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Talent-Oriented Leadership, the Small Group, and Implications for Organization



by Daryl Vander Kooi

Unless one is completely withdrawn from society, he/she will be a member of a small group at work, in the church, in a volunteer organization, or in some other context. The small group is a small number of people, usually from three to ten or twelve, who relate to each other and influence each other. As the members develop relationships, they become somewhat cohesive, they adjust social norms to become group norms, and they form some type of leadership. Some typical small groups are the committee, the church council, the farmers co-op board, and the social gathering of two or more married couples. Part of the dynamics of the small

group is establishing roles. One person might become the secretary, another might ask pertinent questions, another supplies information, and still another will become the leader. Most groups in organizations exist on the formal or structural level; i.e., they have designated roles, such as chairperson, secretary, or treasurer, but in all organizations informal or "behind the scenes" dynamics operate as well. While the committee or board of the local cooperative elects or appoints a chairperson, for example, another member can actually influence the group more at the informal level. At both the formal and the informal level, a key question in our culture is "who will lead?"

Researchers, consultants, and experts in communication have examined the role of leadership in the small group and in organizations. They have advanced a variety of leadership theories that focus on the role of group leader. Some see the leader as one having a specific list of traits; some see the leader as one who completes a set of functions in the group; still others see the leader as a trained individual; and others see no single leader but several leaders in the group (distributive and cluster leadership.) However, how one perceives leadership depends upon what one assumes about leaders. The purpose of this paper is to develop a theory of ability or talent-oriented group leadership. Talent-oriented group leadership is based on a number of assumptions about the nature and character of human beings, their abilities, and their responsibilities. After reviewing three general perspectives of leadership, I will develop the concept of talent-oriented leadership, discuss the place of the small group in organizations, and indicate the implications of the

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small group and talent-oriented group leadership for organizations.

Because leaders can be elected, appointed, hired for the position, emerge from the group, or take the role in a totalitarian take-over, researchers and practitioners have attempted to determine the source of leadership rather than just ask why leaders are chosen. Researchers wish to know if leadership arises from one or more traits of a particular person, from a set of skills, or from the functions that the leader completes in a small group.

The traits theory assumes that all leaders have one trait or a particular set of traits. Those traits might be personality traits, physical traits, psychological traits, or some combination of traits. While researchers have not been able to locate one trait or any combination of traits that are common to all leaders, traits theory continues to find proponents among those who conduct workshops and training sessions. One still finds lists of recommended traits for the would-be leader, such as be a good listener, be pleasant, and be understanding.

The skills perspective maintains that leadership finds its source in the individual's natural or trainable skills.¹ Training workshops seek to develop and promote such skills as asking questions, clarifying misunderstandings, organizing the task group, and managing time. Just as some public address workshops focus on developing speaking skills, so too the skills perspective focuses on providing the prospective leader with a package of techniques and skills to perform the duties of group leader.

The functional view of leadership (what behaviors or functions the individual is to perform) considers the source of leadership to reside in the group with its particular needs and purposes. The group decides who will be leader according to the members' desires for leader behaviors, and the leader role emerges through various phases in group development. The role usually consists of particular behaviors and/or characteristics that are recognized by the group and identified with the leader of the group.

A number of problems exist with all of the above perspectives. First, all three assume that only one person leads. Occasionally one might see two or more persons sharing the duties of leader (called shared, distributed, or cluster leadership) but closer examination will reveal that one person is still the

final authority.² When shared leadership is advocated by some, even among those that share the role, one person leads at a specific time in a leader sub-group. One can verify that only one leads by checking the status and power structures that distinguish the leader from others, the rewards for his/her extra work, and the motivations of leaders. Regardless of one's traits or skills (even if the leader is elected, appointed, or hired for the position), when a person becomes a group member, according to Bormann and Fisher, he becomes involved in the group development phases of contention and elimination.³ The individual is embroiled in a contest to determine who will lead. An atmosphere of tension, friction, attack, and intrigue results. This atmosphere (often found in the leaderless group discussion) becomes apparent in the informal intrigues of organizations when members withhold information and go "over the head" of a superior.⁴ Such tensions frequently result in poor productivity, low morale, and faulty compromise,⁵ but the major difficulty is the assumed association of leadership with one person.

