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PSEUDO LEADERSHIP AND SAFETY CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Search Amazon.com using the keyword “leadership,” and you are rewarded with a list of over 144,000 titles. There is no shortage of books and articles, many of them well written, with excellent ideas. So why is there still a constant cry for effective leadership in organizations? Often, the person in charge has personal blinders that prevent them from seeing or understanding how to implement the newest leadership idea or method. Either deliberately or subliminally, there is a disconnect from learning about leadership, and actually modelling and implementing what has been learned. Some current research in leadership theory can provide insight and tools to address this issue.

INTRODUCTION

Let’s start with a discussion of terms. *Pseudo* is defined by Webster (2015) as “Being apparently rather actually as stated.” Synonyms include affected, assumed, contrived, fake, false, phony, pretended, and artificial. Antonyms for pseudo provide additional clarity, especially when we consider terms normally associated with effective leadership: genuine, natural, unaffected, unforced. A similar type from my world of academia is a *pseudointellectual*, “A person exhibiting intellectual pretensions that have no basis in sound scholarship” (Dictionary.com, 2015). This is a person pretending to have an interest in intellectual activities for status; a fraudulent intellectuality.

The thought of applying the term pseudo to leadership first occurred to me while reading *Power and Innocence* by Rollo May (1972). In discussing the dynamics of power, and how the innocent are often victims of the exercise of power, especially the more aggressive and destructive types of power, he saw two types of innocence. The first he called *authentic innocence*, which he described as a childlike clarity that carried into adulthood. The second type he called *pseudoinnocence*, a type of naïveté that makes a virtue of powerlessness, weakness, and helplessness; being more childish than childlike (p. 48-50).

Just as there is the potential for pseudoinnocence and pseudointellectuals, it is also possible to experience *pseudo leadership*. (I hope the gentle reader is not troubled by my decision to use pseudo leadership as two separate words, in contrast to the use of compound words for pseudoinnocence and pseudointellectual cited above. Since there is no official definition of pseudo leadership, I have exercised my author’s prerogative to treat it as two words, both because I think in this particular application this makes the most sense, and also I think it is easier to read). As we will see, there are numerous theories applied to leadership. What is so troubling to many of us in organizations, there are a myriad of “leaders” in companies espousing pet theories, but very few instances where the *actions* of these individuals match their *words*. This is a particularly important problem when we look at the effect this has on the day to day operations of a mine, and where effective leadership (or its absence) can have a profound impact on both productivity and safety.

THEORY IN PRACTICE

We all have blind spots, aspects of who we are and our behavior that we may not be aware of (Jung, 1957). Argyris and Schön (1974) described this as the difference between our espoused theory (what we think we believe and do), and our theory-in-use (what we actually

believe and do). Most people are unaware of how their attitudes affect their behavior, and how this can have a negative impact on others. “Blindness to incongruity between espoused theory and theory-in-use may be culturally as well as individually caused and maintained” (p. xxix).

Internal consistency is one the hallmarks of a leader people trust, there is no self-contradiction; rather, this type of leader displays a congruence between their espoused theory (what they say) and their theory-in-use (what they actual do, actions that match espoused values). What Argyris and Schön discovered in their research was troubling—leaders claimed to practice contemporary leadership skills including empathy for workers, acceptance of feedback, and high listening skills—but they found that none of their research subjects actually practiced these skills (p. xxii). What they did commonly find was defensiveness, manipulative behavior, a competitive win/lose attitude, group behavior dysfunction, and a tenuous equilibrium maintained through Machiavellian safety valves (p. 80-81). They go on to recommend that these often destructive characteristics will not change until the leaders learn to embrace and maximize the uniqueness of each individual, to deal with conflict in a healthy, open manner, and to be open to a culture of continual learning (p. 102-103).

LEADERSHIP THEORIES

There are a lot of theories applied to leadership. *Leadership: Theory and Practice* by Northouse (2007) is one of the most popular books for teaching, and is probably cited as often as any book when writing about leadership (as a testament to its popularity, I am referencing the 4th edition, published in 2007 for this preprint, but the 7th edition published in 2015 is now available). He makes the point that there are many ways to finish the sentence “Leadership is . . .” (p. 2). Despite the challenge, he does provide a definition (Northouse, p. 3):

“Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.”

He makes a point that this definition has nothing to do with personality or character traits unique to the leader. The emphasis is the process that will accomplish the goals, implying that both leader and followers are affecting and affected by the process. Influence on a group is also a key aspect of this definition—leadership occurs in the context of a group or community. While the terms leader and followers are used to describe the relationships in this dynamic, both are involved together in the leadership process.

