

The Relevance of Situational Leadership Juxtaposed with the Followership Approach in the Fight Against the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT: Literature is reviewed on situational leadership, followership, and the COVID-19 pandemic to make a contribution to the fight against COVID-19 crisis. The paper first discusses the effects of the pandemic. Following that, the response by leaders is proposed citing examples of how some leaders and governments have responded. The nature of the crisis is such that, the discussion is an ongoing concern and the assumption is that both leaders and followers ought to identify their roles. Situational leadership is proposed as a leadership approach of consideration. Literature on current affairs (Newspaper and Journals) in relation to response to COVID-19 indicates a need for various leadership styles consistent with situations on the ground. Followership is discussed following the leadership responses. Accommodating followership in the equation enhances this approach. In conclusion, we observe that the nature of the pandemic indicates that time matters in relation to preservation of life and saving the economy. Leaders are to learn from others, taking into consideration their contexts. Expectation met against leadership is proportional to expectations on followership.

KEYWORDS: Situational Leadership, Followership, Pandemic, COVID-19

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I. INTRODUCTION

When the COVID-19 Corona Virus was first heard of in Wuhan, China in December 2019, it seemed like an issue belonging to China alone. However, global travel and the transmission rate of COVID-19 have enabled the virus to spread fast throughout the globe. The socio-economic impact of the virus is unprecedented (McKinsey & Company, 2019). Some nations ignored it, others reacted swiftly to the challenge, and better still other nations were proactive in preparing for it.

National leaders including; civil leaders, business, religious leaders etc, have had to face the challenge of managing the economy and followers through what has since been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020). Arifa et al. (2019) emphasize that leadership is crucial in disease outbreak management to ensure successfulness of control and prevention program. This position supports the 2016 Flagship Report by WHO, which emphasizes the importance of leadership in combating and control of diseases.

This study seeks to discuss how a situational approach to leadership, and followership can help face this monster. Northouse (2019) argues that situational leadership addresses situations in various contexts and matches the leadership style to competencies of followers. The styles in this approach include; directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating. A key element in this concept is the development of follower's competencies and commitment. Because of follower's developmental continuum, cross-cultural contexts, and technical influences, situational leadership becomes essential. Followership also entails the decision by followers to be influenced by leaders.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data is from observation and attention to the pandemic while secondary data (literature review) emanates from journals, government publications and news websites.

III. DISCUSSION

The Pandemic and its Effects

Jarus (2020) observes that throughout the course of history, disease outbreaks have ravaged humanity, sometimes changing the course of history and, at times, signaling the end of entire civilizations. Examples of such pandemics and epidemics include the Black death (1346-1353), the Cocoliztli Epidemic (1545-1548), Flue Pandemic (1889-1890), Spanish Flu (1918-1920), the Asian Flue (1957-1958), H1N1 Swine Flu (2009-2010).

The effects of pandemics as stated above cannot and should not be undermined. The Asian flu, for example, resulted in death toll of more than 1.1 million worldwide (Jarus, 2020; CDC, 2019). According to the CDC (2019), The H1N1 registered a death toll within a range of 151,700 – 575,400 worldwide. Human loss seems to be the primary effects of pandemics which is currently proving to be the prevailing situations with COVID-19, corona virus.

The vital health concern resulting from the mortality rate of 4% (Worldometer, 2020) of this pandemic requires that measures be taken by leaders to contain the disease. Containment requires washing hands, avoiding touching the face and social distancing, actions that are to be done by everyone including leaders and followers. These actions may seem easy to do however; they have proven to be so difficult to adhere to, thus requiring drastic control measures by leadership (Nature.com, 2020).

Because of the drastic measures required to contain this pandemic, specifically that of changing work habits and social distancing, Daco(2020) suggests that a recession is inevitable. A consulting firm, McKinsey & Company (2020) suggests that the GDP could cut global GDP in half as a result of social distancing and change of work habits. It is becoming increasingly difficult to make projections to possible financial impact since the virus is spreading and new developments with different governments in the world making decision to have lockdown.

