

Leadership styles in higher education - BIG leader-bonds, inspires, guides

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Abstract

Objectives: Different leadership styles are adopted to motivate employees and to promote innovations. This research aims at identifying the leadership styles followed in higher institutions of learning in Chennai. We have also tried to explore which leadership style in higher level educational institutions motivates a team to a greater extent.

Method: This research is an exploratory research that aims at identifying the leadership styles followed in higher institutions of learning in Chennai. We have also tried to explore which leadership style in higher level educational institutions motivates a team more by conducting in-depth interviews with team members working under different leadership styles. The data has been collected, analyzed through percentage analysis, and tabulated.

Results: We identified three leadership styles: Authoritarian, Participative, and Innovative leadership style. It was found that majority of the educational institutions follow an authoritarian style of leadership. Participative leadership style was next and very few leaders were innovators. It was found that authoritarian style is the least desirable and participative leadership style is highly successful in educational institutions. We have tried to identify the crucial traits of a leader based on desk research, responses received through questionnaire, and discussions with teams. Some of the traits of a good leader are: a. The Three Aces: Acknowledging Uniqueness, Assessing Potential, and Assigning Appropriate Role. b. Providing direction through clearly articulating the mission and vision, c. Building trust through honesty & integrity. d. Consistency. e. Effective communication and praise. f. Setting high standards and never ceding control.

Conclusion: The higher level leadership in educational institutions are so obsessed with the bottom line that they forget that bottom line can be achieved only through delegation, empowerment and involvement of team members in the decision making process. To support the agenda of accountability and good performance educational leaders need to be proficient in leadership and a participative, democratic and innovative leadership style plays a pivotal role in improving the bottom line.

Keywords: Leadership, Authoritarian leadership, Participative leadership, Innovative leadership, Education.

1. Introduction

Leadership has been defined in various ways but each person will have his/her own definition of leadership. My definition of leadership is simple: Leadership is a unique bond created between a person and a group for the purpose of guiding the team to success. Leadership is about establishing a connection, building a relationship that goes beyond structures and systems. [1] Leadership is about inspiring people to reach for the stars and holding their hands in that endeavor. It is not about pure show of authority, it is about using the authority of your position in a manner that makes people feel valued and cared for. Leadership is an emotional bond and not a bond born purely out of hierarchy. A person may be a boss but not a leader in the true sense of the word.[2] A leader has to make his team feel like he is one among them and not a superior locked inside his glass shell – real or imaginary. A leader has to be selfless and emotionally vibrant, dynamic and connected. He needs to be respected for his wisdom and leadership qualities, not feared for his position.

A leader has to be BIG: B - Bond, I- Inspire, G - Guide

2. Research methodology

Leadership plays an important role in leading a group and influencing that group to achieve its goals. Different leadership styles are adopted to motivate employees and to promote innovations. A lot of studies have been done to establish the fact that a participative leadership style gives better results. We often think that knowing something means doing something. This research is an exploratory research that aims at identifying the leadership styles followed in higher institutions of learning in Chennai. We have also tried to explore which leadership style in higher level educational institutions motivates a team more by conducting in-depth interviews with team members working under different leadership styles. We have also tried to identify the crucial traits of a leader based on desk research, responses received through questionnaire, and discussions with teams. This study is about leaders in education sector—Principals, Institutional Heads, Department Heads exercising leadership roles in temples of learning—providing direction, exercising influence in matters related to policy and practice. The sample was Heads of Departments, Principals or Heads of Institutions. 200 questionnaires were distributed in higher education institutes of Chennai for data collection by using stratified random sampling technique. Approximately 150 questionnaires were received in complete form. There was a set of 20 questions asked with the responses to be given by circling any one of the following categories that will indicate the degree to which the respondent agrees or disagrees. [2] The responses will help the researcher understand the leadership style of the respondent. The respondents have been advised to give their immediate impressions and that there are no right or wrong answers. The categories are i. strongly disagree ii. disagree iii. neutral iv. agree v. strongly agree. [3]

Some of the questions asked were:

1. Employees need to be supervised closely, or they are not likely to do their work.
2. Employees want to be a part of the decision-making process.
3. In complex situations, leaders should let subordinates work problems out on their own.
4. Providing guidance without pressure is the key to being a good leader.
5. Leadership requires staying out of the way of subordinates as they do their work.
6. As a rule, employees must be given rewards or punishments in order to motivate them to achieve organizational objectives.
7. Leaders should give subordinates complete freedom to solve problems on their own.
8. The leader is the chief judge of the achievements of the members of the group.
9. It is the leader's job to help subordinates find their "passion."
10. People are basically competent and if given a task will do a good job.

