Leadership Traits

1. LEARNING OUTCOME

Students will become aware of the career-readiness competency Leadership and connect this competency and the skills associated with it to the assignment topic.

2. OBJECTIVE

The following exercises are designed to help you identify different characteristics of leadership and authority. As you move through them, reflect on what you believe are your most significant strengths and weaknesses when it comes leadership. By understanding the different forms and theories of leadership, you should be able to recognize, practice, and implement leadership traits.

3. LEADERSHIP DEFINED

We know leadership when we see it. However, defining the concepts of “leader” or “leadership” is not so easy! Even scholars differ somewhat on the essential features of leadership.

In the past, most theories of leadership focused on specific traits or personality characteristics of leaders. In the leadership literature, many debates centered on whether or not leaders are born or made. Traditional notions of leadership are typically based on assumptions of a “top-down” approach with a single person leading and a group following.

Alternative approaches to leadership emphasize flexibility in leadership; situational factors affecting leadership; the development of leadership skills; and the existence of group leadership patterns. Group leadership can include team leadership, transformative leadership, or servant leadership (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006).
5. **EXERCISE ONE**

*Consider the following information on Leadership and Authority types, styles, and theories.*

**Traditional Authority**

Traditional authority, just as it sounds, is rooted in tradition. Authority comes from the fact that *this is the way it has always been.* In Great Britain, the royal family has authority based on tradition. Aristocracies in the Middle Ages were built on traditional authority.

Traditional authority does not have the problem of succession (as with charismatic authority), but suffers from the problem of inflexibility. In other words, traditional authority does not adapt well to change.

**Charismatic Authority**

Charismatic authority is derived from a leader’s special (i.e., charismatic) traits. There may be a strong belief that the leader is uniquely gifted or divine. Charismatic leaders often have powerful personalities. They use their affect, interpersonal skills, and communication abilities to attract, retain, and persuade followers.

Charismatic authority is the most fragile of the three types. Once the leader steps away (or dies), his or her regime - and its legacy - ends.

Although charismatic authority is sometimes associated with destructive leadership, many positive leaders were/are also quite charismatic (example: Martin Luther King, Jr.)

**Rational-Legal Authority**

Rational-legal authority, also called legal-rational authority, is based on explicit rules or laws. Authority derives from formal policies. These policies outline who is in charge and why. Furthermore, policies and laws specify the domains over which a leader has oversight. Policies also spell out the limits as well as the terms (length) of authority. In other words, “the rules rule” (Conley, 2019, p. 621).
**Styles of Leadership: Authoritarian, Authoritative, & Permissive**

Traditionally, scholars identified three styles of leadership: Authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive (also known as laissez-faire).

**Authoritarian leadership** is a “top-down” approach in which the leader makes all of the decisions for the group without input. Authoritarian leaders are inflexible. They attempt to exert total control and power over group members and expect compliance. They are not consensus seekers and do not view all members of the group as equals.

Although the word “authoritative” sounds very similar to “authoritarian,” these are distinct concepts. **Authoritative leaders** provide guidance and structure for group members but also seek consensus. In other words, they seek input from the group and attempt to balance what they believe to be the best course of action against what the group views as best. They have reasonable expectations for group members and they welcome feedback from them.

As most of us are aware, laissez-faire means “hands off.” **Permissive leaders** provide little to no structure or guidance for the group. The wants of group members come first; that is, the preferences of the group take priority over the preferences of the leader. Individuals choose their own course of action, if any, and have no accountability to other group members or to the leader. Laissez-faire leaders do not impose their will on the group. They stand (or sit) back and allow the group to run itself.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Which style(s) of leadership have you encountered at home, at work, at school, or in other contexts? Describe them.
2. Which style of leadership do you believe works best? How might this style vary by setting?
3. Which style of leadership do you believe you are most likely to demonstrate? Might you adopt a blended approach?
The earliest theories of leadership, sometimes known as “great men” theories, focused on specific traits associated with persons having leadership qualities. Such theories, also known as Trait Theories, often treated leadership as an ascribed quality – one that is present from the beginning (often assumed present at birth).

**Power and Influence Theories** emphasize the ways in which leaders exert influence over their followers. These theories consider the reciprocal nature of leadership. How does a leader influence others? What factors lead team/group members to internalize (adopt) the ideas of the leader?

**Transactional and Transformative Theories** emphasize the mutual relationship between leaders and followers as well as the transactional nature of leadership. For example, an individual may approach others for an exchange that will be mutually beneficial.

Transformational leaders are fundamentally authoritative in their approach. They motivate individuals to place group needs over personal interests. They also encourage group members to seek new challenges and to expand their perspectives, thereby fostering group solidarity and individual growth simultaneously (Ertureten, Cemalcilar, & Aycan, 2013).

**Behavioral Theories** of leadership emphasize the specific style adopted by a leader. They examine what leaders do. How do they deal with group members? For example, do they utilize an authoritarian or an authoritative (democratic) approach?

Finally, **Contingency Theories** argue that leaders adapt their style and their approach to specific circumstances. The idea is that leadership style will vary by context and by audience.
5. **EXERCISE TWO: IDENTIFY LEADERSHIP TYPES**

In small groups, review the list of leaders below. For each example, identify 1) The primary type of leadership exhibited; and 2) Whether or not multiple types of leadership were/are utilized. If multiple types are involved, what are they?

Remember, the notion of “types” of leadership refers to Weber’s framework discussed near the beginning of this module.

If you are not familiar with the figure, perform your own background search to learn a bit more about the individual. (Doing so links to another career competency – digital literacy)!

- Mother Teresa
- Oprah Winfrey
- Winston Churchill
- Barack Obama
- Donald Trump
- Jim Jones
- Adolph Hitler
- Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Gloria Steinem

6. **EXERCISE THREE: DEFINE LEADERSHIP**

Either individually or in small groups, develop a definition of “leadership.” Try to limit your definition to no more than two sentences. Is your definition more aligned with traditional or alternative notions of leadership?

What components of leadership did you include? What do you believe are the essential elements of leadership?

Write your definition on an index card but do not include your name on the card. Your instructor will then read the definitions aloud. As a class, discuss the similarities and differences across the definitions.