Kelly (2020) observes that the coronavirus has changed the job market almost overnight. The global outbreak has seriously impacted the economy and job security. It will have long-lasting, game-changing ramifications. Blementhal (2020), citing a study across 30 states, supports that as lockdowns increase, businesses close and concern grows about the economic effects of the coronavirus pandemic, Goldman Sachs is projecting that a record 2.25 million people in the US could file for unemployment benefits this week. Kelly (2020) also recognizes that there will be sectors, companies and workers that may benefit from this near-tragedy. However, there will be industries that are severely harmed. People in these areas will lose their jobs and have extreme difficulties finding new ones.

Leadership Response

As stated in introduction, situational approach to leadership has various styles including; directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating. The unique nature of COVID-19, and the speed at which it spreads requires leadership to be decisive in their actions, and yet sensitive to the varied situations being cognizant of all stakeholders. The dynamics are such that different styles need to be employed to fight the virus and mitigate its effects reducing mortality rate. Glazer (2020) rightly observes that, crisis management is perhaps the most difficult test for leaders. This is especially true for a case like COVID-19, which does not have a comparable historical precedent or solution and where the threat is evolving constantly.

Baldoni (2020) states that when adversity strikes, people are looking for direction and guidance, and that's why leaders must exert their influence to shape the best way forward. This process involves assessing the situation to determine the style necessary to explore including understanding what is entailed in each style. The situational factors are key in matching the leadership style that can enable achieving success in any given dilemma.

Hersey and Blanchard (1969) suggest that these four leadership styles are such that a leader either uses the directing approach or telling style, which is characterized by giving directions and instructions in an attempt to control the behavior of group members. Northouse (2019) further asserts that the leader gives instructions about what and how goals are to be achieved and then supervises them carefully. Leadership examples in dealing with COVID-19 indicate authoritative stance as effective in arresting the disease. Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, the Chinese government has been widely reported to have significant capacity for control, using vast state authority and a significant surveillance program. As the origin point of COVID-19, the Chinese government's effort to control the virus has been watched by the entire world. Glazer (2020) observes that China responded with what the World Health Organization considered as the most ambitious, agile and aggressive disease containment effort in history. China leaders took action to close down manufacturing sectors, execute mass testing and quarantine millions of people. The Chinese government further made the decision to absorb a significant economic cost to contain COVID-19 rather than potentially lose control and the result was effective (Glazer, 2020). National leadership in Africa that emulated this show of decisiveness and action include; President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa, President Paul Kagame of Rwanda, and President Mokgweetsi Masisi of Botswana.

The next style as mentioned is coaching also known as the selling style (Cherry, 2019). Hersey and Blanchard (1969) suggest that this style involves a back and forth process of a leader selling ideas or giving messages and getting group members to buy into the process. Northouse (2019) adds that the leader here is interested in achieving goals and also in meeting followers' socioemotional needs. Meeting followers' socioemotional needs does not mean being dishonest about facts to ease concerns like Glazer (2020) observes, the American government has attempted to alleviate concerns and assure Americans COVID-19 has already

been contained. The opposite is true of the spread of the virus. Mayberry et al. (2020) state that the US now has the third highest death toll after Italy and Spain, and the highest number of coronavirus cases in the world with more than 175,000.

Participating or supporting style is the third as suggested by Hersey and Blanchard (1969). This style involves leadership offering less direction and allowing group members to come up with more ideas and making decision. Northouse (2019) observes that the leader focuses on allowing followers to bring out their skills around the goal that needs to be accomplished. This is, as Glazer (2020) observes, not as Trump has shown a tendency during difficult situations to rely heavily on his inner circle rather than subject matter experts and to state opinions as facts. This has created several situations where Trump has contradicted experts on his own task force attempting to educate the public, most notably by consistently overstating the scientifically acknowledged timeline to create a vaccine. Such leadership does not inspire trust and confidence with the masses.

Hersey and Blanchard (1969) suggest that the last leadership style in situational approach is about delegating. This style means that the members make most decision and take most of the responsibility for what happens (Cherry, 2019). Northouse (2019) highlights that the leader does not interfere but allows followers to get the job done the way they see fit. Further, the leader refrains from intervening with unnecessary social support (Ibid.). This style is not suggesting lack of leadership action like the Italian government response which, according to Glazer (2020), there was a lack of consistency in the Italian government's response. CNN (2020) reported that Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte acknowledged a "not entirely proper," management of a North Italy hospital helped contribute to the outbreak, but even as the virus spread the Italian government and tourism heads tried to convey that everything was under control and the situation was business as usual. The results of this inaction, and indecisiveness are seen in the high mortality rate.

