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Humanist Leadership in Hierarchical Systems



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This article addresses the most important psychological and educational aspects of humanist leadership, with particular emphasis on the public service sector, and discusses fundamental approaches to and principles of successful leadership from the perspectives of humanistic psychology and modern interaction analysis. The article mainly focuses on the question of how to implement a humanist view of people in daily leadership activities, rather than on leadership skills or strategies in general. I devote particular attention to the humanistic treatment of individuals in hierarchical situations, defining leadership as a bidirectional process that, while acknowledging the existence of different levels within hierarchical organizations, is committed to the idea of basic equality between the subjects involved. Accordingly, leadership behavior, as defined here, follows a dialogical approach. This concept of leadership draws heavily on Carl Rogers' work, which attaches particular importance to the attributes of respect, empathy and authenticity. Finally, the article also offers a critical examination of the most commonly used leadership training and selection methods.

INTRODUCTION

The public service sector relies on hierarchical forms of organization and on clearly defined structures, with all rights, responsibilities, and procedures stipulated in the applicable bylaws, organizational charts, job descriptions, mandatory instructions, statutes, administrative orders, decrees and the like. In fact, supervisors can fall back on these provisions and hierarchies whenever they feel the need to so. Nevertheless, it is hard to deny that a unit, department, section, ministry, or any other subordinate agency also requires personal leadership skills, including empathy, at all levels of the organization in order to deliver optimum performance.

However one may wish to define and measure success, pure technocrats probably

have the ability to perform successful acts of leadership and achieve considerable results. One might, however, wonder whether there is a price to pay and whether there would be a better way; in other words, whether humanist leadership, which takes the needs of the employees into account, might have the potential to improve the performance of the team, ultimately, as a whole. This, of course, is a rhetorical question that must be answered with an emphatic yes. Arguably, this is a trivial insight and graduates of any leadership training program will agree that modern leaders should possess a healthy measure of personal authority and be as responsive to their subordinates as possible, rather than hide behind statutory provisions, the authority of their office or individual distinctions. One might even

argue that this view is conventional wisdom nowadays, common to all theories of leadership behavior.

A QUESTION OF LEADERSHIP

Each time a group of people come together, this series of interesting psychological phenomena is set in motion. Challenges and problems are an especially common occurrence in the initial phases of group formation. Such challenges and problems must be handled effectively to allow the group to develop in a positive direction. These challenges are, in many cases, unconscious, i.e., unknown to both ordinary members and to their leaders. First of all, a deliberate attempt at tackling such challenges, and thereby making a positive impact on intra-group developments, requires conscious awareness. Of course, team leaders, i.e., managers, have a special responsibility when it comes to steering group dynamics in a specific direction and navigating group processes. Accordingly, leaders must use educational tools to support group development and set their own priorities, for example, by organizing team building activities.

At this point, at the latest, the question of leadership comes into play. More specifically, what approach should a leader take to influence the group in various situations? Should they be firm or relaxed, autocratic or socially inclusive, or maybe even laissez-faire? By definition, leaders have leadership responsibilities that they must fulfill. However, before a leader can, should, and may act, they should start out by engaging in some introspection and by reflecting on their own understanding of what leadership means. In order to support this self-reflection, this article offers a humanistic approach to leadership, which has gained wide acceptance in educational research. This view of leadership has also established itself in those many private

corporations that were perceptive enough to become aware of the ramifications of negative leadership for group dynamics and business activities. Consistently authoritarian leadership, which does not grant any freedom or room for personal fulfillment to subordinates, has a particularly devastating impact on groups, as already demonstrated in a number of studies carried out in the mid-20th century by Kurt Lewin (cf. Lewin et al. 1939). Today we know that such an understanding of leadership may lead to the downfall of entire corporations. Accordingly, the cost of conflict, which arises if a hierarchy has an exclusively authoritarian leadership style, is a substantial item in the budget of any company and has sent many a business into bankruptcy. It is therefore no coincidence that responsible executives in the corporate sector have long recognized the importance of personal development and the necessity of improving group cohesion by offering social activities. Global businesses such as Google and Microsoft have been known to follow this road. These corporations have been aware of the fact that providing all employees with the maximum amount of leeway is not only conducive to creativity and taking ownership of one's own work but also supports positive group dynamics.

