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Leadership Awakening, Metamorphosis and Transcendence: Insights from the Leadership Journey of Twelve Former Presidents of a National Human Resource Managers' Association in the Philippines

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Abstract:
This Qualitative Research highlights meaningful insights drawn from the leadership journey and experiences of twelve (12) former presidents of a national association of human resource management professionals in the Philippines. Key points culled out through the in-depth interviews were analyzed, categorized into common themes and synthesized, resulting into the identification of three (3) major leadership journey stages namely: Leadership Awakening, Leadership Metamorphosis, and Leadership Transcendence. Each stage was characterized by insights that will be useful to anyone aiming to personally journey as a leader. The study participants were purposively selected considering the following criteria: He or She must be a former president of the Peoples Management Association of the Philippines (PMAP), still active in the association, willing to participate in the study, and practitioners in the fields of leadership and human resource management. The study reveals that a person's leadership potential is awakened by an inner need for personal development and the external influences of their leadership mentors. They metamorphose into seasoned and competent leaders through the various challenges and problems they have gone through, and as they grow in wisdom and tacit knowledge, they start to transcend from self-centeredness to others-centeredness.

Keywords: Leadership, leadership journey

1. Introduction

The United Nation's Chief Executive Board (CEB) for Coordination, in its April 2016 session underscored the critical importance of transformative leadership, highlighted it in their 2030 agenda and tasked its high-level committees to help develop a shared concept of leadership characteristics necessary in the era of the Sustainable Development Goals. On the other hand, Infopro Learning, in its 2017 Leadership Development Survey found out that Eighty-four percent (84%) of organizations in the world, anticipate a shortfall of leaders in the next five years and only Eighteen percent (18%) of those organizations surveyed claimed that their leaders are very effective in achieving business goals. Furthermore, Boss (2017) in a Forbes Magazine article, opined that one of the leadership challenges that organizations have to prepare for are those brought about by the rapidly changing global business environment and the emergence of millennial in the workforce. Such initiatives by no less than the United Nations and a list of alarming leadership statistics emphasize among others, the critical importance that leadership plays in human development, the emerging threats of leadership shortage and the apparent challenge of organizations in developing effective leaders, not just to keep at pace with the changes taking place, but also with the way organizations themselves have evolved over time.

A survey of leadership literature would easily point out that Leadership is an interplay among factors like the person's personal characteristics, the leader's own behavior, the leadership situation and the characteristics of people being led. Early literature in leadership argues that leaders are born with certain sets of personality traits and characteristics (Carlyle, 1840; Galton, 1869; Cowley, 1931). This claim was however opposed by behavioral leadership theorists and contend that leadership success is determined by a strong leadership role behavior (Stogdill, 1948; Mann, 1959; Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992; Huges, Ginnett, & Curphy, 1996;). Situational leadership theorists, on the other hand, identified leadership environment and situation as important factors in leadership success (Tannenbaum & Schmidt, 1959; Fiedler, 1964; Hershey & Blanchard, 1969). More recent literature, on the other hand, underscore the characteristics of people being led (Zaleznik, 1965; Kelley 1992; Riggio, Chaleff, & Lipman-Blumen, 2008) as another important factor in leadership success.

2. Methodology

This study used the qualitative method of research and analyzed the leadership journey of twelve (12) former presidents of a national association of human resource managers in the Philippines. The research participants were selected using the following criteria: First, They must be a previous president of the Peoples Management Association of the Philippines (PMAP); Second, They must still be active in the association, and Third, They are willing to participate in the study. The research participants are the following: Ms. Rosario S. Ventura, DPM, PMAP President 1993, Atty. Pilar Nenuca P. Almira, DPM - PMAP President 1996, Atty. Ranulfo P. Payos, DPM - PMAP President 1989-1990, Mr. Ernesto O. Cecilia, DPM - PMAP President 1999, Ms. Lina A. Aseneta, FPM - PMAP President 2005, Mr. Ernesto G. Espinosa, FPM - PMAP President 2002, Ms. Evelyn Grace C. Sorongon - PMAP President 2013, Mr. Orlando D. Peña, DPM - PMAP President 1970-1973, Mr. Federico R. Marquez Jr., FPM – PMAP President 2001, Mr. Rene M. Gener, DPM - PMAP President 2000, Mr. Enrique V. Abadesco Jr., DPM - PMAP President 2008, Mr. Schubert Caesar C. Austero - PMAP President 2011.

