

Sustainability as a Vital Leadership Proficiency

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Abstract

This paper presents the case that sustainability should be acknowledged as an important proficiency in organisational leaders. Arguably, sustainability requirements have been present in organisations for some time, however, sustainability has not usually been expected of leaders themselves. Conversely, the advent of new requirements of organisations and its leadership are increasing. Therefore, successful leadership will not be solely measured on effectiveness criteria, but gradually on the ethics that leaders exhibit when taking on environmental and social initiatives. In the development of both leadership in organisations and individual leaders, the application of a competence framework is prevailing among human resource practitioners, portraying a popular move toward conceptualising the attributes that ought to be developed in leaders to ensure their effectiveness in organisations. Furthermore, it is argued that if sustainability was a proficiency that was incorporated by the leadership of organisations, then leaders would be better able to achieve the triple bottom line. This paper proposes that individualised consideration, empathy, enthusiasm to serve and modesty are some of the attribute of sustainability proficiency in leadership, which would distinguish this style of leadership from other leadership competencies. The paper also proposes suggestions for further research on sustainability as vital a leadership proficiency.

Index Terms - Corporate citizenship, leadership proficiency, sustainability, triple bottom line.

Introduction

In leadership development, the competency framework has predominantly been adopted in human resource practice and conceptually represents an accepted approach of what attributes of a leader should possess in an organisation to be effective (Boyatzis, 2009). However, current literature on leadership overlooks sustainability as a proficiency (Boyatzis, 2011; Burns, Smith & Ulrich 2012; Ryan, Emmerling & Spencer, 2009; Tompson & Tompson, 2013). One of the few studies which investigates this topic is that of Yamazaki (2014) who investigated managers in Asia; he included qualities such as helping, compassion and caring into a recently constructed competency framework (Gravells, 2012). Service has also been proposed as a leadership competency by Pearse (2017). The present paper puts forward the notion that sustainability is a vital leadership proficiency that should be developed in leader, and as a result, its conceptualisation should be investigated.

2. Sustainability in organisations

The significance of the sustainability concept is well known in various organisations. It is a topic that has sparked debate about business and its purpose, environmental and social initiatives and profit maximisation. To start on a transitional journey to sustainability and citizenship engagement, organisations need a new type of leadership. Recent developments in corporate social responsibility put forward the notion that organisations are obligated not just to shareholders but to various other stakeholders as well, notably, the broader society (Kramer & Porter, 2011). Thus, organisations which have to date been solely profit-oriented have now come to recognise that it is necessary to serve the community in which they operate.

A leader's ability to inculcate sustainability into people, places, products, processes and profits enables them to become restorative through the power of influence (Weybrecht, 2014). Sustainability principles improve resource efficiency utilisation, promote product differentiation, give competitive advantage and enhance corporate image (Porter & van der Linde, 1995). Moreover, a leader of an organisation is not only expected to provide a service to customers but to engage and influence suppliers in value chain creation (de Marchi *et al.*, 2013). These sustainability initiatives include engagement through share value creation (Kramer & Porter, 2011). However, there is a minority of theories in leadership that openly advocate that organisational leaders ought to display sustainability competency. Bennis and Metcalf (2012) hold the view that leadership is key in interpreting how sustainable an organisation will be.

In this respect, Greenleaf (1977) observes on servant leadership that "it involves exceeding one's self interest". The individual and his or her needs are at the centre of servant leadership; this correlates with the social dimension of sustainability. Servant leadership provides direction, empowers people and strives for the good of the whole (van Dierendonck, 2011). Sarros and Sendjaya (2002) viewed servant leadership as an oxymoron. The main concept underpinning servant leadership is to serve first (Greenleaf, 1977). This is supported by the work of Crippen (2005) contending that leadership without service is incomplete.

Authentic leadership is also recognised as sustainable orientation (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). The two pillars of authentic leadership – moral perspective and self-awareness – are both necessary for leadership to be effective (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing & Peterson, 2007). Drach-Zahavy and Somech (2006) suggest that leaders helping subordinates is central to the leadership role.

It can therefore be concluded that although leaders have, to some extent, been excluded in leadership theory from serving the environment and society, this should not be the case. Not only is sustainability proficiency becoming increasingly important in transforming the role of organisations, society and environment, but it also contributes to the integrated reporting of the organisation. Subsequently, it is argued other trends in leadership are also in support of sustainable-oriented leaders.

3. Current trends in organisational leadership

In this paper, three trends in leadership theory have been identified. These are assigning responsibilities in leadership, leaders rejected due to their status as celebrities and the practical emphasis laid on leadership ethics. To start with, the leadership of organisations is heading towards delegative leadership and moving away from hero-oriented models, recognising the role of system thinking and total quality management. The leadership task is complex to be handled by an individual (Sarros & Sendjaya, 2002). Looking at delegation leadership, more emphasis is placed on the function of the team. Otherwise, individuals are helpful collectively. During leadership task rotation, members of the team are expected to support one another.

Secondly, in moving away from hero-oriented leadership, organisations are shifting away from celebrity status ideas to anti-hero leadership, with modest, low profile, restrained and humble leaders (Morris, Brotheridge & Urbanski, 2005).

Thirdly, there are demands from followers for different types of leadership. Kellerman (2012) evaluates ethics and effectiveness and contends that both are leadership success indicators. According to Gardner *et al.* (2010), the moral aspect of leadership is increasingly being emphasised. In support of this view, without strong corporate governance, ethical behaviour, open and transparent relationships with stakeholders and sustainability principles, the goals of the organisation will remain elusive (Weybrecht, 2014). This is confirmed by Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum and Kuenzi (2012), who note an incidence of community engagement and donating one's time to charity instead of money. In reality, if sustainably-oriented leaders are also ethical, then organisations may begin shaping leadership ethics by developing sustainability as a leadership proficiency.

