

## Leadership in Public Sector: A Discussion from Theoretical and Practical Aspects

ZENG Zhihong<sup>[a],\*</sup>; CHEN Wei<sup>[b]</sup>; ZENG Xiaoying<sup>[c]</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Lecturer. School of Political Science and Public Management, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.

<sup>[b]</sup>Lecturer in School of Culture and Social Development al Studies, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.

<sup>[c]</sup>Graduate. School of Political Science and Public Management, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.

\*Corresponding author.

Received 15 March 2013; accepted 6 June 2013

### Abstract

Leadership is a critical component of good public governance (OECD, 2001). Effective leadership can bring greater efficiency and quality of service for the organization as well as the increase in personal satisfaction at work. Moreover, it can develop innovation and ability to adapt to the external environment for government. Therefore, there is a great need to improve the quality of leaders. Effective leadership is determined by both heredity and environment. This paper goes on to prove leadership in public sector can be learned from theoretical and practical aspects. As for the theoretical aspects, some innate traits, such as personality can only explain 30% of the leadership effectiveness, and even some personal traits, such as problem solving skill, expertise can be learned. Environment plays the most important role in the leadership of public sector. Emergence and leadership behaviors can contribute to leadership effectiveness. So a lot of leadership development programs, such as formal training, mentoring, and feedback can be used to cultivate leadership.

**Key words:** Leadership; Public sector; Theoretical; Practical

ZENG Zhihong, CHEN Wei, ZENG Xiaoying (2013). Leadership in Public Sector: A Discussion from Theoretical and Practical Aspects. *Canadian Social Science*, 9(4), 73-77. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/j.css.1923669720130904.2552> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.css.1923669720130904.2552>.

If leaders are born not made, and if no one can teach anyone else to improve – let's start investigating leadership in the biology lab rather than in the business world (Doh, 2003).

(Steve Stumpf, Professor, 2002, quoted in Doh, 2003, p.55).

### INTRODUCTION

Are leaders in public sector born or made? Does heredity or environment contribute more to leadership effectiveness? Does the public organization can develop leadership among civil servants? Great bodies of scholarly and practitioner research focus on those questions. To begin with, the definition of leadership in public sector will be introduced and discussed. Then, according to the definition, this paper will prove that leadership in public sector can be learned from theoretical and practical aspects. In theoretical aspect, effective leadership in public sector is shaped not only by personal traits and characteristics, but also by the situation leaders confront with and their appropriate leader behaviours and styles. In practical aspects, some practices of leadership development, such as training, leadership feedback, and mentoring program will be introduced. Finally, this paper concludes that leadership in public sector is the outcome of innate characteristics and environment, and leadership can be learned by effective developmental programs.

### 1. THE DEFINITION OF LEADERSHIP IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

In today's increasingly competitive and more complex external environment, the success of an organization is often determined by the presence of effective leaders with a broad business perspective (Elmuti, Minnis & Abebe, 2005). Rosenbach (2003) defines leadership as a process of the leader and followers engaging in reciprocal influence to achieve a shared purpose. In other words, leadership is about getting people to work together to

make things happen that might not otherwise occur, or to prevent things from happening that would ordinarily take place. How to cultivate more public officials who can draw others into high spirits of public service geared to the needs of contemporary society, and thereby provide better services to government and citizens (OECD, 2001)? Administrative leadership is the process of providing the results required by authorized processes in an efficient, effective, and legal manner; a process of developing/supporting followers who provide the results; a process of the organization's adjusting to its environment, especially to the macro-level changes necessary, and realigning the culture as appropriate (Montgomery Van Wart, 2003). So, to conclude, leadership in public sector is a group concept, a process of affecting, a power of public spirit, a movement to common goals, and a direction to organisation development.

## **2. LEADERSHIP CAN BE LEARNED ----- FROM THEORETICAL ASPECTS**

A historical review on the theoretical and empirical literature dealing with the concept of leadership reveals a variety of approaches that have developed over the years (Schmid, 2006). One of the approaches, which prevailed in the literature from 1930 to 1950, was the traits approach (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Zaccaro, 2007). This approach focused on personal attributes of leaders, assuming that leaders are born rather than made (Schmid, 2006). Kirkpatrick & Locke (1991) also argue that there are some traits that make leaders different from non-leaders, such as height, weight, and physique are heavily dependent on heredity, whereas others such as knowledge of the industry are dependent on experience and learning. Zaccaro et al. (2004) define leader's traits as relatively coherent and integrated patterns of personal characteristics, reflecting a range of individual differences that foster consistent leadership effectiveness across a variety of group and organizational situations.