The insights drawn were taken from the thematic analysis and interpretation of data derived through a face-to-face qualitative interview. The senior leaders were informed as to their respective roles and were oriented on the purpose, procedures, relevance and the voluntary nature of their research participation. With the research participant's consent, all interview proceedings were audio captured, transcribed, translated, coded and analyzed to identify key concepts for transferability and credibility. This resulted in the identification of journey stages and development of categories and sub-categories and major themes of experiences per stage of the journey.

3. Results and Discussion

The result of the study led to the identification of three major stages in the participants' leadership journey namely: Leadership Awakening, the Metamorphosis, and the Transcendence. The Awakening stage covered the participants' preliminary encounter with the association, heading the call to serve as a leader and personally recognizing their need for leadership preparation. Leadership metamorphosis covered their personal and professional experiences and challenges that strengthened their leadership attitude, competencies and skills; the Third stage is Transcendence, which covered their leadership evolution from self-centeredness to other-centeredness including the accumulation of new philosophies, principles and, values as a leader.

3.1. Stage 1: Leadership Awakening

Leadership Awakening is the time regardless of one's age when he or she begins to picture the possibility of taking on a role beyond their means to achieve this larger-than-life endeavor.

Many of the senior leaders interviewed entered the People Management Association of the Philippines with one purpose in mind: to develop their professional credentials, learn from its training programs and succeed in the workplace. Little did they know that they would be exceedingly immersed in the association that they were oftentimes already prioritizing it over other important matters. They began their leadership journeys with an encounter with an unknown future as they were armed only with the hope that the organization will usher them towards professional improvement.

Leadership formation means a time in a leader's journey where his character is molded to better prepare him for a leadership role. It is also considered a segment in a leader's life when he absorbs every bit of knowledge from his peers, family members or mentors whom he looks up to as his role models. It is when the leader is trying to mirror them and keep up with their expectations such that they develop similar work ethics and leadership paradigm.

Ms. Ventura during the interview states, "...there are certain reasons why you become a member of an association and PMAP feeds into my own professional development so that is how I got involved and beyond just being an ordinary member, I might as well be active in the association. "

It goes to show that many of the past leaders of the association had set their sights on developing their professions as their major aim in joining. A good number of them were clueless about the things to come after their encounter with the organization. Rosenback and Taylor (2006) captured this context best when they opined, "Leadership is not a person or a position ... it is a complex, paradoxical and moral relationship between people...and is based on trust, obligation, commitment, emotion and a shared vision of the good..." Thus, these leaders put their hearts at the center of their commitment to do their best for that vision of what is good.

Atty. Almira and Ms. Sorongon epitomize the essence of leadership formation that had mentors who guided them along the way. Not only did their mentors directed their leadership paths but they likewise inspired them to a higher calling and purpose which is, to be a president of PMAP in the years ahead. Some of these senior leaders such as Ms. Sorongon do not only have one mentor but several of them.

Atty. Almira declares: "...of course in the profession, there were those who have inspired me, past president Orly is one, the other one of course was Nonong ...he really encouraged me to pursue my career in HR...and then past president Orly Pena was the one who told when I was a young professional... he told me you gonna be...president of the association..."

Ms. Sorongon says "...I know some people ...those people that have been helpful and really coaching and mentoring me would be, Atty. Pilar is one and Bong is another one, of course, Art... also Orly. They were the four who really...I mean all out in terms of helping you, in giving you tips..."

"...In PMAP... well... Atty. Pilar, to a certain extent..... Pilar, has mentored me... si Sonny, has mentored me to a... certain extent... but I guess Grace Zata has always been a mentor to me...", says Mr. Austero.

The experiences of Atty. Almira, Mr. Austero, and Ms. Sorongon epitomize the stage of leadership awakening which is characterized by having mentors who guided them along the path of leadership. Some of these leaders had more than just one mentor. This is an evidence of how leaders attract other leadership potentials.

Leadership, however, is not just about shaping or molding leaders. It is also about envisioning a greater purpose for the would-be leader, inspiring him or her to achieve an end goal perhaps even more than what end-goals of the shaper or mentor had when he was his or her age.

3.2. Stage 2: Leadership Metamorphosis

Stage 2: Leadership Metamorphosis is that part in a leader's existence when he is confronted with all sorts of conflicts, both organizational and personal, problems and difficulties, but were able to emerge out of the situation, a better person firstly and a better leader consequently.

