Case Study – Trait Approach

MMI 481 – Foundations of Leadership

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Northwestern University

Kevin Scharnhorst

for Dr. Russell Roberson

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Case Study 1 – Choosing a New Directory of Research

Sandra, as the Vice President for research and development at Great Lakes Foods (GLF), has a very challenging task ahead of her in selecting among the three highly qualified candidates that have applied for the director of research position that will report to her. The additional pressure coming from the company's President and Board of Directors likely adds unneeded stress and contributes to the difficulty in choosing the right person best fitted by their leadership traits.

In considering Alexa Smith, Kelsey Metts and Thomas Santiago on the bases of their best fit for leadership traits, the case study will seek to answer the following questions in desire to narrow to a final candidate.

If you were one of the candidates applying for this position what would you do to improve your chances of being selected?

As a potential candidate and realizing that the director position is within the leadership ranks, this should naturally lead to a desire for self-reflection. Studying the job description and expectations would be a natural start with a focused attention on identifying leadership attributes that are specifically mentioned.

Reflecting through past performance reviews and self-assessments could help highlight strength attributes that are identified with good leaders. There are a number of personality tests available that can help identify leadership traits as well if taken. It would serve well to seek out renowned leadership assessments in advance, to help identify strengths and weaknesses in an effort to provide reflective analysis points in upcoming interviews for the director position.

There are many examples that can be garnered from one's own professional experience. It would be a good reflection exercise to take inventory of the top three most influential leaders that I have worked with. Once identified, list out the characteristic traits each of these leaders had that were most admired. With each, it would be helpful to identify situational examples where their leadership were observed. We each seem to mimic behaviors we see modeled from others. Knowing this, I could explain how applying the three different leaders' traits in my own life has strengthened me as a leader.

Lastly, in preparation for the interview, it would be advantageous to recount examples from the mentioned exercises showing how taking personal inventory helps identify your strong and weak areas as a leader and how knowing both empowers you to grow.

How would knowledge of the trait approach to leadership help you with your preparation and application for this position?

Knowing the trait approach to leadership would better focus energy to aspects that would matter in influencing the interviewers to identify with my talents that would match the traits looked for. Coming prepared with results from the reflective exercises mentioned in the prior section would demonstrate

motivation and to a degree self-monitoring. Being assertive and showing an attempt to convince the interview panel of me as their choice could demonstrate extroversion.

The approach, in general, is based on psychological characteristics and to a large degree can be left to individual interpretation. It is all about the leader and not the followers. The interview, in essence, is a rehearsal to allow my leadership traits to be showcased. Being cognizant of the leadership trait theory s would help balance the interview and help me as the interviewee to read reactions.

Knowing up front would help me know in advance what would be sought and on the opposite spectrum too, highlight the weaknesses with the theory so that doubts could be eliminated in offering what the theory lacks to show by nature.

How could you use trait theory in interviewing and selecting the best candidate for the position?

The focus in using trait theory rests on the leader and specifically on his or her personality. In comparison to other selection mechanisms, the trait theory, is one of the most straight forward to put in practice. The task as described by Northhouse involves, " in essence, the trait approach is concerned with what traits leaders exhibit and who has these traits." (Peter G. Northouse. Leadership: Theory and Practice (Kindle Location 396). Kindle Edition) In interviewing then, it would make sense to identify up front which traits are being sought and then a uniform scale to rate each of the three candidates against. The rating will be collected through observation of the candidates responses to questions and from examples provided from the candidates. Personal accomplishments are also good to take into account for as leadership can be seen over time through direct practice. Judging personality for cultural fit would also play a factor.

Equally as important as what you are looking for, is what weaknesses the tool has in helping to identify what is being sought. The trait theory has several deficiencies and when realized, can be countered by asking more focused questions and in looking for things that can help remove bias or ignorance.

What are some example questions you might ask the candidates?

The questions asked to the potential candidate should help uncover the personality characteristics that match the traits desired. The questions should also help remove bias and ignorance and in so doing focus on eliminating weaknesses that trait theory is susceptible to. The type of questions should reveal personal information about the candidates. Open ended questions will best encourage candidates to open up and give a preview to personality traits. Below are some examples of questions that could be asked.

- Describe an experience in which you were self-motivated to develop and grow yourself as a leader amongst your peers?

- Considering you most recent position, what sets you apart as qualified to advance in a leadership position?

- Describe a confrontational situation and what you did to facilitate resolution?

- Explain for us two of our proudest accomplishments.

- What characteristics are the most essential in your opinion for a good leader?

Summary – Narrowing the selection

Given the close qualifications of the three candidates, it ultimately boils down to Sandra's interpretation of the information extracted through the interview process. Given her current stewardship, she has a unique perspective on what will be required of the new director of research. Putting myself in her shoes and thinking about the three internal candidates certainly doesn't make the choice any easier.

Thomas portrays characteristics of an emergent leader with followers that trust him and upper management that confide in him. He has a reputation of integrity and honesty. Those that work with or for him seem to have a high level of respect for him. He certainly possesses leadership traits that would are valued.

Alexa's background and experience demonstrate a steady career and dedicated focus toward the company, its mission and values and shareholder's interests. As described, she is definitely a valuable asset to the company and with her commitment to the varied tasks that the job requires is focused to the finish. In my own assessment, there seems to be untapped potential and perhaps investing more in her education will help her develop traits desired in a leader. At present, she seems a great fit for a manager and capitalizing her more in this capacity might best serve the company until which time another leadership position surfaces.

Kelsey has the least amount of tenure with the company but her background demonstrates leadership traits such as motivation, emotional intelligence, social intelligence, cognitive abilities, conscientiousness, etc. She is a loyal contributor to the company and seems to be an emergent leader too as she is perceived as one trusted and respected. Her personality strengths overlap and then exceed the other two candidates. Sandra might see Kelsey as a threat to her own career but the better leader will surround themselves with people which will stretch themselves as they will grow in the process. She is a Harvard trained leader and can offer a fresh perspective to the leadership team. Perceptions from others offer that she may one day be a president of her own company.   Why not give her an opportunity which might lead to the same opportunity within GLF? Further, her perspective might provide opportunities to the other two candidates at some point. For example, the same education that Kelsey received might be encouraged to Alexa.

The choice is still a tough one but applying the theory of leadership traits and applying it with consistency in considering all three candidates may help Sandra identify the strongest candidate on the theories merits.