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Traits and Skills for Managerial Leadership
A Virtue Theory Approach

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Abstract:

This is a contemporary study of traits and skills for managerial leadership which applies a virtue theory approach from moral philosophy. A classification of virtues for leadership is proposed. Traits and skills as virtues are divided in four categories: general intellectual, specific intellectual, general moral and specific moral. The model is substantiated by an example of a detailed catalogue of virtues for managerial leadership.

1. Introduction

The idea that successful managerial leadership most of the times does not occur by chance, and that successful leaders generally possess some special qualities and abilities, is substantiated and anchored in everyday life. Influenced by psychological theories, early scholars have analyzed these attributes in terms of traits and skills. Traits is a composite concept which denotes stable individual characteristics which direct or help individuals to behave in a certain way, such as character dispositions, states of mind, needs, motives and values. Skills on the other hand concern the ability to do something in an efficient way. However, the scientific study of leadership has had considerable difficulties to map out definitely the distinctive traits and skills which characterize a successful leader.

According to comprehensive reviews in the area (e.g. Bass, 1990, especially Ch. 4 and 5), the failure of the first traits studies to produce viable results is due to the methods and measurements used, and above all to an underemphasis on the situational, contextual and social factors in a leadership situation. For this reason, many of the earlier simplistic views have been abandoned in favor of more complex but promising contingency models, accompanied by dynamic conceptions of leadership. Some of these tendencies are noted also in the research on character
traits in the field of personality psychology, where the once abandoned concept of traits has been rediscovered (Wiggins, 1997). Furthermore, recent research and theories on managerial leadership have changed their focus from issues of traits and skills that predict emergent leadership in informal groups to issues of traits and skills that contribute to managerial effectiveness and advancement, which is a relevant measure of successful leadership. This new line of research has contributed with some more consistent results.

Nowadays, most scholars accept the thesis that leadership is a relational concept which assumes the existence of both a leader and followers. The concept of follower implies at least one physical person. The leader concept does not always refer to a physical person, such as in the case of the indirect leadership, which has to do with influence through symbols, ideologies etc. (Gardner, 1995).

The relational concept of leadership entails some consequences, which are often confirmed by observation. The relationship between a leader and a follower is generally not automatically transferable to other persons and situations, and it is subject to change in time, especially when conditions surrounding the relationship are changing. It has therefore been considered rather unlikely that would be any universal leadership traits and skills that are appropriate to all situations. Leaders possessing such universal attributes are either notable empirical exceptions or a construction of normative leadership models justified mainly by their pedagogical purposes.

In spite of the fact that trait theory in its new form has made a comeback (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991), there is still some reluctance among contemporary organizational researchers to use the trait concept in assessing leadership. The conception among psychologists of some traits as inborn characteristics implies that
not everyone is suitable as a leader. This can be understood as to run counter to egalitarian values. However, this does not apply to the concept of skills, since skills are always acquired. Skills which are subject to formal education and training are not only easier to develop, but also easier to define than traits.

2. Some aspects in the contemporary study of traits and skills in relation to managerial effectiveness

According to Yukl’s (1998, p. 257f.) evaluation of the trait research, there are still some methodological and conceptual limitations which must be considered in future research. Two problems are often identified. First, that proposed traits are too abstract, which makes it difficult to interpret their relevance to leadership effectiveness. Second, that the impact of each single trait on behavior has been investigated separately, without taking into consideration the relation between traits. If traits occur in patterns, what is the composition of these patterns? Yukl points out a third problem, the issue of balance. By this he means that it is possible that the optimal amount of some trait in managerial leadership is neither a very high nor a very low but rather a moderate amount of the trait. Therefore we need, according to Yukl, not only a theory which explains how traits or combinations of traits are related to managerial effectiveness and advancement, but also a research design, which is capable of testing the existence of complex curvilinear relationships and not just simple, linear relationships.

Furthermore, since leadership is a relational concept, its study should take into consideration the followers and their opinions. These opinions are important
for at least three reasons. First, they are indispensable for the recognition and legitimacy of the leader. Second, the behavior of leaders is compared to and evaluated in the light of what is considered desirable leadership features and actions. These opinions are externalizations of followers’ *implicit leadership theories* (Eden & Leviatan, 1975). The term refers to informal or everyday theories of leadership which are often used in an unconscious way and are based on widely shared beliefs about leadership issues, such as the typical personality and actions of leaders. Implicit leadership theories are embodied in the natural language, and they influence how laymen perceive, categorize and describe leaders and their behavior, and how they use these beliefs to make predictions about additional characteristics and behavior. Third, the attitude of followers towards the leader is a common indicator of leader effectiveness and represents a so-called subjective measure of it (Yukl, 1998, s. 6). Subjective measures of leadership in general are important and they are often preferred to objective measures (e.g. Boyatzis, 1982). To relate relevant leadership traits directly to an organization’s quantitative results, such as profits, market shares, return on investment or productivity, which are the basis of objective effectiveness measures, is a problematic issue because of the complicated relation between cause and effect variables (Hunt, 1991).

