

Three concepts of leadership

Potency, power and function

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Abstract

Leadership conception is often confused by organizations even from people in charge of this question such as HR or leaders themselves. In addition, academic research paid a lot of attention to leadership definition and styles, and more recently to leadership development, but very few on transformations a leader may engender among follower(s). As a result, examining empirically the phenomenon and trying to conceptualise leadership from this specific angle can be both useful for organizations and innovative for management sciences research.

The paper introduces three innovative concepts of leadership in order to better understand a leader's potential influence vis-à-vis his followers. These interactions are of value because they illustrate the follower's transformations resulting from the impact of his leader. This impact of each kind of leadership is also discussed from the organizational point of view.

The three leadership concepts that are proposed are potency, function and power leadership. The state of leadership is dependent on the nature of the transformations experienced by the follower.

Introduction

The interest in leadership has been very high for more than a decade now as the importance of non-academic and academic literature illustrates (Schyns, Kiefer, Kerschreiter & Tymon, 2011). However, defining what leadership still seems problematic, as you can find as many definitions as researches who did try to conceptualise the notion (Stogdill, 1974). The only consensus that does emerge lately consists in understanding leadership as the interaction of three main pillars: leader, follower and context (Avolio, 2007).

This consensus is quite recent insofar as during last century management sciences' research focused on emergence and efficiency conditions for leadership (Avolio, 2007). From now on, research tries to understand leadership mechanisms in order to foster the development of these attributes by organizations (DeRue & Wellman 2009).

The interest in leadership results from its ability to transform an organization (Kotter, 1995) and also from the fact that the post-2000 world requires permanent reinventions from organizations, no matter who they are and what they do. Indeed, no actor seems protected

from the “turbulent field” (Emery & Trist, 1965) that did emerge lately and that the 2008 financial crisis made even more binding.

This « leadership calling » has contributed to explore leadership development, which forms one of the main evolutions of emergent leadership theories (Avolio, Walumbwa & Weber, 2009), such as authentic leadership (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). One of the other main issues of emerging leadership theories concerns the importance of the follower, who became, according to Avolio et al. (2009), “an integral part of the leadership dynamic system” (p.442).

In this context, it is worth studying the state of leadership a leader can have, according to the nature of the transformations experienced by the follower. Liaising this outcome with its potential contribution on organization can also be relevant in terms of management implications.

Research Problem, Objectives and Plan

Leadership is a polysemic word that can be used in many different contexts, with many different meaning (Garcia, 2011). This multi-meaning characteristic and the lack of consensual definition do not help organizations to understand the real sense of the notion, and by extension to develop it. As a result, a lot of confusion seems to exist even when the angle is reduced to the impact a leader can have on his follower(s). Here, several kinds of leadership can be mixed and misunderstood. The same word leadership is indeed generally used to qualify a leader having a strong impact on his follower(s), whatever this impact might be, positive or destructive. We consider this lack of precision as a weakness in epistemology and, as a result, a way to explore for management sciences’ research.

The question of the transformations that a leader may facilitate among his follower(s) seems key today, due to new leaders and leadership requirements in terms of quantity and quality from an organizational point of view (Hannah & Jennings, 2013).

In addition, besides measuring the impact leadership can make on follower, the study can be used to evaluate the influence produced towards the organization, from a management sciences perspective. Thus, each kind of leadership should be analysed from its own contribution to organization development, in order to catch a bigger picture than just the follower angle. This organizational effect, as a whole, will be tackled later.

Lastly, as leadership turns out to be mandatory, the issue of the fabrication of the most valuable form of leadership, that is supposed to emerge from this research, should be tackled. As the process of developing something supposes its knowledge (Hollenbeck, McCall & Silzer, 2006), then new cognition of leadership, that the study aims at, can lead to conation for the organization, i.e. improving the pathway of positive leadership fabrication.

The main objectives of the study are: (1) defining three concepts of leadership in terms of transformations a leader may create among follower(s), i.e. management cognition, (2) discussing the organizational impact of each kind of leadership thus defined, i.e. management effects on organization, (3) discussing these issues through fabrication aspects and the influence the organization may have on leadership development, i.e. management conation.

As a result, the paper is based upon the following rationale: the literature review was analyzed; then main methodology options were examined, which included multiple-case study choice, data collection, population, sample design, and data analysis. Finally, the results were presented followed by a series of conclusions with managerial implications, then certain limitations and further research to be explored were pointed out.