Each of the above perspectives either assumes that what exists as the source of leadership is normative (i.e. what does exist is what should exist), or it avoids the question of normativity. Interestingly, while communication experts will maintain norms for rhetoric and then apply those norms to specific speaking or writing, they ignore norms for leadership in the small group. The traits and skills perspectives assume that the norm is that leaders have particular traits or skills, while the functional approach contends that it simply describes and generalizes the actual development in groups. In fact, Fisher attempts to debate the issue of prescriptive (what *should be*) versus descriptive (what *is*) approaches.⁶ While I have found the descriptive approach rather accurate in my own experience with groups and with teaching group dynamics, the perspective fails as soon as one attempts to make recommendations (prescriptions) for group members. The descriptive becomes the prescriptive when one teaches others how to lead a group or how to become a leader.⁷ To assume that what *is* is correct, is hazardous. Few people would make that same assumption in economics, politics, or health. In a similar way, defining leadership should begin by identifying what one assumes and what is normative.

Before explaining talent-oriented group leader-

ship, I will state my view of human beings. Human beings are created as social beings. They have an affiliative need; i.e., they must be with and work with others. That affiliative need forms the basis for work in society and groups in that society. Human beings have also been commanded to work in and to promote the creation, including groups. In order to complete that cultural mandate, each human being has been given a unique set of abilities or talents and responsibilities. Human beings are responsible for using and developing their talents, for promoting the welfare and talents of others, for conducting their work well for others, for completing their vocations (laborers, mothers, teachers, farmers, etc.)

Talents fit in a unique combination of abilities, skills, and understandings identified with each individual. Talents include mental, physical, social, and creative abilities. While many can ask questions, hoe gardens, converse, and listen to others, indicating that many parts of the package are general, each person has a particular combination of abilities and has developed them in a unique way. That unique package of abilities is the source of, or basis for, group leadership.

While each person has the responsibility to develop and use his/her talents as a social being, he/she is also responsible for assisting others in the use of their talents. The group should promote and use the available talents of its members to complete its responsibilities for members, for the group, and for the group's purpose or goal.

Talent-oriented group leadership, then, consists of all members of the group using their individual sets or packages of abilities to perform all the group's activities. For example, those persons who can resolve differences of opinion will do so; those who can clarify misunderstandings will do so; those members who can interview well will do so. No one or two members will be the leader. Another illustration might help. One often finds a leader package described as—initiates discussion, asks pertinent questions, provides direction, suggests solutions, organizes, works overtime, researches, encourages others, gives roles to other group members, delegates authority, etc. If one scrutinizes that set of skills and/or functions, he/she will recognize that other group members have similar abilities as part of different packages. Leadership consists of each member utilizing his/her individual package of

talents so that member A encourages others, researches, initiates discussion; member B researches, questions, clarifies, suggests; member C questions, clarifies, initiates.

Talent-oriented group leadership has a different impact on the total group than do the other perspectives. The elimination and contention phases of the functional theory of leader emergence disappear along with the associated atmosphere of tension, dissatisfaction, and intrigue. The probationary period of the leader is unnecessary. Status and power are no longer associated with group roles. Finally, a sense of community develops rather than individuals creating conflict.⁸ However, talent-

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oriented group leadership demands training for group members to recognize its design and to implement it in groups.

Most American for-profit organizations are structured according to line and staff. Line indicates the vertical set of relationships such as President to Vice-President to District Manager to Manager, while staff indicates the horizontal relationships in the organization such as a group of secretaries in a secretarial pool or a group of district managers. In most organizational structures, the small group is recognized formally as a committee, a board, or a designated number of employees located in a particular physical area, such as the shipping department. However, the small group also exists informally as those employees having similar tasks, such as the die makers of a tool and die department, or those employees who regularly eat together or ride to work together. Each organization necessarily contains small groups.⁹

While formally recognized or informally present, the small group is not highly esteemed in many organizations.¹⁰ Many management publications view the small group as a costly, inefficient committee which solves little or develops poor solutions. However, the fault is not the small group, but a misunderstanding of the small group. For example, if one assumes that efficiency is the sole goal, then the small group might not fit well in organizations. Or if one assumes that organizations are based upon

individuals with specific tasks who are responsible to a person higher in the line-staff structure, then again the small group does not fit well. Even the presence of the small group in the informal structure threatens management, efficiency, and profitability because of its grapevine and rumor. The line and staff structure is not compatible with the small group unless small groups are restricted to committees or employee pools. However, when efficiency and profit-motive give way to assistance or service found in many volunteer organizations, then the small group works well. We see this in political campaign organizations, in the Salvation Army, and in many Protestant churches in which management is a small group.

The fundamental issue is the purpose of the organization. I maintain that there should be a different purpose for business than profit and efficiency. A business should help others complete their personal and communal responsibilities by utilizing their talents. Profits from a business should be used to develop more employment so that more people can use and improve their talents. Moreover, employees should be recognized as group members with abilities for more than one specific repetitive task.

