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The leadership of pragmatism Reconsidering Franklin in the age of charisma

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Abstract

In recent years, our quest to understand outstanding leadership has focused on the characteristics of charismatic or transformational leaders. In this article, however, we will argue that outstanding leadership need not always involve charisma but may instead be based on a functional, problem-centered approach we refer to as a pragmatic leadership strategy. Initially, certain key propositions pertaining to the nature of pragmatic leadership are described. Subsequently, these propositions are evaluated with respect to 10 cases of noteworthy leadership evidenced by Benjamin Franklin. It is argued that pragmatic leaders, such as Franklin, exercise influence by identifying and communicating solutions to significant social problems, working through elites in solution generation, creating structures to support solution implementation, and demonstrating the feasibility of these solutions. The conditions under which this pragmatic approach can effectively be applied are discussed and contrasted with current views of the conditions calling for charismatic, transformational, and transactional leadership. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Scholars have long debated exactly what makes exceptional, outstanding leadership possible. What allowed Julius Caesar, George Washington, and Joan of Arc to exercise such profound influence on their contemporaries? Beginning with Weber's (1947) examination of notable historic leaders, students of leadership have examined the merits of using the concept of charisma (e.g., Conger & Kanungo, 1987, 1994; House, 1995; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993), or the closely related, albeit broader, concept of transformational leadership (e.g., Avolio,

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Howell, & Sosik, 1999; Bass, 1997; Burns, 1978) to account for these incidents of outstanding leadership. In fact, the evidence compiled by Howell and Avolio (1993), Lowe, Koveck, and Sivasubramaniam (1996), and Yorges, Weiss, and Strickland (1999) among others indicate that charismatic and transformational leadership can indeed account for many incidents of exceptional leadership.

Charismatic and transformational leaders provide followers with a motivating sense of identity by presenting and articulating a vision (Shamir, Zakay, Breinin, & Popper, 1998). In contrast to this rather romantic view of leadership (Abra, 1994), one might propose a more rationalistic, or functional, view. In other words, one might ask whether exceptional leadership can be based on an appeal to “interest” in the common good rather than an appeal to identity. To explore the nature of this functional approach to leadership, we will, in the present article, examine 10 cases drawn from a noted historic leader. More specifically, we will examine the leadership strategies used by Benjamin Franklin whose apparent disdain for charisma is aptly summarized by his comment in the 1754 *Poor Richard’s Almanac*: “In the affairs of this world men are saved not by faith but by want of it” (Franklin, 1754).

2. Charismatic and transformational leadership

Before proceeding to our propositions with regard to this alternative style of outstanding leadership, it might be useful to briefly review some of the central tenets of the charismatic and transformational models currently being used to account for outstanding leadership. Traditional models of leadership were, as Bass (1997) points out, based on transactional principals: an exchange of support for rewards. While useful in accounting for routine institutional leadership, these transactional models could not account for the profound impact characteristic of truly exceptional leaders. In contrast, charismatic and transformational models focus on outstanding leadership, emphasizing the need for followers to find meaning through leadership. Leaders provide followers with meaning by constructing and communicating a vision, or image, that articulates followers’ values while allowing them to express their identity through a shared collective vision. This appeal to values and identity not only motivates people to work towards an envisioned future but also serves as well to build feelings of competence and self-worth (House & Shamir, 1993; Mumford, Yammarino, & Dansereau, 2000).

Although virtually all models of outstanding leadership stress the importance of vision, different investigators make different assumptions about other kinds of actions likely to play a role in exceptional leadership (Hunt, 1991; Yukl, 1994). House (1977), in his description of charismatic leaders, emphasizes the importance of passion and self-sacrifice, displaying confidence in followers, and role modeling among other dimensions. House and Podsakoff (1994) argue that charismatic leadership involves inspirational communication, external representation, and exhibition of high expectations. Conger and Kanungo (1998) hold that charismatic leaders assess the external environment to find weaknesses in the status quo, attracting followers by presenting an appealing vision that seems radically different from the current status quo (Conger, 1999; Conger & Kanungo, 1998). In this regard, however, it is important to bear in mind a point made by Hunt, Boal, and Dodge (1999) who note that

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