

Egalitarian Leadership as an Optimized for the Present

Paul Pensabene, Ph.D.

Faculty of the Larry L. Luing School of Business
Berkeley College, New York, N.Y.
pdp@berkeleycollege.edu paulpensa@aol.com

Abstract

The current investigation examines egalitarian leadership as a preferred leadership style for communicative, dynamic organizations in which employees feel that they are being treated as equals in decision-making, rather than representatives of hierarchical and static organizational positions. To show the benefits of egalitarian leadership, the current author juxtaposes it against hierarchical leadership, concluding that egalitarian leadership, despite some drawbacks, has significant advantages for organizations in competitive industries where lean performance is valued, and responsive decision-making is integral. The current author discusses and compares leadership styles before presenting results, making recommendations and drawing conclusions.

Introduction

In the existing environment of organizational theory, there are many leadership models which are proposed to define and describe traits which successful leaders use. Although leadership is difficult to quantify and relatively easy to recognize, there are various schools of thought about which leadership model or paradigm works best in a broad context. Theories of egalitarian leadership focus on ideas of equality; this leader inspires not by seeing the employees as vessels for their own plans, but rather, by seeing employees as equal partners with valid contributions to make. Egalitarian leadership tends to favor collaboration and the elimination of power distance between management and employee factions. It can improve communication and transcend hierarchical bureaucracies, but egalitarian leadership also has its drawbacks. Overall, in egalitarian styles of leadership, executive management is encouraged to, “provide employees with channels of communication and improve their ability of understanding each other (open communication)” (Abdolvand et al., 2010). Communication has been demonstrated to be integral to organizational decision-making and empowerment in employees. The basic assumption of the current report is that egalitarian leadership is a superior typology because it focuses on employee empowerment, cooperation, and inter-departmental trust, which ultimately (and optimally) allows the organization to respond more effectively and quickly to external changes.

Discussion

In terms of background, the general external organizational environment, or macro-environment, is one of risk and change in most industries. Unless the industry is stabilized artificially, it is likely that competition is a key factor. In competitive markets, change tends to move more quickly than in static markets, and the organization that can adapt best to change is the organization that can be the most dynamic. Using egalitarian leadership can help firms “to achieve optimal process operation (Maull et al., 2003; Terziovski et al., 2003). Egalitarian culture makes the positive changes take place with little resistance” (Abdolvand et al., 2010). Although there are many different forms of leadership, egalitarian leadership can help organizations react to external flux more efficiently, and can cut down on bureaucratic red tape.

Egalitarian leadership can be separated from two general other models of leadership, hierarchical leadership and individual leadership. Looking at individual leadership, in this form, the leader does not see group consensus as being at all important to optimal organizational decision-making. The individualist leader has little use for consensus or faith in group processes, but would rather deal on a one-on-one basis. For example, a transformational leader at a software company may discover a new time-saving process, and implement the process as expediently as possible. The result could still be optimized for the organization, but there is no group feedback in the process. In a hierarchical model, the perspective is one “such that problems are understood as manifestations of the absence of sufficient rules or the enforcement of rules” (Grint, 2013). Hierarchical leaders could still value group processes, but only if they go according to accepted chains of command and through proper established channels. For example, a hierarchical leader at a travel company could approve of a new change in rates after an executive-level meeting which achieved consensus. Again, the result could still be good for the company, but this type of leader is not going to listen to a wide range of employees; a travel agent, for example, would not have been invited to the hierarchical leader’s meeting. “In contrast, egalitarians see the same problem as one connected to the weakness of the collective community – it is less about rules and more about the community generating greater solidarity to solve the problem” (Grint, 2013).

Egalitarian leadership is seen in many contexts in professional literature, from organizational environments such as the one of interest to the current report, to anthropological contexts. “In small-scale societies that exhibit very limited hierarchy, potential victims deal with their ambivalence by setting aside their individual tendencies to submit and forming a coalition to control their more assertive peers” (Boehm, 1993). From a naturalist or anthropological perspective, one may assume that egalitarianism could be called the natural choice for organizational leadership. Top management teams make “strategic decisions, and the products of their decision making influence organizational performance. However, a subtle paradox is embedded in this relationship” (Amason, 1996). The rationale for this assumption is that egalitarian leadership evolved as humans became more prudent, and as leaders learned to set aside the tendency to dominate followers, and started to submit to group whims. “I have said that the social

result of this interaction is...a group that cooperates well and that remains small because in the absence of strong leadership it so readily subdivides" (Boehm, 1993).