Finally, traits and skills – whether they are universal or contingent, abstract or concrete, patterns of attributes or separate phenomena, whether they have been studied in the context of leader-follower relationship or independently of that – are in themselves not sufficient to explain leadership behavior. For this, it is also required that the leader is conscious about his or her traits and skills, and has not only the willingness to use them and develop them, but also the propensity to use them properly in the right leadership situations. In the theory of leadership traits and
skills, all these aspect are taken as given. The volition of leaders is treated only in other contexts, such as the issue of motivation concerning leaders’ need for power, or their desire to influence and lead others. In contrast to skills, traits have generally been treated as inborn characteristics in a rather static fashion. The ethical aspect is treated only indirectly in connection with the issue of leadership values.

Considering the large amount of possible attributes of leaders in the natural language, the aim of this paper is to propose a classificatory model of traits and skills relevant to effective leadership in different domains. The model takes into consideration the relational nature of the leadership concept, as well as the contextual and contingency issues discussed above. Its point of departure includes individual differences in cognitive, emotional, moral and behavioral dispositions of leaders as well as dispositions related to physique and health, based on a virtue theory in moral philosophy and social sciences.

By seeing traits and skills as virtues, stress is laid on the developmental nature of these issues as well as the assumed consciousness, willingness, deliberate and right actions of involved actors. It also takes into consideration the problem of the connection of traits to behavior, the problem of the relations between traits, as well as the problem of balance. First, virtues are practiced dispositions. Second, they operate in patterns. Third, they are continuously refined and developed. Fourth, they are defined in relation to their counterparts. A virtue is the mean between two vices, excess and defect (Aristotle, 2000, s. 31).

The proposed descriptive model consists of relevant virtues corroborated by conceptions of enduring characteristics of successful leaders conceived by followers in real life leadership relationships. The issue is to define “good” leadership. The primary aim of the model is of course not to contribute to the development of
moral philosophy, but rather to the development of leadership theory through some basic concepts of moral philosophy.

3. A virtue theory for leadership

The description and analysis of the leadership phenomenon through virtues is a rather old practice. It can be traced to at least Homer, and has since then been used without interruption by classic writers such as Xenophon, Plutarch and Machiavelli, until the biographies of important persons of our days. However, the contemporary use of the concept in scientific research on leadership has other origins. It is the result of an increasing interest in ethical issues in organizations. Several authors have seen virtue ethics as at least as fruitful, if not superior, to prevailing deontological and utilitarian ethical theories (see Mintz, 1996; Shaw, 1996; Solomon, 1993, Walton, 1988).

The perspective used in the present work is inspired by Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, which is the earliest and most influential systematic account of virtues, and the contemporary interpretations of the Aristotelian ethics, as represented in the works of among others Foot (1978), MacIntyre (1966; 1984) and Sherman (1989). It is also influenced by the work of among others Cooper *et al.* (1992) and Solomon (1993), who discuss virtue ethics in administration and business respectively. Of course the Aristotelian ethics has its most immediate reference to the Greek city-state, but as Solomon and others have demonstrated, it can also be applied to other contexts. He writes (*ibid*. p. 200f.):
Taken as a description not of the Greek city-state but of the corporation, we can recognize here too many of the virtues ascribed to the best executives, who are moderate and often surprisingly modest, generous with their time and money, concerned first and foremost with their and the company’s reputation (honor), and loathe to risk any action that might be humiliating. So, too, such virtues as charm, wit, and friendliness are recognized as extremely important. Probably no one has reached the executive floor by wit alone, but few have succeeded without it. It is necessary to lead and to lead effectively, as an admirable, inspiring human being.

According to the famous Aristotelian definition, virtue is a settled disposition of the mind determining the choice of feelings and actions, consisting in a mean relative to us and determined by practical reason (prudence). In respect of its essence is a mean between two vices, one of excess, the other of deficiency; with regard to what is best and good it is an extreme (Aristotle, 2000, p. 31). Virtue, in Greek “arete”, can be translated as excellence.

Virtues are neither emotions nor capacities or ethical knowledge. They are dispositions that make a human being good and also make him perform his function well (ibid., s. 29). In order to act virtuously, it is not enough that a person has the knowledge of doing something right, or is by nature capable of doing something well, or has done this by chance, or under instruction from another person. He has to have a deliberate purpose to perform his functions as human being properly and to constantly strive for improvement. (Ibid., s. 27f.).

