Effective Leadership for Sustainable Development

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Abstract
This study provides perspectives of 13 organizational leaders, executives, and business owners who are third year doctoral learners from the University of Phoenix. This research focused on the perspectives of leadership qualities they deemed necessary for effective leadership. These professional leaders offered insights regarding social, economic, or environmental problems that affect their ability to lead within their organization. The findings identified ten effective leadership qualities necessary for sustainable development; learn, empower, adapt, develop, engage, reflect, sustain, humility, integrity, and practice.

Professional and world leaders have adopted various leadership styles, which continually evolve to be effective. However, leaders are ill equipped to meet the needs of the fast-paced changes in society (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Leaders’ personal values integrated with suitable leadership qualities are the catalyst for effective and practical leadership. Moving forward, current leaders must be willing to change behaviors and adjust leadership strategies to remain effective leaders (Nahavandi, 2006).

Framework for the Study

Senior leaders in political and managerial positions must be skillful in their abilities to motivate and inspire managers and followers. Leaders must be able to influence middle managers to develop new focus on sustainability that serves a greater purpose than meeting green status quotas. Goleman and Lueneburger (2010) suggested that values or qualities a sustainable leader must embrace include collaborating and influencing others in the process of transitioning from oblivious business activity to a conscious focus on sustainability.

When certain leadership qualities are lacking in the personal life of leaders, those leaders have difficulty influencing others to promote sustainable development. Middlebrooks, Miltenberger, Tweedy, Newman, and Follman (2009) suggested recognizing the importance of supporting personal and organizational values with practical actions. Leaders often integrate values into sustainable development. The problem is the lack of effective and practical leadership qualities among leaders threatens sustainable development.
Leadership and Sustainable Development Models

Traditionally, sustainable development consists of meeting the needs of today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Kupar, 2012). The most recognizable model of sustainable development is the three-pillar model consisting of the environmental, social, and economic pillars (Klotz-Young, 2012). An appropriate balance of these three pillars helps to maintain sustainable development in our global setting. When one pillar becomes unbalanced it affects the other elements as well as sustainability. Many critics argue the political agendas of our leaders combined with social justice movements have pushed society so far the idea of sustainability will be difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish in the future (Devall, 2001).

Similar to the three-pillar system of the sustainable development model is the scholar, practitioner, leader model (SPL) of leadership (University of Phoenix, 2013). The scholar element of the SPL model focuses on lifelong learning; the practitioner element focuses on social and workplace contributions; the leader element focuses on the ability to exert positive influence in the academic, professional, and personal life (University of Phoenix, 2013). The SPL model suggests these three elements are significantly important in developing effective leadership.

The sustainable development and SPL models are dynamic representations that have one central core affected by three outlying elements. When any of the outlying elements of the sustainable development model (environment, economic, and social) or the SPL (scholar, practitioner, leader) model are modified, the central core and the other elements are affected. For example, during the 2008 economic crisis in the US, the economic element was obviously affected (Chan, 2011). However, the environmental and social elements were indirectly affected because of various budget cuts and adjustments in environmental and social programs. A similar example using the SPL model; if lifelong learning is eliminated or limited, the ability to be an effective leader is greatly compromised.

Sustainable Development for Leadership Model

Sustainable development for leadership is the development of leadership qualities that meet the economic, environmental, and social needs of the present while preparing to meet the challenges of the future. Ten leadership qualities identified as part of the sustainable development for leadership include learn, empower, adapt, develop, engage, reflect, sustain, humility, integrity, and practice. These qualities are not all-inclusive however; these qualities are vital to the leadership community and its ability to confront future sustainment development challenges.

Learn

Leaders who embrace ontological humility are considered learners while leaders who embrace ontological arrogance are considered controllers (Kofman, 2006). Lifetime learners bridge necessary leadership qualities of today to prepare for sustained development of future leadership.
The ability to lead with an open mind creates opportunity for positive growth in leadership. Lifetime learners need to be prepared for future challenges that test their leadership capabilities.

**Empower**

Leaders who empower their employees provide them with increased responsibility and autonomy. The ability to relinquish power to others demonstrates a leader who recognizes the potential in others and places trust in their abilities. The importance of shared leadership practices enhances teamwork and increases motivation. The sustainable development of this leadership quality strengthens a leader’s ability to handle current situations as well as face future challenges. Making the change through communication and employee empowerment will generate small victories of changed behavior and acceptance (Leban & Stone, 2008).

**Adapt**

The ability to remain flexible and adapt to change is an important quality present and future leaders must possess. Organizational change is not likely to succeed without leadership behaviors of motivation, guidance, and support (Yukl, 2010). Organizational leaders who create a culture of adaptability allow organizational flexibility. This is especially important in our competitive and changing organizational environment. Creating the climate for change includes the development of the vision and goals for the organization (Leban & Stone, 2008).

