

Examining task and relationship-oriented leadership styles: an in-class application activity

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ABSTRACT

The author has written a management class activity based on real life experience. The students are presented with two different types of leaders, one task oriented and one relationship oriented. After reading the descriptions of each leader, discussion questions will be posed and students will decide what type of leader they feel is more effective. This activity can be used in a variety of Management courses that address the role of leadership in organizations. It can be used either before or after a lesson explaining task and relationship oriented leadership. The author provides a brief literature review focused on the subject in order to provide background information regarding task and relationship oriented leadership.

Keywords: leadership, task-oriented leadership, relationship-oriented leadership

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership has been said to be the most influential component to organizational longevity. Leaders, specifically those that are effective, are an asset that distinguishes a company from its competition. (Harper, 2012.) Effective leaders are especially capable of fostering team cohesion and promote the ability to attain goals. What makes an effective leader, specifically in regard to what behaviors an effective leader exhibits, is important due to the impact leaders have on followers' attitudes and behaviors presented in the workplace (Ruggieri, 2013.) Effective leaders are more likely to be able to influence and facilitate both individual and collective efforts in order to accomplish workplace objectives. Furthermore, Harris, Berendt, Malindretos, Scoullis, & Williams, (2012) have said that good leadership is necessary in order for any organization to be successful long-term. Bennis, (1999) describes the leader as one who innovates, develops, focuses on people, has a long-range perspective, has his or her eye on the horizon, and originates. In order to successfully accomplish these things, the behaviors that one exhibits become an important component to understanding what effective leadership looks like.

Over the years, many studies have been conducted with the intent to examine how leaders behave. True leadership, as outlined by Bennis (1999) includes a track record of results, communication skills able to motivate and delegate, judgment exercised in decision-making, the ability to cultivate talent, the ability to coach, hiring, firing, budgeting, and conducting performance appraisals. This list is not exhaustive, however describes two realms of leadership, both of which are needed for effective leadership to occur; these two dimensions are task behaviors and relationship behaviors. Northouse (2012) states that the degree to which a leader is successful is determined by how these two behaviors are exhibited. Situations will differ, but each situation needs a degree of both task and relationship behaviors.

Task-related behaviors ensure that people, equipment, and other resources are efficiently used in order to accomplish objectives. The component behaviors in order to meet these specific objectives include planning, organizing, clarifying roles and objectives, monitoring operations, and resolving conflict. Yukl (2012) cites various research studies within each component behavior providing evidence that exhibiting each behavior can enhance leadership effectiveness.

Relationship-related behaviors are used by leaders to enhance member skills, leader-member relationship, identification with team, unit, or organization, and commitment to the mission of the organization (Yukl, 2012.) Yukl (2012) describes specific component behavior that includes supporting, developing, recognizing, and empowering and cites various research studies supporting each component behavior providing evidence that exhibiting each behavior can enhance leadership effectiveness. Yukl (2012) ultimately provided support for a conclusion stating that leaders can enhance team, unit, or organization performance by using a combination of task and relationship-oriented behaviors, relevant to situation.

Tabernerero, Chambel, & Curral (2009) examined the role of task-oriented versus relationship-oriented leadership in relation to the development of normative contract and group performance. The results showed that the leaders' behavior influenced the development of normative contracts, group processes, and performance. They found that task-oriented and relationship-oriented behavior roles had a positive effect on both the development of transactional and relational normative contracts, respectively. The results in this study are supportive of various other studies, maintaining the importance of leadership behaviors in the workplace. It becomes the leaders' challenge to integrate ideal amounts of each behavior, since each of these dimensions is inextricably tied together. Derue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey

(2011) conducted a study focusing on leadership behaviors and effectiveness. In this study, it was found that behaviors were important predictors of overall leader effectiveness. They concluded that task-oriented behaviors improve performance-related leadership outcomes and relational-oriented behaviors improve affective criteria such as follower satisfaction with the leader.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This in-class activity can be utilized in a variety of management-related courses, specifically those that include a lesson on leadership. Bob and Mike, two different leaders are described. Bob is a task-oriented leader and Mike is a relationship-oriented leader. Students will read the descriptions of both leaders and then comment on discussion questions provided by the instructor. A class discussion will highlight the student responses, as well as the instructor highlighting various behaviors of each leader. The instructor will focus on question number 3 which asks students which leader they feel is more effective. The responses to this question are crucial to the learning outcomes, which are focused on identifying positive contributions of both task and relationship-oriented leadership. Each style has its own strengths and appropriate times for utilization by effective leaders. The students should leave this lesson realizing that effective leaders know their own preferred style and understand when and how it's appropriate to incorporate each style of leadership into their daily work responsibilities and routines.