There are numerous leadership models in the literature. This reflects both the already mentioned plethora of ideas about leadership, but also reflects the diverse applications and complex diversity of organization types, applications, structures, and cultures. To illustrate the diversity of ideas on leadership, table 1 provides a summary of many of the current theories:

While beyond the scope of this paper to examine each theory, we will look at two popular theories, transformational and servant leadership, to illustrate how pseudo leadership might be manifested in the context of each approach. Excellent descriptions of each theory in table 1 can be found in the references.

Table 1. Leadership theories.

Trait theory
Leadership style theory
Contingency theory
Leader-member exchange
Transformational theory
Servant leadership
Style approach
Skills approach
Situational approach
Path-goal theory
Team leadership
Psychodynamic approach

(Source: Bolman & Deal, 2013; Northouse, 2007)

THE POWER OF LEADERSHIP

One popular theory is transformative leadership (Burns, 1978; Northouse, 2007). Burns is credited with making the term, and the concept, of transformative leadership popular. He used the term *transforming* leadership, and contrasted this approach with the transactional approach of absolute power. Transforming leadership occurs when leaders are engaged with followers in a reciprocal relationship. Ultimately this becomes a moral issue, raising the level of human conduct and ethical aspirations of both; hence the transforming effect on both leader and followers. The contrast in forms of power between absolute power and transforming leadership are near extremes on the power continuum (Table 2).

Table 2. Contrast between absolute power and transforming power

ABSOLUTE POWER	TRANSFORMING POWER
Brute power	Reciprocal leadership-followerhip
Corrupts, coerces absolutely	Sensitivity to followers
Wields power to override others	Leader and followers interdependent
Objectifies victims	Motives, values & goals merge

(Burns, 1978, p. 20-21)

One place I found the term pseudo applied to leadership was in reference to this theory, applied when leaders espoused their use of transformational leadership, but failed to actually lead in this manner. This is sometimes referred to as *pseudo-transformational leadership* (Christie, et al, 2011; Donohue, 2013) (I know, they use a hyphen).

Transformational leadership puts a high priority on the reciprocal relationship between leader and follower. It is designed to be a process that changes and transform people. "It is concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals and includes assessing followers' motives, satisfying their needs, and treating them as full human beings" (Northouse, 2007, p. 175).

There is a high priority given to the personality traits of leaders in many transformational leadership descriptions, with an emphasis on charisma and the associated traits of dominance, desire to influence, confidence, and strong values (p. 178). Most measures of the effectiveness of this theory place a high priority on the satisfaction, motivation, and performance of workers.

Where this approach can easily devolve into what I am calling pseudo leadership is described by Northouse in his criticisms of transformational leadership. One area where it can fall short is a lack of conceptual clarity. A pseudo leader can use the jargon of transformational leadership, and think of themselves as dynamic, charismatic leaders; but if their goal is only their own self-promotion, and the jargon they use does not provide clear direction, it is difficult for followers to define exactly what is expected. It can also be difficult to measure satisfaction and motivation in workers, and consequently difficult to assess the effectiveness of the leader.

Another potential manifestation of pseudo leadership is the emphasis on leadership as a personality trait or personal predisposition, rather than a behavior that can be taught. This becomes problematic from a training standpoint, and also puts undo

focus on the personality of the leader. A related tendency is for the pseudo leader to assume an elitist attitude, acting independently of followers by putting his or her interests above the needs of followers (Schuh et al., 2013).

Leaders can also think they are effectively applying the principles of transformational leadership by adopting a "heroic leadership" bias (Yukl, 1999). Transformational leadership stresses that the leader moves the followers, and this has the potential to be abused. A vision can be destructive, and overreliance on one leader has often led organizations into very destructive behavior. The use of coercive power by charismatic leaders can pose significant risks for psychological damage in organizations (Northouse, 2007, pp. 192-194).

SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND PATERNALISM

The second theory we will discuss is servant leadership. This theory was first developed by Greenleaf (1977), and puts the focus of leadership on those being led. The focus for Greenleaf was the effect a leader had on those being led: "Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (Greenleaf, pp. 13-14). It is easy to see the appeal of this approach. Who would not like to work in this kind of environment?

Again, the devil is in the implementation. Greenleaf himself warned about the dangers of using coercive power, and the importance of leaders surrounding themselves with others of equal organizational power to curb the tendency toward coercive, rather than persuasive power. Thought leaders in servant leadership often write about the necessity of true servant leaders to live authentic lives, to have a clear sense of personal meaning and self-knowledge, as described by the editor of *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*:

"The discipline involved in growing the interior of the self, the heart and the soul, creates a complex, often unwieldy set of circumstances for all who aspire to lead" (Ferch, 2005, p.3).

