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What lurks beneath leadership ineffectiveness? A theoretical overview

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The impact of effective leadership practices on various aspects of organisational success is a well-researched area in the domain of leadership and management. There is, however, only a small amount of research available that focuses on those aspects that constitute ineffective leadership, which, in turn, contributes to organisational failure. Research suggests that there is a tendency in the literature, academia and industry to focus on the positive aspects of leadership while avoiding the negative side of leadership. The aim of this article is to bridge that. A non-empirical method was utilised for the purpose of this study. A literature approach was used to illustrate the different theoretical perspectives, trends and thinking on what constitutes leadership ineffectiveness. The analysis of the literature illustrate that leaders are more likely to be considered ineffective due to character flaws and the inability to effectively manage their emotions and maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships than any other aspect. The scrutiny of the literature raises another topic in leadership research previously neglected, in that, it explores and illustrate how narcissism, a personality disorder, as described in the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM-IV) may in fact resemble some of the aspects associated with ineffective leadership.

Key words: Leadership, leadership failure, ineffective leadership, bad leadership, narcissism, personality disorders.

INTRODUCTION

Hogan and Kaiser (2005) define leadership as 'the ability to build and maintain a group that performs well, relative to its competition'. Hogan and Hogan (2001) however states that between 50 and 75% of leaders are ineffective. Leadership ineffectiveness is central to one of the four primary schools of thought relating to organisational failure (Longenecker et al., 1999). According to Shilling (2009), ineffective leadership refers to those behaviours of leaders that are counterproductive to organisational success. This author distinguishes yet another term, namely 'destructive leadership', which refers to behaviours that directly or indirectly prevent organisations and individuals from attaining their respective goals. This author also makes reference to the term 'de-railed leadership' which is considered to be the most extreme form of destructive leadership, and implies leaders who are disloyal to their followers and their tasks. Limpan-Blumen (2005) introduces yet another term to describe ineffective leadership, namely 'toxic leadership', which refers to those destructive behaviours and dysfunctional personal qualities of a leader. Hogan and Kaiser (2005)

state that, 'leadership failure is more related to undesirable qualities than to the lacking of desirable qualities'.

Godkin and Allcorn (2009) states that dysfunctional leadership behaviours have far reaching implications for those within organisations as they seem to become 'contagious' and therefore have a ripple effect throughout an organisation.

Hogan and Kaiser (2005) shares this thought when they indicate that a leader's personality influences the dynamics and culture of the top management team and that this again influences and filters down into the rest of the organisation.

For the purpose of this article ineffective leadership will be used as an overarching term that includes disliked and denounced behaviours ranging from ineffective to destructive aspects of leadership behaviour.

Problem statement and research objectives

Burke (2006) argues that few resources and available

literature tend to focus on describing ineffective leadership practices (or referred to in this article as behaviour). This thought is shared by McCartney and Campbell (2006) and Schilling (2009), who express concern regarding the paucity of empirical research exploring leadership ineffectiveness. Schilling (2009), however, states that there is growing research interest in deviant and destructive behaviour of people in supervisory positions. Kellerman (2004) shares the same view when stating that literature, academia and industry tend to focus more on the positive aspects of leadership, while neglecting the negative side of leadership. The reason for steering clear of this type of research may be in part because the costs are too difficult to calibrate.

Higgs (2009) refer to Rowland and Higgs who concluded that there is a dire need for understanding the 'dark side' of leadership; however, existing literature on leadership does not focus on this facet of leadership and there is little empirical research available covering this research area. According to Schilling (2009), it is more important to understand the root causes of these ineffective (leadership) behaviours than to focus on the surface level behaviours.

Rationale of the study

To ensure a better understanding of why leaders fail, it is of paramount importance to understand the behaviours and underlying drivers causing them to be ineffective. Another reason for studying leadership ineffectiveness is that many of these ineffective behaviours and underlying drivers are difficult to detect because they often coexist with well-developed social skills and may be concealed by initial positive impressions. Dotlich and Cairo (2003) are of the opinion that successful leaders are those who identify and learn to control their de-railers – which presents another reason for this study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research method

A literature-based method was used in this study as it provides a critical analysis of the available literature and illustrates the different theoretical perspectives on the topic under investigation, as the body of empirical evidence on ineffective leadership is apparently still small. This approach furthermore allows for theory-building, in that, it wishes to gain a deeper understanding of ineffective leadership.

