

HOW DO EPISTEMOLOGICAL BELIEFS CONTRIBUTE TO LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOUR, AND THE CHANGES REQUIRED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF TODAY'S BUSINESS CHALLENGES?

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between personal epistemological beliefs and behaviours of leaders will be undertaken as part of a doctoral research investigation. The research will also examine the changes that occur in leadership constructs and behaviour when epistemological beliefs are surfaced and explored with individuals. Leadership research and theory are briefly examined to identify a relevant leadership paradigm on which to begin the research. Similarly, epistemological beliefs and their role in leader values, decision-making and practice are discussed. Links between surfacing epistemological beliefs and leadership change are highlighted from the literature and offered as an imperative for investigation. Several postulates from the literature review are presented for consideration and as signposts for the doctoral study.

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INTRODUCTION: LEADERSHIP FOR NEW TIMES

At the end of the 20th Century several books emerged in an attempt to represent the thoughts of the most notable practitioners, philosophers and academic writers on business leadership for the next century. By explanation, the prefaces of these compiled texts highlighted the social, economic and political imperatives for thinking differently about the nature(s) and structure(s) of organisations that would prosper in future times. They also identified the need for new paradigms for leading the newly emerging style of organisation (Dickie, 1998; Hesselbein, Goldsmith, & Beckhard, 1996; Toffler & Toffler, 1996).

Toffler and Toffler (1996, p. ix) reported that the knowledge revolution had generated a “Third Wave of economic, technical and social change”. This, they said, “is forcing businesses to operate in radically new, continually shifting ways that stand Second Wave [industrial] notions on their head” (p. ix). The re-formulation of management and leadership ideas were, according to Toffler and Toffler (1996), a result of the bursts of creative thinking that accompany resultant paradigm shifts (p. ix).

Dickie (1998) also described a leadership paradigm that appeared to consolidate key ideas from some of the thought leaders that he interviewed for his book. Dickie (1998, p. xiv) claimed that what was needed was strategic entrepreneurship to meet the pace of change and the different types of decision-making processes for emerging markets. Chief Executive Officers (CEO’s) of the future he said, “require a highly entrepreneurial approach to creating and exploiting opportunities and shifting between scenarios as they unfold” (p. xiv). These notions and, among others, the leadership of organisational imperatives such as innovation, shared learning, continual improvement and greater entrepreneurship were listed by Dickie as part of the new CEO agenda (p. xvii).

The complexity of leading business in the future was summed up by Toffler and Toffler (1996). These authors note that Third Wave reality forces business leaders to consider more than economic and management issues. Business leaders must also consider and respond to “social, technological, political, cultural and religious

shocks”, some of which may happen without warning and have lasting effects (Toffler & Toffler, 1996, p. x). To address this issue other notable writers reflected on the need to examine personally held assumptions (mental models) (Senge, 1990, 1996) and values (Covey, 1989, 1992, 1996), handle paradox (Handy, 1989, 1996a), and to create the adaptive cultures (Kotter, 1996a, 1996b) necessary for creative thinking and entrepreneurship to flourish (Bennis, 1996; Bennis & Biederman, 1997). Many of these ideas had been around for some time, and by the late 1990s were more likely than before to be adopted by the business sector.

Dickie (1998) described a number of “executive lexicons” (p. xvi) that were beginning to be taken seriously in response to the need for change in new times. Concepts like horizontal organisation, team-based management, learning organisation and empowerment had previously been nominally embraced, but this was beginning to change (Dickie, 1998, p. xvi). This may be why these texts and others (Spears, 1998) contained articles written by CEO’s who had acted upon the “lexicons” and could confirm the effectiveness of their use in organisational renewal (Steere, 1996; Weber, 1996). Other authors at that time (Mant, 1997; Sarros & Butchatsky, 1996) used interview case studies to describe a range of leadership skills being used by CEO’s that reflected the new leadership paradigms.