Combining these norms for the organization with talent-oriented group leadership implies the following: First, the line and staff structure is replaced by a structure of interlocking small groups so that at least one group member is also in another small group in the organization. Second, job descriptions are replaced by group task descriptions and talent descriptions. Third, employees are hired to become members of specific groups rather than limited to the performance of specific tasks. Fourth, employees are trained to recognize and improve their talents and to solve problems in groups. Fifth, employees are moved about in the organization according to talent rather than seniority, nepotism, or organizational power. Sixth, individual work is recognized and promoted as part of group work. Seventh, the grapevine network can become an integral part of the communication network rather than a subversive secondary system of rumor and intrigue. Such changes imply designing buildings, revising methods of communication, and distributing labor to fit the structure.

A number of these changes have been tried in the past. Experiments have been conducted which at least imply that the above changes can be beneficial.

As early as 1934 the Hawthorne research indicated that recognizing and utilizing a group improved worker satisfaction with no negative impact on production.¹¹ Utilizing a group might also reduce employee problems. The free flow of information and development of group cohesiveness can also improve production and employee satisfaction.¹² The existence of many of these outcomes within volunteer organizations lends support; however, research is needed to determine the full impact of changes.

Nevertheless, a number of disadvantages can develop. First, without training, few are able to recognize and record their own talents and the talents of other group members. Second, the elimination of power, status, and the profit motive could be opposed by employees in positions of power, by owners, by stockholders, and by management. Third, existing management would need training to recognize the structural values of the small group. Fourth, to implement talent-oriented leadership completely into existing line-staff, for-profit organizations could be too costly in time, loss of production, and training costs, unless transition stages are developed and the corporation is dedicated to the change. Finally, a major shift in the perspective and philosophy of a corporation can be opposed by insecure employees unless they are informed and assured. While these disadvantages are serious, most can be alleviated with training, communication, and support from those in existing positions of power.

Presently, many American organizations are looking for direction and change to compete with other industrial nations. Some are using an adaptation of the Japanese organizational structure with Quality Circles, but their success has been questionable. Talent-oriented leadership might help American corporations shift their organizational structures and bring greater employee satisfaction along with the competitive edge they desire. Other organizations, such as churches and hospitals, might consider changing to talent-oriented leadership to address problems of member or employee satisfaction.

END NOTES

- 1 For examples, see Ernest Stech and Sharon A. Ratliffe, *Working in Groups* (Skokie, Ill.: National Textbook, 1976) 200; and Jerry Moser, "Am I a Leader," *Iowa Farm Bureau Spokesman*, 1 December 1979, 4A, for a popularized example.

- 2 Stech and Ratliffe, 201.
- 3 Stech and Ratliffe, 211. See also Ernest G. Bormann, *Discussion and Group Methods*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); and B. Aubrey Fisher, *Small Group Decision Making*, 2nd. ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980).
- 4 See Randy Y. Hirokawa, "Improving Intra-organizational Communication: A Lesson from Japanese Management," *Communication Quarterly*, 30 (Winter 1981) 36; and Lloyd S. Pettegrew, "Organizational Communication and the S.O.B. Theory of Management," *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 46 (Spring 1982) 181.
- 5 Michael E. Pacanowski and Nick O'Donnell-Trujillo, "Communication and Organizational Cultures," *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 46 (Spring 1982), 119.
- 6 Fisher, 130-133.
- 7 For a more complete critique of the functional perspective, see Linda L. Putnam, "Paradigms for Organizational Communication Research: An Overview and Synthesis," *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 46 (Spring 1982) 195.
- 8 Berlew's charismatic leadership begins to approximate a sense of community, but its basis is humanistic and Hirokawa describes the Japanese concept in the extended family analogy, but its purpose is the organization's goals. David E. Berlew, "Leadership and Organizational Excitement," *Small Group Communication: A Reader*, ed. Robert S. Cathcart and Larry A. Samovar, 3rd ed. (Dubuque: Brown, 1979) 424-34; and Hirokawa, 35.
- 9 Paul R. Lawrence, John A. Seiler, et. al., *Organizational Behavior and Administration*, rev. ed. (Homewood, Ill.: Irwin, 1965) 558.
- 10 Haner and Ford, 203; Sisk, 373,377.
- 11 Lawrence and Seiler, 173.
- 12 Notice in the Hirokawa article that some concepts are present or approximated in the Japanese organizational structure; e.g., information flow, management in group structure, and employees assisting each other.