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2013

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ABSTRACT

This study adds to the qualitative data showing how leaders in the emergency services perceive legitimacy and the bases of power. The study examines leader perception of the reasons their subordinates view their leadership as legitimate. Two definitions of legitimacy are presented: the traditional viewpoint of French and Raven (1959) associating legitimate power “with having status or formal job authority” and the other proposed by Maxfield (2012) in the LEAP leadership model basing legitimacy more on the characteristics leaders bring to their positions. Emergency service students interviewed leaders in their career fields, determining their view of legitimacy. They found that few emergency services leaders perceived legitimacy as traditionally defined, but rather they saw it as the experience, education and training, the skills and traits they bring to the position. Subordinate trust was important to their definition of legitimacy and this was on leader experience and integrity.

INTRODUCTION

French and Raven’s (1959) research on the bases of social power is the most widely quoted writing on the source of leader power. Their research provides a framework of dyadic relationships connecting the person with the power and the persons influenced by the power. French and Raven identified five types of power as legitimate, reward, coercive, referent, and expert. Northouse (2013, pp. 10-11) further divided the types of power into position and personal power. Position power is the power a person acquires from being holder of a position, rank or office within an organization. Because of position, these leaders can exercise any or all of legitimate, reward or coercive authority as the bases of their power. French and Raven defined legitimate as being “associated with having status or formal job authority.” Reward power comes from the leader’s ability to provide rewards to subordinates. Coercive power is “the capacity to penalize or punish others.” Personal power, on the other hand, is the authority followers attribute to leaders. It is gained based on referent or expert power. Referent power comes from the followers’ liking or identification for the leader. Followers attribute expert power to the leader when they perceive a leader as being competent and knowledgeable as a leader or in the business enterprise.

Maxfield (2012) introduced a new leadership model, which redefines the bases of power and legitimacy. This model, designated by the acronym LEAP, provides a guide for developing and assessing leadership. Maxfield and Fisher (2012) propose it as an effective tool in professionalizing fire and emergency service leadership (or for that matter, any other discipline). The LEAP model is comprised of the four leader traits or characteristics they believe to be most important. A leader is: 1) Legitimate—a leader has legitimate power, knowledge, skill and ability developed through his or her work, experience, education, and attention to detail; 2) Ethical—a good leader has strong character, strong values, and makes ethical decisions when confronted with choices and/or dilemmas; 3) Affective—a good leader has the ability to

instill trust, confidence, emotion, passion, and create vision with others; and, 4) Persistent—a good leader does not give up when times are tough or there is resistance to a righteous idea or plan, but shows determination in achieving goals and objectives.

The LEAP model appears to fit when applied to the desired proficiencies/outcomes of the Professional Fire Officer Development Standard (National Fire Protection Association, 2012). The education, training, and experience components of the professional standard seek to demonstrate the individual's legitimate expertise in the discipline by assessing the demonstrative outcomes of the taxonomies of learning, e.g., cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains (Bloom, Krathwhol, & Masia, 1964; Bloom, 1956).

The self-development section of the proposed standard assesses the individual's growth and understanding of inter-personal skills, values, ethics, communication and efficacy in creating/ promoting vision, emotion, passion, etc. It can be posited that self-efficacy, or the belief that one has the knowledge and skills to produce creative solutions and outcomes seems to demonstrate or reflect intrinsic motivation to engage in ethical development and affective or creative activities such as vision building (Gong, Huang, & Fahr, 2009).

Finally, implied as is the intended outcome of the professional development model, an individual demonstrates a certain amount of persistence in completing the process and portfolio requirements of the standard. No empirical evidence exists (yet) that this fire and emergency services standard's process completely develops an individual's leadership ability. However, considerable anecdotal evidence shows the correlation between education, training, experience and leadership success.

METHODOLOGY

Twenty-eight senior emergency services students in a leadership capstone course were asked to interview public administrators. Most chose to interview administrators in their career field – fire (14), police (7), or emergency management (3). Other fields (4) included city government, health and university administration, and disaster agency management. Three interviewees were female, none from police or fire. One of the questions the leaders were asked was: “What personal characteristics or background do you have that your subordinates would say legitimize you as a leader?” Other questions were related to ethics, vision, and persistence. The students asked to have the responses supported by leadership experiences and specific examples or stories. Then they wrote the responses into a narrative as part of a paper about leadership. The interview was chosen because it is suitable for the novice as well as the sophisticated researcher (Turner, 2010).

