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A Leader-Member Exchange Perspective

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More than ever, good leaders depend on good followers.
—Joseph S. Nye Jr.

Conceptualising Leadership and Followership

Various streams of thought have converged on the concept of leadership as a process rather than a person or state. This process is essentially a shared experience with benefits to be gained and hazards to be surmounted by the parties involved. A leader is a key figure whose actions or inactions can determine others' well-being and the broader good (Hollander, 1995). A model by Agle (1996) emphasizes the relationship between leadership and organizational ethics. The leadership styles singled out to explain variabilities of leader-follower relational aspects and ethical conduct in an organization are transactional leadership style, laissez-faire leadership style, and transformational leadership. Among these, transformational leadership style is evaluated as having its origin in personal value systems that include values such as justice and integrity (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). The strength of this style compared to the other leadership styles is that the leader is guided by values such as respect for human dignity and equality of human rights; supports and enacts comprehensive values that "express followers' more fundamental and enduring needs."

Under the transformational leadership style, some existing theories of charismatic leadership are accused of promoting a "heroic leadership" stereotype (Beyer, 1999; Howell & Shamir, 2005), which depicts leaders as heroic figures that are single-handedly capable of determining the fate and fortunes of groups and organizations. In this heroic conception, the leader is perceived as omnipotent, and followers are submissive to the leader's will and demands. However, the rarely discussed issue in literatures

is how followers can counteract the pitfalls of charismatic leadership such as the abuse of power so that both serve the common ethical purpose in an organization. It is therefore crucial to ascertain how followers play a more active role in constructing the leadership relationship, empowering the leader and influencing his or her behavior, and ultimately determining the consequences of the leadership relationship.

Personal characteristics exhibited by transformational leaders include: Self-confidence, dominance, and a strong conviction in the moral righteousness of one's beliefs (Bass & Bernard, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1995). The transformational leader is said to exhibit inspirational leadership that includes individual consideration, intellectual stimulation and charisma (Bass & Avolio, 1990). However, in order to develop adequate understanding of the reciprocal relationship between the leader and follower for sustained ethical behavior in organizations, there is need to know much more about the hitherto nameless persons who comprise the followers of leaders (Burns, 2007).

One the other hand, individuals who are formally designated at the bottom and in the middle levels in an organizational hierarchy, being subordinates to superiors in the higher positions, are the ones referred to as followers. The term *follower* is historically regarded as something of an insult and has been shunned by those in the leadership field as the term has traditionally been thought to connote too much passivity and dependence. Followers were therefore regarded as individuals with no apparent power, authority, or influence on those with more power and authority (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2013). In order to realize sustained ethical leadership in organizations, however, there is a dire need to regard leaders and followers as inextricably enmeshed and each is defined by and dependent on the other (Kellerman, 2018).

Anchoring Ethical Leadership: The Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Perspective

The quest for continued ethical conduct in organizations has been a concern of different scholars in an attempt to explain why organizations succeed or fail in sustaining ethical conduct. This study adopts a theory of leader-member exchange to explain how the interdependence of power and influence between leaders and followers are of paramount importance to yield sustained ethical practices in organizations. The leader-member exchange (LMX) approach was developed by Graen (1976) and extended

by Graen and Uhl–Bien (1995). Unlike most leadership theories, this theory acknowledges the importance of the role of followers in leadership processes, and it emphasizes that both a leader and a follower mutually determine the quality of the relationship in breeding ethical behavior.

Leader–Follower Reciprocity of Influence: Delineating Ethical and Unethical Followership

Leaders, in responding to their own motives, appeal to the motives of potential followers. As followers respond, a symbiotic relationship develops that binds leader and follower together. A major component of the leader–follower relationship is the leader's perception of his or her self relative to followers and how they in turn perceive the leader. This self–other perception implicates important ethical issues concerning how followers are involved, used or abused, especially in a relationship favoring a leader's power over them, and it can in turn fuel self–absorption and self–deception, which are pitfalls of arbitrary power and ethics crisis in organizations (Hollander, 1995). Burgeoning research on the leader-follower reciprocal relationship suggests that the dynamic relational aspect is a turning point for sustained ethical behavior in an organization because it discerns that individuals hold a variety of beliefs about the role followers should play in the leadership process (Carsten et al., 2010; Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2013; Sy, 2010).