Of course, comparisons between organizations in the corporate sector and the public service sector are not necessarily justified, due to the fact that the latter are subject to strictly hierarchical structures and statutory regulations. This applies in particular to bodies with quasi-military forms of organization, such as the police.

Obviously, the rules of the game are sometimes very different in such organizations. In certain situations, these rules would make granting extensive freedoms to employees not only impossible but even fatal. One might think of a typical demonstration of hooligans ready to resort to vio-

lence. It would be rather counterproductive to encourage police officers caught in the midst of such a disturbance to act proactively, since, by rushing ahead on one's own, one might endanger one's own health and safety. Rather, such situations call for a smoothly operating chain of command and, concomitantly, a firm, or even authoritarian, leadership style. However, under different circumstances, authoritarian leadership might be unnecessary, or it could backfire. Such circumstances might very well present themselves in the police or in the military, especially in the top levels of the hierarchy. Obviously, public officials are always legally obligated to follow instructions and each of them has their own place in the organizational hierarchy. This is evidenced, among other things, by the fact that the Electronic Act program of the Austrian Federal Government grants each category of public officials a unique set of rights, or by the fact that public officials are assigned to different functional groups within their organizations. At the same time, commanders as well as team, unit, department and section heads with progressive views have recognized that flat hierarchies and a socially inclusive leadership style can, in many cases, improve work performance on a daily basis.

Consequently, neither authoritarian nor socially inclusive leadership is a panacea. Today's managers should have a command of both, along with a certain number of laissez-faire methods, and use each according to the exigencies of the situation. However, this requires a highly reflective and confident personality. The selection processes currently in place, such as recruitment procedures used by the police, for admissions to mid-level supervisor training programs in the executive branch ("E2a"), or officer training programs, are not necessarily able to identify such person-

ality traits. Even the most comprehensive selection and assessment tools only allow for certain predictions: it is impossible to anticipate the future, including those factors and life circumstances that might, at some later point in time, have an effect on the persons selected (e.g., life crises). It is perfectly possible for a supervisor whose personality traits initially appear to be those of a highly capable leader to lose their leadership abilities due to subsequent changes to their personal situation. It is unlikely that any selection process will ever be able to eliminate all such uncertainties. Accordingly, leadership and education researchers have devoted more attention to the issue of exploring the characteristics of beneficial and efficient leadership.

A HUMANIST APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP

The terms "education", "leadership", and "pedagogy" – used interchangeably in this article – have been defined and conceptualized in myriad different ways in the educational sciences; for example by Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Meister, or Brezinka (cf. Hobmair 2008), and many others. Obviously, the meaning and the implications of the concept heavily depend on the worldview that they seek to "define". This article relies on a concept of education that draws on three interrelated schools of thought: the tradition of German idealism (e.g., Kant and Fichte); the principles of humanistic theories (Rogers 1972, Maslow 1981, and others); and the insights of the modern psychology of interactions and communication (Tausch/Tausch 1979, Berne 2002, Goleman et al. 2003, Cohn 2004, Schulz von Thun 2005, Watzlawik et al. 2007, Schley/Schratz 2007, etc.).

All three schools of thought share a common understanding of leadership as "an interpersonal process involving interactions between individuals aimed at promoting

the personal autonomy and individual potential of each participant under the premise of mutual recognition, esteem, and respect” (cf. Spenger 2004, 52).

In the following, I will explore the meaning of humanist leadership by analyzing several aspects of the conceptualization laid out above.