Leader #1: Bob

Bob arrives to work each morning at 7:30am. He officially begins his day at 8:00am but he prefers to arrive 30 minutes early in order to prepare himself for his day. He begins his day at his desk where he reviews his calendar for the day. His calendar is his to-do list for the day and includes all meetings and work responsibilities that must be accomplished before he leaves at the end of the day. The calendar also includes a list of daily goals that Bob focuses on achieving before going home in the evening. Bob is goal driven and believes that reaching his daily goals are positive expressions of who he is. Bob initiates structure in all he does. It's now 7:45am and Bob leaves his office and walks to the break room. This is where the work team will begin their morning. Bob starts each morning with a team meeting where he outlines the daily responsibilities to his team. Bob will stress the importance of "getting the job done" to his team during the morning meeting. It's 8:15am and Bob leaves the meeting ready to tackle his to do list. In fact, from 8:15am until he leaves at 5:00pm. Bob doesn't stop, he's constantly on the go. Bob doesn't take an official lunch break. Instead, he keeps energy bars in his pants pocket and will eat those when he is hungry. He keeps his checklist handy and makes notes of what has been accomplished throughout the day. He finally goes back to his office at 4:45pm. Bob ends his day the same way it begins, with a review of his calendar. He reviews what he accomplished during the day and makes notes of how he will structure his day tomorrow. When asked, his employees say that Bob is an efficient taskmaster that gives them explicit instructions regarding their job responsibilities and provides them checklists that they are required to follow and submit at the end of each work day. Bob stresses the importance of the rules and pays close attention to all deadlines. He emphasizes performance standards for the team and keeps the team focused on meeting goals.

Leader # 2: Mike

Mike arrives at the office between 7:30am and 8:00am each morning. His team arrives at 8:00am and he likes to be there when everyone arrives so he can talk with everyone before the work day begins. Mike has a genuine concern for his employees and works very hard to make sure everyone feels comfortable with him, each other, and the work environment. For the past five years, Mike has brought donuts and coffee in on the first Friday of each month in order to celebrate work anniversaries of all employees in that particular month. Mike spends a great deal of his day talking with his employees, making sure they feel valued, focusing on each one of them and their unique attributes. When asked, Mike will tell people that his greatest work accomplishment is “making the work setting a pleasant place to be.” He prides himself in treating everyone with respect, and he spends a lot of time building relationships with his employees, helping people get along. Mike feels that building trust between him and his employees is a key factor in providing an environment that is fair. Mike takes a lunch break every day at the same time most team members take their lunch. Mike goes to the break room and sits down for nearly an hour talking with everyone while they eat lunch. Mike routinely asks everyone how their day is going and if there’s anything he can do in order to improve the working conditions. When asked, his employees will say that Mike tries to make the work environment fun, shows concern for the personal-well-being of others, listens to their needs, expresses support for the team members’ ideas, and expresses positive feelings toward the team members. Mike leaves

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did you like/dislike about Bob’s leadership style? Explain.
2. What did you like/dislike about Mike’s leadership style? Explain.
3. Overall, which leader do you think is more effective? (Bob or Mike) Why?
4. Which leader would you prefer to work for? Why?
5. Describe your leadership style. Is it more like Bob or Mike? Explain.
6. Knowing your dominant style, how can you work to incorporate aspects of the opposite style into your daily routine?

INSTRUCTOR’S DISCUSSION POINTS

After the students answer the discussion questions, the instructor will moderate a class discussion focused on Bob and Mike’s leadership styles, specifically pointing out the differences between the two leaders.

The instructor will end the lesson by explaining that it becomes the leaders’ challenge to integrate ideal amounts of each behavior, since each of these dimensions is inextricably tied together. It is important that leaders know when to use each style in order to be most effective. In addition, it’s imperative that a leader understands his or her own personal style of work, and is able to recognize the need to get the job done while still focusing on building positive relationships built on mutual trust, respect, and understanding.

CONCLUSION

The instructor will make sure the students know that neither type is “best.” Instead, leaders need to be cognizant of their own style, work upon incorporating varying amounts of both task and relationship into the work day, depending upon the situation, and realize the importance of utilizing both styles in order to be most effective as a leader.

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