Followership

In most cases, leadership is applauded while followers remain hidden in background yet there is no leadership without followers. It is not surprising that little attention has been paid to the vitality of followership (Carsten, 2017). Kellerman (2008) asserts that the value placed on leaders tends to be overestimated because of their power and authority resulting in underestimating the importance of followership. The advent of pandemics (such as the COVID-19), crisis and situations behooves us to rightly place followers at the center stage. While the power of leaders cannot go unnoticed, how followers respond determines the influence and power (Northouse, 2019) of the situational leader. In fact, Kelley (2008) describes followers as equal to leaders the difference being the roles they play. Thus, the construct of followership is unequivocally intrinsic in the leadership process (Bufalino, 2018) because it is a pre-requisite to effective leadership (Foley, 2015). In view of the theory of followership spawned by Uhl-Bien et al. (2014), we advance only two features of theory, follower role and outcome summarized from the work of Klingensmith (2017).

Leaders of governments in different countries have flexed their authority and power as an effort towards apprehending the spread of the disease. None (leader or follower) is excused from the rampage of the virus. The state of emergency befits both the situational leader and the follower to respond urgently thus forming a reciprocal relationship around a common purpose (Chaleff, 2008). The role of the follower is to be alert to updates and proclamations by their government. For instance, Botswana's President and Health Minister, His Excellency Dr. Eric Mokoetsi Masisi and Honorable Dr. Lemogang Kwappe routinely give the nation updates as the reins of movement and travel are tightened (Mguni, 2020). The Minister is on national television and radio daily to update about the situation and amend previous proclamations with new ones since the situation caused by COVID-19 morphs each new day. Another regional leader in Southern Africa, President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa, recently effected a twenty-one (21) day lock down (Tandwa, 2020). Up to date, Botswana has not registered any COVID-19 case, according to United States Embassy (2020).

In the case of South Africa, Africa's second largest economy (Enaifoghe, 2019) and the sub-region's indisputable powerhouse (Asuelime, 2019), the corona virus has not been lenient. South Africa is a popular destination (Dithebe and Mukhuba, 2018) and attracts business from all over the world (Vickers 2014). It remains to be seen how South Africans who have had a seemingly a general cozy and relaxed approach to life, will respond (outcome) to the lock down declared by President Ramaphosa.

In Italy just like in many other countries, Rocca (2020), Chief of International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, lamented the fact that there were many noticeable individuals who did not practice simple rules on physical/social distancing. The slackness in responding to declarations (washing hands and staying home) made by the government significantly increased the number of death tolls in a day by 376% [168 to 631] thereby making Italy the most hit hard place on earth at 15% of the world fatalities (Jankowicz, 2020). Whereas in Spain, as a measure of mitigating the harsh and extreme effects of the virus and following the principle of precaution, police were mounted in the streets to clear the streets because of followers who did not heed the advice of health authorities, reported The Guardian (2020).

The value of followership cannot be underestimated. A shared common purpose between the leader and the follower forms a reciprocal relationship (Chaleff, 2008) such that the leader gives instructions and followers give feedback. The cooperation of each party heightens survival. Therefore, followership is a vital component of the leadership process (Prilipko, 2019).

IV. CONCLUSION

The fight against a pandemic naturally places every leader on a decisive path of urgent action. Arifa et al. (2019) have emphasized the importance of leadership in disease outbreak management to ensure successfulness of control and prevention. Since pandemics are not a day-to-day operation of any government or organization, situational leadership offers relevance in the fight for human survival amidst the Coronavirus scourge. It takes a decisive leader to apprehend the scourge thereby mitigating losses, both human and financial. One of the prescriptive values of situational leadership is being intuitive and flexible since situations can change due to followership response or the mutating nature of a pandemic. Juxtaposed to the importance of situational leadership is heightened germaneness of followership response to the situational leadership styles. Situational leadership without the appropriate response and attitude of followers is an unyielding process. Just as the English man once said, 'it takes two to tango,' we conclude both situational leadership and an astute followership approach are necessary in the fight against COVID-19. This dyad will ensure effective management of the already limited financial, human, time and asset resources of governments and organizations, and in turn enabling strategic planning and implementation of intervention methods.

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