## **3. INNATE CHARACTERS ARE NOT THE POINT**

The innate trait most frequently mentioned in the literatures is the personality (Andersen, 2006; De Hooghi, 2005). There are streams of researches examine the relationship between the personality and the leadership effectiveness. Andersen states (2005) that the relationship between personality traits and leader behaviour exists, as there is a relationship in general between personality and behaviour for all individuals and all professions. And De Hoogh et al. also argue (2005) that subordinates evaluations of charismatic leader behaviour can be positively related to perceived effectiveness only under dynamic work conditions. This finding is consistent with other researches that find charismatic leadership is

likely to be more effective under conditions of challenge and change (e.g., Howell & Avolio, 1993; Shamir & Howell, 1999), or under conditions of high environmental uncertainty (Waldman et al., 2001).

Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) contend that character as a leadership attribute consists of six elements: drive, desire to lead, honesty and integrity, self-confidence, cognitive ability, and knowledge of business. Zaccaro (2007) argue in his latest research that qualities which distinguish leaders from non-leaders are far ranging and include not only personality attributes but also motives, values, cognitive abilities, social and problem solving skills, and expertise. Cognitive abilities, personality and motives as well as values belong to distal attributes, while social appraisal skills, problem solving skills and expertise and tacit knowledge belong to proximal attributes (Zaccaro et al., 2004).

Plomin and Daniels (1987, p. 1, cited in Avolio, 2007) suggested that behavioural-genetics research shows that genetic differences among individuals can not explain more than half of the variance for complex traits. Many scholars agree that although there are some natural talents beneficial in leadership effectiveness, other significant aspects of knowledge, skills and abilities that make up an effective leader can be learned (Rosenbach, 2003; Doh, 2003; Connaughton et al., 2003; Avolio, 2007). Evidence from behavioural genetics leadership research suggests that 30% of the variance in leadership style and appearance can be accounted for by genetic predispositions, while the remaining variance can be attributed to non-shared environmental influences such as individuals exposed to varying opportunities for leadership development (Arvey, et al., 2006; Taggar et al., 1999). Zaccaro et al. (2006) agree with this opinion, they state that the timing of assignments, relative to emerging leader performance requirements, also will determine their efficiency in shaping the development of particular leader traits.

Actually, among the traits researches this paper has mentioned before, Kirkpatrick and Locke in 1991 have pointed out that the cognitive ability, the desire to lead and the drive is either hard to learn or difficult to judge. However, the knowledge of the industry and self-confidence can be developed through experience and training, and honesty is also something can change in the formal organizational culture (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). Day (2000) and Zaccaro et al. also show (2006) that proximal attributes are more flexible and susceptible to continuous and systematic intervention.

## **4. SITUATION PLAYS A ROLE IN LEADERSHIP EMERGENCE**

It seems reasonable to suggest that traits interact with the situation and, therefore, that the relationship between one's traits and leadership emergence will vary as a

consequence of the nature of the situation (Avolio, 2005; Vroom & Jago, 2007). In contrast with the little empirical evidence relate leadership emergence with individual dispositions leaders, there are certain types of events can trigger leadership emergence and cultivate its development (Avolio, 2005; Avolio et al., 2004). For example, Banmrand shows (1991) that children who were exposed to an authoritarian parenting style and were shown later in life to have higher achievement orientation, self-confidence, internal locus of control, and self-efficacy. In sum of many leadership literatures, there appears to be some consensus that not all traits are fixed with regard to their impact on leadership development, emergence, and success (Avolio, 2005). Moreover, traits themselves may evolve over time and change depending on the dynamic exchange between the leader, follower, and environment (Avolio, 2005; Vroom & Jago, 2007; Zaccaro, 2007). So, traits, including the innate characteristics, such as personality, cognitive ability, are not either/or but a matter of degree in shaping leadership effectiveness, emergence, and development (Avolio, 2005).

Leadership was assumed to be a general personal trait independent of the context in which the leadership was performed (Vroom & Jago, 2007). Many years ago, Cronbach (1957, cited in Vroom & Jago, 2007) identified two distinct disciplines of psychology. One of these, represented by experimental and social psychology, was concerned with the effects of external events on behaviour. The second was concerned with measurement of individual differences. Neither discipline was capable of explaining behaviour by itself. People, including leaders, are affected by their environment as well as by fairly stable characteristics that predispose them to certain kinds of behaviour.

In all, leadership is potentially influenced not only by the leaders' dispositions but also by the situations that leaders confront. For example, leadership skills and expertise are likely to be more closely bound and constrained by situational requirements, especially in crisis. Individuals with particular kinds of skills and expertise can, indeed, be leaders in one situation but not in others that require very different knowledge and technical skill sets (Dubrin, 2007). So, leadership's emergence is the outcome of certain traits and situation.