In 2004 the complex and rapidly changing business environment is still a focus for research and the popular press. The leadership paradigms that are emerging centre on innovation, creativity and entrepreneurial activity and are argued as being necessary to ensure the adaptability required of organisations to succeed now and in the future (Basadur, 2004; Gupta, MacMillan, & Surie, 2004). These, and other authors suggest that while leadership has been shown to have a strong impact on an organisation’s performance, the role of leaders in the development of adaptable cultures is particularly significant (Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002). Adaptability requires creative problem-solving of complex issues that are often ill-defined (Reiter-Palmon & Illies, 2004), and success is achieved when the leader has the cognitive capacity, in terms of complex thinking skills and creativity, to facilitate the creative problem-solving of subordinates (see Hunt, Stelluto, & Hooijberg, 2004; Mumford, Connelly, & Gaddis, 2003). These skills and capacities are described as *leader adaptiveness* in this paper.

It appears from this brief overview of the business context and leadership imperatives discussed thus far, a first postulate worth considering is:

Postulate 1- Finding new ways of understanding what underpins leader adaptiveness is crucial to confirming, developing and further challenging leaders of today to lead tomorrow's enterprises.

WHAT SOME FOLKS DO: LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOUR

In order to start thinking about how best to find new ways of understanding what underpins leader adaptiveness it is important to review what we already know about leadership. A review of fifty years of study of leadership by House and Aditya (1997) illustrated the extent to which the phenomena of leadership has evolved. House and Aditya distinguished between leadership style, and generic leadership functions which have behavioural manifestations of leadership. First, leadership style was defined by these authors as “the manner in which specific behaviours are expressed” (p. 451), and had according to them, not been the focus of research attention. Second, early research on generic leadership functions had examined task-oriented (ensuring organisational performance and incorporated task related behaviours) and socially-oriented functions (focusing on effective integration of members and activities and included people oriented behaviours). Other, and more recently researched generic leadership functions, according to House and Aditya, related to the neo-charismatic leadership paradigm and incorporated those activities and behaviours described in the transformational (Bass, 1999) and visionary literature (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Our attention now turns to these developments in leadership research and theory which can contribute to an initial understanding of adaptive leadership behaviour.

Those researchers and theorists who broadly integrate neo-charismatic concepts into their discussions introduce cognitive, affective and social dimensions that require complex, reflexive activity by leaders. Such activity appears in:

- Primal leadership which focuses on emotional intelligence (Cooper & Sawaf, 1997; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002);

- Steward leadership and servant leadership based on the work of Greenleaf (1977) which involves having a particular focus on working with people (and trusting them) to achieve the desired results (Davis, Schoorman, & Donaldson, 1997; Spears, 1998);
- Revolutionary leadership which takes organisations and people into a non-linear imaginative, radically innovative new world (Hamel, 2000), and may be compared with entrepreneurial leadership recently described by Gupta et al. (2004);
- Charismatic leadership, originally introduced by House (1977) and often associated with transformational leadership (Bass, 1995), which focuses on change by appealing to the values and self-fulfilment of followers to move the organisation forward. House and Aditya (1997) note that transformational leadership, breakthrough leadership (Sarros & Butchatsky, 1996), visionary leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2002), and values based leadership (House, 1997) are located in the neo-charismatic paradigm.

Neo-charismatic leadership approaches theorised and researched in the literature often identify the need for cognitive complexity and creative thinking by leaders. For example, leadership behaviours associated with transformational leadership, such as supporting the development of individual staff members, arousing and inspiring them and helping them to see old problems in new ways, have been shown to positively affect organisational adaptation to change (Lam & Pang, 2003). The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) was developed to test transformational leadership theory and is the most widely used neo-charismatic leadership measure (House & Aditya, 1997). Recently, it was used to predict the performance of followers based on leadership behaviour (Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003). The transformational components of the MLQ provide useful attitudinal and behavioural descriptors that cluster sub-dimensions to measure (self and other) perceptions of what it is that leaders do to create an adaptive organisational culture. The transformational sub-dimensions include idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1999).

The MLQ has been much examined to prove its validity, and often the scales have been adjusted to suit specific research purposes (Antonakis, Avolio, &

Sivasubramaniam, 2003; DenHartog, VanMuijen, & Koopman, 1997). Others (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004) have examined the mixed empirical support for the transformational model articulated by Bass (1995) and tested and found support for an alternative five factor model (vision, inspirational communication, intellectual stimulation, personal recognition and supportive leadership). Regardless of the ongoing examination and debate surrounding the MLQ and the transformational model, it is clear that behavioural (and attitudinal) components of leadership that are adaptive in style and activity have been identified by Bass. With due recognition of the on-going MLQ/transformational empirical and theoretical discourse, we can use transformational leadership theory and the MLQ as an appropriately well developed leadership paradigm from which to begin investigating what underpins leader adaptiveness.

