



NORTHWESTERN
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Case Study – HBR on Leadership Analysis



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Case Study 1 – The Readings

In a quest to broaden my knowledge and understanding of leadership further, this case study will apply principles learned through reading a Harvard Business Review (HBR) article entitled “Managing Away Bad Habits” by James Waldroop and Timothy Butler. Additionally, two other articles were considered and key principles will be pulled in as they apply to my analysis. Those articles include; “Are You Picking the Right Leaders?”; and “Personalize Your Management Development”.

Beginnings in Leadership

As a relatively new leader myself, the article covering the selection of leaders really resonated with me at a personal level. When chosen for the opportunity, and even still, I find myself assessing the requirements and comparing to understand if I am a match. Previous to my current position, I was an individual contributor in a software engineering role. I have always been classified as a hard worker and recognized for my strong work ethic. I have been fortunate to have found a field and discipline in which I am very passionate towards and my natural talents accentuate. As such, I do not have to struggle much to invest the effort to be perceived as going beyond expectations. Teams recognize me as an emergent or informal leader. Assigned responsibilities to lead projects technically have provided me opportunities to prove my ability to add value for the organization. In essence, it is natural for me to rally colleagues toward a common purpose within the context of the projects we work on together because I am recognized as a subject matter expert. In applying to myself, my “bosses usually view them favorably because they make life easier by helping their divisions, departments, or groups run smoothly.” (Sorcher & Brant, 2004) This more than any other reason seems to explain why I was given a formal leadership role.

When approached, I was asked to serve in the position rather than apply and go through a selection process. Because I didn't go seeking this on my own pursuit, I have been "the reluctant leader" (Griffin, 2008) as described in "Personalize Your Management Development". This type of leader is described as having "the raw material to make outstanding managers, but they're sabotaged by their own lack of confidence. Their deeply ingrained insecurities manifest themselves in a variety of ways— indecisiveness, risk aversion, and the tendency to avoid conflict" (Griffin, 2008). I also have a bit of "the workaholic" (Griffin, 2008) type in me, but realize the unhealthy attributes of this behavior and try to keep it in check so that I do not miss out on the important things that life has to offer in the experiences I will gain in raising my family.

In reading from the HBR article on "Are You Picking the Right Leaders" it has driven my desire to be more than "consensus manager" or "team player" (Sorcher & Brant, 2004). These types of leaders are risk averse because of their natural tendency to please the group. They also tend to "assemble teams of people who are like themselves. Homogeneous groups often run more smoothly, but they usually lack the synergistic power of diverse team of people with talents, skills, and characteristics that complement one another." (Sorcher & Brant, 2004) Reflecting on my current team, this much at least is not true of my situation. I was partly chosen for the respect my team has for me and my deep technical abilities and given the opportunity I would not feel threatened to bring on more experienced individuals. I am not threatened by opposing thinkers. The solutions that are delivered by my team are often very complex in nature and the stakes are high. There is a high level of contention between other teams and I often mediate interactions to provide a "safe" environment to objectively consider all the ideas for their merit and creative perspective.

Recognizing that I may have been chosen for my ability to achieve consensus and my desire to be more, I agree with the statement that "exceptional leaders are willing to take risks by picking people

who are unlike them—and who may even have different leadership styles. They are also willing to take a chance on untested people if they size them up and conclude they have what it takes. Furthermore, such leaders do not feel threatened when they hire someone who is more skilled, better experienced, and smarter than they are. (Sorcher & Brant, 2004)” Realizing this, I think I can direct my development as a leader to become more of what is described as the “exceptional leader”. In addition, I think an exceptional leader has a balance of all things at his or her command. I therefore cannot underestimate the skills, traits and talents that I possess and which provided me the opportunity in the first place.

Achieving Results

As mentioned, in my current team, there are some contentious situations and I walked into a leadership opportunity which came accompanied with some baggage. I was given a situation which had been brewing for 3 years and stakes were extremely high to produce something that could justify the investment in human and software assets that were made in an effort to transform the company’s ability to deliver software solution to our business customers. The spirit of partnership between my team and one in particular was displaced by hostility. Many “big” issues had never been resolved and only buried deep in the ground. Open communication was long gone and replaced by avoidance. As a new comer to the situation it is grossly understated to say that I inherited a mess. I daily triage the battleground and uncover land mines which have to be disarmed in order to reopen the channels of communication. Obtaining trust from both teams is a delicate situation as I have to be careful not to pick any one side of a problem. In short, I felt the HBR article titled “Managing away Bad Habits” was written for me personally. I have reread it a couple times over already and envision it as a field guide to navigate the battlefield for which I have been given command.

The land mines I have uncovered so far and have yet to find are emotionally charged situations which are activated by bad habits possessed by individuals. There were six habit profiles described in all

and I can honestly say that each are present in my own habits or team members. As well, they exist with the other team I work with in diffusing the situation. They include; “the hero; the meritocrat; bulldozer; the pessimist; the rebel and the home run hitter”. Without analyzing each in detail, it will suffice to say that most opposition has been caused by an individual who has a combination of these habits. The authors of the article articulate solutions to confront the bad habits in portraying role situational examples. Through the examples I feel that the bad habits can be managed. The article is clear in saying that they cannot be cured, but they can be treated. It is important as well to assess the worth of effort that will be required and in some cases it is better to manage the person(s) away from the organization. In my own predicament, I do not think that there is anything that cannot be managed. It will provide me opportunities to grow personally in my leadership role as I confront it head on. I will need to prepare myself and go in knowing that it will agitate the wounds that have scabbed over before my arriving to the scene. I will have to overcome my aversion to risk in order to be successful.

Summary

The readings this week helped me identify my motivations for leadership and take inventory of the challenges I have faced over the past year. Better, it has provided me a path to develop myself as an exceptional leader and made me willing to take risks to improve my reach as a leader.

