Theory into Practice: An Overview of Historical Leadership Theories and Approaches[1]

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This *Theory into Practice* series is designed to outline a chronological perspective of leadership theories and approaches. Each article will highlight a theoretical perspective or leadership approach, a scenario in which the theory or approach can be or has been used, as well as strengths and critiques of the theory. The theories that are included in this series are trait, behavioral, skills, transformational, authentic, servant, adaptive, and an overview of contemporary leadership theories.

This first article defines leadership and briefly provides a chronological overview of the theories to be covered throughout this series. These publications aim to help introduce practitioners, such as Extension professionals or K–12 educators, to the discipline of leadership holistically.

Introduction to Leadership

Leaders and the idea of leadership have been in existence since the beginning of time. The first recorded leadership scholars were Greek philosophers who grappled with questions about humanity and concepts of right and wrong. Leadership began to be studied in the 1930s and 1940s with a focus on the difference between developing a leader and how the process of leadership works (Day et al., 2014). Developing a leader focuses on the skills, attributes, and traits one should possess in a leadership position (Day, 2001). Leadership is focused on development of all elements of a situation in which a leader may be involved, including the followers, context, and goal (Day et al., 2014).

As an example, think about the leader and leadership in the environment of a county Extension office. If a 4-H agent is out sick, the leader of that county's 4-H program is missing. However, the 4-H program will continue to function under the leadership of that 4-H agent because the processes and systems they have created will continue whether the agent is present or not. Leaders are a singular entity, whereas leadership is a dynamic process that involves systems and followers (Day, 2001).

Leadership Defined

An internet search of "the definition of leadership" will end with millions of results. Some scholars joke that as many definitions of leadership exist as individuals who aspire to be leaders (Stogdill, 1974). This is because leadership is a complex and multifaceted discipline with varying experts across many specialization areas. Even so, leadership can also be a basic principle, much like love, freedom, or peace (Northouse, 2021). The concept is understandable to many individuals, but its abstract nature allows the development of unique meaning amongst those individuals. Within leadership education, one definition is commonly used: "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2021, p. 6).

Some elements of this definition that stand out are process, influence, and goal. As explored later in this series, leadership is no longer something that is defined by inherent characteristics or traits. Historically, leaders were viewed as ones specially chosen by a creator. In modern times, it is understood that leadership can be learned because it is a series of behaviors and skills that can be developed through processes. Leadership can be explored most simply as a dyadic relationship between a leader and a follower, and can therefore be explained as the influence a leader has over those they are expected to lead. Goals are a common target for the leader and the follower to move towards. As we define leadership, we must not overlook the intended outcome when embarking on the leadership process.

Leadership Theory Timeline

Leadership theories have evolved greatly over time. Early ideas focused on the characteristics of effective leaders. The first guiding theories of leadership which emerged in the 1840s were known as the trait or "Great Man" theories. These theories proposed that leaders were born with inherent qualities, such as charisma, intelligence, and attractiveness, that allowed them to be leaders (Stogdill, 1948). The 1940s and 1950s started a trend of behavioral approaches that would span multiple decades. This shift shows that individuals can develop into leaders if they work on particular observable actions rather than rely on static traits (Hemphill & Coons, 1957). In the mid-20th century, contingency theories emerged, which introduced the concept of leadership depending on situational factors

rather than being stagnant across contexts (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969).

In the 1970s and 1980s, transformational leadership theories were developed, which highlighted the role of leaders in inspiring and motivating followers to achieve great outcomes (Burns, 1978). This notes a shift in leadership concepts from tasks and outcomes to consideration of emotions and visionary aspects of leadership. Leadership approaches began exploring complexities of situations and uniqueness of disciplines through looking at challenges adaptively or through great personal investment, as in the servant leadership approach (Greenleaf, 1998; Heifetz et al., n.d.). Recently, leadership theories have become all-encompassing of each dimension of individuals. These contemporary theories explore the intersection of differing approaches within the broader landscape of leadership.

Summary

Leadership is a dynamic field that has many complex intersections. While leaders have existed for centuries, academic investigation of the concept of leadership has only occurred in the last three centuries. Leaders are individuals who have the skills or attributes one needs to guide others. Leadership is the process by which an individual moves others towards a common goal. There have been multiple shifts in leadership as a discipline that have moved the field forward and into a space where each person can be developed and trained to enact great progress in a given situation.

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Appendix A: *Theory into Practice Series Publications*

Theory into Practice: An Overview of Historical Leadership Theories and Approaches

Theory into Practice: Trait and Skills Approach

Theory into Practice: Behavioral and Situational Approach

Theory into Practice: Transformational Leadership

Theory into Practice: Authentic Leadership

Theory into Practice: Servant Leadership

Theory into Practice: Adaptive Leadership

Theory into Practice: Contemporary Leadership Approaches

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