LEADERSHIP AS A BIDIRECTIONAL PROCESS

According to this tradition, education is never a one-way street. Instead, education is understood as a bidirectional (or multidirectional) and interpersonal process that involves two or more individuals of equal value (but mostly not with equal powers) that interact with each other and mutually influence each other, rather than taking for granted that there is a strictly hierarchical duality, of educators vs. those to be educated, professors vs. students, or supervisors vs. subordinates (a description once commonly accepted in education research). Accordingly, this understanding of education does not seek to provide “role descriptions” for adults and adolescents or for supervisors and subordinates, nor does it posit that the older or higher-ranking person should always educate, lead, and guide the younger or lower-ranking person. We do not assume a rigid order of seniority with “superior” and “inferior” individuals or a predefined directionality; rather, we think of education as an interpersonal process that offers, or at least has the potential to offer, some benefit to everyone involved. Let me give two examples to illustrate this principle. According to this understanding, a three-year-old child is just as capable of educating their parents as vice versa. In fact, it is hard to believe how much I have been able to learn from my own children; however, the first step is to acknowledge the existence of this bidirectionality and to become aware and

recognize that anyone could help a person further their own development process. With the appropriate abilities and attitudes, a manageress in a multinational corporation might also be capable of learning and accepting a lot from their coworkers. If she is smart enough, she will use a leadership style that does not (and must not) disregard the aspect of leading but that is, at the same time, sufficiently democratic, socially inclusive and reflective to engage others all the time in decision making and to trigger a series of bottom-up processes. Tools that could be used to this end are review meetings between superiors and staff members, which, although mandated by law in the Austrian public service sector, are at present unfortunately not particularly popular. In addition to enabling the review of employee performance, such meetings would also be an ideal venue for supervisors to solicit feedback on their own work. A supervisor’s job is often a solitary one anyway, especially when it comes to leadership roles with a lot of exposure and to leading large organizations or units. In such cases, leaders often only exchange views “horizontally”, i.e., with persons from the same level of the organizational hierarchy (a prime example of this is officers clubs). However, this practice is sub-optimal from the point of view of one’s own development, since supervisors are generally not, or at least not directly, affected by other supervisors’ decisions and behavior.

As such, it is much more useful to engage direct reports in dialogue. No manager should find it beneath their dignity to listen to their coworkers’ opinions regarding their own leadership style (as long as employees convey their opinions in an appropriate manner), or to give them the opportunity to share their ideas when decisions have to be made. Of course, in order to be able to do this, managers must have the ability to take criticism in their stride,

lest they respond defensively or, even worse, with sanctions against the mildest expressions of criticism. Such behavior would destroy any kind of trust between the manager and their reports. You should therefore encourage others to give you feedback only if you are ready to hear and cope with what they have to say; however, those who are unable to do so are probably not fit for a leadership role anyway.

EQUAL VALUE AND EQUAL RIGHTS

As already mentioned above, this definition of leadership implies that the subjects involved have equal value, although not necessarily equal rights. In a nutshell, this means that humans are inherently valuable and their value does not depend on things like performance, position in social, domestic, or corporate hierarchies, earnings, success, skills, physical appearance, race, or skin color. Obviously there are differences between individuals; however, most of these differences are differences of power, which are used to create hierarchies on the basis of various factors. Some people are simply allowed to do more than others. An 18-year-old person has more opportunities than a 6-year old; in some contexts, college graduates have more opportunities than those with a high school diploma (even if the only difference is that certain jobs are open to college graduates but not to high school graduates); a corporate executive or manager has more opportunities than a junior associate; professors report to school principals, whereas principals report to boards of education. Such situations are natural and it would be absurdly utopian to call such hierarchies into question, since they are necessary to ensure the proper functioning of society, at least as we know it today. History has shown that some people are always “more equal”, (i.e., have more power

and privileges) than others, even when it comes to systems of government based on the elusive dream of equality (such as communism). Thus, hierarchies may sometimes be flat and at other times steep, but they remain an essential principle and an inevitable element of any society or community. Without them, societies and communities would collapse into chaos. Organizations like the police and military make sure that societal hierarchies remain intact.

