
PROFILE OF SUCCESSFUL XXI CENTURY LEADERS – A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

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Abstract: The constant change in the business environment imposes redefinition of organizational roles, restructuring of organizational models, changes in the way the organizations function, and different perspectives for leadership. The various leadership theories, considered over time, clearly show how leadership focus has shifted: from narrowly described processes and imposition of sanctions for discrepancies between set and fulfilled, to the perception of the leader as a mentor and a role model who helps employees to develop and succeed. Leadership, as a social phenomenon, unites people around a common goal. The leader empowers and motivates the followers to create added value for the company. Comments about leadership decline are increasingly common nowadays. This is probably one of the reasons the interest in the topic has increased. Leadership has different dimensions and could be discussed from multiple research perspectives. Leadership could be considered through the prism of the leader's functions; the factors on which it depends; the results of leadership, etc. New technologies, IoT, digital transformation and transition to industry 4.0 inevitably affect the way leaders behave. Scholars and practitioners continue to improve the models that would facilitate leaders in their efforts to be effective. There has been a growing interest in qualitative methodology for leadership research. Qualitative approaches allow for more in-depth discussion, conscious understanding of the interviewee's answers, discovering new ideas and phenomena. Based on qualitative survey a model for the effective leader in the XXI century has been elaborated. The center of the model has been built by trust. Trust is found to be essential for leadership. The respondents shared various leadership competences that relates to trust (peace of mind and charisma; strategic orientation; personal commitment; environment of trust; empowerment; delegation of tasks; acts as a mediator, etc.). The other answers were grouped in four broad categories. The first one represents the team spirit. The key competences include communicativeness, ability to listen actively, motivational skills, etc. Business results are in the focus of the next group of competences. The third group is composed of competencies that describe the ability of the leader to support ideas and initiatives. The fourth group of competences is about personal example, which includes behavioral characteristics based on values. The results could serve as a reference point in elaboration of strategies for human resources development, in supporting programs aimed at building specific management skills, as well as in defining corporate models for entrepreneurship.

Keywords: leadership, qualitative survey, effective leadership model, XXI century leadership, competences

1. INTRODUCTION

As the world is constantly changing the need of better understanding the organizational processes and improving the traditional models for managing become essential for the survival and the development of the organizations. The constant change in the business environment imposes redefinition of organizational roles, restructuring of organizational models, changes in the way the organizations function, and different perspectives for leadership. Many theories have been created over the years trying to explain the components of effective leadership and also to describe the set of competences that a successful leader relies on. The broad research processes has been facilitated by both quantitative and qualitative methods. Conger (1998) argues that qualitative methods for leadership research are often time consuming and complex but they could provide a broad perspective for different point of view, new ideas and better understanding of the researched issues. Based on a qualitative evidence this paper will try to give additional insight about basic leadership competences that are essential for the XXI century leaders.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Leadership research

The leader empowers and guides associates to create added value for all stakeholders (George, et al., 2007). Leadership can be manifested in various areas and social structures - in business organizations, political formations, at school, in the family, on the street, etc. (Davidkov, 2005, Dimitrov, 2017). Various industries, start-up, entrepreneurs, and nonprofit organizations are following the latest trends in leadership research trying to be more effective and resilient (Kanazireva, 2016). There have been numerous theories and models trying to explain leadership. However, there is no common definition or broadly accepted model. Stewart (2006, pp. 2) concludes that despite the abundance of literature on leadership, there is no definition that everyone has agreed on. Similarly, Burns (1978, pp. 3) conceptualizes that leadership is one of the most studied and least understood phenomena. The

leadership theories continue to evolve and to develop trying to provide additional insight about better understanding of the leadership processes. Donnelly, Gibson, and Ivanchevich (1997, pp. 316) argue that leadership is the ability to persuade others to strive enthusiastically toward goals, and Naylor (2004, pp. 368) argues that an effective leader mobilizes group resources to achieve change. Drucker (1997: 108) presumes that the leader sets goals, priorities, and standards. The four functions of the leader according to Dimitrov (1992, pp. 74-75) are: presentation in the organization, initiation of actions, administration of processes of realization of actions, interpretation of the organizational reality. For Paunov (2006, pp. 221) these are emotional support, building and maintaining team spirit and subjective feelings of satisfaction and security, motivation, guidance and conflict resolution. Mihailova (2016) also concludes that conflict resolution is a key management competence. For Semerdzhiev (2007, pp. 14-15) the leader is a person who awakens the consciousness of people, shows the winning areas and activities, achieves high results, gives an example of how to act and reap benefits for themselves and the people around them. Krainer (1998, pp. 247) summarizes that the role of the leader is to facilitate coordination and integration in order to get the job done. Peeling (2006) argues that the leader sets the direction and goals for the team creating a vision for the future and having the respect and trust of the team members. John Maxwell (2005) brings out twenty-one leadership qualities: character, charisma, communication, competence, courage, foresight, focus, generosity, initiative, listening, passion, positive attitude, problem solving, relationships, responsibility, confidence, self-discipline, ability to serve, ability to learn, vision. According to the author, this is a set of qualities and skills that motivate people to follow a certain leader.

