

Deconstruction of Leadership Assumptions – A Personal Perspective

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Leaders are the energetic force that drives others to pursue and achieve common goals that impact the well-being of the organization and all its members (Greenleaf, 2003). Individuals who exercise leadership positions are expected to be effective decision-makers and innovative risk-takers. (Schein, 2003). An important skill attributed to leaders is self-awareness of their behaviors and the impact of those behaviors in others and in the organization (Antonakis & House, 2002).

This paper will present in the first section a deconstruction of leadership assumptions that have influenced this learner in the past. In the second section the author will present a revised version of these assumptions and a discussion of how this improves the effectiveness of her interactions with others in the professional, academic and personal areas.

A deconstructive process is defined as an analysis of statements in order to detect statements that, if looked carefully, contradict, demean or omit what was originally stated (Paparone, 2004, p. 3). Critical thinking skills are important in deconstruction, because through cognition and logical thinking, individuals can identify flawed assumptions (Duplass & Ziedler, 2002; Paparone, 2004).

Assumptions are thoughts generated unconsciously or naturally (Duplass & Ziedler, 2002) and they are used as simplified ways to support decisions made on a daily basis (Ruggiero, 2004, p. 94-95). From the logical thinking perspective, assumptions are important for argumentation and therefore they require being supported (Ruggiero, 2004, p. 141); unsupported or unwarranted assumptions are the objective of a deconstructive process as they distort the facts (Schwarze and Lape, 2001, p. 67)

Deconstructing assumptions makes individuals aware of the dissonance promoting transformation in their behaviors (Kirby and Goodpaster, 2001); either individuals continue accepting the assumption –if it was strong enough to support the test- or reject it to avoid conflicting evidence that affects their judgment (Paparone, 2004).

Assumptions about Leadership

For more than a decade this learner has performed different roles in the academic and economic consulting fields, as director of a graduate program and director of projects in a private bank in Latin America. Her leadership style was also influenced by her role as university professor for more than 15 years in Ecuador and the United States.

This section will deconstruct three working assumptions behind the transactional leadership style of this learner:

1. Constant supervision is sufficient to ensure tasks are completed successfully
2. Being a leader means to always be right
3. Leadership is exercised from the top of the organization chart

Constant Supervision is Sufficient to Ensure Tasks are Completed Successfully

This first assumption suggests a transactional style of leadership. Transactional leadership is a style based in rewards and punishments, where leaders provide direction to their followers in order to accomplish specific tasks (Antonakis & House, 2002).

This style seemed to also work satisfactorily in her role of director of graduate programs where she had only one person under her supervision. She gave directions and controlled and corrected any deviations from the original plan using this transactional style. Since her goals of recruitment were met, detailed supervision and control were validated as success factors of her transactional style.

Being a Leader Means to Always Be Right

This assumption applied to her role of business instructor at the university level. This learner assumed that in order to impart knowledge a necessary skill was to provide right answers. Her belief was that by doing otherwise she would appear unprepared and disqualified in front of her students. This pattern was transferred to her professional activities in charge of preparing projects for funding, where accuracy in the operations was required to justify the investment in front of directors and possible investors. The successful results of her projects ensured her more challenging positions, strengthening her assumption that leadership could be ultimately attained by producing correct results.

Leadership is Exercised from the Top of the Organization Chart

This assumption is related to hierarchical positions and leadership behavior and is closely tied to assumption number two. The experience this learner has had in the past has been in organizations with several layers of management, where managers positioned at the top of the organization chart held power, made strategic decisions and earned consistently more.

In this context, this learner assumed that an expected goal was to move up in the corporate ladder in order to exercise leadership. However, more contemporary leadership theories argue that influence in leadership is not linked to rank or position (Paparone, 2004). In fact, leadership is different to management in that regard because leaders can arise from different levels of the organization (Wageman & Hackman, 2007).

Revised Assumptions

Starting last year, this learner became a full-time professor for a state college in Nevada. She does not hold a formal leadership position but she is in close contact with her Dean and provides advice in topics related to curriculum building and partnerships with local corporations.

Through her work in this newly established institution, she has been able to observe her old assumptions and revise them to generate new ones. The following section presents an analysis of the new assumptions and their expected impact on this learner's professional, academic and personal life:

1. Clear communication facilitates the achievement of goals
2. Being a leader requires self-awareness of own limitations
3. Leadership is exercised from any level of the organization chart

Clear Communication Facilitates the Achievement of Goals

Communication instead of supervision and control characterizes harmonic relationships between leaders and followers (Clawson, 2006). This element assists in her role of educator, to increase the learning inventory of her students. In her relationship with colleagues and teammates, this learner will perceive better results if her *directions* become *suggestions* communicated in a tone that shows her genuine interest for the success of the team. This style gears towards servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2003).

Being a Leader Requires Self-awareness of Own Limitations

Self-awareness is more important than being right. Transformational leaders are able to remove their egocentrism and be inspirational and visionary (Antonakis & House, 2002). This learner will observe better results in the future if she learns from their own errors and use them as part of their own learning process. She will be able to intellectually stimulate her followers or peers with vision and drive and not through the power of a self-warranted *truth*. If she overcomes her old assumption of right or wrong she will be able to embrace new ideas and reduce her tendency to appear infallible.

Leadership is Exercised from any Level of the Organization Chart

The major assumption about hierarchy as a condition to exercise leadership should be removed from the set of beliefs of this learner. In fact her current relationship with her boss is characterized by an exchange of influences and rewarding work that meets characteristics of an Exchange-type leadership than a top-down type (Bradford and Cohen, as cited in Clawson, 2006). If this learner continues to believe that hierarchy generates effective leadership, her attention will be focused more on a promotion rather than her formation of leader and scholar.

Effects on Interpersonal Relationships

Using the revised assumptions about leadership, this learner will be able to improve the effectiveness of her interactions in the professional, academic and personal life:

Professional life: By accepting that constant control is not a requisite to effective leadership this learner will move from a transactional to a transformational style and will be able to interact better with colleagues and students through inspiration and intellectual stimulation.

Academic life: In her relationship with other scholars in her doctoral program, using servant leadership will help her put the interests of the team above her own, while reducing the level of stress over others and herself.

Personal life: By achieving a harmonious state in the above dimensions of her life, she will be able to allocate proper time to what matters the most: Her husband and her daughter. Secondly, she will be able to create and keep real friendships throughout her life.

Based on the above descriptions, this learner will show transformational behaviors mixed with servant-leadership behaviors. She envisions becoming a servant- full-range transformational leader (Greenleaf, 2003).

Conclusion

Leaders are important agents of change in organizations. Through their drive, inspiration and vision they can influence in others to work on a common goal. In order to do this, leaders need to continuously deconstruct their assumptions about leadership and be open to revisions.

This document presented a deconstructive process of three assumptions held by this learner and has extracted the unwarranted assumptions and refined them in a way that moves the leadership style to a more effective one. The transition from a transactional style to a servant-transformational style will help this author improve the effectiveness in her interactions with others.

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