Despite any differences in terms of hierarchical positions, it is imperative to maintain respect for human dignity and to treat all humans humanely. In this context, those in the upper echelon of an organization have a special responsibility to treat their peers and subordinates in such a way as to support them effectively and to avoid demotivating them. Individuals, unfortunately including individuals in the highest positions, often have blind spots and barely anyone subordinated to them in the organizational hierarchy has a real opportunity to illuminate such blind spots. At the same time, as already mentioned above, leaders (including the “lone wolves” among them) have a (fundamental) right to receive some feedback, i.e., to receive information about their behavior and the (emotional) impact of their actions. Most problems that civilization has produced and which sometimes make it so difficult for people to coexist stem from problems of communication and interaction. This applies both to mundane disagreements in interpersonal relationships and major clashes between nations and cultures, which unfortunately often provoke armed conflict. It is therefore important to remind ourselves of one of the fundamental messages of the discussions around ecological sustainability – “Think globally, act locally” or, to put it differently, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with

a single step". Adjusting one's behavior in such a way that it does not hurt others first requires making some adjustments to one's self and attitudes and internalizing a more humanitarian worldview. Trying to simulate a democratic or socially inclusive leadership style will inevitably blow up in the face of someone who has not spent enough time grappling with their own values and attitudes, because such a person will lack authenticity and sincerity. As is commonly known, up to 80 percent of all communication takes place via nonverbal channels; having discovered the leader's "true face" (including what lies at their core and what their actual intentions are), those involved will not buy into any make-believe message. Consequently, sincerity and authenticity are essential elements of any leadership process.

THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE AS A GOLDEN RULE OF ETHICS AND LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR

This takes us to another element of the definition laid out above, namely the issue of mutual recognition and respect. This aspect of the concept focuses our attention on the attitudes that a leader should have, and display convincingly, towards others.

Any successful interpersonal interaction requires recognition and respect rather than mistrust, disregard, or disrespect; therefore, maintaining respect towards our fellow humans should always be a self-evident goal in any interaction. Such an attitude is probably easiest to achieve by considering Kant's categorical imperative or the so-called "golden rule of ethics", or by internalizing the philosophical basis of Martin Buber's dialogical learning (Buber 2006). To put it very simply, one should not treat others in ways that one would not like to be treated (or, "do as you would be done by"). As long as one does not happen to be a masochist, enjoying being humili-

ated, nor a sadist enjoying humiliating others, one should (be able to) expect to be treated with respect and recognition. An everyday example for this is what is known as the "reversibility of language". Those who abuse their position of power or seniority by treating their subordinates without respect (e.g., yelling or cursing at them, or throwing verbal abuse around) are clearly in violation of any reasonable principles of leadership. This is all the more true because subordinates might not have the ability or courage to speak up in such situations, for fear of negative consequences, be they real or imagined. Yelling and other forms of verbal abuse directed against dependents, including one's children, are an expression of one's own helplessness or exasperation. Moreover, as an absolutely disgraceful form of behavior, they are an absolute no-go – not only in the corporate or public service sector, but also in any other environment, including schools and families.

Clearly, no one has the right to treat others without acknowledging the other person's inherent humanity simply on account of the position that they occupy in some hierarchy. There are myriads of ways of expressing criticism in an appropriate and decent manner. The point is therefore to only use such verbal and non-verbal means in one's communication that the other person would be able to use as well. Obviously, this rule does not apply to the content of (lawful) commands or instructions that only senior officials are entitled to give to their subordinates. Rather, this is a question of style and of the way in which someone expresses themselves. Imagine a case in which a police officer uses patronizing, or even harsh, language towards a citizen while acting in their official capacity and then reports the same citizen for obstructing a law enforcement officer, should the citizen react to them in

the same way. This behavior would constitute an abuse of power; moreover, it would clearly indicate that the police officer has not understood, or at least not internalized, the principle of reversibility. The same would apply to a professor tapping their forehead to indicate that one of their students is not too bright (which is a form of nonverbal communication). For such an act to be reversible the student would have to have the right to respond in kind without suffering any negative consequences as a result; however, this is not the case with most professors.