This section has focused on the vigorous inquiry into leadership behaviour (what some folks do) that contributes to the development of creativity, innovation and adaptiveness (in organisations and people). In so doing it has led to a second postulate:

Postulate 2 – Theories and measures of transformational leadership can form a robust paradigmatic base for investigating what underpins leader adaptiveness.

WHY SOME FOLKS DO: VALUES AND COGNITION IN TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Why do some CEOs such as Steere (1996) and Weber (1996) understand and act on the need to do things differently in a rapidly changing and complex business world? Why can some leaders more readily embrace or create different paradigms of leadership which enable them to do what Charles Handy refers to as shaping the future (Handy, 1996, 1996a)? Recently, research attention has shifted to investigating factors that may predispose individuals to use transformational leadership (Turner, Barling, Epitropaki, Butcher, & Milner, 2002, p. 157), and to ways that transformational leadership behaviours can be identified and developed (Sivanathan & Fekken, 2002). One emerging area of interest is the study of the value and belief systems that may underlie such behaviours (Krishnan, 2001). It is argued that by

understanding the basic value characteristics of transformational leaders, such leaders can be identified and developed through training (Krishnan, 2001). However, as Bass (1999) notes, little is known about the relationship between transformational leadership and underlying values and beliefs.

Burns (1978) in his seminal work on transformational leadership indicated that “values are internalized so deeply that they define personality and behaviour as well as consciously and unconsciously held attitudes....and become an expression of both *conscience* and *consciousness*” (p. 75). Citing Milton Rokeach (1972, p. 160), Burns adds that values have cognitive as well as motivational, affective and behavioural components and ultimately, values drive leadership behaviour. Rokeach (1972) considered a value “to be a type of belief, centrally located within one’s total belief system” (p. 124).

It is significant that thinking, learning, and values (beliefs) feature highly in recent leadership literature on creativity, innovation and transformational behaviours (Elkins & Keller, 2003; Howell & Boies, 2004; Jung, Chow, & Wu, 2003; Reiter-Palmon & Illies, 2004; Sosik, Godshalk, & Yammarino, 2004; Sternberg, Kaufman, & Pretz, 2003). Other disciplines such as education, have an historical interest in, and have developed theories and methods for understanding the relationship between beliefs, learning and teacher behaviour. However, approaches to understanding these relationships by researchers in education differ from those used in leadership research. Significant insights in education have resulted from focusing on the role of particular kinds of beliefs on teacher learning and teacher behaviour. Borrowing from this empirical tradition in education may be useful for understanding what underpins leader adaptiveness, and leads to a third postulate:

Postulate 3 – Insights from empirical studies on beliefs that underpin learning and values that have been undertaken in other disciplines can inform how we can understand what underpins leader adaptiveness and leader development.

WHY SOME FOLKS DO: EPISTEMOLOGICAL BELIEFS AS FILTER

A specific genre of beliefs, known as epistemological beliefs, has provided a way to understand thinking, learning and behaviour in education, health and other disciplines. Based on the seminal work undertaken with college students by Perry (1970), the study of personal epistemology is a growing area of interest most notably in education. Richard Kitchener (2002) described personal epistemology as being concerned with how a person develops conceptions of knowledge. This includes the individual's belief about the definition of knowledge, how knowledge is constructed, how knowledge is evaluated, where knowledge resides, and how knowing occurs" (Hofer, 2002 p. 4). Such core beliefs are considered to be central to the belief system and subsequently filter all knowledge and beliefs (Posner, Strike, Hewson, & Gertzog, 1982). Kitchener noted that although investigators differ about the number, descriptions and labels that are used, there appears to be a sequential progression of epistemological positions (beliefs) held by an individual. The first, uncritical *objectivism*, Kitchener described as beliefs about knowledge that are "direct and accurate copies of the world" (p. 90). The second, *subjectivism* is where beliefs are "nothing but personal opinions" (p. 90). These two extremes, he said, are then "dialectically synthesised into a more comprehensive, rational reflective, or evaluative, stance in which knowledge is seen to be more fallible, and based upon reasonable criteria" (p. 90). This is often described as an *evaluativistic* stance in personal epistemology.