Conflict as one of the senior leaders claimed, may be in the form of having been into a dilemma of political rumblings, such that they find difficulty in distinguishing which side to take. This necessitated them to have a deep re-examination of their personal values and convictions, and sometimes, the chosen decision will alienate them from respected colleagues. One of the senior leaders admitted that the position got into his head and realized that his self-perceived high level of expertise and competence actually led him to arrogance, causing some members to withdraw their support from him.

The lure of trying to please everyone also came as an inner conflict for one of the senior leaders, claiming his authenticity was once tested when he made a decision based on his personal convictions and the said decision was unpopular to the members. At the start, it really caused a tension in the relationship. Being steadfast in his convictions and objectivity, however, the members, later on, realized that made the right decision, and this gained him even more respect from them.

The senior leaders' experiences apparently illustrate the great demands of leadership. Such demands taught them how to carefully strike a balance between their concerns for the association, their career, and their family. Another challenge shared by one of the leaders interviewed is to juggle the roles of her being a mother, a teacher, a family person and an HR Manager. Her job in the consulting corporation was highly demanding that it occupied much of her time. Despite this, she managed to ease her busy work life, her family, and teaching obligations. Bonding moments with her children, however, were then only reduced to rides going to school and coming back home.

Pillai and Meindl (1998) opine that during uncertain and turbulent times, authentic leaders actually emerge. It is during critical and desperate situations where real leaders emerge. On the other hand, it is by facing these challenges and hardships that leaders were further honed and pruned, and gain wisdom.

3.3. The Challenges: Life Events That Strengthened Leadership Competencies and Skills

Leaders do not become such without challenges. It is, indeed, difficult to lead when the values of the people one works with do not jibe with the leader. The interplay of leadership capabilities and skills more often cannot suffice the dissenting forces of other leaders in the organization.

According to the senior leaders interviewed, leaders do not become as such without challenges. Similar to a "baptism of fire," the leaders' mettle is tried to the fullest when they struggle to gain their ground during challenging predicaments. One of these leaders believes that the decision to run for the presidency is already a tough decision to make much more if one is already voted as such. For sure, the hardships one has to undergo when he or she decides to run for a leadership role will make their leadership prowess stronger and better prepared for more crucial situations to decide upon. Atty. Pilar says, "...The decision to run for president kasi (because) it has always been a male-dominated organization. I said, "Do you want to run or don't you want?" And then I made up my mind, "Sige (Go ahead)." I think that was a tough decision. I was not even sure that I was going to win, but I tried my best, I think, so I think that was a tough decision to make...."

Some of these leaders have had their challenges during their incumbency. They were surprised to know that it is not that easy to synergize the collective will of the majority when some groups have values that are not aligned with theirs. Mr. Cecilia avers, "...Ah, that's the harder part because personally, I have my own personal values. I know the association has its values and many of the people in the board have their own values as well that may not be in keeping with mine, that is not congruent with mine and that is really, that's really the challenge eh..."

It is, indeed, difficult to lead when the values of the people one works with do not jibe with the leader. Executive decisions must be dealt with a caution that all of them should be made through the consensus of other leaders in the association. The challenge lies when the association head's principles are the exact opposite of his member in such a way that gridlocks in the decision-making process occur. This may stifle the flow of ideas and, thus, may derail and delay the desired outcomes.

Part of leadership is also to be prepared to be frustrated. Mr. Marquez narrates,

"...I was the one giving time and hope I still don't get appreciated you have to... that is your share being able to make them or inspire them to do their job...you cannot really please them all unlike in the company you can always say if you're not that liberal I can sack you... you can get your pay and get a livelihood from them unlike here they are only volunteers... imagine I am already committing my time, I am already contributing there is no salary here and yet I am not appreciated...."

Hands-on as they were in directing their leadership affairs, many of these leaders had daunting challenges in balancing work and their personal lives, tip-toeing in between political and apolitical principles, executing their organizational plans and being accountable and worthy of the trust and confidence of their subordinates. The risks they took as leaders somehow caused a toll in their lives; however, the challenges that go with them became the milestones in their careers as top HR practitioners. Similar to a mother giving birth, the pains endured by a leader may not be less than the birth pangs of an infant. Indeed, leadership comes with a price. Out of these leadership frustrations, challenges and pains, the interviewees emerged as better leaders.

3.4. Leaders Make Mistakes and Learn from It

Leaders could also be borne out of their mistakes. People may see these mistakes as these leaders downfall; however, in reality, these are their defining moments because these are the events in their lives that helped shape their destinies as future authentic or awakened leaders.

