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VISIONARY LEADERSHIP THEORY

How do some leaders attract followers and inspire them to pursue a shared goal, achieving beyond ordinary expectations? Visionary leadership theory seeks to answer this question by studying leaders who inspire extraordinary levels of achievement in their followers through an inspiring vision and through other behaviors.

Visionary leaders can be found in every facet of society, whether business, government, social change movements, religious organizations, community groups, or sports teams. Visionary leadership exists in all cultures, across gender lines, and at all organizational levels. However, the phenomenon of leadership has been studied for thousands of years, it was not until the late 1970s that formal visionary leadership theories were developed.

WHAT IS A VISION?

In the business world, a vision is a leader's ideological statement of a desired, long-term future for an organi-

zation. A vision describes the ideal future that the leader wants to create; it is articulated in what is referred to as a vision statement. Most vision statements are not intended to be fully achievable on a planned-out timetable; rather, they are intended to be pursued or worked toward on a daily basis over the long term. The vision often is communicated through concrete examples, stories, or analogies that vividly describe the desired long-term state. For example, one flower shop's vision statement is "We don't sell flowers, we sell beauty" (Peters 1987). To take another example, Giro Sport Design, a manufacturer of bicycle helmets, includes the following as part of its longer vision statement (from Collins & Porras, 1991):

The best riders in the world will be using our products in world-class competition. Winners of the Tour de France, the World Championships, and the Olympic Gold Medal will win while wearing Giro helmets. We will receive unsolicited phone calls and letters from customers who say, "Thank you for being in business; one of your helmets saved my life." Our employees will feel that this is the best place they've ever worked. When you ask people to name the top company in the cycling business, the vast majority will say, "Giro."

A vision is sometimes confused with a mission statement, a strategy, a philosophy, or general goals—related, but distinct, concepts. A mission statement is a description of what the organization does. In the case of the flower shop mentioned above, the mission

statement might be “We will sell flowers and provide value to our customers in the form of low prices and reliable delivery.” A strategy typically is considered to be a statement of how the organization will achieve its mission. The flower shop might articulate its strategy in a statement such as “We will sell flowers to customers in the eastern United States through Internet and telephone sales.” Finally, a philosophy states the organization’s principles and values. Part of an organization’s philosophy might be, for example, to treat customers fairly. However, a philosophy does not focus specifically on the organization’s long-term goal. Finally, goals are specific statements of what the organization wishes to achieve, such as “Our goal is to have \$5 million in sales in 2003.”

VISIONARY LEADERSHIP THEORIES

Visionary leadership theory is part of a genre of leadership theory that includes leader visioning behavior as a key leadership behavior. Early ideas on visionary leadership were developed via the sociologist Max Weber’s notions of charisma and the transformational and charismatic leadership theories of the historian James MacGregor Burns and the management scholar Robert House. Other theorists, such as Bernard Bass, Ben Avolio, Warren Bennis, Burt Nanus, Jay Conger, and Rabindra Kanungo also developed theories with vision communication components.

Visionary leadership behaviors beyond vision development and communication vary across leadership theories. Visionary leadership is said to have positive effects on follower outcomes, resulting in high trust in the leader, high commitment to the leader, high levels of performance among followers, and high overall organizational performance.

Developing and Communicating a Vision

Visionary leaders are said to have insight into followers’ needs or values and to develop a vision statement reflecting those needs or values. In addressing why a leader’s visionary behavior improves followers’ outcomes, Robert House and the psychologist Boas Shamir theorize that this happens because

the vision has positive effects on followers’ self-concepts; followers become motivated to achieve the vision because they find it meaningful, identify with it, and believe in the vision and their ability to achieve it.

Although the ideological goals that visionary leaders provide can never fully be achieved in practice, followers can pursue or can act in accordance with the vision statement on a daily basis. For example, a pharmaceutical company’s vision statement might make ideological references to improving health care and saving lives. Other aspects of the vision include statements of confidence in followers’ ability to carry out the vision, especially by working together; vision statements may also make references to the organization’s unique history. The organization’s early principles or experiences, difficulties that have been overcome, or specific markets that it serves often appear in vision statements.

The scholar Marshall Sashkin proposed that to formulate a vision, a leader must have certain personality attributes and cognitive skills. Specifically, the leader must have the ability to think in long time spans. This ability allows the leader to develop a long-range vision of what his or her organization should become in ten, twenty, or more years into the future. The leader also must possess excellent communication skills, as he or she must communicate the vision continually, in new ways, and must tailor the vision to the specific audience.

Another attribute thought to contribute to the ability to develop and communicate a vision is charisma. Charismatic leaders engage in several rhetorical techniques that serve to increase their persuasiveness. These techniques include using metaphors, analogies, stories, and repetition. Charismatic leaders also typically have an animated, confident, and dramatic communication style. Although some leaders may possess rhetorical gifts or a self-confident and dramatic manner of presentation naturally, leaders who do not may be able to develop them through training.

Implementing the Vision

In addition to discussing how visions are formulated and communicated, visionary leadership theories

specify how leaders implement the vision. Below are some of the key implementation behaviors various theorists have discussed.

Role modeling. Visionary leaders model the desired actions required for working toward the vision. They are visible symbols of what they want their followers to be. They set an example through their actions.