**Develop**

Leaders should possess the ability to recognize and develop future leaders. The development of future leaders includes training, providing feedback, mentoring, effective communication, recognition, and rewards. Lacking this quality may affect the future sustainable development of leadership. Furthermore, organizations have the responsibility to support the effectiveness of leaders by providing on-going professional development training (Morrisette & Schraeder, 2010).

**Engage**

According to Clawson (2006), the four initiatives of leadership include leaders, followers, tasks, and the organization. Leaders must remain fully engaged with all elements of leadership in the present, but must also be aware of how the organizational environment affects sustainable development of future leadership. According to Berkley and Watson (2009) employer-employee relationships are the foundation for building organizational ethics and corporate responsibility.
Reflection

Reflection is a quality leaders must possess to self-evaluate performance and determine if personal expectations are met. When reflection is mentioned, there is an uncritically accepted connotation of goodness (MacPherson, 2009). However, it is the leader who takes account of satisfying personal accomplishments and team success. Reflection allows leaders to step back from common behaviors and examine any assumptions.

Sustain

Leader sustainability is not judged by the leader’s behavior, but by how followers are inspired by the leader (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2011). A critical task of an effective leader is to demonstrate passion for sustainable development through motivation. The leader’s ability to motivate a team is judged by behavior not intentions (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2011). Leaders who strive for sustainability clearly demonstrate passion for positive change.

Humility

Humility is a vital quality in a leader and without humility a leader is bound for failure (Kallasvuo, 2007). Humility reveals the human side of a leader and their degree of concern and care for team members. The humble leader is successful in connecting with followers emotionally while accepting mistakes and creating methods to accomplish team goals and meet organizational expectations (Hamstra, 2009). In this way, humility supports sustainable development for continued future positive outcomes with the team and the organization.

Integrity

A leader with integrity believes in personal wholeness and being true to oneself (Palanski & Yammarino, 2009). This quality is critical for a leader decision-maker who can have future implications on organization members. Integrity demonstrates a leader’s conviction for doing what is right and beneficial for future sustainable development. However, in situations where mistakes are made, the leader with integrity accepts mistakes and works to correct them.

Practice

In order for a leader to be successful with sustainable development there must be a continual striving for performance growth and positive outcomes. Performance growth and outcomes encourage reasonable change to accomplish organizational goals (Barclay, 2009). Practicing positive behavior and interaction with followers is critical for continued success.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process took place over a two-day period. A group of 13 third-year doctoral students at the University of Phoenix participated in the interview process. The doctoral students from multiple educational disciplines were also business leaders in their respective careers: healthcare, military, manufacturing, education, government, non-profit, consulting, resource
development, and global management. The number of years with senior management and leadership experience ranged from 10 to 49 years. The age group of the participants ranged from 29 to 67, eight were male and five were female.

The group of researchers personally interviewed each participant in a face-to-face, three-question interview. The interview questions were as follows:

1. What are five qualities you possess that make you an effective leader?
2. Identify an economic, environmental, or social problem, which currently exists that impacts you as an effective leader?
3. What qualities do leaders need to possess to address the aforementioned problem?

The goal of the first question was to determine if there was a relationship between the qualities presented in the leadership model and the qualities identified by the participants. The participants were leaders that represented a sample of professional and global leaders practicing in current leadership roles. The purpose of the second question was for the participants to identify a current sustainability problem that affected their ability to effectively lead and framed the third question. The purpose of the third question was to determine the relationship between qualities leaders believed would solve the leadership sustainability problems identified in the second question, and qualities listed in the sustained leadership model.

NVivo was used during data collection to calculate word frequency (See Table 1).
Table 1
*Frequency of Leadership Quality Responses*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Model Qualities</th>
<th>Concept Defined Word</th>
<th>Word Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engage</td>
<td>Approachability, Availability, Care, Communication, Listener, Interaction, Collaboration</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>Honesty, Ethical, Responsible, Accountability, Truth, Believable</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humility</td>
<td>Compassion, Empathy, Understanding</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empower</td>
<td>Confidence, Passion, Strong</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop</td>
<td>Coach, Training</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflect</td>
<td>Awareness, Visionary</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapt</td>
<td>Adaptability, Flexibility</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustain</td>
<td>Perseverance</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn</td>
<td>Skill Set</td>
<td>6</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The results of the study indicated 217 of the 317 analyzed responses included qualities associated with engagement, integrity, and humility. Data revealed that 68% of all responses identified engagement, integrity, and humility as the most significant qualities necessary for effective leadership.

**Summary**

Leadership today requires qualities that enhance the overall sustainability of leadership in organizations. The skillset for leaders requires significantly different qualities than past leaders. A federal inquiry commission found that the 2008 financial crisis was an avoidable disaster caused by widespread failures in our leaders to exhibit good judgment and leadership skills (Chan, 2011). Two presidential administrations and the Federal Reserve were blamed for the debacle (Chan, 2011). The leadership qualities identified in this study validate the importance of specific characteristics necessary to solidify effective leadership for sustainable development.
References


