

Effect of life events on effective leadership



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Meers' study is qualitative in nature. The purpose of his study was to explore how the selected leaders made sense of their experiences by understanding the context of the experiences themselves. It was imperative to the efficacy of his study to understand the perspectives of the leaders as they related their life experiences and what impact they saw these events having on their leadership development. As life experiences are best related in story format, it best served this study for the researcher to utilize personal interviews with participants as the primary method of data collection. The stories that leaders told about their formative life experiences cannot be broken down into easily manipulated variables, but rather must be understood as whole events that carry complex meanings for each individual. As Meers began his study, a theory was not presented for proving or dis-proving, however, in the process of data collection a theory did emerge. This is consistent with the qualitative approach and specifically the grounded theory method. Strauss and Corbin (1998) define grounded theory as: "theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process" (pg. 12). The theoretical framework of how effective leaders learn from significant life experiences developed within this study matches this definition. The situation studied within this project was the significant life experiences of effective leaders with the process being leadership and the phenomenon being how these leaders learned from their respective significant experiences. The exploration of leaders' life experiences moved from the specifics of each individual's stories to generalizations that can be applied to the broader area of leadership development.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to discover the role that significant life events played in the development of effective leaders. The use of the term “significant” in describing life events could sound somewhat limiting; however the intent of this study was for participants to define for themselves what a “significant” life event entails. Utilizing a semi-structured interview process, leaders perceived as being effective were interviewed to explore the meaning they made out of certain life experiences. Through analysis of this information the author attempted to discover common emerging themes which impacted their development.

Problem Statements

- 1) What is leadership? and
- 2) How do leaders develop? or, From where do leaders come?

Alignment of Research Question, Purpose Statement, and Problem Statement

The author of this paper believes that the research questions, the purpose statement, and the problem statement are well aligned. First, based on the research question(s), it was critical for the researcher to provide a clear definition of leadership. In doing so, he was able to establish a foundation for his study. Meers’ study looked at “effective leaders”. It was critical for Meers to identify what an effective leader is. He did this through his review of literature and the identification of leadership based on a longitudinal study that included theory from numerous pioneers in the field of leadership and organizational studies.

Meers also needed to research the foundations of leadership development. Most specifically, it was critical for him to include prior research theories of how a person becomes a leader and how a person develops and refines leadership skill and traits.

Meers' purpose statement effectively describes the research questions using concise language.

Literature Used to Identify Gaps and Tensions within the Literature

Meers dissertation includes a comprehensive literature review of prior studies. He began his review by defining leadership, which he accomplished through his own acquired knowledge. After defining leadership, the question (mentioned previously) that then arises is: How are leaders developed? Where do they come from?

To answer these questions, Meers looked to the earlier work of Thomas Carlyle called the "Great Man" theory (Wren, 1995). Meers then addressed the transformation of leadership theory during the mid part of the twentieth century. He relied on the studies conducted by Conger (1992) and Fulmer (1997) who both studied the relationship between leaders and managers and whose work provided Meers with a clear distinction between management and leadership.

Fulmer's research regarding early leadership training provided Meers with an overview of where the field has been, where it was at the time of his research and where he saw it headed (Fulmer, 1997).

The studies conducted by Burns (1978), Greenleaf (1970) and Kegan (1982) provided Meers with further information regarding the transformation of leadership theory. In his seminal work, *Leadership*, Burns (1978) proposed the idea that there were really two forms of leadership: transactional and transforming (or transformational). Burns' (1978) work then encouraged others to begin to think of leadership as different from management, with leadership being much more focused on relationships with followers and particularly on influencing others to achieve common goals. For the purposes of his study, Meers did not conduct a thorough analysis of servant leadership and transformational leadership, but instead focused on the impact the articulation and popularization of these forms of leadership have had upon the field of leadership training and development. He looked to the research of Greenleaf for this information. Kegan's theory of moral development impacted the world of leadership training and development, mainly by introducing his idea of development. Meers was thorough in his choice to include the work of these three theorists. Meers' longitudinal report ends with the contemporary work of Peter Senge (1990) who focused closely on the organization as a learning organization.

Meers makes a nice transition from his section on the development of the organization to the actual experiences of leaders and managers and how emphasis has been placed upon learning from work experiences, specifically upon using these experiences as preparation for advancement to higher levels of management or leadership. Again, Meers cited the works of Senge (1990) and Kegan (1982), and also focused on the work of Robert E. Quinn

(1996) who explored the importance of personal change in leading organizational change.

To further establish the foundation for his area of study, Meers looked to the work of Ronald Heifetz of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University who brought forth the importance of learning from personal experiences and specifically how the reflection on certain experiences has become a part of some executive leadership education programs. A particular method that Heifetz developed and one he uses extensively in his courses at Harvard is the “ Case-in-point” methodology in which students in the classroom bring their experiences to class and in essence become their own case studies (Parks, 2005).

Also included in Meers’ literature review is the qualitative study conducted by Shamir, Dayan-Horesh and Adler (2005) in which they explored the life-stories that leaders tell. The purpose of their study was to extrapolate common themes in the leaders’ stories that may provide further insight into leadership development. Shamir, et al (2005) made the case that a leader’s own story and even how he/she tells it has a strong impact upon how influential they are with their followers.

Meers referred to the work of Avolio (1994) whose work, although ground breaking in the area of leadership development impacted by life experiences, was somewhat limited. The purpose of Avolio’s study was to explore the correlation between certain life experiences and to identify transformational leadership behaviors. Avolio (1994) selected the life experiences he was going to analyze. Meers stated in his dissertation that

while this is a legitimate approach to a quantitative study, it limited the choices of the leaders in regard to which experiences they could identify as having impacted their development (Meers, 2009, p. 31). Yet another limitation to the study that Meers reported was in the more narrow focus on identified “transformational” leaders and especially upon specific transformational behaviors. Avolio’s study found some correlation between certain experiences and certain transformational leaders but it did not provide a great deal of insight into the general impact of life events or experiences upon leadership development (Avolio, 1994).

Much like the work conducted by Avolio, Meers looked to a study completed by Bennis and Thomas (2002). Bennis and Thomas identified what they call “crucible experiences” which they define as those experiences that generally consisted of high stakes and often were tragic in nature. There were also gaps in this study. As with Avolio’s (1994) study, the field was limited as the leaders interviewed seemed more inclined to talk about experiences that they perceived as having an impact directly upon their leadership development. Meers felt that this approach may not have told the complete story regarding development as the participants most likely automatically limited themselves in the experiences they selected as having impacts. Also, Meers felt that the researchers conducting this study failed to identify the meaning of leadership.

Due to these limitations, Meers believed that there was room for further research to be conducted with defined leaders and how they perceived they had been impacted by their own significant life events.