Empowerment. The leader's optimism and confidence in followers' abilities empowers them to work toward the vision. Visionary leaders are confident that followers will work toward the common vision rather than their own personal agendas. The leader's high expectations have been found to elicit high performance from followers.

Image building. Visionary leaders consciously build a positive image of themselves for followers. Visionary leaders reflect the vision in their work lives, personal lives, attire, and demeanor. Also, they often rehearse their speeches in order to present the desired image in a dramatic fashion.

Risk taking. Visionary leaders engage in unconventional behavior and may make what the followers perceive to be sacrifices. (From the leader's perspective, a sacrifice may not exist; instead, the leader may be entirely focused on pursuing the vision.) These are not blind risks, however; they are calculated. Visionary leaders carefully evaluate options. Risk-taking behavior serves to promote change and innovation and to challenge existing assumptions.

Supporting. Effective leaders support followers by providing them with individualized consideration. Leaders provide emotional support during difficult times or when followers become frustrated. Support can be provided to groups of followers as well as to specific followers on an individual basis. Further, leaders coach and mentor followers to facilitate their development.

Adapting. Responsiveness to a changing environment is another visionary leadership behavior. Visionary leaders display flexible or versatile problem-solving styles. They are effective at gathering, processing, and distributing information to their organizations so that appropriate responses can be carried out.

Intellectually stimulating. Visionary leaders are said to stimulate followers to challenge assumptions, to see the world in new ways, and to question existing stereotypes or generalizations. The leader's ideas may be different from followers' existing beliefs but a visionary leader can persuade followers of his or her

Never mistake knowledge for wisdom. One helps you make a living; the other helps you make a life.

—Sandra Carey

ideas because of the high trust and commitment that followers of visionary leaders demonstrate.

Developing the organization. Visionary leaders are said to create organizational conditions that allow followers to pursue the vision. They structure the organization so that followers can function efficiently and without unnecessary bureaucracy. They select, train, and acculturate followers who are willing and able to work toward the vision. They also develop reward and punishment systems to motivate followers toward vision pursuit.

RESEARCH

Research on visionary leadership has focused on establishing the relationship between the vision and outcomes such as organizational performance, follower performance, and follower attitudes. At least thirty-five studies have supported the theoretical relationships between leader behavior and follower outcomes. These studies have been conducted across a variety of samples, including students and managers who served as laboratory study participants, military combat and noncombat leaders, middle- and lower-level managers at their place of employment, educational leaders, national leaders, political leaders, and corporate leaders. A variety of research methods were employed, including case studies, longitudinal studies, field studies, interviews, laboratory experiments, and historical analysis of archival information. Taken together, there is strong evidence that a relationship exists between the general set of visionary leadership behaviors and follower and organizational outcomes.

Studies also have supported the importance of communicating the vision through both verbal and written methods and of focusing on the content of the message, regardless of whether a charismatic communication style is used. In a well-controlled experimental study (1989), Jane Howell and Peter John

Where there is no vision, the people perish.

—Proverbs 29:18

Frost observed that charismatic leadership affected followers' performance and attitudes more positively than a structuring or considerate style of leadership.

Despite broad empirical support for visionary leadership theory, the vision formulation process is regarded as somewhat of an art form. A leader's intuition and insight into his or her followers' values and the organization's unique culture and environment affect the vision the leader develops and how effective it is. A 2002 study conducted by Shelley Kirkpatrick, Jerry Wofford, and J. Robert Baum found that an effective vision statement for a public-sector service organization may be very different from an effective vision statement for private-sector manufacturing companies.

APPLICATIONS

Visionary leadership theory applications can be found in skills training programs for managers or leaders. Leaders can attend training that includes hands-on exercises to assist them in thinking about what the future might look like. Exercises may include preparing one's own obituary, writing a magazine article for twenty years in the future describing the accomplishments of one's company, or writing an inspirational speech to be delivered to new employees. One training approach emphasizes communicating the vision in a storytelling style as a way of concretely and descriptively explaining to followers the desired future action. This approach is intended to ensure that the vision provides a sense of meaning and motivation to organization members; it also differentiates the vision from the related concepts discussed earlier.

Another training approach employs a series of systematic steps to identify the organization's products or services and its markets. A series of diagnostic questions and exercises relating to the organization's external environment (for example, questions on the demand for its products or services,

or about its competitors) and internal environment (for example, its culture, values) help identify effective future directions for the organization. Several possible vision statements are developed, and the optimal one is chosen.

CURRENT STATUS OF THE THEORY

There are several areas in which research and theorizing on the topic of visionary leadership theory can continue. First, the process of formulating a vision is not well understood. Some leaders develop a vision statement with no input, while others involve followers from all levels of the organization. Additional research on vision formulation would help improve leader training techniques. Second, many vision statements that generally are regarded as effective do not contain all the characteristics of effective vision statements. Identification of which components are necessary for effective vision statements or of the trade-offs among the components would help leaders create inspiring vision statements. Similarly, investigation of how various vision implementation behaviors interrelate would help researchers identify which behaviors are necessary in given conditions. Finally, empirical testing of House and Shamir's self-concept-based theory would help to refine and advance current theory.

—Shelley A. Kirkpatrick

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