A Conceptual Analysis of the Leadership Theories and Proposed Leadership Framework in Higher Education

Muftahu Jibirin Salihu[1*]

[1]*National Higher Education Research Institute, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia.*

Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

This research paper on the critique of the leadership theories and the proposed leadership framework revolves around two key areas. The first part is an examination and critique of the different leadership theories that have emerged over the past 40 years. Second, the paper will be presenting the proposed leadership framework which could suit the role of an education leader. The proposed leadership framework will be presented in a diagrammatic and/or descriptive form with accompanying description. The critique of the leadership theories is specifically on three theories, which are the trait theory, behavioural theory, and contingency and situational theory. The rationale behind the choices of the three theories to be critiqued in this paper was because these theories are the most commonly used and applied in the areas of teaching, learning, and leadership in education.

_____

Corresponding author: Email: muftahu@usm.my, mujibsal@gmail.com;

1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership in general has been conceptualised as the ability to address problems, inspire, and encourage other to realise their potential towards delivery of the organisational goals [1].

Leadership in education has been understood as leading and managing an educational organisation towards achieving the stated goals of an institution and making the environment an enabling type to increase the competencies of the stakeholders, particularly the students. This is basically the reason for the need for global educators who can be significantly helpful in shaping the future by establishing a learning environment, which can help to increase the competencies of the students and to make them more prepared in being successful professionals in the future [2].

2. CRITIQUE OF THE LEADERSHIP THEORIES

In this section of the research paper, the author will be conducting a critique of three of the most well-renowned leadership theories, namely the trait theory, behavioural theory, and contingency and situational theory.

3. CONTINGENCY AND SITUATIONAL THEORY

The first leadership theory that will be examined in this paper is the contingency and situational theory, which emphasises the influence of situation on certain leadership behaviour and leadership style. It was also stated that leadership style and behaviour were contingent or dependent on certain situational forces as well as group member characteristics [3]. This theory revolves around the premise that internal and external environmental forces have a significant impact on leadership effectiveness [4].

According to Rice and Kastenbaum [5], the contingency and situational theory basically emerged and became apparent from the previous studies, which indicated that the behaviour of followers might itself be a factor in determining a leader's leadership style. Eventually, this assumption was further influenced by the study conducted by Fred Fiedler which revealed that 'leadership depends on the situation'. More specifically, Fiedler's contribution to leadership theory occurred through his creation of the concept of situation favourableness as one of the most important contingent factors that was found to have a major influence on leadership. Fiedler identified three variables as comprising situation favourableness. The variables are better member relations, task structure, and position power. Fiedler further asserted that leadership styles vary depending on the needs of each individual situation [6].

This was supported by further suggestions of Fiedler which indicated the 'appropriateness of different leadership styles in the context of various situational contingencies'. Fiedler also suggested the necessity of certain prescribed behaviours which leaders are encouraged to demonstrate, especially in certain types of situations which involve decision-making [7]. Nevertheless, while the assertions and conclusions of Fiedler may prove to be making sense, they still failed to meet the ultimate goal of supposedly enabling all practising leaders and educational administrators to improve their teaching practices which this paper thinks is one of the strongest criticisms against the contingency and situational theory.

The Fiedler's contingency and situational theory may be quite disadvantageous to apply in the context of leadership in education because it implies that the leader, in this case the educator, needs to change his or her leadership style from time to time in order to meet or address the needs presented in an unfavourable situation. As an educator, this would be quite difficult to manage because there are many factors in the internal and external environment of academia which are simply beyond one's control such as a group of students or an entire class which is comprised of the brightest students and the worst students at the university. In this scenario, it would be quite hard to always change or shift gear when it comes to how an educator would exercise his leadership over the class if he is going to apply the Fiedler's contingency and situational theory [8,9,10].

Aside from this, another criticism against the Fiedler's contingency and situational theory is that this theory implies that the only available alternative for an unalterable mismatch in leader orientation as well as an unfavourable situation is by changing the leader which is not favourable when it comes to its application in the educational context. In the context of academic teaching, it is quite impossible and impractical to always change the leader from time to time, especially when the situation leads to uncontrolled and unfavourable results [6].

4. TRAIT THEORY OF LEADERSHIP

The trait theory in leadership reference revolves around the idea that the leadership characteristics of a person stems from the fact that people are born with specific character qualities and traits. The implication of this is that since specific traits are associated with a person's level of proficiency in leadership, then it may be assumed that people who possess the correct traits will most likely be identified as leaders and will therefore excel because of their 'inherited' leadership potential [11].

In addition, the leadership trait theory stems from the idea and basic concept of 'inherited traits' such as those of kings. For Stogdill [12], the search and discovery of such traits may be considered a mythical belief because such traits are either inherited by a person or a person must have those qualities and traits to become a leader, and such qualities must be perceived by others. Lombard [13] raised a question on the personal qualities of a person, especially in the areas of emotional stability and composure, humility, interpersonal skills, and intellectual breadth.