Leadership in one area of their life, as in a person's career, could lead to his last position in other aspects of living such as in raising a family. It can be concluded then, that intertwining professional competence and family responsibility may be a combination of opposite worlds that can confuse any leader. By and large, there are countless other leadership gurus who put emphasis on balance between work and family life. There is a deeper meaning to leadership other than achieving organizational goals.

Ms. Aseneta admittedly said, "...Yes, being successful in PMAP and in my career ...brought me mistakes like my loss of health when I was diagnosed with... breast cancer stage 4 almost three years ago... "

It can be said that with these leaders mistakes come to their realizations. With Ms. Aseneta, the lesson learned was in the form of embracing excellence to a point that she forgot to slow down in life. Due to her workaholic attitude, it did not matter to her whether her career was taking a toll on her physical health. She regretfully said:

"...There are lessons learned like to slow down my life, be more patient, no longer take life, love, friendship and health for granted, and not have my energy so absorbed by the demands of work and agenda.

On the other hand, it was his resilience amidst personal attacks that made Mr. Austero realized the value of standing by one's principles in life. During that time when he was president, he was personally assaulted for defending his decisions over certain strategic directives he initiated for PMAP. In the end, he came out victorious because he maintained the composure he had while in his presidential post despite the fact that many of his fault-finders continued to disagree with his decisions. He narrated this by saying:

"...We persevered and kept on explaining the value of the decisions. I was guided by the quotation 'In matters of principle, stand like a rock; in matters of style, swim with the current.' I learned that very often, people may disagree but that doesn't mean they will get in the way if they have a healthy respect for what you are doing..."

Thus, personal mastery is the key component that paved the way for these PMAP presidents to learn from their mistakes. Overall, it is in mending one's behavior that leads a person towards the achievement of his dreams. There may be no one that is not mistaken. From being a toddler, everyone crawls, stands up and falls while learning how to walk. Since life is mainly experiential, every individual learns from one's mishap and no one can ultimately avoid all of their mistakes. It is then in mastering one's inner self whereby a person become versed in the ups and downs of life. Ms. Ventura had this to say about this matter:

"...It is you who really have to deal with life and provide your own motivation, look for what will inspire you and what will make you move forward. Talagang tama iyon eh (It is really true). Your personal mastery is very important..."

3.5. Stage 3: The Transcendence

This stage occurs when leaders no longer see themselves as an instrumental figure in the evolution of other leaders. He or she no longer seeks attention to steer the direction of corporations; instead, this leader multiplies his influence by making others become awakened leaders at present and evolved leaders of the future.

Meidl (1999) suggested that people see leaders as "emotionally involved in a virtuous cause for which they make self-sacrifices and exert extra effort." This may be due to the fact that most leaders were molded by tribulations in the past that they are already prepared for self-sacrifices. In essence, the true mindset of an evolved leader is the self-emptying sacrifice of developing others into better individuals. Similar to Ms. Ventura, she does not feel the need to be compensated nor to be recognized, she does not stop improving her competence as an HR professional but goes even further than that by helping future generations of HR practitioners enhance their abilities.

Beyond the words in this interview, nevertheless, lies the reality that success is difficult to achieve such that one has to make numerous sacrifices to reach it. The interviewees stressed "sustainability in whatever you do." An evolved leader continues to seek for aspects where one can contribute.

Atty. Payos narrates, "...In spite of my age, I still would like to continue in Labor Relations even in PMAP... in COPA. Yes. I still would like to be able to contribute to the enhancement of profession of Human Resources Management

so I kept myself up to date, to ask new. …I'm willing to listen to a young person. So, I kept… uhhh… absorbing line, I don't adopt an attitude na (that) I've been there, done this, done that…"

Thus, to a true leader, there is no formal retirement. An evolved leader continues to seek for aspects where he or she can contribute. Atty. Payos narrates, even at his ripe age, he keeps himself "up-to-date" and fine-tunes himself to be willing to "listen to young persons." Indeed, learning to a fully evolved leader never ends. Similar to a circumvolving cycle, a true leader begins life anew by way of stepping onto the first stage once again. He grapples once more in the leadership formation phase where he will be remolded; it is that stage where he will learn the basics of leadership, this time, in other aspects where he is fundamentally weak or where he has not yet evolved. Then he undergoes leadership metamorphoses where he will form his own principles and values depending on his experiences. Lastly, he reaches the Transcendence Stage, the fullness of his journey by sharing his wisdom, shaping other people's hearts and multiplying his giftedness. After which, the cycle restarts to the first stage and he begins to be a student of the University of Life all over again.