The goal of this study was to determine how legitimacy was defined by the leaders as interpreted by the students and whether they came up with new insights about leadership legitimacy.

The interview provides rich qualitative data that can result in better understanding of phenomena as well as the generation of hypotheses or propositions related to the phenomena. Grounded theory provides a process for analysis by developing categories of information, then interconnecting them, to develop theoretical propositions. This research follows a process of analysis, described as the data analysis spiral (Creswell, 2013, p. 183). Interview data is organized and then read. At the same time the researcher makes notes and memos in the margins. Then a process of describing, classifying and interpreting begins. This process puts the data in context, makes comparisons, and categorizes the information using codes.

Codes are combined and reduced in number and, using grounded theory, propositions are put forward that connect the phenomena with their contexts.

FINDINGS

The study's findings found that experience, education and training, skills and traits were the most important characteristics in establishing legitimacy as perceived by the leaders interviewed.

Experience

Experience was the most frequent reason interviewees gave for subordinates viewing them as legitimate leaders. Experience was identified 23 times. Working "from the ground up" has provided them opportunities to serve in many positions and take on many responsibilities. "The main thing that legitimizes you as a leader is your current experiences with the guys you work with," said one leader.

Four identified length of time as important. One saw his career as "a path of consistent progression and promotion." Another said, "I believe being in a position for months and/or years allows for a greater understanding of the position's responsibilities and objectives." Another added that through experience he has "been able to accrue heavy and complex responsibilities [leading to] an authoritative positional role in the process." A fourth indicated that having done the job of those she now leads is important in legitimizing her as a leader.

Two indicated that their experience made them competent leaders and two said their experience gave them understanding. One fire chief indicated that "the experiences he carries with him have helped give him a deep understanding and appreciation for the work of his firefighters." Another leader said, "I have shown by my past experience that my judgment is sound." Another added, "When people know that you have been around for a while, they look to you for answers."

Experience has allowed them to learn from other leaders. One administrator said experience allowed him to see what he liked and did not like in other leaders and to observe the type of values that he found to be worthwhile in others. It made him more aware of some of his personal qualities and deficiencies. One fire chief indicated: "I learned from my old leader's inadequacies. One lieutenant was not the leader of the crew. The engineer was the unofficial leader. It was a difficult process to learn." He added appreciatively, "I had a captain who was a strong leader and helped me to develop my own leadership skills by counseling and heart-to-heart talks."

Education and Training

While experience teaches leadership skills, formal education and training also help to legitimize administrators in the emergency services as leaders. Eight interviewees identified education and training as important. Education is often defined as the formal studies taken at colleges or universities which help someone to think critically and problem solve. Training on the other hand is more practical and is often offered on site.

One leader clarified the relationship between experience and education. "Even with my experience I am learning new methodologies and believe that education is the key in maintaining good leadership." Another added, "I have proven skills and training that echoes through my leadership. I believe that is why

others are drawn to my leadership.” Another said, “People look to well educated people to know the answers to ... problems.”

Skills

Skills are often distinguished from traits because they are learned (Northouse, 2013). Often they overlap. Fourteen interviewees identified skills that they thought were important in legitimizing them as leaders. Among the skills leaders identified communication and listening (8), problem solving and decision making (5), and technical expertise (1). Communication and problem solving are skills the leaders use on a daily basis.

Good listening skills are critical, according to one leader. “By listening to team members who have different levels of experience and expertise, [a leader] can learn and [get] more understanding and [build] relationships,” he said. The result is greater success in accomplishing the overall goals and objectives of the unit. Another said, “Legitimate leaders are understanding and willing to listen.... Having the ability to listen is critical and not taking offense when someone has different ideas.” A fire chief emphasized the importance of listening in decision making. “I rarely make a decision without the input of at least a few other members of the department at the combat level,” he said.