However, while the trait theories may have been popularised in the past decades as one of the most well-recognised leadership theories, according to Zaccaro [11], the fact remains that the theory has certain limitations such as it focuses on only a small set of characteristics or attributes of an individual. The theory focuses too much on the personal 'inherited' traits of a person and does not include an emphasis on the values, expertise, cognitive abilities, social skills as well as problem-solving skills of a specific person [11].

Another main criticism or limitation on the trait leadership theory is that it fails to consider the different patterns as well as integrations of the multiple attributes that may exist in a specific person [11]. The trait leadership theory's too much focus on the obvious and very vivid 'inherited' traits of a person is what was considered by many scholars in the past to be very limiting because it implies that only those born with such traits may be made leaders and even those with multiple attributes may not pass as potentially good leaders. As an educator, this paper agrees with this specific criticism on the trait leadership theory because in academia, teachers are required to be 'leaders' themselves and if the trait theory is applied, then most existing teachers currently in academia do not qualify. Even if these teachers have managed to train themselves in acquisition of the leadership skills and knowledge needed to be considered a great leader, their efforts will merely be put to waste should this theory be applied.

Zaccaro [11] noted that another failure and significant limitation of the trait leadership theory is its inability to distinguish and sort out specific leader attributes which may appear to be malleable over time and may be shaped or bound to certain situational influences. The trait leadership theory also fails to consider the stability of each leader attributes and how it accounts for the behavioural diversity that is necessary for effective leadership even in the context of learning and academia.

5. BEHAVIOURAL THEORY

The behavioural theory arose as a response to the criticisms made on the trait leadership theory. In behavioural theory, the basic principle revolves around the idea that leaders are made and that successful leadership is based on specific definable learning behaviours. Moreover, behavioural theory proves to be big leap from the trait theory as it promoted the exact opposite principles of trait leadership theory and opened the window to leadership development. Not to mention, the behavioural theory in leadership also helped align people, enabled people in the organisations to be more open to workers' opinions, created visibility and inspiration, provided emotional support and encouragement, and promoted principles and values of soon-to-be-leaders [14].

If we are going to compare the behavioural leadership theory with the trait leadership theory, we would be able to conclude that there are many distinct advantages of behavioural leadership theory compared to the trait theory because the former teaches and enables potential leaders to improve and become more effective in their leadership while the latter closes the door of opportunities for other people to pursue their dream of becoming great leaders [14]. Nevertheless, the only criticism against the behavioural leadership theory is that it may have the tendency to totally neglect or consider a specific person's traits when considering that person's leadership potential and abilities, which may also be highly disadvantageous. Hence, there must be a right balance between the application of the behavioural leadership theory and the trait leadership theory.
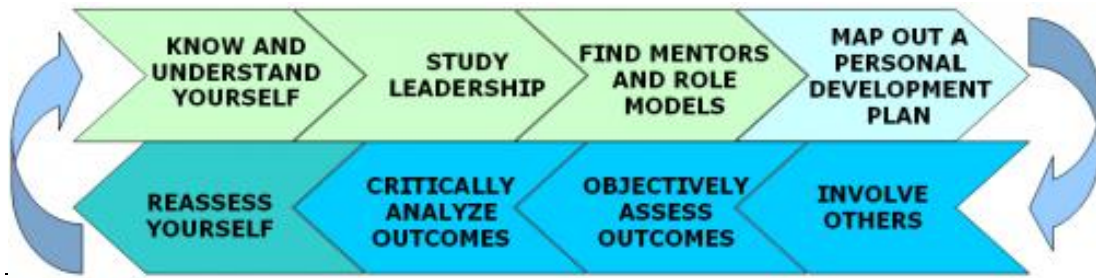
3

Fig. 1. Proposed leadership framework

Presentation and Explanation of a Proposed Leadership Framework to Suit Role as an Education Leader

As the author is a personal believer of lifelong learning, he developed a version of personal leadership framework which could serve as a guide in attaining target leadership mission and vision. Fig. 1 shows the personal leadership framework.

The proposed leadership framework is divided into four core components. The components are illustrated by four different colour schemes separating each of the eight listed task items. The core components include the main foundation for leadership development which is the first three task items listed in the upper part starting from the left. The next component is the leadership development planning which is the fourth general task item in the upper part of the framework. The third core component is the implementation of execution of the leadership development plan which includes the succeeding three task items in the lower part of the framework from the right. Finally, the last core component in the framework includes the self-reassessment which is the leftmost task item in the lower part of the framework.

In the proposed leadership framework, the description listed the task 'know and understand yourself' as the first priority or the very first step in the framework. This is because it is believed that it is highly significant for any aspiring leader to possess a deep level of understanding of himself or herself. Basically, this includes knowing one's strengths, weaknesses, desires, and aspirations. Without properly understanding oneself, it would be quite difficult to also know and understand other people.

The next step in the proposed personal leadership framework is 'study leadership' which literally means that any aspiring leader must be familiar with the different leadership concepts as well as each concept's application. It is an important pre-requisite that aspiring leaders must constantly be up to date with any new or newly emerged leadership theories and must know the leadership principles and standards in which he or she believes in.

