

Interpretative Analysis of Servant Leadership

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Abstract

This paper has analyzed the leadership style of a recognized leader Mahatma Gandhi of India. His unconventional leadership is studied through the lenses of two theories; Gronn's theory of leadership as a career and Greenleaf's servant leadership. It was clear that Gandhi's leadership was basically nurtured by various systems of the environment and his particular life experiences. His leadership best aligned with all fundamental principles of a 'servant leadership' in vision, integrity, modeling, honesty and empowerment of the community for better life and living.

Keywords— Career, Community, Leadership, Servant, Truth.

I. INTRODUCTION

Owing to its importance for better changes 'leadership' as a field of study has been embraced by various organizations across the globe. However, it is not surprising that there are hundreds and thousands of definitions or theories of leadership (Ehrich & Creyton, 2008). The different theories attempt to explain the different leadership styles of various leaders; political, community and business. This paper will briefly study about the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, who is very much recognized as a political leader in the history of India. Gronn's theory of leadership as a career and Greenleaf's servant leadership theories are employed to explain his leadership.

II. LEADERSHIP AS A CAREER THEORY

According to Gronn (1999) when the leadership is studied from the career perspective, it not only allows the student of leadership to obtain informed understanding of various contextual factors in which leaders lead but also feeds sound knowledge about the importance of biographical experiences of a leader. The leaders are basically nurtured by the various systems of the environment and his/her particular life experiences. Career model explains leadership in terms of four stages of leader's lifespan; formation, accession, incumbency and divestiture.

Formation stage

Formation refers to the leader's early years from infancy to early adulthood that is basically shaped by family and school (Gronn, 1999). Its influence helps to generate a concept of self that lays the foundation for the leader's character (Ehrich & Creyton, 2008; Gronn, 1999). Formation means those preparatory socialization processes and experiences where the leadership aspirants in a state of social and psychological readiness to assume responsibility and authority' (Gronn, 1999). Gandhi was brought up by virtuous parents. He described his father as 'lover of his clan, truthful, brave and generous, but short-tempered' and mother as 'deeply religious' (Gandhi, 2008). According to the society's culture and values, leaders are positioned as the member of age-group cohort (Gronn, 1999). As a young boy, he was decent and intelligent who used to read books. His good manners were basically influenced by the stories of Shravana and king Harishchandra (Gandhi, 2018). Gandhi wrote 'why should I not all be truthful like Harishchandra?' (Gandhi, 1983, p.11). After passing his matriculation examination in 1887, he went to England to study with an aim to be lawyer (Gandhi, 2008). Thus, his character structure was formed by three principal institutions; family, school and references (Gronn, 1999). Through those experiences, Gandhi knew himself better which Gronn (1999) refers as 'definition of self and identity' (p. 34).

Accession stage

‘Accession refers to a stage of grooming or anticipation in which candidates for leadership roles rehearse or test their potential capacity to lead by direct comparison with existing leaders and the field of their prospective rivals for advancement’ (Gronn, 1999, p. 36). After he had problem with British officer in India, he accepted a contract to work in South Africa, which was also under British Empire. In South Africa, upon witnessing the inhumane treatment of Indians without human rights, he founded Natal Indian congress. When British government asked them to register the organization, a mass protest meeting was held in Johannesburg and for the first time used his weapons of *Satyagraha* (devotion to the truth) and *Ahimsa* (non-violence) (Gandhi, 2008). Such behaviors where a leader tests hi/her potential to fly is termed as ‘wing-stretching’ (Gronn, 1999). Due to his efforts African government granted some human rights to the Indians and thereafter he became so popular throughout Africa for his great contributions to the public there. According to Gronn (1999) accession is the time when an aspiring leader realizes the development of one’s special gifts or potential which ultimately grow sense of ‘self efficacy’ and ‘self esteem’. Gandhi tested his potential to lead which Gronn (1999) refers accession as the time of ‘road-testing’. He came back to India in 1915 and joined Congress political party. He had a clear vision to free India.

Incumbency stage

Incumbency is the time when a leader has gained numerous experiences, develop public personas and prove themselves worthy of their leading potent (Gronn, 1999). To further express their quest for mastery and self realization in leadership, they change leading positions by circulating amongst various elite postings and leadership roles. Such shifts in positions will require further induction in to organizational and workplace norms (Gronn, 1999). In 1920, he became the leader of the Congress party and declared independence India whereby British leader refuted (Gandhi, 2008). After Gandhi refused to support war in Germany he was imprisoned by the British Empire for six years (Gandhi, 2008). He was against the war because he did not believe in using violence. In 1917 he launched Champaran Satyagraha to demand the rights of Indigo planters who were not provided good working conditions (Chakrabarty, 2006). Upon seeing the deprivation of rights to Indians, he launched Non-cooperation Movement in 1920 (Golson, 2008). By then he had already gained majority supporters of Indians. When their leadership roles are congruent with the personal needs, it is called ‘requisite fit’ which further enable them to meet their need to self actualize (Gronn, 1999).