2.2. Qualitative approaches to leadership research

Recently the qualitative research approaches in the study of leadership has increased. Qualitative methods for data collection and analysis are useful in areas where quantitative methods fail to fully explain the phenomena studied. According to Naydenova, et al. (2008, pp. 174), focus groups in the social sciences can be used as an additional source of data that complements the results obtained by another method, which is essential for the study. Bass (2008, pp. 75) declares that 188 articles in the *Leadership Quarterly* in the 1990s used about half as many qualitative methods as quantitative methods. According to the author the most preferable qualitative methods have been content analysis (53%), case studies (45%), and grounded theory (24%). Bass (2008) summaries that there are two broad categories of qualitative research: ideographic and nomothetic. The ideographic approach is an intensive study of a single case, and the nomothetic approach focuses on some aspects of the researched phenomena analyzing large number of cases.

Conducting quantitative research can be expensive, time consuming and complex, but the information that can be obtained by properly conducting a qualitative study is circumstantial and provides a wide range of understanding and analysis of the issues. Qualitative approaches allow for more in-depth discussion, conscious understanding of the interviewee's answers, generation of new ideas and not so much in testing old and existing theories. Bryman (2004) argues that when applying qualitative research, the way in which leaders and their leadership style promote change and / or how leadership styles change the leaders is often explored. Case studies, focus groups and interviews (structured, unstructured and in-depth) are some of the preferred qualitative methods. Qualitative methods for collecting and analyzing information are used by Halim and Razak (2014) in a study that discusses the communication strategies used by women leaders. The authors use observation, content analysis and structured interviews. Girdauskiene and Eyvazzade (2015) also made a research about successful women in leadership positions in a multicultural context, using in-depth interviews.

Bryman, et al. (1988) use a quantitative method (in the form of an interview) to research situational factors that are considered by project managers in the field of construction. Sayles (1964) uses a structured interview to analyze circumstances, changes, and conflict situations. Waldman et al. (1998) also made a leadership research using quantitative methods of analysis - interview. Piotrowski and Armstrong (1989) randomly selected 25 recordings of 80 interviews of executives broadcast on CNN to evaluate managers on twenty-five characteristics. Another popular method is the storytelling and it has been preferred by Boje (1995) and Spicochi and Tyran (2002) for their research studies.

3. METHODOLOGY

In the late 2018 and the beginning of 2019 a leadership research was conducted aiming at exploring typical approaches, attitudes and behaviors of leaders in Bulgaria. Four sectors of the economy were included in the research: services, trade, production and central and local administration. A combination of quantitative and qualitative approach was followed for collecting and analyzing the data. In this paper we will focus our attention only on the qualitative results of the study. The interviews were based on two basic questions: 1) Tell me a story that happened to you or that you witnessed and that illustrates the manifestation of successful leadership; and 2) What are your three most important principles for leadership? At the end of the conversation the respondents were invited

to share additional thoughts about leadership, which they identify as important for the discussion. Five people from each sector were interviewed. The conversations were recorded and subsequently transferred and processed in a text version. Further in the text the respondents will be presented as follows: for the services sector - X1, X2, X3, X4, X5, for the production sector - Y1, Y2, Y3, Y4, Y5, for the trade sector - Z1, Z2, Z3, Z4, Z5, for central and local administration sector - Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5. Selected quotes and reflections without stylistic or semantic intervention are presented in the discussion.

However, when conducting qualitative research, important characteristics such as the validity and reliability of the data obtained should be considered. Criticisms of these methods include claims that analyzes are often subjective, unscientific, and hypothetical.

4. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

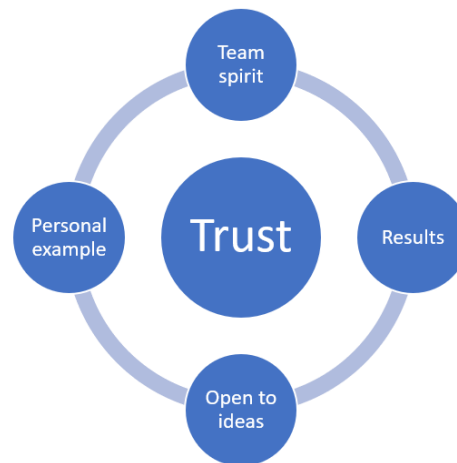
Shamir and Eilam (2005) use life stories told by leaders in determining the authenticity of leadership. The stories help recognizing the personal values and beliefs of the leaders. The authors quote Pearce (2003, pp 18, 21), who argues that leader's passion grows from the foundation built on the values formed during his/her life path. These values are important not because they are socially acceptable and not because they look good, but because the leaders have experienced them. Every idea that a leader likes or protects has its origins somewhere in leaders' personal experience. The authors distinguish four categories of leadership development: 1) Leadership development as a natural process, 2) Leadership development out of struggle, 3) Leadership development as finding a cause, and 4) Leadership development as learning from experience.