Virtue ethics leaves great space to the individual to develop his character, pursue excellence and self-actualization. However, it is far apart from an elitist and atomistic individualism, since Aristotle’s virtue ethics has a central social dimension. Virtues exist in a community setting. They are defined by the larger community and concern what is best for all people. Therefore, there is no antagonism

There are two kinds of virtues: that of the intellect and that of moral. The first concerns excellence in knowing, the second concerns perfection in desiring. The main intellectual virtues discussed by Aristotle are scientific knowledge, art or technical skill, prudence, intelligence or rational intuition, and wisdom. Examples of the moral or character virtues discussed are courage, temperance, liberality or generosity, magnificence, greatness of soul, honor or proper ambition, gentleness, agreeableness and friendliness, truthfulness, wittiness, modesty, and justice. According to Aristotle, intellectual virtues are mainly produced and developed by instruction and therefore require experience and time. Moral virtues are the result of the habit of acting rightly. Moral virtues are acquired by practice, the same way as ordinary skills are acquired. (Ibid., p. 23).

Finally, moral and intellectual virtues are highly interdependent. The perfection of moral virtues requires the existence of intellectual virtues, and an intellectual virtue cannot be conceived as such unless it is accompanied by moral values. Furthermore, fundamental virtues do not conflict, and there is a unity among them. When someone truly acquires one, he acquires them all.

To sum up, virtues are characteristics of a person that are not inborn but acquired and developed through learning, instruction and continuous practice. They dispose the individual to be excellent and to act in a conscious and consistently right way, in accordance with the aims and the ideals of the entire community. They are good habits of acting rightly, as distinguished from the contrasting vices of excess and deficiency, which are bad habits.
4. A classification of virtues for leadership

Traits and skills as virtues can be divided into four categories, depending on whether they are intellectual or moral, general or specific. These divisions are depicted in Fig. 1, which shows the proposed model of the classification of managerial virtues. The first division between intellectual and moral virtues is discussed thoroughly by Aristotle and has been already introduced in this paper. The second division is that between virtues which are general, basic or elementary, and those which are specific. According to MacIntyre (1966, p. 77), it was not perceived by Aristotle himself. However, one has to acknowledge that the classics classified virtues according to relative importance, as in the case of the so-called cardinal virtues: prudence, temperance, courage and justice. Even though this practice has been conceived as an example of reductivism in ethics, since it assumes that moral considerations are related in a hierarchical order (Pincoffs, 1986).

The second division is based on the difference between those virtues that are valued in any human community, and those, which are limited to a specific community. There are actually essential virtues which concern almost everyone in almost every circumstance, just as there are virtues specific to particular social relations, human practices, organizations and institutions. The division between general and specific can also be perceived as the difference between hard-core virtues and peripheral virtues in the same community. The important point here is that the content of these categories varies both in time and place. Therefore, peripheral virtues can become hard-core virtues, or vice versa.
Fig. 1. A model of virtues for managerial leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intellectual</th>
<th>Moral or character</th>
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<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>A</td>
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<td>Specific</td>
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Skills are an aspect of the intellectual virtue “Art or technical skill”, which includes technical, administrative and some interpersonal or social skills related to managerial leadership. Technical skills concern methods, processes, and procedures necessary for conducting specialized activities. The relevant interpersonal skills are those involving knowledge about human behavior, interpersonal processes and acceptable social behavior, as well as the ability to perform successfully according to that knowledge.

One difference between intellectual and moral virtues is that the former, with the exception of prudence and wisdom, can be measured quantitatively by ordinal, interval and ratio scales, whereas moral virtues are absolute and can only be measured qualitatively by categorical or nominal scales. One can easily talk about degrees of technical skills, competence and ability to understand others, but hardly about degrees of courage, justice and truthfulness. Of course, one can act justly or be courageous in situations which varies in importance, complexity, degree of
difficulty etc., but when it comes to moral or character virtues as such, one either has the virtues, or at least tries to attain them, or one does not.

Intellectual virtues have been seen as the right means to reach goals. They are not discussed as an average between two vices, that of excess and defect, which is very usual in the discussion of moral or character virtues in general. One can be without a certain intellectual virtue or have a low degree of it, but there is no upper limit. The more of that virtue, the better. However, under some circumstances, even intellectual virtues can be seen as a mean between two vices. This applies for example to the intellectual virtue of technical knowledge, which in management and organizational contexts is known as “Task Competence”. A lack or excess of task competence can be a vice from the point of view of the organization member and the organization as a whole. It is obvious that the lack of competence is a vice. But the same applies to the opposite. To be much more competent than what is demanded for a task is a waste of resources, not only for the practicing individual but also for the organization where he/she belongs. It is a vice for the individual if he does not at least try to get another position or work which is more suitable to his abilities, but it is a fatal vice for the organization not to use the talents and competencies of its members efficiently.

