

THE NATURE OF LEADERSHIP WORK - HANDOUT

ADDITIONAL EXERCISES ON THE NATURE OF LEADERSHIP WORK

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF....

Main idea: Instead of analysing your day to day work life as a leader, find someone in a leadership position and shadow them for 1 day analysing in detail what they do and how they do it.

How it works:

1. Shadowing a leader is a unique opportunity to experience leadership firsthand. Find the right person and ask them for permission to get an up-close look at a day in their life. Sometimes it is useful to exchange experiences, you spend one day with them and the next day they could shadow you.
2. Take notes of what you notice and include your impressions.
3. Take special care of things like: what type of activities do they do, who do they talk to, what interruptions do they get (are they external or self-made), how long do they invest on each task, take note of their agenda items and see which things were expected and which were not, etc.
4. At the end of the day reflect on the experience
 - a. What similarities and differences do you see from your job?
 - b. What can you improve from your job after watching the other person?
 - c. What feedback can I give the person I have followed for the day?

LEADERSHIP IN MOVIES

Main idea: Sometimes we do not have people around us whom we can observe. However, movies are a great and fun way to learn more about leadership. Choose a movie featuring men or women leading and analyse some scenes in detail to see how leadership work is represented.

How it works:

1. Choose a movie featuring leadership work. Here are some examples:
 - a. [The Darkest Hour \(Winston Churchill\)](#)
 - b. [Invictus \(Nelson Mandela\)](#)
 - c. [The Post](#)
2. Choose one scene you would like to analyse. For example: in the Darkest Hour the scene where Winston Churchill appears for the first time.
3. Take notes of the different actions they carry out. How long are the activities? How many interruptions do they have? How are they performing their role? How do they adapt to the circumstances?
4. It is useful to compare the list with the workshop document that highlights the different characteristics of the leadership work.
5. Do you see any similarities and differences from your job?

THE NATURE OF LEADERSHIP WORK - INPUT

INTRODUCTION

While countless books on leadership and management offer their views on what makes the “perfect leader” by focusing on what leaders should do, they constantly forget to mention what leaders really do which is even more revealing. Exemplary leadership is far from common sense or mechanical techniques. As we take the time to examine the nature and characteristics of our own work we are able to enrich our own understanding of it and we become more aware of their implications in the different dimensions of our life.

MAIN IDEAS

When you look at your agenda over an extended period and examine the time that your tasks have taken, you will learn a lot about the nature of your work and may probably notice a pattern. Your observations may clash with or confirm your current understanding of what a leader should really dedicate his/her time to, but chances are that what you noticed is aligned with the empirical analysis of experts. Surveys on the nature of the leadership work challenge the myth of the leader as always in control, sitting behind a desk planning for the next 10 years, and show that their responsibility is often characterized by:

- Long working hours (more than 8 hours a day and working on weekends)
- A hectic pace and brevity of tasks (49% of activities lasting less than 9 minutes)
- Fragmentation and frequent interruptions (13 from every 14 meetings are ad hoc)
- Open-ended work (it does not have a formal ending)
- A strong orientation to action and absence of reflection (intense in stimulus-response)
- An intensiveness in personal relations (whether hierarchical or lateral)
- A preference for oral communication (60-90% of the time)

The above characteristics have several implications and, left unexamined, they may heavily affect the way leaders perceive and perform their functions and the way they live their responsibilities. Among the threats involved we note: the risk of burnout and anxiety, the trap of getting stuck in superficiality and expediency at the expense of purpose, the hardening of one’s heart (less empathy, cynicism), emotional numbness and creativity deadlock, and many more.

How can we address these series of implications and challenges resulting from the nature of the leadership work?

- Managing these challenges requires us to continuously inquire our assumptions and understanding of leadership work.
- Having a clear purpose as a guide towards everyday decisions
- Learning to distinguish anecdote from symptoms (relevance of experience)
- It also involves alternating between the heat of the action (hitting the dance floor) and strategic reflection (moving to the balcony) (Ronald Heifetz).

- Finally, it calls for a developed awareness of ourselves, of others and most importantly of the context in which we are operating. The context of our leadership work will affect greatly our responsibilities and the way we work in our positions (leading a small JRS group of 5 people in a context of war is quite distinct from leading a university with 200 staff members in a stable country).

IGNATIAN NOTE

The Ignatian tradition offers many insights and practices that might help leaders face the challenges of their work (for example: considering context and the specificities of every situation, place, person and other factors; engaging in contemplative practices, receiving feedback and support, emphasizing the care for the body,...). The below are excerpts from Ignatius' instructions to Jesuits at the Council of Trent in 1546.

On looking after ourselves

[1] We should set an hour aside every evening for all of us to inform one another what has been done during the day and what should be done on the following day.

[2] We will take votes or use some other way to get agreement on what is past and what is still to come.

[3] One night one can ask the others to point out any faults they may have noticed, and the person criticized should not reply unless he is asked to explain why he did what was found wrong.

[4] Another night another will do the same, and so in turn, so that all can help one another to grow in charity and good influence all around.

[5] Each morning we should look at what we intend for that day, then make examen of conscience twice during the day.

[6] This timetable is to be put into effect five days after our arrival in Trent.

For a more detailed view of the associated challenges to leadership work and the contributions of ignatian spirituality in this regard, see Losada (2010) and the Resources section.

FINAL THOUGHT

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you! – *Mark 1, 35-37*

EXPECTED LEARNINGS AND OUTCOMES

1. Connecting with your daily experience as leaders
2. Appreciating the inherent characteristics and implications of leadership work
3. Reflecting on strategies to best to manage these challenge

If you ask managers what they do, they will most likely tell you that they plan, organise, co-ordinate and control. Then watch what they do. Don't be surprised if you can't relate what you see to those four words.

Henry Mintzberg