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Weakness is the New Strength: How Vulnerability Makes Leaders Stronger

Traditionally, leaders are considered strong if they give orders, act tough, are demanding bosses, rule from above, and act with impunity. Strong leaders are also seen as having a commanding presence, a firm handshake, and a directive style, making them seem unquestionable, infallible, and unapproachable.

Those artificial strengths often lay the groundwork for a designated leader's failure. Often that failure is due to the leader's inability to learn and apply "soft" skills. The ability to communicate effectively, build relationships, and listen to feedback have long been regarded as "soft" skills for leaders (Hires & Davis, 2021). Moreover, leaders who spend time listening and developing caring relationships with peers and subordinates are sometimes perceived as weak.

The purpose of this article is to show that transformational leaders are exactly the opposite of weak. This research demonstrates that strong leaders are by necessity vulnerable and approachable, and their behavior predictable, especially when dealing with personal or organizational conflict.

These strong and vulnerable leaders open themselves to negative feedback, ask for disconfirming evidence, listen to others, and create the conditions that enable all members of the organization to feel safe in communicating even the most adverse information without dire negative consequences (Dick, 2017). In short, vulnerable leaders accept what could be precursors to conflict (negative feedback) as a way to foster, introduce, shape, refine and improve proposed alterations in the organization, as well as to introduce new products, hone processes, or implement significant organizational change. These leaders sometimes create conflict to energize stakeholders to consider innovation instead of immediately opposing any proposed change.

Leaders also use conflict to improve relationships with traditional oppositional stakeholders such as unions, citizen activists, and employees. Those groups may instinctively resist all innovation or modifications that could affect them. Such innovations might include budget cuts, layoffs, unit closures or other major alterations to organizational structure, activities, or processes (Dick, 2017). Instead of breaking communication in the face of conflict, strong leaders build bridges and are the first ones to cross them.

This grounded theory study combined five phenomenological studies of leaders from different occupations to examine specific activities from six different behavior domains. These domains interact and are used to resolve and mitigate conflict by building shared mutual knowledge with stakeholders. Those domains are communication, collaboration, process, problem solving, emotional intelligence, and ethics.

For the purposes of this paper, vulnerability can be examined based on the leader's use or neglect of four domains of behavior when dealing with conflict of all types, often generated by negative or unwelcome feedback. Those domains are: communication, collaboration, ethics, and emotional intelligence. It remains a leader's responsibility to address conflict—especially unresolved conflict.

Review of the Literature

Conflict

Conflict is defined as "any cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimension that differs from another cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral dimension. This difference can be individual or collective" (Dick, 2017, p. 17). Conflict exists on a regular basis among

nations, trading partners, nongovernmental organizations, diplomatic entities, the military, businesses, neighbors, and families (Allen, 2014). There is no limit to the places where conflict arises and remains. One way to demonstrate the scale of conflict is by examining the number of lawsuits filed each year. In 2012, 15 million new lawsuits were filed in the United States alone (Nicholson, 2012). There is also no limit to who is afflicted by conflict. Conflict at work costs people their jobs and companies millions of dollars (Allen, 2014; Mandelbaum & Friedman, 2011). Conflict at school can take the form of bullying or differences of opinion on how schools should be run and what subjects should be taught (Masewicz, 2010). Hardened attitudes on how resources should be allocated continue to turn citizens against each other across the United States. This lack of shared mutual knowledge and the resulting negative feedback loop leads to political gridlock, denying the opportunity for critical improvements in conducting the nation's business (Mandelbaum & Friedman, 2011).

Unresolved Conflict

Unresolved conflict is defined as any perceived conflict that is ignored, remains unaddressed, and/or is unresolved by the participants (Dick, 2017). There are multiple reasons why conflict remains unresolved. First, a leader may not be skilled or trained in conflict resolution. The second is that the organization may not foster a positive conflict culture but instead avoids conflict at all costs (Gelfand et al., 2013). The third is that senior management is resistant to receiving negative feedback, where such feedback might alleviate conflict (Hamrin et al., 2016). The fourth is that leaders fear that embracing conflict will make them appear weak and exposed (Hanley, 2010).