The third step in the proposed personal leadership framework is 'finding mentors and role models' which is believed to be critical for any aspiring leader. Role models and mentors serve as motivators and real-life guides for any aspiring leader, which is why they need to be carefully selected by the aspiring leader. Mentors and role models not only act as guides but also advisers and friends with whom the aspiring leader may be able to confide in in times of difficult decision-making situations. In most cases, an aspiring leader's ideal role model and mentor may be someone who is also a leader that can very well relate to his or her situation.

The fourth step in the proposed personal leadership framework is 'mapping out a personal development plan'. More or less, any aspiring leader has an idea on what he or she wants to achieve and become. In order to attain these goals, it is necessary for the aspiring leader to map out specific actions that would lead to the achievement of that personal development plan. Personal development planning usually covers a wide range of topics which focus on the key steps to further enhance or improve the main strengths of a leader.

The fifth step in the proposed personal leadership framework is 'involving others', which is also believed to be a critical stage in the execution or implementation of any aspiring leader's personal leadership development plans. No aspiring leader is able to achieve his personal development plan alone, thus it is important to

involve others in the process. The sixth step in the personal leadership framework is 'objectively assessing outcomes', which requires an aspiring leader to take specific steps to assess or evaluate the outcomes or results of an endeavour. Ideally, in order to avoid any biases, it must come from the point of view of a third-party observer.

The second last step in the proposed personal leadership framework is 'critically analysing outcomes' which basically includes a final and critical analysis of a specific objectively-assessed outcome. Such assessments are important in any effective personal development plans to ensure that the plan will only deliver the outcomes that are necessary and relevant. Finally, the last step in the proposed personal leadership framework is 'reassessing yourself' which serves as the model requiring continuous self-reassessment intended to measure leader's personal development plan against its outcomes and provide an area to reflect on key learning.

6. CONCLUSION

The development and application of the personal leadership framework is critical for every educator or even people who believe in lifelong learning. One great benefit of personal leadership frameworks is that it allows educators to keep track of their progress concerning their levels of learning and it keeps them focused on the achievement of one's target leadership mission and vision. On the other hand, knowledge of the strengths and weakness of various leadership theories are also crucial for educators as it helps teachers such as the author identify and execute the most appropriate leadership style to be applied in every unique situation. Such knowledge is practical and helpful in transforming educators into excellent leaders in the educational field as well [15].

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

REFERENCES

1. Peleg S. The role of leadership in the education system. Education Journal. 2012;1(1):5–8.
2. Salihu MJ, Ramadneh NMA. The need for global educators? Their significance in the present time and implication for quality education. Global Journal of Educational Studies. 2015;1(2):67 76.
3. Yukl G. Leadership in organizations (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education; 2006.
4. Pounder D, Ogawa R, Adams E. Leadership as an organization-wide phenomenon: Its impact on school performance. Educational Administration Quarterly. 1995;31(4):564–88.
5. Rice RW, Kastenbaum DR. The contingency of leadership: Some current issues. Basic and Applied Social Psychology. 1983;4(4):373–392. Available:https://doi.org/10.1207/s15324834basp0404_6
6. Hersey P, Blanchard KH, Natemeyer WE. Situational leadership, perception and the impact of power. Group and Organization Management. 1979;4(4): 418–428.
7. Vroom VH, Yetton PW. Basic considerations underlying the normative model. In V. H. Vroom & P. W. Yetton, Leadership and decision-making. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. 1973;10–31.
8. Ayman R, Chemers MM, Fiedler F. The contingency model of leadership effectiveness: Its levels of analysis. The Leadership Quarterly. 1995;6(2): 147–167.
9. Peters LH, Hartke DD, Pohlmann JT. Fiedler's contingency theory of leadership: An application of the meta-analysis procedures of Schmidt and Hunter. Psychological Bulletin. 1985;97(2):274–285. Available:https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.97.2.274
10. Van Seters DA, Field RH. The evolution of leadership theory. Journal of Organizational Change Management. 1990;3(3):29–45. Available:https://doi.org/10.1108/09534819010142139
11. Zaccaro SJ. Trait-based perspectives of leadership. American Psychologist. 2007; 62(1):6–16.
12. Stogdill RM. The study of educational leadership. 1983;217–223.
13. Lombard E. Gender and leadership in academic libraries. The Journal of Academic Librarianship. 2018;44(2):226–230.

14. Kozlowski SWJ, Gully SM, Salas E, Cannon-Bowers JA. Team leadership and development: Theory, principles, and guidelines for training leaders and teams. In MM. Beyerlein, D Johnson, & ST Beyerlein (Eds.), Advances in interdisciplinary studies of work teams: Team leadership). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Ltd. 1996;3: 253– 291.

15. Tng CS. An educational leadership framework based on traditional and contemporary leadership theories. E-Leader Kuala Lumpur. 2009; 1–7.

Peer-review history:
The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:
http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/53473