So, from the theoretical aspects, leadership in public sector can be learned. First, although some personal traits are quite difficult to change, proximal traits of leaders, such as problem-solving skills and social-appraisal skill can be learned; Second, the significance of leadership appearance depends on the environmental factors, in which individuals can cultivate the appropriate behaviours and demanding ability of leadership.

However, if leadership can be learned, how could it be learned in the practices? The following paper will discuss leadership learning process from practical perspective.

## 5. LEADERSHIP CAN BE LEARNED ----- FROM PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVE

Traits theory and situation theory besides, there is another theory ----- leadership behaviour or leadership style theory which is broadly applied in leadership development programs (Arvonen & Ekvall, 1999). One of the popular streams in behaviour theory is universality theory (Avolio, 2007; Vroom & Jago, 2007). The spokesmen of this theory describe leadership behaviour in the two broad dimensions emanating from Ohio and Michigan leadership research programs; orientation towards employees and relations and towards production, task and structure (Arvonen & Ekvall, 1999). The standpoint of the universality theories is that the leaders who are high in both relation and task-orientation are effective (Vroom & Jago, 2007). This theory also argues that leaders' personal traits can not explain leadership effectiveness, and appropriate leader behaviour, such as leadership style which are suitable in the situation; they can also determine leadership effectiveness (Avolio, 2007). So, according to this theory, some behaviours of leaders which are vital for leadership effectiveness can be learned by leadership development programs.

Also, Jay Conger, a professor in the London Business School points out the leadership mainly comprises of three elements: skills, perspectives, and dispositions (Doh, 2003). According to him, leadership education can possibly help teach important leadership skills and perhaps perspectives like effective oral and written communicational skills (Doh, 2003). Furthermore, the survey results from over 500 senior learning professionals indicate that leadership and development are among the top training priorities among U.S. profitable or non-profitable governmental organizations, with the need for experienced managers increasingly recognized as urgent (Hall, 2005). This is why Academic units are all interested in leadership development programs.

However, there are many studies find that some aspects of leadership are part of innate qualities and hence cannot be effectively acquired through formal teaching (Doh, 2003). For example, some tacit dimensions of leadership involve different processes to gain commitment to a strategy and vision, or the ability of empowering employees by building relationships and demonstrating confidence with humility that can never be effectively addressed by formal classroom training (Elmuti, Minnis & Abebe, 2005). While Doh (2003) and Gosling and Mintzberg (2004) state that this kind of leadership development can be acquired only through practical experiences like case studies and job training. Taggar et al. argue that (1999) cognitive ability is often regarded as a skill (something that has been acquired) rather than a personality (inborn) trait in leadership research. Furthermore, most educators agreed that individual personality traits provided at least part of the basis upon which leadership skills are built, and such characteristics reach stability by adolescence (Doh, 2003).

Most educators of leadership development programs have similar perspectives on what they think as major ingredients of an effective leadership education (Elmuti, Minnis & Abebe, 2005). They suggest particular skills that can be well taught in order to cultivate potential leaders. A program that is highly practical and uses techniques such as coaching, training and mentoring is likely to be effective leadership education (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2004; Blass & Ferris, 2007). Others believe that skills such as analytical, communication (both oral and written), and problem-solving can be successfully developed in a formal leadership training (Allio, 2005; Elmuti, Minnis & Abebe, 2005). Political skill is shaped by mentoring and contextual learning experiences, which, in turn, affect the flexibility needed for making favourable impressions on others, adaptation, and fit (Blass & Ferris, 2007).

Dubrin states (2007) that through effective education, experience and mentoring, combined with feedback and evaluation, leadership can be developed. His opinion was consistent with that of Elmuti et al. (2005), and they demonstrate that in the dynamic business environment, a multi-stage model built on the fundamental knowledge and skills to develop more relevant leadership skills such as conceptual, interpersonal and practical skills should be used. So, they put much emphasis on coaching, mentoring and on-the-job training as tools for leadership development (2005). Furthermore, effective leadership development programs should not only includes practical business skills, but also involves in-depth training on inter-personal and conceptual skills (Elmuti et al., 2005). Students need to be well prepared to be transformational leaders that can effectively deliver the vision and mission to their followers in an organization (Stone et al., 2004). In addition, leadership education should particularly integrate ethical education in every facet of the training process and a global perspective should be adopted in leadership education (Elmuti et al., 2005).

Allio argues (2005) there are three essential steps for effective leadership development programs: to select the right candidates, which is also supported by Sansone and Schreiber-Abshire (2006), to create learning challenges, and to provide mentoring. Evidence suggests that the most effective leadership programs will focus on building self-knowledge and skills in rhetoric and critical thinking (Allio, 2005).