We identified three leadership styles in educational institutes in our sample. To get further insight regarding which leadership style is more effective we conducted three Focus Group discussions with teams working under different leadership styles. The group members were selected through stratified random sampling technique. Institutes/Departments following the same leadership style formed one stratum, so three leadership styles meant three strata, and three focus groups. 10 team members were picked from each stratum through random sampling for a focus group discussion. These focus group discussions helped us in understanding the pros and cons of each of these leadership styles.

3. Leadership styles in educational institutions

In our research we found that 64% of the educational institutions in our sample follow an authoritarian style of leadership, 34% followed Participative leadership style and only 2% of the leaders were innovators. This is based on the responses to our questionnaire. Through Focus group discussions of team members who have worked under leaders with different leadership styles it was found that authoritarian style was the least desirable in an educational institute since it stifles creativity and nurtures passivity and anger. People just work for the sake of money without any involvement or passion. Participative Leadership style is highly successful in educational institutions. [4] Least direction, freedom to work, delegation, freedom to express dissent, listening and responding respectfully, inspires team members to unleash their full potential of creativity and productivity and gives them a sense of pride in their work. It motivates them to come to work, freely share their creative ideas, gives them a sense of belongingness in

decision making and is a relatively stress free environment. Such teams are happier teams and happy people work better and have more passion and energy [5]. Employees feel valued motivated and get involved in decision-making. This style also minimizes conflicts among employees because conflicts arise when an autocratic leader is not willing to listen to problems and there is no sense of bonding in the team. Such leaders could get optimal result from the team by creating a shared vision and a feeling of oneness and belongingness in the team. Everybody strives to attain the vision and mission because it is their own and not foisted from above [6].

In our research we saw that the third category, that is, leaders who were innovative and could do new things, implement novel ideas and had the courage to take risks were able to create a transformation in their departments and institutions. They were often respected by their teams and looked up as great leaders. Sadly the percentage of innovative leaders was just 2% and probably that is the reason for lack of innovation and creativity, lack of dynamism and new thinking in so many educational institutes (Table 1 and Table 2) [7].

Table 1. Leadership styles in educational institutions

Leadership Style followed in educational institutes	Percentage
Authoritarian	64%
Participative/Democratic	34%
Innovative	2%

Table 2. Best Leadership Style

Best Leadership Style	Percentage supporting the Leadership Style
Authoritarian	7%
Participative/Democratic	28%
Innovative	65%

3.1. Authoritarian leadership

This is a top down approach of leadership where the focus of the leader is on deciding the next order and ensuring that it is obeyed. There is lack of consensus building or collaborative decision making and the leader rarely listens to the team. In authoritarian leadership the person in charge has complete authority and he follows a command and control mechanism. Team meetings are rare and far between since the leader decides based on his thinking with very little input from group members. Leader makes decisions based on his perceptions and judgments and rarely accepts advice from team members. Teams work due to fear of the leader or some other compulsion, so the team performance is sub-optimal and creativity and passion diminishes [8].

3.2. Participative leadership

The other end of the spectrum is where decisions are taken through consensus building. Here collaboration and efforts at consensus building through frequent team meetings is the style of the leader. Team members are provided opportunity to voice their complaints, suggestions and questions thus leading them to use the very highest standards in performing their work. Team members are involved in decision making and the leader does not just think about the orders that should be given to get work done. He discusses issues, problems, and challenges with the team and then decides the orders. He welcomes voices of dissent and encourages team members to give their inputs [9]. There is more empowerment of team members, more delegation, more of listening respectfully to diverse and sometimes opposite opinions, and members are not micro managed. This is a democratic set up where team performance is optimal since all team members feel that they are a part of the decision making process [10].