The abovementioned lack of strong leadership is one of the risks of egalitarian models, in terms of potential drawbacks. For example, a company that has installed egalitarian leadership structures may face problems stemming from a lack of controlling leadership, which then places the locus of responsibility on the worker to find and fix problems. "In a traditional company, good managers can get the most out of employees whose skills are lacking, but an egalitarianism company needs every worker to bear personal responsibility and take initiative" (Advantages, 2014). In addition, there could be a positive side to hierarchical leadership, as well, since hierarchies may increase group decision-making quality by giving control to the leader, who is assumed to be competent. From this perspective, the ambiguity of group decision-making can be resolved through hierarchical systems. "Competent individuals presumably will make better decisions for the group than would those with lesser or average acuity" (Anderson and Brown, 2010). Of course, competence and other variables are assumed in this example, but this may not carry through to reality.

Leadership comparison

Comparing hierarchical and egalitarian leadership models, one finds a lot of opposition and polarity. When one looks at the egalitarian form in terms of governance, one can see social unity and equality that are brought about; when one looks at hierarchies, one sees, arguably, social unity that is still highlighted, but no equality. This results in a governance situation where, "I would have said that we cannot make a constitution together unless and until we are already equals, unless we are already the equals that only history can make us become" (Cohen, 2014). Instead of constitution in this example, one could also say organizational decision, and the same logical process would apply. Hierarchical leaders tend to be aloof and socially distant from subordinates, "whereas democratic leaders were more egalitarian and unconcerned by status differentials" (Antonakis and Atwater, 2002). Leadership that is hierarchical is more likely to be based on the power of the leader's position than it is on charisma, behaviors, or attitudes. However, this style is not always unpopular. "It turns out employees sometimes prefer hierarchical relationships over equal ones, according to a study conducted by Stanford Graduate School of Business professor Larissa Tiedens and Emily Zitek" (Desmaries, 2014).

As opposed to hierarchical styles, egalitarian leadership is more about teamwork and consensus-building. Vertical communication is encouraged, and employees are urged to think of themselves as the equals of managers in terms of decision-making power. "In working with teams of hardware and software engineers, I have seen how smaller, motivated groups of broadly talented individuals who hold one another accountable for overall performance can and do thrive without a traditional boss" (Is, 2013). Companies with egalitarian leadership tend to impose fewer boundaries on their employees than hierarchical companies. "In a hierarchical business, employees can avoid

performing certain tasks that aren't explicitly stated in their job descriptions" (McMullen, 2014).

Results

The current investigation favors egalitarian leadership over hierarchical leadership on the basis that it can better help organizations to make fast, lean decisions that are the result of multiple voices being heard, rather than the "top down" decision making of hierarchical systems. "Egalitarianism is characterized by a monotonicity axiom called Agreement: no two agents ever disagree in comparing two distinct preferences of a third one. Laissez-fairism is characterized by the No Subsidy axiom: a coalition would not be worse off if the other agents were not present" (Pure, 2014). Although both styles have their situational benefits, organizational studies have found that "Overall the return on investment for hierarchically organized groups was significantly less than that of egalitarian groups" (Edge and Remus, 1984). Findings across the extant literature on the subject seem to denote an agreement about egalitarian forms of leadership being conducive to communication; however, there is not such an agreement regarding results. The latter findings "suggest that egalitarian groups do not always perform better than hierarchical groups. The hierarchical leadership can force organizational sacrifice which egalitarian groups cannot force." (Edge and Remus, 1984).

When dimensions of control and leadership include questions of groups and authority, leadership styles can be subdivided and categorized in various ways. It seems to be that egalitarian leadership, by opening communication pathways, will lead to greater responsiveness in organizations, which may be more dynamic in times of change. One of the dimensions refers to one of two very basic questions: "The hierarchist style of doing public management is typified by a strong emphasis on rules and procedures" (Messchalk, 2004). A sense of charismatic leadership is perhaps better aligned with egalitarian than hierarchical models, based on the above survey and analysis of the existing literature on both types of leadership theory.

