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Naturalistic Leadership

**Introduction**

To define leadership concisely is an impossible task and one that has not even been accomplished fully by the theorists from whom I have gained my understanding of leadership. This definition becomes even harder to find when many of the more significant developments into theories of leadership, are relatively modern. However, even though this, I have found a way of explaining what leadership is, specifically through the use of Chaos theory and how organizations, business, governments, and even group dynamics can be ‘Led’ similarly to how nature and ecosystems act. I have held a similar idea with me since my Environmental Science class in High School, even recently finding a note recently that I had written two years ago about how the government would be better off in the long run if they operated more similarly to an ecosystem. Now entering the Chaos theory class, these ideas that I have previously had sparks of, were given the chance to grow and develop with the theories of Chaos and Complexity theory. This has brought me to define leadership, very generally, as: a situationally based and cooperative process, in which many complex and diverse relationships exist that allow shared information to lead to learning and adapting.

**Component 1: Situational and Cooperative**

Going back to LS250 when we discussed the Leadership River, one aspect that I found most intriguing came from Hershey and Blanchard’s Situational rapids. This concept makes a great deal of sense to me, personally, as I believe a great deal of the other theories only spoke about a single way to conduct leadership no matter the situation. Even Hershey and Blanchard’s relationship/consideration diagram still seems too simplified for the vast possibilities that can take place in a living and working environment. Ronald Heifetz, author of *Leadership Without Easy Answers* has a similar idea as well, but using the terms “Autocratic, Consultative, Participative, and Consensual” instead; his definition too seems too limited and although it helps us direct attention and identify a method to follow, is too refined (Heifetz, 1994). Look at an actual Ecosystem, for example. Day to day, there is no knowing what may happen within that system. One day the weather could be terrible, taking down a tree, and causing the affected area to adapt to the new problem they are faced. In this situation, something else that should be too obvious to need noting, is that when this happens the Ecosystem doesn’t just give up. Nor does the Ecosystem look at the issue and decide to abandon the problem and not think about how a tree just fell. The plants around the tree will begin to re-incorporate the tree into the ecosystem, new plants will grow from it, and the entire forest will move on.

If you are a leader, there are many things in this example which you should take into account. The first, is that you should always be expecting the unexpected. With this, too, is the need not to panic when something unexpected happens, as this will only cause a sense of panic throughout your followers. If there is panic, too is there a lack of trust from your followers to you and your abilities to appropriately navigate the issue. Next is to utilize the problem as an opportunity, rather than a problem; every problem will allow you to grow from it, even if the solution initially fails. Something I will explain later in this essay, is that you should also look to your followers for the diverse amount of information they are giving you. Though you may be looked at as the leader, you can never hold all the answers. The good thing about having employees or followers or coworkers, or whomever you may be influencing through your leadership, is that they have different experiences than you that could aid in the progression through problems that you collectively face.

Another thing, however, that I believe can cause leadership to be situational in nature, is that we should be basing many of our actions based on the wants and needs of our followers based on your collective purpose and values; a cooperative process. An idea that I got from James MacGregor Burns, adjusting actions to these collective wants and needs will allow you not only to further society in the direction they collectively wish it to be aimed, but it will also allow you to understand your followers, and even people who aren’t your followers, on a deeper level. It will do this because you will have to be relational enough to as and seek what these wants and needs are, as well as continuously determine what yours are, while still keeping the larger purpose and values in mind. However, I do also believe that there is another aspect to this that is seldom discussed: Is morality required in leadership?

**Subcomponent A: Is Morality Required?**

Where most theories at some point talk about the need to have morals in order to conduct leadership, I believe that this will only occur in some situations. I believe that morality is an issue that may be common throughout every culture (each culture having a different definition of when it is ok to murder, for example), but to base our morals on those of a specific culture could also be very limiting. This would create a lens through which we view other cultures, now allowing us to accept diversity. On a smaller scale, we are able to lead with morals if the morals are important to that group of people and are included in their purpose and values. Likely, the leader given authority by the people will have the morals aligned with those giving them authority. If leadership really is the collective purpose and values, what if the collective purpose and values is not considered “moral” to people outside looking in? To the followers and to the leader they give authority, though others may believe their morals to be negative or wrong, those who hold it as a part of their purpose and values do believe in those morals. An argument can be made that Hitler may have misled the people of Germany, and that misleading is not leading. However, in this case, Hitler would not have been conducting leadership from the perspective of those he misled, and only them. To other Nazis and to Hitler himself, who all collectively bought into their purpose and values, they are conducting themselves based on their standards of morality. Hitler would not have been a leader in the eyes of people who he killed, because they were not in his follower base, meaning that in part they did not share the same morals as him. If we are to say, instead, that morals are contained as a part of the purpose and values (my answer remains the same. The purpose and values are what we would collectively base our wants and needs on, but no one group will have the same purpose and values and in some cases morality may not be applicable to their ultimate purpose and values anyway. I am willing to be convinced otherwise on this topic, however as my understanding currently stands, I believe that morality and leadership is situationally and perspective based.

**Component 2: Diversity**

This part of my leadership philosophy is one that I have experience with on a more personal level, and has been something I have been working with the hope of being intentional about it. Diversity, after all, can be seen from so many standpoints as being one of the most important parts of understanding and leadership, but there is so much that goes into it.