Unresolved conflict increases employee frustration, contributes to apathy, and forces employees to make their own judgments as to why conflict is not addressed (Aula & Siira, 2010; Weeks, 1994). As the conflict progresses, the relationship between conflictants continues to erode. As this erosion takes place, the conflictants spend less time communicating when communication is needed most (Lederach, 2003a). Instead of conflict partners eliminating barriers to communication, they erect them. These obstacles create a wider gap between parties, making communication more difficult (Lederach, 2003b). The consequences of unresolved conflict are clear, creating an erosion of trust, financial loss, employee turnover, discontent, and forfeiture of innovation.

Leaders who successfully transform conflict build trust, create strong teams, find ways for antagonists to work together, and resolve issues that are important to society both large and small (Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Kincannon, 2014). Many do attempt to use various strategies and techniques to manage conflict. However, given the many examples of unresolved conflict—hostility toward out-groups, labor-management struggles, and political gridlock—it is apparent that more research is needed into leaders and their ability to transform conflict.

Conflict Transformation

In conflict transformation, the conflict is resolved and the relationship among or between the conflict participants is improved. The result of conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships (Dick, 2017). This effort requires leaders to develop and refine behaviors from a set of

behavior domains, including the use of intentional and deliberate communication skills while remaining vulnerable and open to negative feedback.

Communication

Communication is defined here as the transferring of meaning from sender to receiver while overcoming noise and filters so that the intended meaning is received by the intended recipient (Dick, 2017). Communication is not a simple process. Communication exchanges are fraught with opportunities for the communicators to be misunderstood or their words misinterpreted. This is made worse by humans who are already burdened by preexisting impediments to listening and interpretation skills. Moreover, communication is even more difficult during times of stress or conflict.

The importance of quality communication in the workplace cannot be overstated. The role of communication in leadership is central to leader behavior. Research on manager and leader workload shows that designated leaders devote up to 90% of their time at work communicating with others in some way (Dick, 2017).

This finding is significant in that indicators of organizational performance are a direct result of what the leader says. It also means that every communication from a leader needs to be intentional, relevant, timely, and focused (Brandts et al., 2015).

The roles of being both an effective communicator and a leader are inextricably linked; it is not possible to separate them. Leadership consists of dual roles that are composed of multiple activities devoted to communication and social interaction. Leaders must recognize that in order to be effective communicators, they must engage socially with superiors, peers, and subordinates (Tourish, 2014).

Communication is also discursive. The interaction between a leader and all others is a process that occurs naturally as needed. This is not a result of a simple linear process between messenger and receiver, but rather is a result of many simultaneous exchanges about multiple related or unrelated topics. Successful leader communication results from deliberate communicative acts designed with a specific intent.

Discursive leadership does not consist of top-down directives or orders. Rather, it is constructed from the ebb and flow of communications between all the members of the organizations at all levels (Tourish, 2014). Furthermore, leadership communication requires a constant back-and-forth exchange between leader and followers to create shared mutual knowledge, which is the cornerstone of a leader's success (Hamrin et al, 2016).

Shared Mutual Knowledge

Shared mutual knowledge is defined as agreed-upon and mutually known information that is believed, presupposed, or taken for granted by participants involved in a joint activity (Liu, 2014). Shared mutual knowledge is the vehicle that enables modern organizations to thrive. Transformational leaders develop shared mutual knowledge by way of open dialogue, transparency, focused communication, and commitment (Allen, 2014; Jameson et al., 2010).

This shared knowledge is constructed from specific elements of information that are common among communicating partners. It also means that each communication interchange is tailored by the speaker for that specific information inquirer. The result is that the communication is immediately accepted as true if the communication partners already have a trusted relationship, thus requiring no additional proof (Hillard & Crook, 2016). This trust between the two parties is instrumental to developing and accepting shared mutual knowledge and the subsequent impact this knowledge has on the workplace.

This shared common knowledge makes it more likely that additional and subsequent communications will be better understood (Cramton, 2002). This is critical for transforming conflict because remaining open to all the issues involved in a conflict makes it possible to focus clearly on those factors identified as part of the dispute (Lederach, 2003b; Weeks, 1994). In this way, conflict partners can accurately establish the parameters of a disagreement and begin to work together to fix it. Still, transforming conflict is no easy task.