Egalitarian leadership can be likened to consensus building. If a leader is able to motivate a group of followers, they are going to need to have the trust of these followers in their authenticity. This authenticity in the egalitarian leadership model, is made up of the ability of the leader to listen as well as speak, and thus seek consensus in group situations. While some may argue that this process of consensus building simply stalls the dynamic decision making of an authoritarian style leader, it is argued in the current report that egalitarian leadership actually can add to a firm's dynamism, if it is utilized in the correct fashion.

By opening up the lines of vertical communication, egalitarian leadership can produce vital new ideas in organizations by seeking feedback from all employees, not just the corporate board. In many companies, employees feel that they cannot make suggestions or have feedback opportunities with upper management. However, the egalitarian style does not just welcome this feedback, but it actively seeks out a

meaningful, two-way conversation with employees, in a manner that is seen by them as authentic and trustworthy.

Egalitarian leadership is best suited for an environment in which change is fast-paced and competition is a significant factor. Once again, there are those who would argue that an authoritarian leader is better able to make quick decisions in such an environment, and that consensus-building takes up valuable time. However, these commentators are looking at decision-making as a quantity over quality equation, and in reality, the inverse of this equation is more often true—firms that are able to reap long-term benefits from quality decision-making are often more competitive than those with decision-making models that are quick, but also, foolish.

Conclusion

Overall, it appears that egalitarian leadership can be successfully defended as a preferred leadership style over hierarchical leadership for a communicative, dynamic workplace where employees feel that they can speak up and be heard, despite their position in the organization. Studies of egalitarian leaders go back to disciplines of anthropology, as well; the same can be said of hierarchical leaders, however. “Leaders do not take more of the spoils... strong leaders can be compatible with egalitarianism, and we suggest that leaders in egalitarian societies may be more motivated by maintaining an altruistic reputation than by short-term rewards of collective action” (Von Rueden, 2014). There is the idea that consensus-building is not a powerful tool, but relates more directly to mediocrity and majority tyranny; this is an accusation that assumes strong leadership is needed to correct the poor decision-making of the majority. While this may be true, optimally, “if you flip the coin, you will see that on the contrary it is minority tyranny when a minority can block an initiative that is wanted by most of the group” (Winkler, 2014). Leadership that is progressive will ultimately use whatever tools and theories necessary to adapt and meet the needs of a given situation or context; generally, this leadership is not the type that is considered to naturally consider it “advisable for the organization or its members to start talking about egalitarian revolution” (Spritler, 2014). This tension between fear of the majority and the need for its feedback is what brings down many hierarchical systems.

Managerial implications

The mainstream status quo in most businesses today, especially those in protected or oligarchical industries, is hierarchical leadership. In this type of leadership, the position matters more than the person. The title of manager means more than the management style. However, egalitarian managers will be able to build consensus based on the unity of the group. “The style emphasizes the boundaries of the group and aims at equality within the group, “not equality of material conditions but equality of power relations” (Maesschaelk, 2004). Hierarchical leadership styles have and maintain traditions, but they are not the wave of the future for managers who want to lead change-dynamic groups in competitive industries. There is a place for hierarchical leadership, and it is in organizations in which bureaucracy or size has caused the companies to move

and respond very slowly. “While hierarchies were the favored form of organizing in the past, they should not be the key design orientation in the next era of business.” (Bring, 2014). People will always need leadership and visionaries who can make executive decisions. But leadership is best when it is agile, and hierarchical systems may carry more risk even when exercising this agility, since the leader may be, for some reason, going against the better interests of the organization.

International implications

Whether a leadership structure in an organization is egalitarian or hierarchical is also an expression of culture and tradition. For example, in one study comparing leadership styles internationally, “the Australians rated traits that attenuate leader–follower power differences (e.g. friendly and respectful) higher than did the Chinese” (Casimir and Waldman, 2007). There are various cultures which have varying degrees of allegiance to collectivist or individual ethical philosophies. “Charismatic' and 'Self-Protective' leadership are evident in both cultures, but that the dimensions have emic (local) culturally determined manifestations” (Trevor et al., 2003). Egalitarian principles assert that policy should be based on the greater welfare of the collective. “As long as there is any positive tradeoff between the utility payoffs to different individuals, this egalitarian principle leads to the same social choices as the maximin principle, which always maximizes utility” (Myers, 1981). Managers of international operations will need to take cultural context into account when organizing groups along the lines of leadership theory models.