To begin, I will look at it from the example of the ecosystem. An ecosystem, like leadership, is something that we are still learning more about, and our findings and definitions continue to grow and evolve every day. What we know for sure, however, is that an Ecosystem functions to the benefit of everything within it, if there is Biodiversity (the variety of life within an ecosystem). There are also, some key pieces to this ecosystem that benefit the entire system more than any other, these are called Ecosystem Engineers, and they help to improve the biodiversity of an ecosystem. If we continue with the example of how we should conduct leadership similar to the environment and organisms, then it makes sense to model ourselves off of the diversity creators of an actual ecosystem, as that is how life flourishes; without this comes only death and decay. This too acknowledges that every part of an organization is important, right down to the very necessary cleaning staff and building maintenance crews. In order to be a good leader, like an ecosystem engineer, it is important to create an environment where diversity can flourish on its own, allowing all parts to interact and continuously grow and evolve.

Diversity can be seen in a variety of ways in the human world. Eboo Patel, author of *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer*, speaks to this point. He speaks at one point in his book about how successful an organization became once they realized that Diversity, namely religious diversity, was at the heart of their company’s values and mission. He also points out the lack of understanding of diversity in the religious sense, stating “All of those cities are becoming more religiously diverse as each day goes by. All of them would be excited about those diverse religious groups working together rather than separately. I’ll bet you none of them are reaching their potential” (Patel 170). This is why the idea of diversity is so crucial to my personal philosophy. I have been looking into a need presented to me at Whitworth, a Presbyterian affiliated University, about how with the growing amount of religious diversity here, there is a lack of communication that allows for understanding. This brings up a key idea that I have about leadership as well. A wide majority of problems faced everywhere can be rooted in the fact that diversity is present but not accepted or valued, causing for the perspectives and ideas that could allow for growth, to be bottled up and closed off to the overall system.

**Subcomponent A: Shared Information**

As a component to the idea of diversity in leadership, comes the need for the sharing of information. Margaret Wheatley puts it best when she says, “Information is unique as a resource because it can generate itself. As long as communication occurs in a shared context, fertility abounds. These new births require freedom; information must be free to circulate and find new partners” (Wheatley 97). This basically means that with shared information, we create a never-ending source of energy. That, coupled with having diverse relationships and perspectives being spread, allows us to also facilitate and breed innovation and creativity. Ralph Stacey, author of *Complexity and Creativity in Organizations*, speaks about what he calls “shadow systems,” which I believe help explain how diversity works to the benefit of an organization. Everyone is connected to many groups of people, every individual has distinct groups, and thus different sources for information and experiences to be collected. When speaking about one organization, for example, this becomes the legitimate system for everyone who is working there. All of their other systems, while they are in organization, become their shadow systems. All of this connectedness allows for an infinite spread of information and growth, a never-ending source of innovation and creativity. This becomes even more thought provoking if you think about the Degree of Separation, or the belief that every person in the world is connected to every other person in six or fewer steps between people you know or have met. This is a literal infinite web of shadow systems and legitimate systems, all constantly feeding into one another and creating a diverse ecosystem of shared information leading the entire world to growth and creativity. However without shared information, and without diversity and the acknowledgment of its importance, this all breaks down and no one can flourish.

**Subcomponent B: Learning and Adapting**

A final subcomponent to my belief in the importance of diversity, is the necessity of learning and adapting. Like my example of the ecosystem, from the information being shared throughout the entire system, there is a level of adaptation and learning required for basic survival. I can put this into a better explanation using Heifetz’s writings on the concept of “adaptive work.” It is, in Heifetz’s book, that it is the Leader’s job to provide a framework for people to adapt and grow as an organization or as an individual. You need to be able to adapt to grow. This part of leadership is difficult, however, as the name implies directly, it is indeed ‘work’. In order for you to be adaptive, you must learn from your mistakes, as well as be ok with failure. Again, in the Example of an ecosystem, the facilitation of diversity brought on by a ecosystem engineer, allows for the growth and flourishing of a biodiverse ecosystem. Looking too at survival of the fittest and how creatures will adapt in that respect, we can see how learning and adapting can apply in a very blunt manner. If members of your species are dying, then obviously something needs to change with how you act. They learn from this and adapt aspects of their species, changing in order to meet this need of survival. Extinction comes when learning and adapting do not take place or are not acted on promptly and proactively.

**Conclusion and Personal Application**

Most of my application of my definition of leadership stems from my research and background in environmental science and the interactions and similarities between our world and the natural world fascinate me. This is why I choose to use the example of an Ecosystem, because all of the same relevant topics that are discussed in the books we’ve read, can be directly applied to the example of an ecosystem. I understand, however, that my specific definition is not complete, and it is instead how I see the world and have been able to successfully conduct leadership myself. Many of these concepts that I have talked about I am beginning to utilize more intentionally through my leadership positions, allowing me to adapt my definition based on failure and success I have seen from my application. Most recently, my goal has been to reorganize the Artists’ Cooperative club at Whitworth. This has been a task that has been on my mind for a great deal of time, and one that I believe has so much potential. Rather than the current structure, which is a very hierarchical structure, we all need to redefine our roles based on what our club actually is, a cooperative. By doing this we will be able to more intentionally create relationships that will help us to fuel creativity and innovation.

I believe that I can also apply much of these concepts, as well as be able to continue to develop my concepts, through the work I do in positions of leadership around Whitworth. Whether that be in advocating for those with less of a voice on campus, restructuring the layout of a club, or acknowledging diversity and differing experiences in my role as an RA, these concepts will both be useful for me as a lens through which I can conduct leadership, as well as will continuously be developing based on these experiences. I intend to continue to read further into leadership, as I am sure there are pieces I am missing, possibly something that would change my entire concept fully. But as it stands I do believe that this is how I best am able to conduct leadership. Leadership that is situational and cooperative, and contains diverse relationships which build into a complex system where information is shared helping the entire system learn and adapt; this is the way I see myself best conducting leadership, and is the naturalistic way leadership should be conducted, like in an ecosystem.

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