3.3. Innovative leadership

Henry Ford once said: **“Whether you think you can or think you can’t—you are right”**.

Innovative leaders probably believe in this more than anyone else. Innovative leaders operate from a transformational perspective and not from a transactional perspective. Innovative leadership is about transforming

systems, structures, processes, and people with the purpose of creating something of value for their organization. They focus on team building, motivation and collaboration across organizations. Innovative Leadership style is about setting the mission & vision for the team. It is not just about status quo and consensus building. It is about encouraging new ideas, getting inputs from all and adapting and modifying with the changing times [11]. An innovative leader believes in participative leadership since he cannot innovate with just his own instincts, his own experiences, and knowledge to rely on. Also he knows that to make any innovation a success he requires the cooperation and involvement of the team. Innovative leaders are not frightened of failure, are not risk averse, and have the courage to face the consequence of their decisions instead of passing on the blame to someone else. Majority of the leaders may find it safer to maintain the status quo than rock the boat. The innovators are willing to try things outside their comfort zone and face the risk of failure. They strongly believe that life begins only when we come out of our comfort zones [12].

4. Traits of a good leader

4.1. The three aces: Acknowledging uniqueness, assessing potential, assigning appropriate role

There is an animation comedy named "Fantastic Mr. Fox", which is based on a children's novel by Roald Dahl. There is a set of wild animals living underground that are able to outwit three farmers who wanted to kill them, through team effort and good leadership. In this comedy there is a scene in which Mr Fox has to give himself up to save the lives of other wild animals. This movie provides great learning in leadership. This story teaches us about survival and role of a leader in helping the team survive through a crisis. Mr Fox builds a team by following three Aces of leadership and team building: Acknowledging Uniqueness, Assessing Potential, Assigning appropriate role. Mr. Fox acknowledges their uniqueness by addressing each wild animal by his/her scientific Latin name in a way that boosts their self-confidence. He wins them over, making his mission theirs too. He lets them assess their strengths and weaknesses and tell him where they fit in. This way, he shows himself to be reasonable in his expectations. The rabbit says he can run at great speed. The beaver says he can chew the toughest wood. The badger says he can demolish anything.

4.2. Providing direction through clearly articulating the mission and vision

It is for the leader to set the direction or the mission & vision for the organization so that people can apply themselves to achieve their goals [13]. In one department the Head had clearly articulated the vision in an acronym – LLRR which meant Learning, Linkage, Research, and Responsibility. It is not mandatory that the direction is stated formally. The leader's actions and decisions should convey the direction to the team. The direction needs to percolate to the grass root level in the organization/department. A Management Institute had a vision "We provide the best education in management subjects". This vision sounds obsolete in today's time and age where the focus is on entrepreneurial thinking so the leader should have seen the changing times and adapted. Contrast this with the vision of another Institute "We wish our students to be job creators & not job seekers" This seems more relevant for the current environment. It is also crucial that the team feels connected to the mission and vision because the leader cannot sail the ship alone. Each person plays an important role in sailing the ship so the leader needs to connect them to this vision through shared values. Another way to motivate the team to pitch in is by giving them a personal vision which is aligned to the broader vision of the organization. This can be achieved by making them feel that they are a crucial part of something much greater. For instance a leader in the education institute with a vision like this: "We wish our students to be job creators & not job seekers" may say, "You're not just joining our institute, you're becoming part of transforming the youth of today into future entrepreneurs."

4.3. Building trust through honesty & integrity

Another important ingredient for successful leadership is trust. People have to trust the leader so as to follow his direction. The leader should know more than the team and be in a trusting relationship to be able to influence his team. To develop this trust honesty and integrity is imperative. Leaders must have clear values and should be seen living by those values. Actions need to match values and leaders need to consistently live by those values, otherwise a sense of betrayal creeps into the team and nothing could be more disastrous. People stop following when they see their leader changing course or shifting values to suit his purpose.[14]

4.4. The power of effective communication and praise

Recognition, reward, and praise are very strong cement in the relationship between the leader and the team and greatest motivators for excelling in work. A leader needs to create passion in the team [15]. He needs to be a good communicator, good at inter-personal skills, a great energizer and create a passion in the team through the power of appreciation and positive reinforcement. After the research a shocking finding was that very few people understood the power of praise, motivation and energy that can be generated through positive communication.

