Reasoning skills for leaders assignment

Business, Management

Reasoning Skills for Leaders Q: Critically discuss why management and leadership development programs place more importance on rational and technical capabilities than emotional ones. Leadership has been defined as " the ability to influence a group towards the achievement of a vision or set of goals", and managers as " people who achieve goals through other people" (Robbins et al 2008, 695).

With these definitions in mind, it would seem that appropriate training for leaders and managers would be highly people oriented; developing emotional intelligence skills, communication skills and appreciating the role of human emotion within the workplace. However, the focus of such programs has been, and still is to a large extent, on technical skills and rational thinking.

Many factors contribute to this disparate focus; the historical and cultural context in which such programs are developed and taught, the assumptions and beliefs on how work directions translate into a good or service, the way universities are structured and even the types of students attending management and leadership programs. Until relatively recently, people were assumed to be " rational creatures" (Ripley 2009, 31). This assumption meant that organisations and educators of leaders/managers were oblivious to the role of emotion in the workplace (Kimura and Yoshimori 1989, 22).

The utilization of rigid structures, explicit rules and procedures, designed to control and limit employee behaviour (Napoli, Whiteley and Johansen 2005, 35) illustrate the reliance of business thinkers upon employee's rational behaviour. Rules plus rational behaviour were thought to produce a

predictable and stable labour force, which allowed management to consider employed labour as a steadfast factor of the production process.

Given the correct rules and procedures, it was thought that employees would fall into line, and hence management and leaders could focus on the technical and rational aspects of the organisation, and did not have to be overly concerned with employees or affective issues. Social issues were part of the equation, at least as they affected profit, productivity, or public relations. But sensitivities beyond that were not the province of business.

Indeed, they could handicap a manager in making the tough decisions often demanded by the bottom line. (Hancock 1998, 41) It is not surprising given this context, that traditional management and leadership training emphasised technical knowledge and rational thinking. In contrast, collectivist cultures have historically emphasised team work, and therefore valued collaborative behaviours, emotional intelligence and effective team skills, balancing these with the technical skills required for their roles.

Western organisational philosophy reflects the western worship of individualism and self pursuit, and so traditionally neglected emotion within the workplace; a view that Japanese management consider to be " elitist, technical and not too pragmatic" (Kimura and Yoshimori 1989, 22). Whilst there is now greater agreement in western organisations that successful managers and leaders require more than just technical knowledge and defensible, rational thinking, there is still a significant acceptance of poor people skills and the neglect of emotion to the great detriment of our organisations.

A 2006 UK survey determined that only 12% of employees are ' highly engaged', with 65% ' moderately engaged' and 23% ' disengaged'. These figures do not surprise. However, when we relate these statistics to another resource, it demonstrates how conditioned we are to accept lower performance from potentially the greatest asset of an organisation (its employees); Now, just for a moment, imagine an organisation where only 20 per cent of the computers worked properly, 60 per cent were unreliable and 20 per cent either did nothing at all or spent their entire time infecting the system with viruses … It would be unthinkable, wouldn't it?

Resource inefficiencies on this scale are simply not tolerated – except, it seems, in the human resources department. (Fairhurst 2008, 321). For many decades, the lack of predictability of managerial theories was ignored (Dutton, Thomas and Butler 1984, 222). Unsupported managerial beliefs continued (Dutton, Thomas and Butler 1984, 220; Donaldson 2002, 96), and the ignorance of emotions role in the workplace persisted. However, in the 1970's and 1980's the pendulum gradually began to swing away from a sole reliance upon rational and technical thinking, and towards recognition that emotions have greater sway than was previously thought.

Two psychologists, Kahneman and Tversky, investigated how people made decisions. Their revolutionary work indicated that instead of ration, people often used ' heuristics', or emotional shortcuts (Ripley 2009, 31). Emotions were finally being recognised as a legitimate factor. Around the same time, the business environment was changing rapidly. Increased competition, technological changes, globalisation and vastly improved speed of

information (Rousseau 1989, 123; Reeve 1992, 3; Clawson 2006, 27) required organisations to adapt and change the way they operated.

For managers, decision making "' strictly by the numbers' became increasingly hazardous as new variables emerged that defied being quantified" (Hancock 1998, 41). However, as Hancock (1998, 41) illustrates, " when business looked to MBA programs to provide that new leadership, it more likely found the source of its problems than their solution". Whilst management and leadership graduates were well versed technically, they lacked the necessary social skills (Hancock 1998, 41).

It became increasingly obvious that there was a disconnect between programs educating managers and leaders and the realities of the business world, where cross-functional team work, and therefore emotional intelligence, were becoming ever more important (Hancock 1998, 42; Deutchman 1991; Reeve 1992, 4). Universities had not yet taken up this challenge and were still encouraging specialization and ' subject matter mastery' (Franklin 2004, 62), and were ' ill-equipped' to teach students about cross-functional issues (Reeve 1992, 4-5).

However, there are significant challenges in assigning group work to students to experientially learn and analyse their own strengths and weaknesses as a collaborative team member. Whilst good for developing their collaborative and people skills, group work can be to the detriment of learning as assignments may be " divided up in a manner to facilitate its completion rather than to facilitate learning" (Hettenhouse 1998, 46). Teaching and assessing rational and technical facts is also much easier, as

the material is less ambiguous and has more detail (Fiske and Linville 1980, 549).

There is also greater academic agreement over technical ' facts' than the ' soft-side' of management/leadership skills (Deutchman 1991). Several academics have also highlighted a shift in the age and experience of those undertaking management and leadership programs, with a trend towards more mature students. The average MBA student now has worked for five years full-time, whereas previously many more students were entering direct from an undergraduate course (Deutchman 1991, 68).

Hettenhouse, chairman of Indiana Univerity's School of Business, attests that the less experienced students required more technical grounding, such as was given in the ' traditional' management and leadership programs (Hettenhouse 1998, 46). There is no doubt that previous management and leadership programs placed more importance on rational and technical capabilities. A great deal of this emanated from the assumption that people and affective elements had negligible impact upon a business because people behaved rationally.

In hindsight, we can see that organisational goals suffered, if not (as was perceived at the time) from deviant behaviour when rationality was ignored, but suffered from neglecting to harness the intangible magic of engaging not only employee's minds, but their hearts. Contemporary businesses and management/leadership programs now do recognise the duality of emotion and rationality. Such programs are beginning to address the development of people skills and emotional intelligence, by teaching communication, team-

building and interpersonal skills (Hancock 1998, 44). Traditional management/leadership programs emphasised talking.

Current programs emphasis listening (Clawson 2006, 27). Observing these changes prompted Hettenhouse (1998, 48) to remark, " This is an exciting time to be involved in MBA education".

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