The creation of shared mutual knowledge is easily disrupted by communication pollutants such as poor feedback skills (both sending and receiving), poor listening skills, harsh speech, stereotyping, unaddressed cultural differences, and unfiltered responses fueled by negative emotions (Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Weeks, 1994). This means that leaders must make themselves vulnerable and carefully employ certain behavior domains across all communications to ensure that the leader's communication efforts and intentions are not derailed. Transforming conflict to create and understand shared mutual knowledge requires new methods, techniques, and strategies. The ultimate outcome remains a result of shared experiences among conflict partners—regardless of the nature of the conflict (Ty, 2011; Weeks, 1994). So what role does leader vulnerability play in the series of communication exchanges necessary for leader success?

Vulnerability

A leader's willingness to accept negative feedback from stakeholders or members of the organization with lower status is by definition vulnerability, which is critical to leader success (Tourish, 2014). Employees' perception of leaders' ability or inability to accept negative feedback heavily influences whether the leader is perceived as an effective communicator. The absence of negative feedback from stakeholders does not mean the absence of unresolved conflict or the acceptance of the status quo.

A leader can easily misunderstand absence of negative feedback from stakeholders as support for or acceptance of the leader's ideas, positions, or statements. Silence by followers is a form of self-protection and most often does *not* indicate approval, acceptance of some new proposal, or general agreement with the leader's statements as truth (Tourish, 2014). If leaders are not sure of approval or support from stakeholders, they need to ask. Why is this important for an organization?

A communicative leader who seeks out negative feedback and creates the conditions for "dissent, difference, and the facilitation of alternative viewpoints" most likely reduces social, organizational, or economic harm (Tourish, 2014, p. 80). Other qualities important for communicative leaders include likeability, approachability, respect for employees, transparency, and genuine concern for an employee's well-being (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). Transparency, approachability, and likeability—key indicators of soft skills—are products of vulnerability and effective communication.

A leader's use of emotional intelligence in governing communication interactions is critical to the success of new ideas (Callahan, 2016). Collaboration requires continuous back-and-forth interactions. Sometimes those exchanges become heated due to multiple exchanges of point-counterpoint ideas. Vulnerability is critical for the success of collaboration, because vulnerable leaders welcome those countervailing ideas expressed during those interactions. Vulnerable leaders must foster the continued free flow of ideas to promote uncensored brainstorming, as well as provide a safe haven for difficult and honest communications that help to solve problems, foster innovation, and contribute to the resolution of conflict.

Collaboration

Collaboration is defined as a process of inquiry that combines trust, role expectations, information exchange, transparency, persuasion, and negotiations to increase the chances of finding creative solutions to established problems (Dick, 2017). Leader vulnerability plays an important role in collaboration. Leaders need to be flexible and listen to other points of view, especially when it comes to important decisions and innovation, as well as when dealing with conflict of all kinds. How does a leader choose collaboration partners?

Leaders need to create collaborative teams with diverse members who have wildly different skill sets and are at different levels in the organization. This diversity of knowledge and experience provides the expertise needed in developing shared mutual knowledge because working together may “generate novel solutions to complex problems” that may otherwise be ignored (Knapp et al., 2015, p. 1).

In addition, collaboration generates useful shared mutual knowledge by identifying and selecting the right people to help solve the right problem at the heart of the conflict. Choosing stakeholders who have insight into, expertise in, or experience with the problem is necessary even if those stakeholders may not support or have had conflict with the leader in the past. A leader’s understanding of the characteristics and patterns of relationships among stakeholders is important to the success or failure of collaboration (Eliason, 2014; Garcia, 2014). Successful collaborative attempts require that leaders employ at least two key aspects of emotional intelligence: behavior management and relationship management.

Emotional Intelligence

McCleskey (2014) refined the concept of emotional intelligence (EI) as “the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional meanings, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote both better emotion and thought” (p. 85). Supervisors employing EI in the workplace has been linked to improved problem solving, increased employee satisfaction, lower employee turnover, and reduced conflict (Barbuto et al., 2014; Hutchinson & Hurley, 2013; Sadri, 2012).

