

Leadership Philosophy

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The underlying philosophy of leaders has a significant impact on the way they relate to others, attempt to influence others, judge the actions of others, and make decisions affecting others. Most leadership theories, however, neglect this factor, focusing instead on other relevant variables such as personality, emotional intelligence, personal strategy or style, interpersonal and managerial competencies, and a wide range of societal, cultural, organizational and situational factors. The purpose of this paper is to discuss "leadership philosophy" and its impact on effective leadership behavior and desired organizational outcomes.

The threshold question is: What is leadership? This question brings into focus a complex range of attitudes and behaviors. It defies simplistic definitions or explanations. Our best theories seem to insufficiently capture the full breath and depth of leadership phenomenon. As one Supreme Court Justice commented in regard to pornography, "I cannot define it, but I know it when I see it". This statement rings true about leadership. Ask a group of people to describe the behaviors of leaders for whom they've done their best work, and it



is clear that most people recognize leadership when they see it and can accurately describe it.

A more essential question is: What factors contribute to effective leadership? The answers to this question form the basis for countless leadership development programs. Many of these programs are well conceived and designed, enhancing the development of effective leadership behavior. But most neglect the critical consideration of "leadership philosophy" and ignore its pervasive effect on leadership behavior.

The relevant question is: What is leadership philosophy? Is it just a simple statement of values or intentions? Hopefully, it won't require an intellectual immersion

in western and eastern philosophical traditions, and an understanding of logical empiricism, humanism, existentialism, and so forth. No, not really.

Leadership philosophy is defined as a set of core beliefs or assumptions about the following considerations:

1. Human Nature and Disposition
2. (The) Human Condition
3. Human Motivation and Performance
4. Human Change and Intervention

It is further postulated that these beliefs, independent of their validity, efficacy or origin, have a profound impact on subsequent leadership attitudes and behavior. For a leader, such beliefs create a selective lens for observation and perception, a dispositional filter for emotions and experience, and often a bounding paradigm for cognition and the construction of social reality. How a leader thinks about the human drama in organizational cultures directly affects how the drama is perceived and unfolds. Leaders are often caught up in a “self-fulfilling prophesy” (Pygmalion Effect) in which their underlying beliefs are played out in their behaviors which, in turn, influence the behavior of others; that behavior tends to confirm the initial beliefs of the leader.

To further illustrate, consider a few examples of these beliefs or assumptions with each dimension:

1. Human Nature and Disposition – true or false?

- a. People are basically lazy!
- b. People are responsible!
- c. People cannot be trusted!
- d. People are creative!

2. Human Condition – true or false?

- a. People get what they deserve!
- b. People have little control over their fate!
- c. Most things happen for a reason!
- d. It’s a cold, dark, dreary world out there!

3. Human Motivation and Performance – true or false?

- a. People need to be directed and controlled!
- b. People work primarily for money!
- c. Power is superior to influence in getting things done!
- d. People like attention!

4. Human Change and Intervention – true or false?

- a. People can engage in personal change!
- b. Lasting change is difficult to sustain!
- c. It’s impossible to change anything!
- d. It’s better to hire new people than train existing ones!

At this point, you may be tempted to embrace such statements as both true and false, depending upon the person in question. To do so, however, misses an important consideration: most leaders tend to have an underlying set of core beliefs and they rarely make exceptions to them, even if justified. Again, when asked to describe effective leaders, people not only list 'behavioral descriptors', but also implicitly infer the underlying beliefs or values that the leader holds. The leader's philosophy is often very transparent to those around him or her and has a profound effect on how people perceive the leader.

The Leadership Philosophy Profile (LPP) is an assessment instrument which explores a person's underlying assumptions or beliefs in 8-10 dimensions within each of the 4 primary areas of consideration. It is a critical area of development independent of leadership strategies and competencies.

Innovative Human Dynamics can support your leadership development efforts by providing a one-day workshop to describe the basic concepts of leadership philosophy, to examine the LLP of participants, and to facilitate a developmental process to encourage change. IHD can also assist executives and managers, in one-on-one coaching, to strengthen their leadership philosophy and examine its impact on the people they lead.