Literature review

Literature and past research were studied in order to set up an adequate theoretical framework aimed at conceptualising dimensions related to the transformations that a leader may stimulate among his follower(s). Three main aspects arose from the empirical analysis (supra) that can be enlightened by this literature review. Indeed, the understanding of the leadership process examined seems to follow three main sources of authorities from the leader vis-à-vis his follower(s): function, potency and power.

Functional leadership

In a famous distinction relative to three types of legitimate rule (1971), Weber distinguishes legal, traditional and charismatic authority. Each kind of authority depends upon specific and respective belief, reason and law, tradition and charisma (Weber, 1971). This analysis can be transposed into leadership comprehension, as deconstruction of the interaction process that ties leaders to followers. Indeed, in any organization a leader, considered as so by his company, seems to exercise leadership based on an authority related to this trilogy of source.

Here, the research will focus on the leadership coming from legal authority. In this case, authority is generated by the function and not the person, evoking a sort of bureaucratic authority. That's what we call functional leadership.

This first conceptualization will help to start the identification of leadership states, based on follower's transformations, the paper is aiming at.

Potency and Power Leadership

Philosophy can teach us the main differences between potency and power. This distinction is key, whatever the context may be: "The confusion between power and potency is ruinous." (Deleuze, 2004). Let's try to address this regarding leadership conceptualisation.

Potency is about giving and creating and not about wanting, looking after and coveting. Potency turns out to be mainly creative and donor, the opposite of dominating. Built on these conceptions, potency leadership may be defined as the ability of a leader to make his follower(s) grow up. Thus, this kind of leadership tends to transform followers into leaders and with leadership. Potency leadership supports Ralph Nader's conception for whom leadership aims at developing more leaders, not followers (Spreitzer, 2006).

On the other hand, power leadership seems to be the corollary of potency leadership. This is a leadership consisting in the protection of the leader's power, preventing followers from growing and keeping them in the status quo of their

followership. This kind of leadership can include the presence of the political, based on the autonomy of this notion that has been observed and conceptualized (Schmitt, 2007). The political, according to Schmitt's conception (2007), may be activated by the leader as power leadership to secure his position inside the organization and sometimes against his follower that could threaten it. As a result, power leadership is about domination and not creation and donation. Power leadership contradicts potency leadership insofar as it stops the follower's fabrication into leader and with leadership: "There is no bad potency. What is bad is the lowest degree of potency and the lowest degree of potency is power." (Deleuze, 2004).

Methodology

The study used qualitative methodical approach that should be reviewed now.

Multiple-Case Study Choice and cases selection

The research joins within the framework of a constructivist epistemology insofar as the reality of leader and leadership seems more resulting from social construct (Piaget, 2008) than something that would exist in itself. In this context, qualitative method seems adequate (Mucchielli, 2009) and case study appropriate due to two major specificities that do match with the subject of the study: the phenomenon examined is contemporary and frontiers between phenomenon and context could be vague (Yin, 2014). Furthermore, multiple-case study brings more robustness to research for many different reasons (Herriott et Firestone, 1983; Eisenhardt, 1991; Yin, 2014).

The research has been carried out in three large organizations, the French Armed Forces, a European bank leader in retail and one of the main international rating agencies, and led to three case studies. First, the three organizations shared common traits that did allow comparisons (Eisenhardt, 1989), large size, leader and proactive in leadership development. However, the sample of organizations shows variety in terms of sector (private and public), service, size (roughly 10 000, 150 000 and 290 000 people), globalization degree, context, strategy and culture (French and Anglo-Saxon).

Data Collection, Population and Sample design

Data collection relies on triangulation, consisting in gathering primary data, according to two different collection modes (semi-structured interviews and participant-observation), and secondary data (mainly HR internal documentation and academic research reviews). The main data collection relied on interviews that did last between 42 minutes and 1h47 minutes (average 1h04 min) and which took place between September 2014 and January 2015 in Paris and London.

The data triangulation has been completed by the point of view of three distinct actors in leadership development of the organizations observed: leaders, considered as so by their organization, trainers, within leadership program or designers, in charge of decisions related to leadership development. Most of time the person interviewed cumulated the three roles mentioned.

Sample design has been determined according to iterative method, within the going process of the theory in construction based upon grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2012).

35 people have been interviewed, i.e. 12 by organization, with an average age of 48 years, 71 % were male (25 men) and 29 % female (10 women).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed iterative process as agreed with grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2012). Interviews have been all retranscribed into written form then has been interpreted thanks to qualitative data software, NVivo. Based on words frequency and co-occurrence analysis, a selective coding has been performed. As long as theoretical saturation was not reached (Glaser & Strauss, 2012), interviews were continued. The retranscription of the 36 hours of the 35 interviews took 70 days and led to 303 pages of written transcription, i.e. 233 293 words.

