

Good Leadership is the Key to Team Performance

An organization is a collection of people who work together and coordinate their actions to achieve individual and organizational goals (George and Jones, 2008, p.1). It can be viewed as one very large team, broken into multiple variably sized teams, each with their own set of tasks and objectives, working in cohesion. Every team, no matter its size and functionality has one thing in common: it has a leader.

As identified by Harrison and Bramson (1984) there are five distinct thinking styles prevalent in Western society: the synthesists, realists, pragmatists, analysts and the idealists, each with their unique personalities and problem solving strategies. Much like an orchestra, a team comprises of people armed with their own unique thinking style; and like a conductor, the leader unifies his performers, sets the tone of the performance, listens to and shapes *his* ensemble. The last twenty years have seen a sharp shift in the demographic makeup of employees entering the workforce and occupying higher-level positions (George and Jones, 2008) This increasing workforce diversity and the new and complex challenges it poses has created, now more than ever, the need to not only focus on what constitutes 'good leadership' but also to identify its role in team effectiveness and performance.

What is effective leadership? Who is a good leader? What is it that sets apart a 'good leader' from the rest? Straightforward questions, with a not so simple answers. Over the last 100 years many have tried to answer these questions and have as a result, formulated multiple theories, each analysing leadership from a different perspective. The first half of the 20th century saw researchers trying to identify those personality traits that people possess, that make them leaders rather than followers and those attributes that make them more effective than others (Buchanan and Huczynski, 2010). Ralph Stogdill (1948, 1974, as cited in Buchanan and Huczynski, 2010, p.599) reviewed hundreds of trait studies and as a result, compiled a comprehensive albeit typical list of *leadership traits*. The lack of consistency in leadership traits and the vague nature of the identified traits soon gave rise to the Leader Behaviour Approach which seeks to identify leader behaviours that help individuals, teams and organisations to achieve their goals. Rensis Likert (1961, as cited in Buchanan and Huczynski, 2010, p.607) re-enforced the benefits of considerate, performance orientated leadership identified by the researchers at Ohio State University (1940's, 1950's), cited four major systems of leadership, and identified that effective leaders generally adopt participative or democratic leadership systems. However, in some situations, some leaders are more effective than other leaders with similar traits and sometimes a leader effective in one situation, is completely ineffective in another. Fiedler's Contingency Theory (George and Jones, 2008, p.397) recognized that leader effectiveness is determined by both- the leaders' traits and the situations and context in which they operate. Unlike Fiedler's theory which identified that leaders can either be relationship-oriented or task-oriented, Hersey and Blanchard (1988) developed the 'Situational Approach' and argued that a good leader is one who adapts his style to meet the demand of the situation (Buchanan and Huczynski, 2010, p.612). They also identified the ability and willingness of the followers as key factors in determining the leader's effectiveness. Over the next decade, various theories have sought to identify and describe 'good and effective leadership' including the Path Goal Theory (House, Mitchell, 1974) and the Vroom-Yetton- Jago Model (1988), however the new leadership movement began with the work of Burns (1978), when he distinguished between transactional and transformational forms of leadership. The early 21st century saw 'good leaders' being identified as individuals who relied on emotional intelligence while leading and could switch styles to suit the operational context (Goleman, 2000; Snowden and Boone, 2007).

Understanding how groups change is important because every group has its own unique challenges and for a group to be effective and attain high performance levels, these challenges need to be effectively managed. Though

the 'Five Stage Model' (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman and Jensen, 1977 as cited in Buchanan and Huczynski, 2010) clearly outlines five stages of group formation, not all groups develop through all stages and the rate of progress through these stages varies. No one stage can be singled out as more important than another, however, *storming*-the conflict stage, is where most groups stagnate and sometimes fail. This is the stage where members begin to question group roles and not only question but also, sometimes, resist control and leadership. Jeff Bezos, Angela Merkel, Satya Nadella- some of the most influential and effective leaders of this century, all have one thing in common: their ability to guide their teams through the storming stage to the performing stage and to take advantage of the diversity in their teams to improve decision making and raise performance levels.

Amazon.com, an organization with humble beginnings, is one of this century's most successful dot.com. At Amazon, founder and CEO Jeff Bezos has cracked the code. Leading as a figurehead and working with his employees to find innovative, cost saving problem solutions, Bezos not only behaves in ways that embody Amazon's values and objectives but also help improve employee attitudes and performance. As a result, employees here are happier, work harder and are less likely to leave their jobs, unlike in many other retail companies. In the absence of an able and willing team that identifies with and relates to its leader, Bezos would never have attained the kind of success he has. As the 'Amazon approach' suggests, a good leader is one who actively creates a favourable work situation in which people at all levels are motivated to work and behave in ways conducive to achieving highest possible performance levels. Good and effective leadership, can be identified as meticulous planning, and a deep and solid understanding and appreciation of *how people behave, what causes these behaviours*, and what can be done to maximize positive and minimize negative behaviours (George and Jones, 2008).

Leadership, especially 'good leadership' has always been a difficult concept to define and its effect on team performance has been an even more debatable area of study. Modern research sentiment identifies a 'good leader' as someone who is flexible, adaptable, considerate, optimistic, shows resilience and can bounce back from catastrophic events (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). But is this enough? Today, as the 'normal range of functioning' for any team and its leader is constantly redefined, we can rightly say that though not the sole determinant, good leadership is the key to team performance.

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