Location and the collection of the literature

The electronic databases that were consulted for the purpose of the literature review included the business source complete psych articles, and psych info. Only texts published in English were considered in the database search. From all the texts yielded by this search, only those that addressed leadership ineffectiveness, leadership failure, bad leadership, toxic leadership, and narcissism were included for review. The reference lists of those articles yielded from the returned results were then again consulted for other relevant literature that may not have been considered.

Analysis of the literature

The literature referred to was analysed using content analysis. According to Bergh (2007), content analysis is appropriate when researchers attempt to examine written documents, as is the case for this article. According to the same author, words or themes could be useful units to apply when examining a specific phenolmenon. It is also advisable to identify these words or themes in advance before databases are consulted (as in the case of this study). Themes that emerged from the literature referred to were subjected to content analysis.

Presentation of the literature

The literature will be presented by first providing a review of the major findings of the literature in light of the objectives of this article, where after, the article will conclude with limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

Literature

Pienaar (2009) cites literature by Crosbie, Babiak and Hare, as well as by McCartney and Campbell, that implies that executives are more often dismissed because of 'personality problems' than any other aspect. These authors seem to suggest that it is mainly leaders' character and interpersonal skills that will ultimately determine whether they will be effective or not. However, this does not negate the importance of leaders' technical competence, business knowledge and managerial skills.

In this article leadership ineffectiveness, as suggested by subsequent authors, will focus on those character attributes, emotions and interpersonal skills presented in the consulted literature that characterise ineffective leadership. The literature will also attempt to illustrate the complexity of trying to describe and illustrate all those aspects of ineffective leadership in the absence of an acceptable integrated model and/or framework describing leadership ineffectiveness.

Components of ineffective leadership

A leader's character is the primary reason why leaders fail (Kellerman, 2004). The author further identifies self-interest, greed and the need for power as underlying motives causing leaders to be ineffective and unethical. These underlying reasons and/or needs may manifest in, for example, behaviour such as lying, cheating and stealing with self-interest as the primary drive or in extreme behaviour, where the leader uses pain as instrument to ensure power. This can manifest in the form of physical and/or psychological harm.

The aforementioned corresponds with the views of Burke (2006) and Hogan (1994), who are of the opinion that people are generally prone to and genetically programmed towards egocentrism, which, if not attended to, could lead people (leaders in this instance) to exhibit selfish behaviour (overtly and covertly). According to Gunn (2006), leaders' effectiveness will be impaired if they engage in activities that merely serve their own interests without considering the well-being of others (employees). Pienaar (2009) refers to the work of the Arbinger Institute (2002), in which it was found that people (employees in this instance) can almost always sense when leaders do not consider their needs and they are merely being treated as objects to serve a particular purpose or cause. Despite

what leaders therefore do on the outside, people (employees) respond primarily to how leaders 'feel' about them. Dotlich and Cairo (2003) supports the idea that people can sense what leaders feel towards them and that this is what people respond to.

According to Burke (2006), Dotlich and Cairo (2003), McCall and Lombardo (in Burke, 2006: 95) and Ruderman et al. (2001), arrogance seems to be an additional factor contributing to a leader being ineffective. Dotlich and Cairo (2003) view arrogance as the opinion a person holds of himself or herself in that he or she is right and everybody else is wrong. This seems to be consistent with the findings of Finkelstein (2003), who illustrated that leaders who presided over major business failures tended to (i) overestimate their ability to control events, (ii) utilise their businesses to carry out personal ambitions, (iii) believe that and behave as if they have all the answers, while often being fixated on needing to be right and in control, (iv) ruthlessly eliminate any critics and renounce any disagreement/opposition, (v) be obsessed with the company's image in the public eye, rather than managing the company, and (vi) stick to practices that worked for them in the past.

This last aspect is consistent with the findings of Burke (2006) and Kellerman (2004), who also identified rigidness (when a leader is competent but unable or unwilling to adapt to new ideas or new information in changing times) as an innate personality attribute that could decrease the effectiveness of a leader. Risk evasiveness is another aspect identified in the literature that may impair the effectiveness of a leader. Risk evasiveness presents itself in a leader who is too afraid to take risks and make errors (Burke, 2006). This may be caused by a leader's underlying inclination towards perfectionism (when he or she focuses on perfecting the little things, even when the big things go wrong) or eagerness to please (where the focal point is to win the popularity contest) as additional aspects that could cause a leader to be ineffective (Dotlich and Cairo, 2003). In their book, *Why CEOs fail,* Dotlich and Cairo (2003) identified additional 'de-railers', which they consistently found in CEOs and senior leaders who were deemed ineffective. They found these additional leadership de-railers to be eccentricity (when a leader attempts to portray an image that is extremely different just for the sake of it), melodrama (when leaders strive to be the centre of attention), excessive caution (the inability of a leader to take action when necessary), habitual distrust (when leaders focus on the negatives), mischievousness (when a leader has a tendency to break rules) and passive resistance (when silence is misinterpreted as agreement).