Behavior Management

Strong EI helps leaders maintain focus and not become distracted if other participants engage in disruptive or unhelpful behavior (Chan et al., 2014; Goleman, 2005). A leader’s ability to manage his or her own emotions as well as respond to the emotions of subordinates, supervisors, and other stakeholders is regarded as an important leadership skill (Barbuto et al., 2014; Goleman, 2005).

Leaders with strong EI skills are perceived by others in the organization as being more in tune within the context of the organization’s mission, goals, and desired outcomes (Dabke, 2016). In the workplace, value is placed on the leader’s ability to remain grounded and calm when confronted with stressful situations. It is important that a leader listens, thinks, and reacts appropriately when faced with potential negative consequences during difficult interactions with all types of stakeholders.

Relationship Management

Stakeholders value a leader who self-regulates in times of stress and does not overreact or make unfounded accusations against a group when one person might be at fault (Sadri, 2012). A leader must also realize that one is always under scrutiny by subordinates, peers, and superiors; maintaining control over expressions, language, and behavior is critical

not only for everyone working in the proximity of the individual, but also for the organization (Combs et al., 2015).

A leader's reputation as an effective leader creates a positive work environment, which creates the conditions in which stakeholders or subordinates are able to build effective relationships with those leaders (Dabke, 2016). These effective relationships mitigate organizational uncertainty, role vagueness, imprecise task instructions, or lack of information. What appears to many as weakness is in reality an embrace of vulnerability by the leader, enabling the pursuit of the best possible outcomes for all stakeholders and the organization. However, a leader's conduct must simultaneously be grounded by a strong ethical mindset.

Ethics

Ethics is defined as “human beings making choices and conducting behavior in a morally responsible way, given the values and morals of the culture” (Dick, 2017, p. 17). Ethics describes an action an individual takes or does not take in response to a stimulus according to his or her moral code (Kaya & Başkaya, 2016; Schwepker, 2013).

Hannah et al. (2011) described modern organizations as “morally complex environments that impose significant ethical demands and challenges on organizational actors” (p. 555). Action is what is important in ethics; it is not what one feels, but what action(s) an individual takes when under threat. The value of ethical behavior used in transforming conflict is that any developed solutions to the conflict are more defensible and durable, and contribute to the betterment of society (Aula & Siira, 2010). Therefore, ethical acts lay the groundwork for the long-term success of those agreed-upon solutions derived by problem solving activities conducted by the conflict partners (Howard & Korver, 2008).

Theoretical Framework

The Common Ground Research Team (CGRT) conducted a series of phenomenological research studies during the academic years 2014, 2015, and 2016. The research explored the work of dissimilar individuals operating as solo designated leaders delimited by location and profession. The five studies produced by the CGRT all contained the same sample selection criteria decided by the CGRT in advance. Each study was restricted to a group of 15 participants based on specific acceptance standards (Dick, 2017).

No coherent theory or set of theories was easily identifiable from reading the five dissertations by the CGRT researchers. A new approach was needed to link the five phenomenological studies with actual behaviors exhibited by the leader sample and tied to the six domains of behaviors. The grounded theory (GT) research method was used in this study. The purpose of this GT study was to generate a theory or theories that explains how leaders from five different fields use six domains of conflict transformation behaviors to establish shared mutual knowledge and transform conflict.

The CGRT used leader interviews that were recorded and transcribed. Each transcript provided from the five studies (approximately 1,300 pages) was analyzed word-by-word. From the beginning, memos were kept to assemble ideas, concepts, and information that linked the activities found among the population sample. Once the activities began to form within the six domains of behavior, they were cross-checked with the existing CGRT themes to provide support for the language of the codes. Existing memos were cross-checked when new behaviors were identified in subsequent transcript analysis, and new memos were created to identify links and ask questions of the data.

The research question asked, What theories emerge from a systematic comparative analysis of the five studies to explain how leaders from various professions use the six domains of behavior to transform conflict and achieve mutual knowledge? This question was relevant for understanding how vulnerability makes leaders stronger.