The view of leadership discussed here therefore immanently requires that the power and authority of office be legitimized by personal authority based on humaneness and a humanist disposition. This entails, among other things, that leaders should justify their decisions and make processes transparent (i.e., engage in meta-communication).

Leadership attitudes and behaviors that are in line with the principle of reversibility ensure that recognition of and respect for others do not remain unattainable goals; as a result, a number of everyday problems are likely to simply dissipate. The underlying principle is “smile a while, and while you smile, others smile, and soon there are miles of smiles”. Psychologists call this phenomenon “emotional contagion”. Try the following simple exercise. Yawn and observe how other people around you respond. You will see that many others will yawn too. The explanation is simply that such reactions are due to our “genetic programming” or phylogenetic setup. In much the same way, humans are able to spread cheerfulness or a bad mood and initiate positive and kind interactions with each other. Constantly complaining and whining about how others should change never helps: in order to change others, it is necessary to start out by changing one’s

own behavior. This is an incredibly effective recipe for success that helps many individuals who have understood and internalized it to be the admired and successful people (and managers) that they are – both in their private and professional lives. To put it very simply, being (and remaining) a good person and being a successful person are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are both essential components of success. In the long run, bad people – if I may use this simple expression – are bound to be unsuccessful. No matter if we are talking about childrearing (or any other private context) or businesses and organizations, evoking fear is never an expedient “intervention program”.

Similarities between the two are not only present, they are blatantly so. Parenting, or any other relationship in the private realm, is not any different from leadership situations in schools, corporations, businesses, or the public service sector. Only those epitomizing a humanist education will be able to produce loving children, responsible students, and valuable employees.

PRINCIPLES OF LEADERSHIP ACCORDING TO ROGERS

As such, the principles of leadership are universally applicable. German education experts Reinhard and Annemarie Tausch (Tausch/Tausch 1979) have identified socially inclusive leadership as the ideal leadership strategy. According to them, socially inclusive leadership relies on respect for their counterparts, emotional warmth and affection, reversibility of language (both verbal and nonverbal), interpersonal encouragement, active listening, fundamental openness toward the other person, and supportive, rather than patronizing, behavior. These attitudes and behavioral patterns are some of the central ingredients of humanist leadership. Such a leadership style does not mean that leaders should

negotiate just about everything with their subordinates or abandon their claim to leadership. Quite the contrary: this leadership concept impresses upon leaders the importance of deliberating over when to tighten the reins and give subordinates explicit instructions, and when to loosen the reins and rely on employees' proactive behavior. Carl Rogers, the father of person-centered therapy (PCT), was an especially vocal advocate of this leadership style.

Rogers specified the following three attributes as the core characteristics of successful leadership: a) unconditional positive regard, b) accurate emphatic understanding and c) congruence (authenticity) (cf. Rogers 1972). With a background in therapy, Rogers was keen on finding out what makes a successful therapist (or team leader), i.e., he was trying to identify those personality traits that distinguish an excellent leader from a good leader, and a good leader from a poor leader. He conducted several studies in order to be able to distill the three core characteristics mentioned above. The issues of respect, warmth, deference, appreciation, and authenticity have already been addressed above. However, the quality that really sets great leaders apart is empathy, and so there are some essential questions. Does a leader have the ability to feel and think from the other person's perspective? Can they listen to others without immediately judging them? Do they try to understand, accept, and at least take into consideration the other person's point of view (which sometimes might be very different from their own)? Unfortunately, leaders often fail to do these, especially if they are powerful and/or convinced of their own infallibility. Such leaders tend to surround themselves with yes-men and cronies who never get tired of praising them. By contrast, employees who have the courage

to voice inconvenient truths run a risk of being fired or, if this is impossible or not easily done, of being sidelined (i.e., assigned minor and unchallenging tasks). Strong leaders prefer strong employees that do not mince words when it comes to offering justified criticism.