Another aspect which seems to affect a leader's effectiveness is a leader's emotions, and more specifically, the difficulty of a leader to manage his or her emotions (Kellerman, 2004; Ruderman et al., 2001) and the fluctuation in a leader's emotions (Burke, 2006). Literature has shown that moodiness (Burke, 2006), mood swings (Dotlich and Cairo, 2003) and angry outbursts (Ruderman et al., 2001) could decrease a leader's effectiveness.

Dotlich and Cairo (2003) and McCall and Lombardo (in Burke, 2006) identified aloofness (when leaders are disengaged and disconnected from the people around them) as an aspect that could cause a leader to be ineffective. The ineffectiveness of a leader might be exacerbated if a leader furthermore shows signs of being insensitive towards others, according to McCall and Lombardo (in Burke, 2006) or when he or she lacks compassion and empathy for others (Ruderman et al., 2001). This corresponds with 'callousness' identified by Kellerman (2004), which means that the leader is uncaring or unkind and ignores or disregards the needs, wants and wishes of subordinates and employees in general (Kellerman, 2004).

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them. Dotlich and Cairo (2003) supports the idea that people can sense what leaders feel towards them and that this is what people respond to.

The effectiveness of a leader may be also be impaired if a leader displays signs of irritation, pessimism or being impatient with others (Burke, 2006). Other interpersonal skills that the literature has shown to be counterproductive include an abrasive style (McCall and Lombardo in Burke, 2006; Ruderman, et al., 2001), a bullying style (McCall and Lombardo in Burke, 2006), abusiveness in general and, more specifically, verbally abusing others (Ruderman et al., 2001).

RESULTS

Conceptual analysis: What lurks beneath leadership ineffectiveness?

As indicated by various authors in the problem statement and eluded to in the rational for this article, it is more important to focus on and simultaneously understand the root causes of ineffective (leadership) behaviours, rather than concentrating on the surface level behaviours.

Pienaar (2009) refers to Dotlich and Cairo (2003), who are of the opinion that leaders may sabotage themselves, albeit unconsciously. They apparently have all the necessary skills, intellect and experience to lead, but for some reason they are unable to do so. These authors suggest that there might be an underlying cause overturning their best efforts as leaders – an aspect of a leaders' character that operates beyond their level of consciousness that might be responsible for their ineffectiveness.

The following narrative illustrates the possibility that there are underlying reason(s) why leaders are ineffective:

There once was a person who noticed a disturbing bump under a rug. This person tried to smooth out the rug, but every time he did, the bump reappeared. In utter frustration, he finally lifted up the rug, and to his great surprise, out slid an angry snake (De Vries, 2006).

This metaphor can be applied to the current literature that tends to focus on the behaviour and symptoms of ineffective leadership, while the 'something deeper' that may be responsible for leaders' ineffectiveness is ignored. This aspect that is integral to a leader and which operates beneath the awareness of a person and contributes to ineffective leadership is identified by Babiak and Hare (2007) as narcissism – a personality disorder.

Hogan and Hogan (1997) proposed that the standard personality disorders described in the DSM-IV could provide a taxonomy of the most important underlying causes of managerial failure – in the absence of an integrated model describing leadership ineffectiveness. The following literature will therefore focus on using a psychological diagnostic approach to illustrate how narcissism, a personality disorder according to the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), could explain some of the behaviours associated with leadership

ineffectiveness. According to Brown et al. (2009), 'narcissism is a one of the oldest constructs in psychology'. It is only in the last 15 to 20 years that researchers prompted the possible relationship between leadership and narcissism – a personality disorder (Higgs, 2009). It is important, however, to note that personality disorders are not forms of mental illness but dysfunctional interpersonal dispositions that coexist with talent, ambition and good social skills that prevent leaders to complete the essential task of leadership, namely building a team (Hogan and Hogan, 1997).

According to the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) people with a narcissistic personality disorder tend to (i) display a grandiose sense of self-importance (for example, exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognised as superior without commensurate achievements), (ii) be preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love, (iii) believe that he/she is special or unique and should associate with other special or high status people, (iv) require excessive admiration, (v) have a sense of entitlement, that is, unreasonable expectations of especially favourable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations, (vi) be interpersonally exploitive, that is, take advantage of others to achieve his or her own goals, (vii) lack empathy, and tend to be unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others, (viii) be envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her and (ix) show arrogant, haughty behaviours or attitudes.

