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2006

The Quest for a General Theory of Leadership

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Recommended Citation

Goethals, George R., and Georgia Jones. Sorenson. *The Quest for a General Theory of Leadership*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2006.

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Introduction

The chapters in this book tell the story of an intellectual journey of nearly five years' duration. Early in the year 2001 James MacGregor Burns, to whom this book is dedicated, asked the two of us, first Georgia Sorenson and then Al Goethals, whether we would like to join him and others in writing an integrative theory of leadership. We accepted the challenge, knowing that the chances of any group of scholars actually producing such a theory were, quite frankly, low. There were two difficulties. One, coming up with an integrative, or what we came to call a general, theory was daunting in itself. Few if any intellectual disciplines or fields have a widely accepted overarching theory. There are highly influential theories in many disciplines, such as plate tectonics in the geosciences, but few comprehensive models. Two, trying to get a group of scholars from different disciplines to come up with a single theoretical statement of any kind, or quality, seemed foolhardy. Theories are not generally formulated by groups. Nor are most essays, stories, novels, treatises or briefs. One might argue that parts of some of the founding documents of the United States of America were produced by groups, but we may judge that the better parts were largely produced by individuals, such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Nevertheless, we proceeded, and through a process described in the opening chapter of the present volume, we engaged a stellar group of scholars to work on the project.

Since we began, the composition of our working group (eventually termed GTOL for general theory of leadership) has expanded. But the authors of the chapters in this book have been consistently engaged. All or most of us have met on eight separate occasions, for up to five days at a time. The collaborative experience has been extremely stimulating, both personally and intellectually. Although we did not accomplish exactly what we set out to accomplish, we are very pleased with this book. It reveals process as well as product. We have learned as much about leadership from working together as from producing our individual chapters. The scholarly community still awaits a general theory of leadership, but we have taken the first steps toward the goal of creating one.

The story of our quest is summarized in Tom Wren's superb chapter detailing the intellectual obstacles that we faced at the beginning of our journey. It reveals that we let spirit and excitement perhaps overrule judgment in undertaking our quest in the first place. That we got as far as we did is clearly attributable to the deft and sometimes subtle leadership of our common mentor, James MacGregor

Burns. Wren tells the story of getting to that place in thorough and compelling fashion. As he explains, as our group thought about how we might ever understand leadership, we realized that we needed to come to terms with some basic aspects of the human condition. It turned out that coming to terms was not the same as coming to agreement. Coming to terms, in the end, meant agreeing to disagree about some fundamental issues. The various conclusions that several of us reached are quite eloquently discussed in Chapter 2, Michael Harvey's essay on the human condition.

We also decided near the beginning of our undertaking that we needed to confront the nature of theory. If we were to construct a general theory, it was important to consider what a theory was and was not, and what it could do and not do. This point of view was articulated persistently and ultimately persuasively by our late colleague, Fred Jablin. Mark Walker graciously bowed to the group's pressure to write about the nature of theory as it applied to our project. His very useful paper constitutes Chapter 3 in this volume.

With the three above-mentioned chapters providing some foundation, we then took on the task of composing chapters that dealt with what we early identified as the fundamental aspects of leadership that any overarching theory must address. These were power and motivation, leader–follower relations, ethics and values, change and causality, meaning making, and historical and cultural context. The next three chapters deal with the first three of these topics. Michael Harvey provides an erudite discussion of the faces of power, as they have been described in various literatures, from Shakespeare to social psychology to Foucault. As Harvey (Chapter 4) explains, power can be quite subtle, or it can be very direct. It can be mutual, lodged in interdependence, or it can be largely asymmetric, wielded almost totally by only one party in an interaction. Our challenge is to see how the many different kinds of power are employed in leadership, and in followership. In Chapter 5, Crystal Hoyt, Al Goethals and Ron Riggio discuss social psychological aspects of group dynamics and the leader–follower relationship that are crucial to understanding the perils and potentials of leadership. It is clear from their analysis that the results of group dynamics and leadership can be constructive or destructive, ethical or unethical, and that the outcome is largely dependent on the methods and morals of leaders. We turn next to Terry Price and Doug Hicks's (Chapter 6) consideration of perhaps the most universal, though largely unquestioned, philosophical question in leadership – namely, the apparent and sometimes real role differentiation (and inequality) in the leader–follower relationship. The GTOL group returned with regularity over our years working together to issues of inequality and justice. Price and Hicks constructively take up these questions as they discuss trait, situational, transactional, and transformational approaches to inequality as well as traditional and modern philosophical attempts to comprehend the dilemmas inherent in this central human relationship.

The philosophical tension apparent in the search for equality brings us squarely into the realm of mindful action, the purview of the concluding chapters. While most people agree that there is a great need for better leadership in all circumstances, our group came to see that the understanding and practice of sound leadership has a crucial role in addressing inequality and its consequences – unequal distribution of wealth, power, opportunity, and dignity. Gill Hickman and Dick Couto (Chapter 7) bring issues of leadership and inequality to center stage by examining a key but largely unknown leadership event during the US civil rights movement: the effort to desegregate schools in Prince Edward County, Virginia. Hickman and Couto take issue with the ‘Newtonian, mechanistic and old science’ view of a leader or leaders initiating change and instead offer a complex net of co-arising historical, economic, group and environmental factors that ebb and flow, push and pull, to collectively birth change. Using a constructionist approach as opposed to an essentialist one, they deftly demonstrate the interpenetrating and complex nature of leadership in action. Sonia Ospina and Georgia Sorenson (Chapter 8) deepen this analysis by intensifying the constructionist illumine. They assert that a leadership event ‘happens when a community develops and uses, over time, shared agreements to create results that have collective value.’ Understanding the meaning-making process in groups helps us to be cognizant of understanding leadership and change from the essential actors’ point of view, and not from our own formulations. Leadership, they conclude, is thus relational – oft times invisible – emergent and contextually rooted in community.

Much of the work of the general theory scholars was not coming to conclusion but rather coming to conversation. Over the years there had been wide-ranging debate in our group about whether a general theory of leadership could be a-historical and a-contextual. Could there be a universal theory which would apply across cultures and times – to drill down into the essence of the elemental nature of human leadership? Our final chapter – prior to the Commentary chapter and the Afterword, fittingly a conversation – is about context in leadership. Scholars Tom Wren and Liz Faier, elucidate the differences in the understanding of context from their own disciplinary perspectives (Chapter 9). Historian Wren perceives context as the environment in which leadership takes place while anthropologist Faier considers context more abstractly, as a space constructed and named by those participating in events. Thus Wren and Faier return to the old familiar mind and matter terrain. Does consciousness precede being, as politician and philosopher-playwright Václav Havel suggested? This deliciously metaphysical question and chapter provides a fitting transition to the two concluding pieces of our volume.

Joanne Ciulla contributes a thoughtful Commentary (Chapter 10), examining the book’s central themes and the connections between each of the chapters. A ‘synthesis’ is probably impossible, but Ciulla’s commentary usefully distills

much of what we have discussed. Finally, James MacGregor Burns contributes an Afterword, the story of his own struggles with understanding leadership and building the foundation for the field of leadership studies. On that foundation, those who follow Jim's leadership can continue to transform the field. We wish them well as they carry forward the quest and question of a general theory of leadership.

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