Traits and characteristics

Numerous traits and characteristics were identified as legitimizing leaders. Perhaps most important was honesty and integrity (identified by 14 leaders). Personal integrity combined with experience leads to trust. “Doing the right thing is important,” said one leader. “Choosing the difficult right over the easy wrong goes right back to your character,” said another leader.

Trust is crucial in the emergency services when a person’s life or death may depend on the decisions of leaders. “You can’t follow someone you don’t trust,” said one leader. Another said he let his personal characteristics guide his actions and he gained the trust of his subordinates. “The guys totally trust me in all aspects of the decisions we make,” said another leader.

One leader focused on the importance of example in building trust. “I do what I say I will do. I live the mission, vision and values of our company. Employees know me. I am visible.” Another said, “I think my deputies know that what I say and what I do is the same thing. I’m never going to ask them to do something I haven’t done before or aren’t willing to do myself.” Another added, “Following the rules whether you agree with them or not is important to your reputation. You follow the rules because that’s the job.”

Another trait that is important (identified by three leaders) is the willingness to learn from subordinates and be flexible in decision making. “Gradually I saw that my ideas were not the only ones and were not always the best ones,” said one leader, reflecting back on his first appointment as a leader in the police force. Another said, “Humble leaders tend to be more successful in connecting with their employees.”

Leadership philosophy was also important. Caring about and helping subordinates was identified by three interviewees. Fairness was identified by another. Three felt it was important to lead by example. “Maturity plays a huge role in my leadership style as well as my employees. Mature employees, who know what needs to be done just do it. Newer employees need guidance and direction,” said one leader.

“You can’t lead from behind and push your employees; you have to lead from the front and encourage them to follow,” another added. “My greatest success is helping others to succeed themselves,” said another.

Five interviewees indicated goal setting and vision were important in legitimizing them as leaders. Task orientation and working hard were important to three others. “To bring others together to work together, to achieve a common goal, and the ability to establish that common goal” are important characteristics that one interviewee identified as legitimizing him as a leader.

A student interviewer summed up the personal characteristics of the leader he interviewed. “He never really did anything different to make himself stand out from his peers other than working hard, being honest, and always acting mature and showing respect.”

Only one interviewee identified his appointment (job authority) was important in legitimizing him as a leader.

The following chart summarizes the characteristics interviewees felt subordinates viewed as important in legitimizing them as leaders.

Chart 1. Characteristics that legitimize leaders

Experience, 23	Traits (continued)
Education and Training, 8	Flexible, 1
Skills, 14	Caring, 3
Communication and listening, 8	Fairness, 1
Problem solving and decision making, 5	Lead by example, 3
Technical expertise, 1	Goal setting, 5
Traits, 33	Hard work, 2
Honesty and integrity, 14	Values, 1
Trust, 3	Involved, 1
Learn from subordinates, 2	Love for department, 1
	Creative, 1
	Appointment, 1

DISCUSSION

Only one leader indicated his legitimate power was based on the traditional definition “associated with having status or formal job authority” (French and Raven, 1959). All leaders saw their legitimacy more in terms of experience, education and training, skills and traits. This fits better Maxfield’s (2012) definition of legitimacy which is “developed through the leader’s work, experience, education, and attention to detail.” It also corresponds better with personal power (Northouse, 2013), which is the authority followers attribute to leaders, based on referent or expert power. Subordinates identify with the leader based on the perception that he or she is competent and knowledgeable. This study is limited in its scope because of its methodology and the size and nature of participants. The interview approach provides qualitative rather than empirical data. Twenty-eight leaders limited to the emergency services

field were interviewed and answers were based on one open-ended question: “What personal characteristics or background do you have that your subordinates would say legitimize you as a leader?”

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study suggest two conclusions (or propositions).

- More emphasis is placed by emergency services leaders on experience and working relationships than on formal appointment and job position.
- Trust is more important in the emergency services than a command and control structure. Personal integrity combined with experience lead to trust.

This study appears to affirm the value of the LEAP model as applied to the emergency services. Leaders can confirm their legitimacy through work experience, education and training, the development of skills and leadership traits. While this study did not examine the Ethical, Affective, and Persistent aspects of the LEAP model, these characteristics appear to build leadership legitimacy as well as trust.

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