Theory building consisted in abductive approach (Strauss et Corbin, 1998), made of round-trip between primary data analysis, based on coding and literature review. The latter gave a conceptual framework in the understanding of the phenomenon related to the dimensions regarding transformations a leader may engender among follower. The other primary (participant-observation) and secondary (internal and external documentation) data sources helped confirming consistency and convergence of the theory building (Yin, 2014).

Results

Empirical analysis confirmed the multifaceted dimension of leadership insofar as, many different types of leadership seem to exist, as illustrated by the case study dedicated to the rating agency that distinguishes analytical leadership from people leadership.

This multifaceted aspect has also been stressed regarding the follower's transformations resulting from the impact of his leader. Indeed, a certain type of leadership seems "toxic", as an interviewer said, vis-à-vis the follower. This destructive interaction can be illustrated by the character of, what the French Armed Forces call, "gang leader", someone who leads followers for his own interest, disregarding the organization.

On the other hand, there is what the rating agency calls "people leadership", which consists for the leader in "exporting talent" of his follower. As a result, organization as a whole would benefit from this exportation of talent. This development process of the follower results from an action made by his leader on making the singular talent seeds of the follower grow.

At last, an ultimate and third main type of leadership appeared to operate in the phenomenon of followers' transformation study, it is characterized by neutral effects. This is more about leadership coming from the function than the person. A function located within the framework of the organization, such as a new officer taking command, or each new job assumed by someone considered officially as a leader. Vertical organizations, like the three ones observed for the study, seemed to create mechanically this last leadership form.

Discussions and Conclusions

The research helped to highlight three different concepts of leadership in terms of transformations a leader may create among follower(s): potency, functional and power leadership. Indeed, each kind of leadership that did emerge from the empirical analysis

produced something specific among followers. This leadership triptych did appear from the coding of the data gathered through multiple case study.

Potency leadership seemed to develop leader and leadership among followers, and as a result potency. Functional leadership appeared to create nothing and at last power leadership tended to be negative in leader and leadership fabrication for followers, preventing potency from growing.

Thus, the paper identifies and conceptualizes leadership and represents them as in a triptych of constructive, neutral or destructive, depending on the nature of the transformations experienced by the follower.

Multiple-case study showed that overlapping may happen between the triptychs among leaders. Thus, leaders' mindset was never understood as purely potency, functional or power, but a mix of these triptychs with, nevertheless, one leadership main kind dominating.

This new conceptualisation of leadership states has managerial implications insofar as, according to each main stream of leadership, the effects generated towards the organization are respectively different. Indeed, if potency leadership brings positive contributions to organization, thanks to the creation of new leaders and leadership on-board, function leadership appears neutral whereas power leadership produces negative outcomes and prevents transformations by maintaining conservatism.

The opposite is also true as organizations have an impact on the development of the leadership, here the triptych of leadership identified can help this process. Indeed, based on the knowledge of the leaders' attributes, in terms of functional, potency and power leadership, the organization can manage the allocation of such follower with such leader in order to optimize leader and leadership fabrication, and by extension organisation's transformations. The other management implication that emerged from the empirical analysis did affect the link between organizational structure verticality and leadership. Important verticality degree turned out to produce functional leadership, thus, individual leadership, and especially potency leadership, seemed to need space in the organizational pyramid. As a result, making the structure more horizontal can represent a way of accelerating individual and potency leadership to grow.

Lastly, studying leadership through its outcomes on followers, and not only from leader point of view (e.g. leadership style streams), seemed relevant and organization driven. Indeed, as empirical research revealed a leader can be charismatic, and as such can exercise authority on his followers (Weber, 1971), the question is for what effects? In the case of power leadership, charisma harms followers and as a result organizations. Charisma is not an end, but a mean, that can serve followers and by extension organizations. "Gang leaders" in the French Forces Armed are usually characterized by strong charisma, but fail to develop soldiers/followers and the military institution. Worse, they can jeopardize the critical chain of command in the Army and, as so, are exfiltrated.