As it is shown in Table 1, which represents an example of an alphabetically ordered catalogue of virtues in managerial leadership, intelligence competence, knowledge, and prudence all belong to the general intellectual virtues. At the same time courage, integrity, justice, temperance, toughness, trustworthiness and dependability, truthfulness and honesty are examples of general moral or character virtues. Among the situation specific virtues we find all skills which are related specifically to managerial positions, such as the ability to delegate and
formulate objectives, to see opportunities, organize, plan, being present, problem solving, to be result oriented, and to have general experience. Experience is important for all kind of virtues, but it is particularly important for the specific intellectual skills. Among the specific character virtues, the following can be mentioned: care, cheerfulness, compromise, liveliness, loyalty, modesty, openness, patience, persistence, self-confidence, and tolerance.

Some of the virtues mentioned above have similar meanings and could be presented under one heading. This is of course a question of scope and of level of analysis. A typical example is the important virtue of integrity, which is considered to be a basic ingredient for leadership (Bass, 1990; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Frederick & Weber, 1990; Gabarro, 1987; Horton, 1986). Integrity is usually equated with honesty. Other synonyms include coherence, moral courage, reliability, and self-awareness (Murphy, 1999). According to Solomon (1993, p. 168), integrity is a constellation of virtues, which taken together form a coherent character and a trustworthy personality, rather than a single virtue.

Even though the proposed catalogue, table 1, is extensive, it is far from complete. The virtues included and their categorization is context-bound and should be assessed empirically. It has been argued earlier that virtues vary in time and place, among cultures, social relations, human practices, roles, organizations and institutions. Considering these conditions, one can imagine the enormous variety of possible virtues. The issue of social relations can be mentioned as an illustration.
A. General intellectual virtues

Intelligence, knowledge and competence, skillfulness, prudence or practical reason, wisdom.

B. General moral or character virtues

Courage, justice and fairness, integrity, temperance, toughness, trustworthiness and dependability, truthfulness and honesty.

C. Specific intellectual virtues

Administrative ability, been present, creativity, communications skills, cooperativeness, distance keeping, formulate and pursuit objectives, handle human relations, keenness and alertness, plainness, organize and plan, sensitivity, social participation, tactfulness and diplomacy, task and result orientation, tolerance of ambiguity, unite people, visionary.

D. Specific moral or character virtues

Adaptability, adjustment and normality, altruism, amiability, assertiveness, benevolence, caring, cheerfulness, civility, commitment, compassion, competition, compromise, concern for others, congeniality, decency, decisiveness, empathy, enthusiasm, flexibility, friendliness, generosity, gracefulness, helpfulness, heroism, honor, independence and nonconformity, indignation, initiative and enterprise, liveliness, loyalty, magnanimity, modesty, motivation, openness, patience, persistence against obstacles, positive and constructive, progressive, resistant to stress, resourcefulness, respect, self-esteem, self-confidence, sincerity, strength of conviction, social charm, tolerance, warmth and hospitality, wittiness and sense of humor.
Leadership as a relational concept presupposes those traits of character that make interpersonal relationships work. The leader is not only dealing with interpersonal relations within his own organization, but also with external relations such as competitors, allies and other actors in the surrounding community and environment in general.

Finally, the content of the proposed catalogue is changing continuously. Not only the importance of specific virtues but also their meaning is subject to change. Many of the virtues that where considered important during antiquity are of less importance today. It is therefore surprising that some cardinal virtues from the classic era, such as justice and courage, seem to be as urgent as ever. But the meaning of some virtues varies in time. As Solomon (ibid., p. 195f.) observes, courage in the early days was mostly mentioned in the context of combat. In our days, the term is usually mentioned as courage of one’s convictions, or as moral courage.

5. Conclusions

This paper is an attempt to demonstrate the usefulness of an old and relatively neglected approach to understanding contemporary leadership phenomena. The return to the classics is neither a conservative nor a traditional endeavor. It is a simple revitalization of a way of thinking focused on human practice and habit (habitus). Intellectual, moral or character virtues are desirable characteristics of leaders within a certain community. The question here is to define effective leadership traits and skills through a thorough study of real life managerial practices.
in an organizational context, where the conceptions of good leadership by followers play a central role. Followers in a leadership relation are the most concrete representatives of the community. Since their attitudes towards a specific leader can be used as a reliable measure of leadership effectiveness, effectiveness and excellence are linked together. Indeed, if one takes into consideration the importance of followers, only virtues, not vices, can be involved in the achievement of success in managerial leadership.

The proposed classification of virtues gives rise to at least two issues for further research. First, to assess empirically the existence of virtues in different leadership contexts. Second, to investigate the mechanisms which explain why some virtues are considered general and others peripheral.
6. References