3.6. Philosophies, Principles, and Values

Leaders have philosophies, principles, and values that guide them as they emerge as impassioned individuals in what they do. These axioms solidify their belief systems that even though they are hindered by setbacks, they are replenished by the thought that they will emerge triumphant in the end. For instance is co-researcher 6 who, according to him, was besieged by crab mentality during his leadership. No amount of deliberate attempt to help and care for the people in the association made his detractors cease from criticizing him. Without any will to fight back, he simply hid under the mantle of his philosophy:

Mr. Espinosa states; "…I would almost always contribute in the discussion and that is probably the reason why… ahhh… the people around me appreciate my contribution and then, eventually elect me to the highest office… the…the sad fact, however, is that I notice … there seems to be a common… ahh… and pardon me for saying this…parang crab mentality na (seemingly there is crab mentality)… because if your… this is what I learned as one of the values in…in Fujitsu…"

It can be, therefore, deciphered based on his words that he leaned to his learning experience in Fujitsu, the company where he worked during his ascendancy to the highest position in PMAP. In his capacity as the president, he braved his cynics by having a humble front. He did not cower in defeat instead he bravely faced his critics by accepting their prejudices and proved them wrong when he continued on with his directives as their leader. He added;
"…The mature rice stalk bends itself low… and when you see the Japanese bow their heads so low… it means ahh…as your position gets higher, the more you should remain humble and I think humility is key to success…"

Mr. Marquez, on the contrary, seemingly enjoyed every bit of his leadership experience when he derived pleasure from his passion for letting people grow. While leadership does not guarantee that life will be rose-colored every step of the way, he simply re-channeled his energies to those things that really matter and in the course of his journey, he found joy in self-effacing himself; it is no longer of importance whether he is adequately rewarded for his efforts, the mere result of seeing his subordinates grow and develop make him conclude that everything else is not necessary. He stresses:
"…I always had the passion… letting people grow… I really enjoy doing is leadership committee that is where I see people grow…and I just feel so good when I could be part of their growth and development…"

It is when one forgets self that one embodies the mark of a true leader. To be a leader for self-aggrandizement is not the aim of authentic leadership. For one to be followed, he or she must be deeply rooted in philosophies that are outward directed or are not directed for selfish ends.

As when Atty. Pilar cited Jesus Christ as an example of true leadership, so it is with PMAP leaders or other heads of organizations for that matter similar to Christ, that one begins to awaken to the fact that sacrifice is the essence of living most especially for business leaders.

Atty. Pilar emphasized this by saying "…When you start to forget yourself and offer yourself for the good of mankind and the good to others… then you don't need to seek position, the position will be given to you and then, by nature, you become acknowledged as a leader and as a servant leader…"

4. Synthesis

This study differs from other leadership studies since it focuses on leadership journey stages of leadership that were referred to as the awakening, metamorphosis, and leadership transcendence. Other leadership researches delve into the qualities and virtues of leaders such as those of Brown and Trevino (2006), Greenleaf (2002) and Burns (2008). Other researchers, on the other hand, dwell on the leaders' relational linkages with other people as Bass and Riggio's (2006) and Whetstone's (2001) transformational leadership theories.

The leadership journey stages can be likened to the development of a person from childhood to adulthood and elderly stage in which such individual passes as he goes through his life span. In effect, the leadership journey theory encompasses the lifespan of a leader: from the moment he is awakened by the call for leadership, to the time he has metamorphosed through the challenges, mistakes, and lessons learned, to the moment he evolved and the time he has transcended from the altruistic state to the others-centered leadership state.

While this leadership theory can be applied to varying cultures and situations of leaders, some researchers opine that leadership approaches in one culture may not be effective in another. Acar (2010), Chen and Kao (2009) are in unison that

leadership theories operate depending on one's cultural context. Nevertheless, this research delves more on the progression of leaders and does not include its underlying effects on people with other cultural backgrounds. Thus, it may be immaterial to point out whether the theory presented herein can be applied to leaders with other cultures as this is not the central point of this study.

Majority of the research participants believed that the factors that contribute to the success of leaders are leadership transcendence toward other-centeredness and managing the association as a challenge and personal mastery. Likewise, at least half of the respondents believe that professional development and leadership metamorphosis through accomplishments are secondary factors that bring about the success of leaders. Finally, at least a third of the participants believe that prioritization and leadership formation through the influence of mentors are tertiary factors which lead to the success of leaders.

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