The interviews from the qualitative research provided examples for the four categories. Some of the respondents shared stories that represented authentic leadership development: "to come to work with a smile, to create a positive work environment and to empower people, to eliminate negativity" - respondent Y2; "knowledgeable, with a clear vision... ambitious and dedicated" - respondent Z1; "slowly step by step... I had the freedom" - respondent Q3; "to have confidence... to give the team absolute freedom... courage to innovate... creative... dedicated to the work and constantly upgrading" - respondent Q4; "the leader is not afraid to withdraw his/her power" - respondent Y4. During the interview leadership stories were shared discussing specific characters or events, which mainly represent crisis situations or moments of difficulty and conflicts. The characteristics that refer to effective leadership included power, decision-making, dealing with organizational conflicts. Leadership development out of struggle was most often related to the transformation of the leader, and the motivation for leadership was associated with the need to overcome injustice, crises and difficult moments that require leadership qualities such as will, confidence, independence, proactivity. Some of the stories included: "...a very stressful situation... I kept my composure" - respondent X3, "successful leadership comes when you have gone through a conflict situation" - respondent Y3. Some of the shared leadership stories reveal the existence of a cause. Usually in these cases life stories are tied to the whole team, the whole community. The story of respondent X2 is similar: "she managed to defend her own position, as well as to defend the interests of the whole group". There were also leadership stories that presented development of leadership based on experience, including experience from mistakes, as well as positive examples of different role models. Most of the shared stories during the interviews were related to previous experience. The vast majority of the stories include the figure of a former manager or supervisor, from whom the respondents have learned and borrowed approaches and good practices: "the person who invited me 15 years ago" - respondent X4; "she started from the lowest position... and reached the highest level" - respondent X5; "I learned from my first manager... think strategically... gave me every chance and made me develop my potential" - respondent Y1; "I learned a lot from the people above me, they were my role models - you don't have to repeat what they do, you have to take what you like, what really suits you most" - researched person Y5; "this man built me and I actually tried to repeat" - respondent Z2; "she has the ability to inspire until you faint" - respondent Z5; "I tried to follow what I have learned from my manager" - respondent Q1; "the person I watched from... he did not change... continued to develop" - respondent Q2; "my manager at the beginning of my career... open to everyone" - respondent Q5.

The answers of the second questions in the interview provided rich information and an opportunity to look for explanations in different research fields. Figure 1 presents a systematization of the answers that tries to represent what are the core competences/behaviors that a successful XXI century leader has to adopt according to the results of our study. The competences described by the respondents as crucial for effective leadership were structured as a concentric system. The center of the system is made by trust. Trust was found to be essential for leadership. The respondents shared various leadership competences that relates to trust (has peace of mind and charisma; think strategically; is personally committed; creates an environment of trust; empowers people; delegates; acts as a mediator; gives freedom; takes responsibility; inspires; attracts; acts confidently; maintains self-control; withstands trial; relies on openness in relationships; is self-aware and has an accurate and clear idea about the situation). The other answers were grouped in four broad categories. The first one represents the team spirit. The key competences

include communicativeness, ability to listen actively, motivational skills; offers recognition, defends, has the role of a mentor, successfully solves organizational conflicts. Business results are in the focus of the next group of essential leadership competences. The respondents shared competencies such as coordination, negotiation, making decisions, defending positions, ensuring the future of the company. The third group is composed of competencies that describe the ability of the leader to support ideas and initiatives: generates ideas, seeks and supports new solutions and ideas, has the courage to innovate, constantly upgrades. The fourth group of competences is personal example, which includes behavioral characteristics based on values (leads by personal example; stands next to the people; demonstrates discipline and commitment; works hard and diligently; has the moral). The results from the qualitative research support the findings of Shamir and Eilam (2005), as well as the conceptualization of Maxwell (2005) Paunov (2006). Additionally, the results highlighted the importance of trust in the leadership process.

Figure 1: Model for competences of the successful leadership



5. CONCLUSION

Klenke (2015, p. Xv) states that as the world in which leaders and managers work becomes more complex and complicated than in the past, it is constantly changing and renewing through intensifying factors such as globalization, rapidly evolving technologies, changing workforce dynamics, and changing perceptions of leadership, there is much to be learned from qualitative research. Trust appeared to be essential for leadership, as well as team spirit, openness to new idea, personal example and results orientation. With the advancing IT technologies and the internationalization of the business processes, one of the important topics nowadays is how leadership is manifested in virtual teams, and how the leader build trust in a virtual team. There are even publications that comment on the development of technology in the direction of complementing and replacing the functions of the leader (Dimitrov, 2018). The obtained results and the derived summaries can be a reference point in the formation of strategies for human resources development, to support programs aimed at building specific management skills (Mihailova, 2020). Studying the various elements of leadership is relevant for the elaboration of successful models for corporate entrepreneurship (Kanazireva, 2018).

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