This description places a high expectation on personal development for those who think they will lead from a servant leadership perspective. Many fall short of this expectation. One manifestation of falling short is demonstrated by leading from a paternalistic perspective, while thinking you are personifying Greenleaf's ideal of a servant leader (Laub, 2005). It is rare for a leader to characterize themselves as paternalistic; but often workers in organizations experience their leader's attempts at servant leadership as paternalistic leadership. This paternalistic approach can seduce the leader into thinking they are exercising servant leadership, and can produce child-like responses in the followers (exactly the opposite result that servant leadership aspires to accomplish). This can result in the same type of self-deception on the part of leaders referred to earlier that Argyris described, and also sounds similar to the concept of pseudoinnocence described by May. A result of this dynamic is both the leader and followers trying to implement servant leadership, but neither being self-aware enough to let go of old autocratic models of authority.

ORGANIZATION CULTURE

So how does this affect an organization? The culture of an organization is how things work, including all the unstated assumptions that allow the smooth functioning of the worksite. Leaders set the tone and reinforce the assumptions and values of an organization (Schein, 1992). For the leadership models we have examined, workers would have some common expectations from leaders.

Major traits of a leader (Northouse, 2007, p. 19):

- Intelligence
- Self-confidence
- Determination
- Integrity
- Sociability

Now imagine if a leader of a group thought he or she had all these traits, while possessing few if any of these traits while leading. If there is a disconnect between what a leader says and what a leader does, this introduces an added burden to the workers. In many instances, this develops into an atmosphere of unresolved stress and anxiety. The following two paragraphs are from Camm (2006, p. 30):

Signs of job stress include headache, sleep disturbances, difficulty in concentrating, short temper, upset stomach, job dissatisfaction, and low morale. Chronic job stress can increase the risk of health problems—cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, psychological disorders, workplace injury, suicide, ulcers, and impaired immune function.

Many approaches are available to reducing job stress: making sure the workload matches capabilities and resources, designing jobs to provide meaning and opportunities, clearly defining roles and responsibilities, providing opportunities for workers to participate in decisions affecting their jobs, improving communications, reducing uncertainty, enhancing opportunities for social interaction among workers, and creating work schedules that are compatible with demands and responsibilities outside the job (NIOSH, 1999).

The approaches to reducing job stress, for example providing meaning and reducing uncertainty, are difficult to accomplish under a manager displaying pseudo leadership characteristics. This can lead to low morale, reduced productivity, and disengagement from workers.

The effects of stress can also lead to burnout. A moderate amount of stress can increase productivity, but beyond a certain point they reach maximum productivity, and any added stress will lead to burn out. This is shown in figure 1, where beyond point B (maximum productivity), any additional stress will push an individual into fatigue, and eventually burnout and exhaustion (point C). An individual managing from a pseudo leadership perspective is much more likely to create a stressful work culture and push workers to burnout.

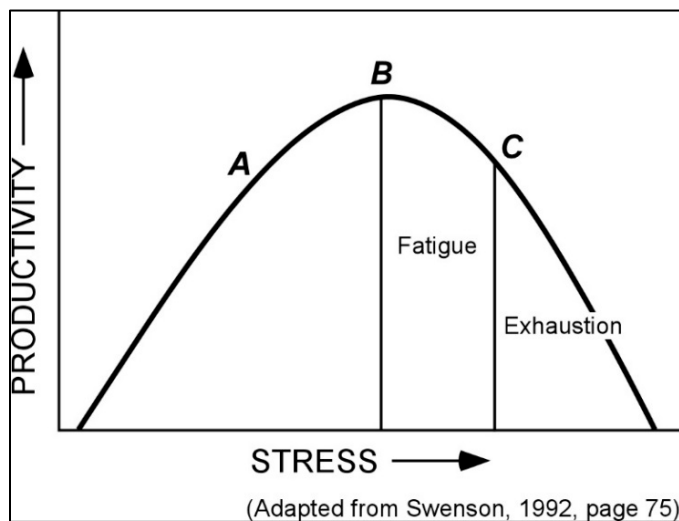


Figure 1. Human function curve (Camm, 2006, p. 31).

FINAL THOUGHTS

Pseudo leadership occurs when a manager thinks he or she is leading from a place of enlightened leadership, following one of the contemporary leadership theories, but is in fact leading from a different, much less nurturing or progressive perspective. There is a great deal of self-deception that is characteristic of the pseudo leader. Most current leadership theories include aspects of the traits we looked at with transformative or servant leadership models (Feser et al., 2015; George, et al., 2007). Leadership is more than what we say, what we do must be consistent with our words.

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