REFERENCE

Abdolvand, N., A. Albadvi, Z. Ferdowsi et al. (2010). Assessing readiness for business process reengineering.

<http://metalab.uniten.edu.my/~rosnafisah/CISB524/Articles/assessing%20BPR%20readiness.pdf>

Amason, A. (1996). Distinguishing the Effects of Functional and Dysfunctional Conflict on Strategic Decision Making: Resolving a Paradox for Top Management Teams

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/256633>

Anderson, C. and C. Brown (2010).The functions and dysfunctions of hierarchy.Research in Organizational Behavior.

Antonakis, J. and L. Atwater (2002).Leader distance.

<file:///C:/Users/HP/Downloads/0deec52398569ee1ae000000.pdf>

Boehm, C. (1993). Egalitarian Behavior and Reverse Dominance Hierarchy. Current Anthropology 34:3.

Casimir, G. and D. Waldman (2007). A Cross Cultural Comparison of the Importance of Leadership Traits for Effective Low-level and High-level Leaders Australia and China
http://www.uk.sagepub.com/humphreyel/study/materials/leaders_bookcase/ch02_casimir.pdf

Cohen, G. (2014). If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?
http://cdn.preterhuman.net/texts/thought_and_writing/philosophy/Cohen-If%20You're%20a%20Egalitarian.pdf

Desmarais, C. (2014). Your employees like hierarchy—No, really.
<http://www.inc.com/christina-desmarais/your-employees-like-hierarchy-no-really.html>

Edge.,A. and W. Remus (1984).The impact of hierarchical and egalitarian organization structure on group decision making attitudes.Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Learning 11.

Erdal, D. C. Boehm and B. Knauft (1994).On Human Egalitarianism: An Evolutionary Product of Machiavellian Status Escalation? Current Anthropology, Vol. 35, No.2.

Grint, K. (2013). Wicked Problems and Clumsy Solutions: the Role of Leadership. The Problem of Problems.

http://www.charity-works.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Short_Wicked_Problems_and_Clumsy_Solutions_22.pdf

Maesschalck, J. (2004). Approaches to Ethics Management in the Public Sector: A Proposed Extension of the Compliance-Integrity Continuum

<http://johnsoninstitute-gspia.org/Portals/25/PDFs/Approaches%20to%20Ethics%20Management%20in%20the%20Public%20Sector.pdf>

McMullen, A (2014). <http://smallbusiness.chron.com/egalitarianstyle-company-34701.html>

Myerson, R. (1981). Utilitarianism, Egalitarianism, and the Timing Effect in Social Choice Problems.Econometrica, Vol. 49, No. 4 pp. 883-897

Von Rueden, C., M. Gurven, H. Kaplan et al. (2014). Leadership in an Egalitarian Society.Human Nature.

Spritler, J. (2014). Progressive organizations don't advocate egalitarian revolution.
<http://www.newdemocracyworld.org/culture/fund.html>

Trevor-Roberts, E., Ashkanasy, N. M. and Kennedy, J. C. (2003) The egalitarian leader: A comparison of leadership in Australia and New Zealand. Asia-Pacific Journal of Management, 20 4: 517-540.

Winkler, T (2014).Egalitarian structure or consensus?<http://new-compass.net/articles/egalitarian-structure-or-consensus>

Advantages and disadvantages of egalitarianism
(2014).<http://smallbusiness.chron.com/advantages-disadvantages-egalitarianism-company-23291.html>

Bring on the egalitarian workplace (2014).
http://www.businessweek.com/debateroom/archives/2011/04/bring_on_the_egalitarian_workplace.html

Egalitarian and complementarian positions
(2014).<http://cbmw.org/uncategorized/summaries-of-the-egalitarian-and-complementarian-positions/>

Is it part of human nature to have hierarchies (2013)?
http://www.ted.com/conversations/20826/is_it_part_of_human_nature_to.html

The Pure Compensation Problem: Egalitarianism Versus Laissez-Fairism (2014)
<http://qje.oxfordjournals.org/content/102/4/769.abstract>