ability to influence other persons is a crucial trait for the successful leadership.

The differences in defining the leadership concept or the role of the leaders not only reflect a deep disunity among leadership scientists but are also resulting in variations in how scholars of different leadership concepts interpret observations of how leadership actors execute their leaderships. This deep disunity among scientists even lends support to the question whether leadership is a useful phenomenon and not only a scientific construct (e.g., Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Miner, 1975). Nevertheless, most of us experience leadership as a profound reality in our daily lives, at work, politically or in the churches like most of the behavioral scientists. They believe that leadership, besides being a social construct also is useful in scientific studies, and, in addition, a real phenomenon, important for creating effectiveness in organizations (Yukl, 2006, p.3).

Influence from a leadership perspective

Influence is the essence of leadership according to Yukl (2006, p.145). How then exactly is the word influence explained, and what exactly is inherent in the expression from a sociological point of view? According to Wikipedia (2009) social influence is created when a person is affected by one or more other individuals to think and/or act in a certain direction. Harvard psychologist, H. Kelman (1958) has identified three broad varieties of social influence:

- *Compliance* is when people appear to be influenced by others but actually are not and keep their dissenting opinions private.
- *Identification* is when people are influenced by someone who is liked and respected, such as a famous celebrity or a successful leader.
- *Internalization* is when people accept a belief or behavior and are influenced both publicly and privately.

Furthermore, M. Deutsch and H. Gerard (1955) identify two psychological needs that influence individuals to act in accordance with the expectations of others. Those influences include the need to be right, i.e. an informational social influence, and the need to be liked, i.e. a normative social influence. Both of them defined here:

- *Informational influence* is the influence of a person who accepts information from another individual as evidence about reality and comes into play when people are uncertain, either because stimuli are intrinsically ambiguous or because there is social disagreement.
- *Normative influence* is the influence when a person conforms to the positive expectations of others.

In terms of Kelman's typology above, normative influence leads to public compliance, whereas informational influence leads to identification or internalization, i.e. to a private acceptance. From a leadership perspective the private acceptance by a person is by all means to prefer, even if a person through an informational influence does act in accordance with expectations because of ambiguity due to social disagreement.

An obvious conclusion to draw from the above is the vast responsibility that rests on the leadership. To consider the influence dimension of the leadership implies that leaders have impact on the persons being led at work but also in these persons' private lives. According to Northouse this responsibility entails an ethical burden on the leaders, because leaders occupy more power and control than do the followers (2010, p. 382).

The virtue leadership

From a philosophical perspective it seems to me that all the three ethical approaches described in the beginning of this thesis will serve more or less well in executing ethical leadership. Irrespective of the leadership philosophy is based on utilitarianism, deontological ethics or virtue ethics, the moral dimension of leadership only depends on how the leadership is conducted, as I understand it. This means that the utilitarian leadership as well as the

deontological one and the virtue ethics, all three, can be highly or poorly morally conducted. The moral dimension flashlights the leader individual and her or his behavior in leadership situations irrespective of what is the contextual situation. A moral behavior, to me, takes certain virtues or vices by the leader person.

Reconsidering Northouse's definition of one of his teleological approaches; ethical egoism, it implies a high degree of concern for the self-interest and a low degree of concern for the interest of others. He exemplifies his thoughts by stating ethical egoism is a common ethics among and within business organizations in achieving their goals and maximizing their profits to the good for the leader, the subordinates and the organization (2010, p. 379), however, still neglecting to consider the effects outside the organization. Therefore I question whether ethical egoism ever can be considered morally good, not knowing the character of the leader.

The 20th century revival of virtue ethics as a frequently considered theory among moralists depends on contributions from a lot of contemporary philosophers of which P. Foot, is one to consider, especially for her work that was published in a collection of essays in 1978 entitled "Virtues and Vices". Her thoughts have been derived by K. Lampou (2002/3) suggesting a division of the virtues into four classes, see Figure 1, namely general/intellectual, general/moral or character, specific/intellectual and finally specific/moral or character.

	Intellectual	Moral or character
General	A	B
Specific	C	D

Figure 1: A model of virtues for managerial leadership

He defines specific virtues as traits and skills necessary in specific situations as in successful leadership roles and general virtues as traits and skills necessary in general life and in subordinate situations.

Northouse's characteristic of ethical leaders can be summarized into five main virtue principles; *respect, service, justice, honesty* and *community* (2010, p. 386). These principles can be traced back to Aristotle. Based on his writings Velasquez (1992) states that a moral

individual should demonstrate the virtues of *courage, temperance, generosity, self-control, honesty, sociability, modesty, fairness* and *justice* according to Northouse (2010, p. 382).

Again considering Lampou's work I find that all of the virtues summarized by Northouse and stated by Velasquez above are recognized by Lampou (2002/3, p 13) as general moral or character virtues; *justice, honesty, courage* and *temperance* or as specific moral or character virtues; *community, fairness, generosity, modesty, respect, self-control, sociability, and service*.

Summary

The difference between the three ethical approaches tends to be more of a moral philosophic dilemma than the way ethics are applied in the daily life. For example, a utilitarian may argue that lying is wrong because of the negative consequences, although may apply white lies in certain delicate situations. A deontologist may argue that lying is always wrong, regardless of some potential good may be the result of the lie. A virtue ethicist, however, will focus less on lying in any circumstances, but consider what a decision to tell a lie or not tell a lie reveals about the lying person's character and morality. (Wikipedia, 2009.)

One conclusion to draw from the leadership text is that leadership may be conducted by one single person or by a group of persons. In order to succeed, however, the leader must possess the ability to influence other individuals. Influence can be conveyed either normatively, i.e. the positive action of the subordinates depends on compliance because of their need to be liked or possess a need to escape uncertainty or to avoid intrinsically ambiguous stimuli. It can also be conveyed in an informational way, which means that the receivers of the influence act positively because of a free will to do so but also because of a need to act rightly. However, irrespective of in what way influence is conveyed, the leader, as the one person that empowers the influence, to me, has a vast moral responsibility for how the subordinates are influenced and how they act due to the influence. The leader has a responsibility for the consequences of the subordinates actions in general as well as for the consequences of her or his own action. A failure for the leader to execute good moral influence among the subordinates will certainly

create obedience and diminished efforts among the subordinates and a failure in reaching the expected goals.

I do believe leadership is of a profound necessity to achieve betterments in life for the human species. As long back in time as we know, people have cooperated in order to improve their life conditions. It soon become obvious that certain individuals were more skilled than other individuals in specific situations, for instance to lead the cooperations. Plato and Aristotle recognized that certain traits characterized good moral leaders. These traits were lacking or less evident among the inferior leaders who consequently might act unmorally. That is why I do believe that character matters in executing good virtue ethics in the leadership. The virtue ethics theory demonstrates a close leadership connection as “specific intellectual virtues” and “moral or character virtues”, using Lampou’s definitions, will service in developing knowledge of how to locate individuals with appropriate traits and skills for successful inspiring leadership, regardless of what ethical concept she or he is an adherent of. So, there is a need to map out what are the specific and general moral virtues that characterize the desired and praiseworthy leader. It is still an open ended issue whether my dissertation will contribute in this respect.

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