Brunell et al. (2008) state that the behaviours associated with narcissism may well be the root cause of ineffective leadership. They also claim that narcissists often rise to positions of leadership and power as they apparently have the skills and qualities for becoming leaders, but not necessarily the capacity to sustain qualities to endure as a leader over time. Hogan and Kaiser (2005) affirm this when they emphasise the problematic nature of the dark-side characteristics (narcissism) of leadership behaviour in that these often coexist with well-developed social skills that mask or compensate for these deficiencies. These authors comment, however, that a narcissist will not be able to sustain this façade over an extended period.

Babiak and Hare (2007), Pullen and Rhodes (2008) and Brunell et al. (2008) describe narcissists as people who have an excessive need for admiration and display a pervasive pattern of grandiosity and a lack of empathy for others. Leaders with this disorder will exhibit behaviours and take action to become the centre of attention. They also display a grandiose sense of self-importance as the primary criterion, while they have an excessive need for admiration by others, arrogance, a sense of uniqueness and entitlement, lack of empathy, and a tendency to exploit others. Brown et al. (2009) refer to literature that state that narcissists are likely to act in self-serving and aggressive ways to self-esteem threats and may exhibit

emotional volatility following positive and/or negative feedback. They also tend to seek out power, interpersonal dominance, status, independence, etc. Associated with this are low levels of agreeableness and a low need for intimacy, which might show up in a lack of interpersonal warmth. Higgs (2009) refers to studies that show narcissists as having mood swings, high levels of anger and aggression in response to negative feedback and high levels of over-confidence in their own abilities.

Finklestein and Hambrick (in Higgs, 2009) identified ways in which narcissistic leadership behaviour in CEOs may show-up in organisations. CEOs with this personality disorder may for example initiate more changes more rapidly, engage in acts of pretentiousness, and initiate processes that will attract attention such as significant and frequent mergers and acquisitions.

Pullen and Rhodes (2008) refer to Brown, who provides further examples of how narcissism may manifest in particular leadership behaviour(s). Leaders who have been identified as narcissistic are more likely to (i) deny facts in the face of realities, (ii) rationalise and justify their own behaviour so as to support the belief of the 'ideal' self, for example rationalising failures, justifying self-serving policies, (iii) practise self-enhancement, focusing on over-stating some virtues and achievements, (iv) attribute positive organisational outcomes to themselves, but rationalise unfavourable organisational outcomes to external factors or people, (v) feel that they are entitled to organisational privileges such as power, success and admiration, while lacking empathy for others, and (vi) be hyper-sensitive to criticism from others.

Other ways that narcissism may show up in organisations are when leaders strive for personal success by way of high visibility, upward mobility and the defeat of rivals. This might be noticed in subtle forms such as people (peers) engaging in practices to gain the approval of their supervisors to achieve wealth, fame and/or power while caring little about the substance of their achievements or their affect on others. Excessive narcissism in leaders may lead to a dysfunctional fixation on power, status, prestige and superiority, in which others mainly serve as a means to an end (Pullen and Rhodes, 2008). The aforementioned behaviours associated with narcissism in leaders eventually contribute to the development of damaged systems and relationships, which in turn lead to negative organisational outcomes such as blaming, toxic organisational cultures, the abuse of power for personal gain, unethical behaviour, and organisational collapse, to name but a few (Higgs, 2009).

Conclusion

The analysis of the literature illustrate that leaders are more likely to be considered ineffective due to character flaws and the inability to effectively manage their emotions and maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships

than any other aspect. The scrutiny of the literature raises another topic in leadership research previously neglected, in that, it explores and illustrate how narcissism, a personality disorder, as described in the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM-IV) may in fact resemble some of the literature associated with ineffective leadership.

Future research and limitations

The literature suggests that researchers are not necessarily in agreement with the components responsible for ineffective leadership and how these factors influence one another. It is therefore suggested that a comprehensive and integrated model be developed to explain leadership ineffectiveness in the absence of such a framework. It would be helpful if researchers could determine whether lack of skills, the personality profile of a person (character) or other aspects, such as disorders (which have not been considered yet), would be better predictors of leadership ineffectiveness.

Prospective researchers should also endeavour to establish whether there is any relationship between ineffective leadership practices and narcissism, as Higgs (2009) states that there are arguments for such a relationship but that more empirical research is required in this area. It would also be beneficial to consider alternative databases and to investigate the organisational outcomes in cases where leadership behaviour that is characteristic of a narcissist presents itself.

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