Trait theory

Introduction

Throughout the 20th century, researchers and analysts devoted their time, resources and energy towards studying leadership and the desirable, inherent characteristics displayed by a good leader. Amongst these theories formulated was the trait approach. This approach focuses on the innate characteristics that make some people outstanding leaders. Primarily, studies were conducted on great leaders in dominant fields such as the military, social arena and the political field in an attempt to differentiate the characteristics indicative of a leader and those possessed by a follower. Therefore, the trait approach was initially referred to as the ' Great Man' theory. Notable figures such as Indira Gandhi, Catherine the Great and Napoleon Bonaparte were extensively studied. Researchers drew a common conclusion that these characteristics and leadership skills were not acquired; rather ' great' people possessed them since birth. However, this mindset and particular school of thought received heavy criticism, more so from Stogdill, whose studies showed that there were no consistently identifiable traits that could differentiate a leader from a follower across diverse situations. Resultantly, the trait approach underwent wide changes in its perspective and coherence. Researchers chose to concentrate on the relationship amongst people faced by particular social circumstances, rather than focus on innate personal attributes possessed by individuals considered as ' great.' Therefore, researchers based their studies partially on the situation's context, although personal traits were not entirely overlooked. This essay shall aim at evaluating the trait theory of leadership and identify its major elements. In addition, the essay shall focus on the strengths and criticisms

underlying this theory. Finally, a coherent approach shall be applied in order to illustrate the importance of this theory in leadership as well as epitomize its applicability.

Elements

During the 20th century, various notable studies were conducted. However, with the progression towards an advanced, high-tech society, these studies presented a general consensus on the major elements that define the trait theory. Five elements have been epitomized as adequately representing this approach. These are intelligence, self-confidence, integrity, determination and sociability.

a) Intelligence

Leadership and an individual's intellectual ability are positively correlated. A leader who has a higher intellectual capacity in comparison to the subordinates possesses intricate problem-solving skills as well as a sound social-judgment capacity. Findings and conclusions made from a study conducted by Zaccaro et al., which analyzed the relationship between intelligence and leadership via use of indices, illustrate that leaders normally have a higher intellectual ability in comparison to their followers. The study, which focused primarily on attributes such as perceptual ability, verbal ability and reasoning capacity, proved that these characteristics were more pronounced in leaders than in the followers. Although a higher intellectual capacity is advantageous to the leader, this should not differ greatly from the followers' ability. Otherwise, an extremely high IQ capacity in comparison to the subordinates is counterproductive due to the fact that the leader shall

experience difficulties in communicating to the followers as well as perceiving their problems, since the leader&rsqo; s ideas and line of thoughts may be too advanced to be conceptualized.

b) Self-confidence

Each and every person is bound to be highly competent as well as more productive if one is self-assured. In the context of the trait approach, this is an ability to feel certain and confident about one's skills and competencies. Additionally, self-confident leaders are bound to have a higher self-esteem and have the belief that they can make a huge difference and significant progress through consolidation of their following. Therefore, it grants the leader the assurance that their attempts to reach out and influence others towards a certain cause are gaining considerable ground.

c) Determination

The ups and downs, associated with a leader's drive towards a certain cause, require more than mere confidence. The leader must possess an indefatigable energy and drive to achieve the laid-down mission despite facing multiple odds. Therefore, determination represents the leader's desire and drive towards achieving certain goals and entails unique attributes such as initiative, compulsion, persistence and control. In certain cases, more so in times when a leader faces opposition or is facing rough times, the leader must rely on this unique attribute, which grants him or her the power to be assertive, proactive, and the ability to persevere in spite of facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Therefore, a leader must stand up to be counted.

d) Integrity

Integrity encompasses two important attributes: honesty and trustworthiness. Not only must a leader exhibit a strong set of socially acceptable principles but must also take responsibility for all actions either carried out by the leader or his/her subordinates. Therefore, this unique attribute reinforces confidence in the leader since such an individual gains the followers' trust and loyalty. Deceptiveness and cunningness may prove to produce results in the short-term but are bound to be disastrous in the long-term such as the case was during the quest for President Clinton's impeachment as well as the search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq during President George W. Bush's administration. Hence, it is of the utmost importance that leaders are perceived as dependable and loyal; else the followers are bound to lose their faith in them.

e) Sociability

The relationship between leaders and their followers is of the utmost importance and must be impeccable and amicable. Obviously, leaders around the world must attend numerous social events such as balls and charity events in order to show their sociability skills, which are vital in their quest for followers towards the advancement of their cause(s). Sociable leaders exhibit tact and are outgoing, courteous, friendly and diplomatic. Leaders must depict genuine concern for the well-being of their followers as well as possess flawless interpersonal skills in order to build a cohesive and cooperative following.

Strengths and Weaknesses

a) Strengths

This theory has various merits in its favor. First, it is intuitively appealing. The society perceives leaders as a special kind of people who have the power to perform extraordinary deeds. The trait approach towards leadership provides a ssimilar approach, since it seeks to depict leaders as people with special attributes. Followers must view their leaders as people with a unique gift, a need fulfilled by this theory. Secondly, this theory has been the subject of research for a lengthy period of time. Therefore, there exist a lot of of literature backing up this approach, which aids in verifying its credibility. Thirdly, the theory focuses primarily on leaders, thereby providing an in-depth understanding of the relationship between leaders and their personality traits. The leadership process encompasses leaders, followers and their context/situations. However, by primarily focusing on leaders, more knowledge surfaces on this relationship. Finally, this approach provides a benchmark for evaluation of what traits an individual possesses and whether one is adequately equipped to face a particular situation. Thus, through this approach, managers and supervisors can evaluate their strengths as well as weaknesses in order to seek ways on how they can be better leaders.

b) Weaknesses

Despite having significant strengths, this approach has various weaknesses. First, this theory has been the subject of research for over a century. However, there is no entirely definitive and exhaustive list of desirable leadership traits. Different studies have divergent opinions, thus, making the list uncertain and ambiguous in some contexts. Secondly, the theory fails in

contextualizing leaders into their situations. Individuals who may emerge as leaders in one field may fail to do so in a different context or may fail to uphold their leadership status over time. Thirdly, the approach cannot be applied in training or inculcating leadership traits. Whereas it might be possible to identify various definitive traits in a particular field, it might be virtually impossible to change them. For instance, it is not possible to raise a manager's IQ. Thus, the theory is based on fixed psychological attributes that severely limit its possible application to training or development.

Application

Although this approach has various shortcomings, it is indispensable in analyzing the concept of leadership. Despite the fact that it does not clearly identify which traits are obligatory, it directs individuals on which traits they should aspire to possess. Therefore, leaders should take personality tests and acquire feedback from other mechanisms in order to identify, which traits are highly relevant in a particular field or situation. In addition, self-evaluation is crucial in identifying their strengths and shortcomings in their leadership field.

In conclusion, the trait approach is inherently different from other theories applied in leadership evaluation due to the fact that it is centered on a leader. Thus, it is straightforward in its evaluation of specific traits and who possesses them. In addition, it does not dictate the principles that a leader must have or the actions that a leader must take but seeks to establish which traits are necessary if a leader is to be considered effective. Hence, it focuses on the relationship between a leader and his/her personality traits.

Finally, this theory suggests that identifying leadership positions with specific profiles is vital if an organization's staff is to work in harmony. Therefore, organizations should identify which traits best suit a particular position then adopt relevant personality assessment mechanisms in order to determine which employees are best suited to these positions.