

LEADERSHIP GIFTS AND SKILLS - INPUT

INTRODUCTION

The qualities and competencies of successful leaders have been a central focus in leadership literature. These lists exist in abundance as it was believed that by isolating leadership attributes, it will be easier to recruit individuals with these features and place them in leadership positions.

Research showed however that no consistent trait could be identified as a clear indicator of what makes some individuals more effective than others. Given the complexity of the leadership process, attention shifted from the generic traits and behaviours of a single heroic leader to a complex and interdependent pool of individuals who detain an array of complementary strengths and experiences that they offer to the benefit of the wider organisation. (Kets de Vries).

MAIN IDEAS

A never-ending list of competencies

By competencies we refer to the mix of general abilities (natural abilities and learned ones), behaviours and other characteristics that allow us to perform well in our jobs and succeed in our roles. They are founded on knowledge we possess (our theoretical or practical understanding of a given subject), skills we have developed through training or experience (whether cognitive, technical or interpersonal skills) as well as other attributes such as our natural talent. Competencies are generally behaviours that are easily identified and measured. While skills generally indicate “what” individuals can do, competencies attempt to describe “how” these individuals perform their job successfully, by taking their skills and knowledge and integrating them into on-the-job behaviours.

Skills + Knowledge + Abilities = Competencies

Researchers and organizations alike have approached the subject of leadership competencies from various angles, and tried to identify skills, traits and strengths in leaders and group them in different ways.

Without going into the various existing frameworks, what stands out is that the list of behaviors and traits associated to leadership is almost never-ending. With the rising complexity of challenges and the increasing need to collaborate and mobilize collective resources to succeed in leadership roles, organizations are realizing that what is required to perform the job goes beyond knowledge, skills and technical abilities. Thus, while defining competencies, more focus is put on honoring organizational values and drawing on individuals’ psychosocial resources (including personal character and attitudes).

Recurrent leadership competencies can be gathered in these three groups (see examples in Handout):

- Personal effectiveness competencies (Leading the Self)
- Interpersonal effectiveness competencies (Leading Others)
- Organisational effectiveness competencies (Leading Organisations)

The traps

The current discussion on competencies and skills provides valuable insights that assist leadership work. However, turning the existing list into a mold for leaders to fit in, is not only unrealistic but potentially damaging:

- On one hand, overemphasizing leadership competencies is in some way similar to adopting a heroic view of the concept, viewing leaders as exceptional beings with countless skills and boundless abilities. Trapped in an unmanageable and almost overwhelming list of requirements, leaders may often find themselves working hard to fix their weaknesses in search for a more “complete” leadership profile, or try hard to mimic the traits and behaviors of great men and women who preceded them.
- On the other hand, the personal abilities of one individual, while undoubtedly important, are unlikely to be sufficient in themselves for the emergence and exercise of leadership in our increasingly complex world.

Recognizing our strengths and partnering with others

Research on high achievers revealed that while there is no universal set of talents that all leaders have in common, great leaders are strengths-based leaders. These individuals spend most of their time in areas of strength, and have learned to delegate and partner with others to tackle areas where complementarity was needed. This strengths orientation is based on the premise that people already have within themselves what they need to succeed. (Gallup’s Research)

As much as this might be countercultural (we’re brought up to focus more on limiting our mistakes and improving our weaknesses rather than identifying our assets), research is showing that leaders would gain a lot by building on the strengths they bring to their current practice, and recognizing how each one of their team can contribute, in his or her own way, to the organization’s performance and mission fulfillment.

IGNATIAN NOTE

The early documents of the Society of Jesus do not directly refer to competencies but mention natural talent and infused gifts and graces as important means to fulfill the mission and serve the ultimate purpose. In the Constitutions [147] Ignatius emphasizes the diversity and importance of these gifts in the admission and formation of Jesuits:

“The greater the number of natural and infused gifts from God which are useful for what the Society aims at in his divine service, and the more assurance the Society has about these gifts, the more suitable will the candidate be to be admitted.”

“Some are natural and some are supernatural ; some are gifts of the spirit, others of the body, others are extrinsic to a person.”

For Ignatius, the effectiveness in serving the mission and reaching the goal does not depend solely on intellectual or physical strengths and talents but mostly on internal spiritual gifts (intensity of faith, of hope and of love; spiritual rejoicing and repose, intense consolation, the raising up of the mind, humility and reverence,...). The Complementary Norms of the Constitution of the Society of Jesus highlight that one way to connect to these gifts are the Spiritual Exercises: *“The Spiritual Exercises of our holy founder stands in first place, both as a perennial source of those interior gifts upon which depends our effectiveness in reaching the goal set before us”.* (S3 - §8)

Ignatius put a lot of emphasis on edifying and forming people by building on their gifts. In the letter to the Jesuits attending the council of Trent, he encourages them in seeking to accomplish God's greater glory to help and exhort others "**according to the talents each is conscious of possessing**".

In the Constitutions he also emphasizes that those who are formed should be directed in accord with their own natural and supernatural gifts. This links well with what current leadership theories suggest when it comes to people development. "*And yet, a person can perform only from strength. One cannot build performance on weaknesses, let alone something one cannot do at all*" - Peter Drucker (2005)

FINAL THOUGHT

"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." - Matthew 5:14-16

EXPECTED LEARNINGS AND OUTCOMES

1. Reflecting on the skills and abilities required of people in leadership positions and providing an overview on key competencies and strengths in the literature
2. Inviting participants to identify personal positive attributes and recognize strengths
3. Inviting participants to integrate personal strengths into their practice and recognize the strengths of others, as gifts they mutually bring to their leadership work

"Individuals gain more when they build on their talents, than when they make comparable efforts to improve their areas of weakness."

Clifton & Harter