The sample population for this study was 75 exemplar leaders who as a matter of position might encounter conflict and who had the responsibility for resolving such conflict. The CGRT researched conflict transformation behaviors by leaders in different fields, and there were no two groups of leaders in the same field.

Primary Data Source

This researcher used secondary sources as the primary data for this research that included the transcripts of the interviews with the subjects. All researchers involved in the CGRT received IRB approval. Comprehensive and appropriate confidentiality procedures included complete redaction of all names and locations of the individuals, organizations, and locations of the participants before the transcripts were delivered to this researcher.

Results and Findings

Fourteen significant findings emerged from the data included in this study. The significant findings were determined to be any behavior activity referenced more than 37 times by the 75 exemplar leaders who were participants in the five studies conducted by the CGRT. The number 37 represents a majority of the sample population who referenced the activity or process in their interview. Data analysis identified at least one or more significant activities or processes in each domain: communication (4), ethics (3), collaboration (2), EI (2), problem solving (2), and process (1). For the purposes of this paper, the domains of communications, collaboration, ethics, and EI are reviewed here.

Communication

Leaders used communication as the primary tool to transform conflict as shown by communication having the highest number of responses across the six domains (27%). Data analysis demonstrated how exemplar leaders use communication to facilitate behavior relative to the other domains, such as collaboration and EI. These domains are directly intertwined in what exemplar leaders communicate, regardless of the method or media chosen to transmit the messages. Leaders intentionally work on message content, tone, relevancy, and length designed to communicate specific ideas to stakeholders at specific and predetermined times (Dick, 2017). Exemplar leaders reported using communication as the primary means to develop or improve relationships with stakeholders, even with past conflictants. Those improved relationships reduced conflict and helped to mitigate or transform future conflict.

Collaboration

Exemplar leaders used collaboration as a direct method to engage stakeholders as evidenced by having a high number of responses across the six domains (23%). Collaboration was used to keep communication flowing and engage knowledgeable stakeholders to solve problems and build relationships with other stakeholders. Stakeholders also engaged in collaboration to take ownership of solutions created during collaboration. Those co-created solutions were found to be more resilient and trusted by stakeholders. Exemplar leaders also identified collaboration as an effective method for maintaining open lines of communication.

Ethics

Ethics plays an important role in exemplary leadership as exhibited by a relatively high number of responses (19%). Exemplar leaders did not identify ethics as a domain of binary behavior in that leaders “do” ethics with an on or an off switch. Ethics is described as a series of behaviors that reflect good works, transparency, openness, predictable behavior, honesty, and moral courage. Moral courage helps to shape a leader’s behavior by his or her refusal to undertake an activity that crosses ethical boundaries established by agreement, contract, regulations, laws, or organizational culture. Moral courage also demands that a leader undertake an action that may be deeply unpopular with stakeholders, but must be undertaken because of necessity, regardless of the consequences to the leader (Dick, 2017).

Emotional Intelligence (EI)

EI plays an important role in the four domains of behavior as represented by the percentage of responses (10%) related to EI. A leader with a strong EI skillset accepts criticism, admits responsibility for mistakes, and receives unfavorable information in a manner consistent with temperate and predictable behavior. Vulnerable leaders set the conditions such that stakeholders are *not* reluctant to challenge, question, or deliver to the vulnerable leader unfavorable information about the leader or the organization. Those leaders consistently seek feedback as a method to improve all forms of behavior, not just those from the four domains reported here.

Conclusions

Transforming Conflict

Leaders who want to transform conflict and create shared mutual knowledge understand the four conflict transformation behavior domains as composed of distinct activities associated within each domain. Leaders deploy activities associated with each domain singularly, in combinations, or at times not at all.

Conclusion 1

Leaders who transform conflict and achieve the most success use the four domains of conflict transformation behaviors in different ways at different times depending on the situation, the stakeholders, the problem, or the conflict. Leaders concentrate on one domain or all four domains together as necessary, contingent on the nature and circumstances of the conflict.

Conclusion 2

Leaders begin the conflict transformation process using communication skills to engage stakeholders in ways that have the strongest potential for successful collaboration. Leaders create collaborative teams composed of various stakeholders even if those stakeholders are seen as enemies of the organization. Leaders work to leverage the abilities of those stakeholders by modeling desired behavior. Leaders then collaborate with those stakeholders to create the shared mutual knowledge needed to transform conflict.