Low Self-Concept Clarity Vs. High Self-Concept Clarity

Followers with low self–concept clarity or a relational orientation are more likely to be influenced by the personalized leader, that is, a leader who is motivated by a need to accumulate personal power and who employs tactics designed to increase followers' identification with him or her (Howell & Shamir, 2005). Since a personalized relationship flourishes among followers with low self-concept clarity and because such a relationship includes idealization and romanticization of the leader, followers who form this type of relationship are likely to be prone to "blind" faith in the leader and to "hyper-compliance" (Zablocki, 1999) and unquestioning obedience to the leader (Kark & Shamir, 2013).

The implication of all these in explaining leader–follower relationships for sustained ethical leadership in organizations is that personalized charismatic relationships may also "over-empower" the leader because such relationships include adoration, idolization, and unquestioning obedience to the leader. The leader may internalize the exaggerated reflected appraisals

of followers and eventually develop an illusion of omnipotence (Howell, 1988). This, in turn, may lead to the abandonment of ethical and other restraints on the use of power.

On the contrary, followers with high self–concept clarity or with a collective identity orientation are less likely to be susceptible to a charismatic leader who they perceive to represent their values and identities on social basis rather than personal (Hogg, 2001). Followers in this type of relationship are not susceptible to the leader's influence because he or she is perceived to possess unusual qualities; rather, they are responsive to the values and identities emphasized by the leader's vision and other forms of behavior. Furthermore, because their relationship with the leader is based on social rather than personal identification, the followers manifest self-reliance and autonomy.

The implication of these relational dynamics towards realizing ethical behavior in an organization is that socialized charismatic relationships are not likely to reinforce or create a delusion of omnipotence on the part of the leader because such relationships do not include idolization and unquestioning obedience to the leader. In such relationships, followers' acceptance, support, and approval of the leader are accompanied by their exercise of independent judgment and their ethical standards. Therefore, the leader will be empowered only as long as he or she exercises restraints on the use of power, conforms to ethical standards, and pursues the collective goal.

Displacement of Responsibility Vs. Constructive Resistance

Bandura (2014) stated that one's predisposition to displace responsibility is a trait–like characteristic. This means that individuals who obey unethical directives also displace responsibility onto the authority figure (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2013). This displacement of responsibility is a key element of moral disengagement, which is a social–cognitive mechanism that leads individuals to obey and engage in unethical acts (Bandura, 2014; Blass, 2009). Followers who displace responsibility are likely to engage in unethical conduct, while followers who believe that the decision to act ethically falls on them rather than the leader likely show resistance to a leader's unethical request (Bandura et al., 2001; Rost, 1995). In this scenario, followers may use such resistance strategies to open a line of dialogue with their leader when they perceive that a leader's request is imprudent or illogical (Tepper et al., 2006). Therefore, displacement of responsibility is a key mechanism in the relationship between followership beliefs and crimes of obedience that compromise ethical practices.

Furthermore, belief in coproduction of leadership plays a paramount role in determining whether a person can condone or reject a leader's unethical conduct during their interaction (Carsten et al., 2010). Belief in the coproduction of leadership is defined as the extent to which an individual believes that followers should partner with leaders to influence and enhance the leadership process.

The implication of this for ethical behavior in organizations is that followers who maintain weaker coproduction of leadership beliefs are likely to engage in crimes of obedience because they believe the follower role is best served by following a leader's directives without question. On the other hand, followers who have stronger coproduction beliefs may constructively challenge their leaders when faced with an unethical directive (Carsten & Uhl–Bien, 2013; Carsten and Uhl–Bien, 2009; Carsten et al., 2010).Thus, the best way to change behavior is to change the person's underlying beliefs (Conner & Armitage, 1998).

Conclusion

This study reveals the important, and often overlooked, role that followers play in the maintenance of ethical conduct in organizations. By establishing the important relationships between follower beliefs, displacement of responsibility and obedience, it forms the foundation to understand the follower side of ethical leadership and appreciate the role that followers play in challenging their leaders to uphold ethical codes.

Limitations and Implications for Further Research

This article limits the ability to draw conclusions about causation. It only describes unethical situations and responses to them. Future research may be conducted considering mediators such as relationship quality with the leader, association power and sense of dependency on the organization.

Lastly, this study does not address across cultural differences and their influence on the leader-follower relational dynamics to show how followers perceive power distance or uncertainty avoidance across cultures and their willingness to constructively challenge leaders in the face of an unethical request. Future research across culture examining the "followership climate" in terms of the number of followers (and leaders) holding stronger or weaker coproduction beliefs may be a fruitful contribution to the field of leadership studies.

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