4. Sustainability as a leadership proficiency

In developing the concept of sustainability as a leadership proficiency, it is first necessary to shed light on leadership competency and sustainability.

4.1 Definition of competency

According to Le Deist and Winterton (2005), there is an inconsistency in the application of competency and competence. 'Competence' describes a work-related task and is considered as a dependent variable, whereas 'competency' describes a behaviour and is treated as an independent variable (Vazirani, 2010). In considering sustainability as a behaviour, the literature on competency is relevant. Boyatzis (2009) defines competency as the capability of an individual to be mobilised in relation to performance, understood in a work demand context in the workplace environment. It is important at this point to define what a competency is. Boyatzis (2011) gives an explanation that these behavioural sets "are the manifestation of an intent alternatively" and highlights that these behavioural sets are applicable in different situations for different reasons. Intent and action are the core of competency (Boyatzis, 2011).

4.2 Sustainability

The act of sustainability is about addressing current and future generations' needs. As put by Weybrecht (2014), it is development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the future generation's needs. Two key concepts are identified: the concept of needs and the idea of limitations. According to Weybrecht (2014), sustainable development focuses on improving the quality of life for all citizens of the Earth. Sustainability acts in this paper refer to leading followers in a given direction. Moreover, the intent of this behaviour should be described in a relationship context. The leadership role requires influencing followers to accept and understand what needs to be accomplished and willingly contributing towards shared objectives (Yukl, 2006). Thus, the proposed sustainability proficiency of leadership can be defined as the ability to behave in such a way that the act of sustainability takes place intending to develop present generations while protecting future generations. Elaborating on this proposed definition, two relevant dimensions are noted, namely, the current and future generation. In addition to these dimensions are attributes central to sustainability as a leadership proficiency, namely, individualised consideration, empathy, enthusiasm to serve and modesty.

Firstly, there is a need for organisational leaders to acquire knowledge of their subordinates; this has been highlighted as individualised consideration, one element from the full range leadership theory (Avolio & Bass, 1990). Individualised consideration requires a leader to understand a follower's needs and develop those potential needs fully (Avolio, Bass & Jung, 1999) through mentorship, role modeling, coaching and by paying attention to followers (Good & Schwepker, 2010). A study conducted by Griffin and Rafferty (2006) has suggested two dimensions of individualised consideration, namely, supportive and developmental leadership. Cameron and Sosik (2010) explore this further by defining individualised consideration as "selfless service through mentorship, coaching, and acknowledging the diversity of followers". Through understanding and knowing one's followers, a leader can recognise their needs. Sustainability proficiency, however, requires the leader to develop those needs.

The second attribute is empathy. Boyatzis *et al.* (2006) note three core elements that are interrelated to empathy, namely, "understanding other's feelings; caring for that person; and the will to act in responding to the feelings of that person". Even though empathy is mostly associated with aiding those in distress (Melwani & Barsade, 2011), in sustainability leadership proficiency, it is contested that followers should not necessarily have to be in distress but should be considered in the context of need. According to Melwani and Barsade (2012), the expression of empathy may lead to a social gap. Therefore leaders must have the right motive and must be humble, insofar as humble leaders care less about social rank (Exline & Geyer, 2004).

Thirdly, another attribute of sustainability as leadership proficiency is the enthusiasm to serve, a motive that underpins a leader's power acquisition and maintenance. When the motive of leadership is examined, it is suggested exerting power should be more social rather than personal (House & Howell, 1992). Power in a socialised context is aligned to democratic behaviour, where power serves a collective interest rather than a leader's own personal agenda (House & Howell, 1992). Research on the motive of leaders to obtain power and utilise it for personal interest, has placed less emphasis on the mechanism motivating leaders to distribute power in a social-oriented manner (Maner & Mead, 2010).

Finally, the attribute of modesty is a trait of sustainability leadership. Modesty in leaders enables them to act in a manner that will maintain a positive social relationship with followers. Even though modesty has been recognised by theories like the level-five leadership, moral-ethical-virtuous-empowering-participative (Qu *et al.* 2014) and servant leadership (Owens & Heckman, 2012), it is a concept that is underdeveloped (Owens & Heckman 2012). The general understanding of modesty is that the leader tends to be open (Owens & Heckman, 2012). According to Nielsen, Marrone and Slay (2010), leaders with modesty are more interdependent than dependent. This is supported by the work of Collins (2001) who emphasises that modesty in leadership enables one to develop their successors. Adding to the theory of modesty, Morris *et al.* (2005) note that modest leaders trust greatness than themselves. This is a catalyst for organisational leaders to initiate acts of sustainability.

In this paper, sustainability as a leadership proficiency has been defined with four attributes, namely, individualised consideration, empathy, enthusiasm to serve and modesty. A future investigation may be required into these attributes.

5. Further study

The case of sustainability as a leadership proficiency has been contested to be considered into the competency framework to balance the environmental and social parameters that are expected of organisational leaders. The position of sustainability proficiency at this stage is theoretical and requires further research to identify if followers and organisations are holding their leaders responsible on sustainability. In addition, this paper proposed a definition of sustainability as a leadership proficiency that may be tested, and its four attributes were verified.

To conclude, in line with social and environmental dimensions in organisations, the case of sustainability as a leadership proficiency has been developed. Further study is required to test this proposed framework and verify its characteristics.

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Biography

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