While much has been theorised, researched and reported about epistemological beliefs, for the purposes of this paper and the consideration of "why some folks do" we have selected and summarised what we consider relevant conclusions about epistemological beliefs that have been drawn by researchers, namely:

- There is a "commonsense theory of knowledge present in the average person" that develops as the person grows from child to adulthood (Kitchener, R. F., 2002, p. 89);
- Some epistemological beliefs develop earlier than others. For example, epistemological beliefs about *institutional* (socially or humanly constructed) facts develop earlier than *brute* (physical, or scientifically tested and proven) facts (Hallett, Chandler, & Krettenauer, 2002, p. 305);
- Epistemological beliefs are context specific (Kitchener, K. S., 2002, p. 325);

- It appears that a tertiary education is a major influence on the development of more sophisticated epistemological beliefs (Kitchener, K. S., 2002, p. 315);
- Core beliefs about knowing influence other beliefs, knowledge, and behaviour (Brownlee, 2000, p. 21).

In summary, it appears that epistemological beliefs may be multi-dimensional and develop at different rates with time and experience. It also appears that the development of a more comprehensive, rational, reflective, or evaluative stance relates to being immersed in (learning) environments that support evidenced based personal conclusions about knowledge. Examining the epistemological beliefs of individuals provides possibilities for understanding why some leaders live with paradox, examine assumptions and values, and create adaptive cultures that are entrepreneurial by design and nature. It also appears that interventions targeted at changing core epistemological beliefs have the potential to change not only other (specific) beliefs, but also behaviour. This leads us to a fourth postulate:

Postulate 4 – Epistemological beliefs, as a set of core beliefs that are considered to filter all knowledge and beliefs, can provide a platform from which to examine what underpins leader adaptiveness, and leadership development.

CONCLUSION: WHERE TO FROM HERE

Core beliefs about knowing that underpin other beliefs knowledge and thinking (such as how they make judgements) (Hofer, 2004) can be developed through interventions that focus on explicit reflection on epistemological beliefs. Such interventions need to enable individuals to see that sometimes critical, evidenced based interpretation of information is necessary to arrive at reasonable perspectives (Kardash & Scholes, 1996). The basis for this explicit consideration of beliefs is the reflective process.

Insights from the research that has been undertaken on personal epistemology may address what we do not yet know about leadership thinking and what underpins leader cognition, and values (Bass, 1999). These insights also may inform what little

we know about leader learning (House & Aditya, 1997). While there has been one study linking leader style (task vs relationship orientation) with epistemological beliefs (Varaki, 2003), this was large-scale questionnaire based research and did not address those leadership behaviours that relate to leading in adaptive, transformative ways. Nor did it address leadership change.

A recent study has been proposed which hypothesises that evaluativistic epistemological beliefs may be associated with transformational leadership behaviours, and objectivistic epistemological beliefs with transactional behaviours (Tickle, Brownlee, & Nailon, in press). Tickle et al. suggest that a set of characteristic epistemological beliefs of transformational leaders could be developed by empirically establishing relationships between the transformational-transactional leadership model and the dimensions of epistemological beliefs.

A proposed PhD study (by Nailon) in the Brisbane Graduate School of Business, QUT, will use the postulates proposed in this paper, to frame an exploration of epistemological beliefs and leadership constructs and behaviour. The study titled “Surfacing epistemological beliefs as a leadership change strategy” will draw upon previous studies, for example Brownlee (2000) and Tickle et al. (in press) to inform the proposed research. The thesis is that after undertaking a series of sessions which surface and explore core beliefs about knowing, business leaders will hold different constructs about their leadership activity and knowledge (including those relating to neo charismatic paradigms such as transformational leadership). Any changes in leader constructs and behaviour that are underpinned by an evaluativistic personal epistemology may contribute to entrepreneurial or revolutionary leadership approaches. Outcomes from this research will make a significant contribution to leadership development and leader change interventions by furthering our understanding of the relationship between personally held beliefs (about knowing and learning) and leadership activity required of business leaders in Toffler and Toffler’s (1996) Third Wave. The final, fifth postulate then is:

Postulate 5 –It is worthwhile to explore in some depth how epistemological beliefs contribute to leadership behaviour, and the changes required to meet the needs of today’s business challenges.

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