Conclusion 3

Leaders communicate intentionally with past conflict partners with the specific purpose of improving relationships. Leaders are open and build trust with past conflictants to create a better chance of transforming future conflict (Garcia, 2014; Young, 2015). Leaders reduce the impact of barriers to communication with those conflict partners by listening to and accepting feedback.

Conclusion 4

Leaders communicate, remain approachable, and share power with collaboration partners to create more resilient solutions to conflict. Leaders share all information that is legally permissible across as wide a network as possible to keep stakeholders informed. Leaders tailor communications for stakeholders such that it is relevant, timely, accurate, and related to the conflict.

Conclusion 5

Leaders must maintain and model ethical behavior and explain the ethical norms expected of the members of the organization. Leaders provide rewards or sanctions as consequences of ethical or unethical behavior.

Conclusion 6

Leaders build on their EI skills to reduce or mitigate behaviors that exacerbate conflict or impair relationships with others. Leaders continuously monitor their personal emotional states and remain open to unfavorable or negative information without rancor or criticism directed toward the messenger. Leaders support a climate of openness and concern for stakeholders' emotional states.

Conclusion 7

Leaders engage stakeholders to address problems in an efficient manner. Leaders leverage the talents of stakeholders to solve problems. Leaders listen to clarify the parameters and elements of a problem before suggesting solutions or making decisions. Leaders accept responsibility for ensuring that agreed-upon solutions are implemented and enforced.

Implications for Action

The implications of this research have the potential to change the way organizations hire, develop, and promote individuals to designated leadership positions. Any organization composed of hierarchies with selected leaders may benefit. It is recommended that senior leaders:

1. Evaluate a candidate's approachability, tolerance for negative feedback, and ability to stay calm when confronted with negative information.
2. Evaluate a candidate for potential promotion to an intermediate leadership position based on their ability to lead while in conflict with stakeholders and other members of the team.
3. Carefully screen a candidate for their ability to create effective, relevant, and timely communications. Human resource departments develop or purchase those instruments designed to evaluate the communication skills of candidates as well as openness to feedback from all sides of a conflict.
4. Evaluate a candidate's understanding of the ethical climate of the organization. Part of this evaluation is the candidate's ability to recognize, adhere to, model, teach, and articulate the components of an ethical climate.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on these findings and conclusions there are two areas of potential research. This first is research designed to discover what kinds of leaders' behaviors and conduct are necessary to keep positive and productive relationships intact while addressing conflict in a high-stress environment. The second is a research study designed to examine the effectiveness and efficacy of leaders who provoke conflict to promote innovation and whether this provocation supports the resolution of, or exacerbates, conflict.

Vulnerability and Strong Leadership

Arguably, individual behavior domains do have an impact on conflict; however, the impact of the four domains working in concert with one another has not been examined previously. Although expertise in one or two domains is helpful, the conclusion of this study indicates that remaining vulnerable and moving to conflict transformation requires the powerful interaction of all four domains of communication, collaboration, ethics, and EI.

The findings from this study support the conclusion that all four domains of behavior are intertwined in a complex series of interactions that include the tangible and intangible activities a leader may or may not employ separately or together. As these actions are taken, each one directly or indirectly influences the leader's behavior in positive or negative ways, which then generates a reaction from the stakeholder(s).

Each interaction creates subsequent interpretations and reactions by all the parties. Behaviors interpreted as positive move the process forward. Behaviors interpreted as negative slow or derail the forward momentum towards creating shared mutual knowledge.

This behavioral back-and-forth is an iterative process that results in action plus reaction and continues from the beginning to the end of a conflict. However, those interactions between a vulnerable leader and stakeholders continue to be influenced by other behaviors from both inside and outside of the domains.

Vulnerable leaders need to remember that any inappropriate response by a regular participant may be tolerated and forgiven by the group. However, inappropriate behavior by the leader can have devastating consequences on the effort to create shared mutual knowledge, eventually resulting in failure to resolve the conflict. This failure could ultimately cost the leader his or her job.

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