The following figure can illustrate the main results that have been discussed:

Figure 1: Main conceptual and managerial results of the research

Three concepts of leadership: Potency, Power & Function

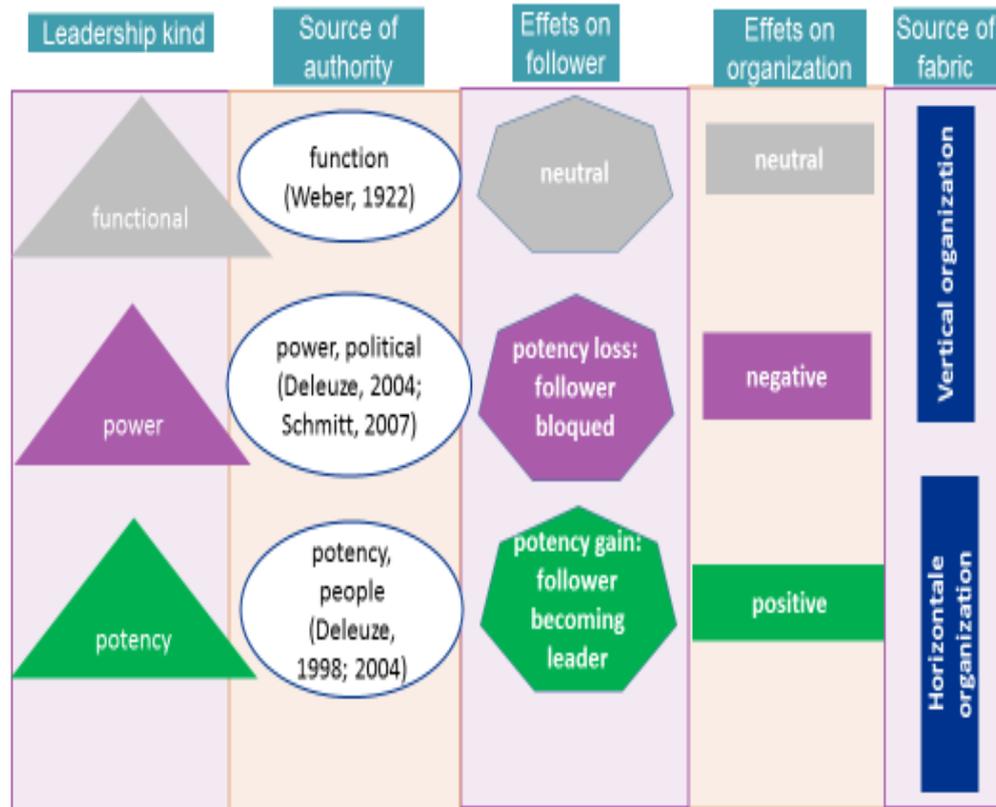


Figure 1 summarises the main findings of the research and emphasizes the potential applicable application and transposition of philosophical definitions (Deleuze, 1998, 2004) into management sciences. Indeed, grounded on followers' developmental transformations that have been observed in empirical studies, Deleuze's notion of potency leadership turns out to be constructive for organization. This kind of leadership seems to energize people towards gain of strength. Potency leader appears to mobilize potency and people as source of authority. As a consequence, these developmental transformations may help to make more leaders from followers and as a result, to accelerate organizational changes.

On the other hand, power leader is prone to producing a loss of followers' potency. As a result, and due to this context, followers will stay followers. Indeed, this kind of leader prevents his follower from developing as a leader, according to Deleuze's distinctions between power and potency (2004). Power and the political (Schmitt 2007) act here as a leverage in the leader's authority vis-à-vis his follower. This power leadership, which is more common in vertical structures, creates negative effects on organization and jeopardize change initiative by allowing the status quo to continue. Thus, new leaders do not emerge from followers and power leaders focus on the political to secure their role disregarding the development of the organization.

As a conclusion, we could say that empowerment, taken literally, implies that leader gives power to follower but with the possibility of taking it back. According to Deleuze's conception of power (2004), this is the lowest degree of potency. This is dependence, from

follower to leader. Thus, empowerment does not make leaders, it perpetuates followers as they receive power's leader, which are not theirs. Potency makes leaders, and potency leadership help followers becoming leaders by conquering their own forces, and as a result independence. The adequate word, based on Deleuze's beliefs (2004), should be "empotencyment". The neologism traduces, indeed, the situation where followers receive potency from leader, which helps them create real and authentic strengths as autonomous developmental pathway.

Limitations and Further research

One main limit of the current work can be pointed out, the necessity to extend the empirical study to different kinds of organizations. Empirical validity can progress, indeed, through case studies extension, implying smaller, newer, more diverse and horizontal organizations.

Furthermore, as the research relies on exclusive qualitative method, quantitative method can grant additional support, in terms of robustness for the research, and as a result more comfort in the conclusions that have been made.

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