Divestiture stage

In fourth stage, the leaders divest themselves of leadership which is referred as ‘letting go’ (Gronn, 1999). The factors of ‘letting go’ may include like aging, illness or incapacity to lead. The process of ‘letting go’ may be voluntarily or involuntary, planned or unplanned and smooth or traumatic (Gronn, 1999). Gandhi in the last years of his service helped to draft constitution of congress and proposed resolutions to unify Hindu and Muslim community. However, his ‘letting go’ was tragic when he was assassinated in 1948 (Wolpert, 2001). Nevertheless, his efforts very much contributed to the freedom of India.

III. SERVANT LEADERSHIP

According to Greenleaf (2007) ‘the great leader is seen as a servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness’ (p. 79). Larry Spears, executive director of the Greenleaf’s Center for Servant-Leadership defines servant-leadership as ‘model which puts serving others as the number one priority and emphasizes increased service to others; a holistic approach to work; promoting a sense of community; and the sharing of power in decision-making (as cited in Smith, 2005, p. 4). The characteristics of being a servant leader are: listening and understanding, acceptance and empathy, foresight, awareness and perception, persuasion, conceptualization, healing and serving, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people and building community (Greenleaf, 1991, & Spears, 2010). Moreover Russell and Stone (2002) propose a list of 9 ‘functional attributes’ like vision, integrity, modeling, honesty, empowerment and ‘accompanying attributes’ like influence, teaching, delegation, and encouragement which are distinctive attributes observed in servant leaders (as cited in Smith, 2005). Servant-hood is born out of caring which is wedded to wisdom found through self knowledge (Bingham, 2005). Besides building community in a learning organization, servant leaders develop leadership capacity of others as a selfless act of dedication to the common good (Bingham, 2005). As a young boy, Gandhi was like a servant to his parents, teachers, friends, animals and truth. Cheating, lying, deceiving and going against parents, teachers, friends and harming animals were totally out of question (Gandhi, 2008). For example, he kept the mother’s three advice; not to drink alcohol, eat meat and feel attracted to other woman throughout his life (Gandhi, 2008). Gandhi wrote ‘the reason of my dislike for gymnastics in school was my keen desire to serve as nurse to my father. As soon as the school closed, I would hurry home and begin serving him’ (Gandhi, 2008 p. 32).

According to Smith (2005) empathy is the ‘ability to mentally project one’s own consciousness into that of

another individual' (p. 5). Ferch, (2003). 'the servant always accepts and empathizes, never rejects' (p. 10). Gandhi described his journey to Africa as hardly going there as a barrister, it was going as a servant of the firm. For example, he founded Indian Educational Association to educate people for their rights. He became popular among Indians and got many supporters of his principle of non-violence (Gandhi, 2008). According to Crippen (2005). 'Individuals grow taller when those who lead them empathize, and when they are accepted for who they are' (p. 2).

'The servant leader rely on persuasion, not positional authority in making decisions' (Spears, 2009, p. 1). Gandhi did not inflict power to his followers by means of coercion rather did through persuasion and integrity. When people of India used military force to fight back British Empire, Gandhi was totally against force rather used to go for fasting to persuade his people the principle of non-violence (Gandhi, 2008).

According to Greenleaf (1991) without the sense of 'awareness' leaders lose opportunities. He used to constantly update the news both of national and international happenings by reading newspapers, keeping in contact with people around and by touring the country (Gandhi, 2008). According to Spears (2009) foresight is the 'ability to foresee the likely outcome of a situation, understands the lesson from the past, the realities of the present and like consequence of a decision of for the future' (p. 1). Similarly, conceptualization is the ability to conceive solution to a problem that do not currently exist and carry other people by the power of ideas (Greenleaf, 1991). He believed that freedom free from prejudice and injustice was the basic human rights. He was aware that waging a war against British was meaningless for Indians lacked resources. Under his leadership, congress party developed new constitution keeping Swaraj (self governance) as the main principle (Gandhi, 2008). Millions of Indians embraced changes brought by Gandhi. Moreover Russell and Stone (2002) state that modeling is one of the functional attributes of the servant leader. Gandhi was a man of words. Gandhi totally left the culture of wearing British made garments rather followed dress code of Indian culture (Gandhi, 2008). He practiced what he preached. Gandhi wrote 'never in my life did I exploit loyalty; never did I seek to gain a selfish end by its means' (Gandhi, 2008, p. 321). He led Quit India Movement with a goal to either 'do or die' for India's independence. To fulfill his vision to free India from British imperialism, Gandhi served prison for many years and nothing could alter his vision thus becoming a highly recognized servant leader.

IV. CONCLUSION

Gandhi's autobiography reflects all the four stages of Gronn's leadership theory as a career. The leadership characteristics of Gandhi had been nurtured by rich experiences gained from family, culture, education and other references. He was a servant leader who served family, teachers, friends and most importantly India. His deeds best explained him as a recognized 'servant leader' of the world.

V. LIMITATION

This paper is based on the limited research and reading of the authors. Given its limited use of literature, the paper will not merit large intellectual discourses and risk biased perspectives of a highly recognized leader.

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