Considering public servants' right to object to unlawful instructions, enshrined in Section 44 paras. 2 and 3 of the Austrian Federal Civil Servants Act (BDG), this is a necessary skill in the public service sector as well. Empathy is an important leadership quality in a number of situations. Unfortunately, it is impossible to buy empathy or even to acquire it in personality development seminars or training courses. Just as with other personality traits, such as self-confidence, strength of character, or respect, people acquire empathy over the course of many years of socialization and education, especially in their families. Those who do not have it need to pursue therapy (in most cases for many years) in order to acquire it, rather than just complete a personality development module in a leadership training program. It should be noted that therapy is not always successful either. Hence, I would like to emphasize the questionable nature of all forms of personality training for adults, especially in terms of their cost/benefit ratio. Instead of relying on such programs, it would be advisable to exercise more caution when selecting candidates for public service positions. Of course, there is no guarantee against inept individuals "sliding through" an assessment or against initially suitable candidates losing their leadership abilities for various personal or external reasons or changes in their circumstances; however, this practice seems substantially more efficient both from a psychological and an economic point of view. The more targeted, precise, and professional the mechanisms used to select leaders with the appropriate

personality traits and social skills, the less likely it is that they turn out to be unfit for their leadership role many years later. Unfortunately, many assessments over-emphasize professional qualifications and do not give sufficient consideration to personality and social skills.

It would be worth all the money in the world to assess these areas in a professional manner as well (of course, such assessments are, in fact, very expensive). Although this conclusion calls into question the widespread practice of leadership selection and training, it would be very hard to deny its plausibility from a psychological perspective.

SUPPORT AND CHALLENGE

The definition of leadership laid out above also extends to the goal of interpersonal (educational) processes. According to this definition, all those involved in such processes should be able to expand their personal autonomy and fulfill their individual potential. In order to be able to realize this goal, participants are called upon to support their peers as well as they can, not to hold back other people's personal development, and to acquire the ability to learn from such interaction processes. Under this premise, jealousy, envy, mobbing, and aggression should never come into play; therefore, one must ensure that communication processes are characterized by altruistic attitudes, support, and motivation. In other words, it should be the goal of any interaction to support, or at least not limit, the other person in their personal development. Promising steps in this direction include delegating responsibility, showing some trust towards others, and not bombarding subordinates with unchallenging tasks. In order to support someone effectively, it is necessary to challenge them; however, challenges should always be accompanied by appropriate

motivation and a show of unrelenting belief in the employee's ability to succeed. A short formula for leadership could be "lead by challenge and encouragement". At the same time, trust, motivation, support and challenge can also occur in the opposite direction, i.e., bottom-up.

As discussed above, professors can learn from students, educators can learn from those they educate, and managers can learn from their secretaries. However, in order for this to happen, leaders must exhibit some openness and readiness to listen. As already mentioned, this also entails soliciting constructive feedback and treating it in a responsible and grateful manner (i.e., praising rather than punishing employees for speaking their mind). It is impossible to create an environment from which everyone can benefit without having a safe space that enables anyone to voice and discuss inconvenient (perceived) truths in a constructive way. And, last but not least, an essential axiom of intragroup processes, "problems should always come first". In other words, one must address any difficulties that may arise before starting (or continuing) to work towards one's ultimate goal.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the concepts of "education", "teaching", and "leadership" are all synonymous with humane and supportive interpersonal relationships.

Since some form of education is part of any interpersonal interaction or communication, and successful and unsuccessful attempts at communication abound in our everyday lives, there is no aspect of the human condition that could not be seen from the point of view of education.

If put into practice, the understanding of leadership (or, simply, human interactions) discussed here would lead to many significant improvements in all walks

of life, including schools and other educational institutions, businesses and organizations, and government agencies and authorities. Unfortunately, the (tacit and unquestioned) prevailing notion of education and leadership in families, schools, companies, and the public service sector still views leaders as (virtually) perfect, and subordinates as in need of education or guidance. However, when held by those in leadership positions, such attitudes can have disastrous consequences.

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