4.5. Consistency

A leader needs to be consistent in his vision, his actions and his interactions. He needs to be dependable and free of complexities. You can compare it to climbing a steep cliff and you have a prop to hold the rock if you slip. A leader has to be like that prop, always behind you, supporting you and always leading from the front. However in a world that is always in a state of flux a leader does need to adapt but even while adapting a sense of direction needs to be there as a milestone guiding the team [16].

4.6. Set high standards and never cede control

A good leader sets the bar high and motivates guides, inspires the team to achieve that. . He leads by his own example, his energy, passion, and enthusiasm to excel becomes contagious An important ingredient required to meet high standards is the leader's ability and willingness to respond quickly and forcefully when team members violate the rules set through collaboration and discussion. The leader has to have a strong personality and there is room for only one at the top [17].

5. Conclusion

In this 21st century where everybody is accountable for their role in work place and tremendous pressure is there to excel, our academic institutions have also changed drastically. Education has become more and more commercialized and leaders face tremendous pressure to meet the bottom line. To succeed in what the management wants them to achieve a leader cannot go alone and do this. He needs the support and help of his team; he needs to make them share his vision, empower them to take decisions, make them accountable for those decisions, and motivate them to aim for the stars through recognition and praise [18]. The old command and control system does not work any longer. As someone who has been in leadership role for so many years I have realized that leaders in educational institutions still follow an obsolete and autocratic style of governance which does nothing to create synergy in their teams. Management, by not creating and valuing diversity in teams are basically chopping the branch on which they are sitting. Diversity of opinions, dissent, discussion and debate should all be a part and parcel of any crucial decision making process [19]

The management in educational institutions are so obsessed with the bottom line that they forget that bottom line can be achieved only through delegation, empowerment and involvement of the department heads and team members in the decision making process. Institutional growth, innovation, and profit making cannot be achieved when decisions are centralized or consultation is possible only with a small coterie surrounding the top management. The top management in educational institutions is insulated from the real challenges of building a top notch institution because access to them is the prerogative of the very few. The same logic applies to department heads where they need to collaborate with the whole team, take decisions based on brain storming done in meetings and value the diverse opinions and unique thought processes of each and every member of the team [20] Creativity is not the prerogative of the privileged few, it can emerge from the junior most members in the organizational hierarchy and we need to foster that creativity, nurture talent, groom second level leaders and keep progressing through collaboration. Collaboration does not mean all are on the same page, there may be and should be some voices of dissent but those voices should not be stifled by the leader. The leader and the team can agree to disagree and in case of dissent the leader can take the final call but should also be willing to take the fall and responsibility if the decision goes wrong, not pass the buck. A clear chain of command also needs to be there in educational institutions for a leader to function in an organized manner [21]

There is no sense of belongingness when there is no shared vision and when decisions are foisted from above [22]. This sense of empowerment and participative decision making needs to percolate at all levels—from the owners of educational institutions to the department heads and from there to the department team members. Managing students and personnel, setting goals, controlling budgets, organizing events, and collaborating with external forces including alumni, parents, industry, recruiters, community outreach groups all need a team that is one cohesive unit and to create that cohesion the onus is on the leader. In today's educational environment the leaders have a larger role to play since expectations from the stakeholders – parents, students, industry, society is sky high. To meet these expectations a leader in an educational institute needs to learn and use all the managerial skills that are practiced in corporate sector.

To support the agenda of accountability and good performance educational leaders need to be proficient in leadership and a participative, democratic and innovative leadership style plays a pivotal role in improving the bottom line. Acknowledging uniqueness, assessing potential, assigning appropriate role, direction, integrity, consistency, motivation through praise, setting high standards and being in control are the crucial pillars of success in leadership. This sounds so simple yet we struggle to see exceptional leaders especially in the education sector, so this is easier said than done. Leadership requires a deep understanding of human nature, a confidence to be able to project and promote others, an ability to communicate, a knack at giving feedback, honesty and inspiring trust and it cannot be faked.

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