## CONCLUSION

So, leadership in public sector is neither born nor learned. The most sensible answer is that the traits, ability, motives, and characteristics required by leadership effectiveness are caused by a combination of heredity and environment (Dubrin, 2007). Although there are some useful innate attributes that are easily associated with leaders, they can not explain why he is a leader in this situation but not a leader in that situation, and they can only account for the small part of different personal

behaviours. So, this paper states that the situation or environment plays an even more important role in the emergence and formulation of leadership. Furthermore, a part of leadership qualities can be successfully acquired (Rosenbach, 2003; Doh, 2003; Connaughton et al., 2003), such as the expertise knowledge, the skill for communication and self-control. So, leadership is partly innate, partly learned. This paper finally discusses many useful ways for leadership development in contemporary leadership literature, such as careful selection, on-the-job training, mentoring program, and effective feedback. All in all, leadership is the combination of innate and learned characteristics; environment and leadership development program both play very important roles in the formation of effective leadership ability and behaviour.

## REFERENCES

- Allio, R. J. (2005). Leadership development: Teaching versus learning. *Management Decision*, 43(7/8), 1071-1077.
- Andersen, J. A. (2006). Leadership, personality and effectiveness. *The Journal of Socio-Economics*, 35(6), 1078-1091.
- Arvey, R. D., Rotundo, M., Johnson, W., Zhang, Z., & McGue, M. (2006). The determinants of leadership role occupancy: Genetic and personality factors. *Leadership Quarterly*, 17(1), 1-20.
- Arvonen, J., & Ekvall, G. (1999). Effective leadership style: Both universal and contingent. *Creativity and Innovation Management*, 8(4), 242-251.
- Avolio, B. J. (2005). *Leadership development in balance: Made/born*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc..
- Avolio, B. J. (2007). Promoting more integrative strategies for leadership theory-building. *American Psychologist*, 62(1), 25-33.
- Avolio, B. J., Gardner, W. L., Walumbwa, F. O., Luthans, F., & May, D. R. (2004). Unlocking the mask: A look at the process by which authentic leaders impact follower attitudes and behaviors. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 15(6), 801-823.
- Bass, B. M. (1995). Concepts of leadership. In Pierce, J. L. & Newstrom, J. W. (Eds.). *Leaders & the leadership process: Readings, self-assessments & applications*. Homewood, IL: Austen Press.
- Baumrind, D. (1991). The influence of parenting style on adolescent competence and substance use. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 11(1), 56-95. DOI:10.1177/0272431691111004
- Blass, F. R., & Ferris, G. R. (2007). Leader reputation: The role of mentoring, political skill, contextual learning, and adaptation. *Human Resource Management*, 46(1), 5-19. DOI:10.1002/hrm.20142
- Connaughton, S., Lawrence, F., & Ruben, B. (2003). Leadership development as a systematic and multidisciplinary enterprise. *Journal of Education for Business*, 79(1), 46-51.
- Day, D. V. (2000). Leadership development: A review in context. *Leadership Quarterly*, 11(4), 581-613. DOI:10.1016/S1048-9843(00)00061-8

- De Hooghi, A. H. B., Den Hartog, D. N., & Koopman, P. L. (2005). Linking the big five-factors of personality to charismatic and transactional leadership; perceived dynamic work environment as a moderator. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 26(7), 839-865.
- Doh, J. P. (2003). Can leadership be taught? Perspectives from management educators. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 2(1), 54-67. DOI:10.5465/AMLE.2003.9324025
- Dubrin, A. J. (2007). *Leadership: Research finding, practice, and skills* (5th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Elmuti, D., Minnis, W., & Abebe, M. (2005). Does education have a role in developing leadership skills? *Management Decision*, 43(7/8), 1018-1031. DOI:10.1108/00251740510610017
- Gibson, J. L., Donnelly, J. H. Jr., Ivancevich, J. M., & Konopaske, R. (2003). *Organizations: Behavior, structure and processes*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill/Irwin.
- Gosling, J., & Mintzberg, H. (2004). The education of practicing managers. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 45(4), 19-22.
- Hall, B. (2005). The top training priorities for 2005. *Training*, 42(2), 23-29.
- Howell, J. M., & Avolio, B. J. (1993). Transformational leadership, transactional leadership, locus of control, and support for innovation: Key predictors of consolidated-business-unit performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 78(6), 891-902. DOI:10.1037//0021-9010.78.6.891
- Kochan, T. A. (2002). Addressing the crisis in confidence in corporations: Root causes, victims, and strategies for reform. *The Executive*, 16(3), 139-141.
- Kirkpatrick, S. A., & Locke, E. A. (1991). Leadership: Do traits matter? *Academy of Management Executive*, 5(2), 48-60.
- OECD. (2011). *Public sector leadership for the 21st century*. DOI:10.1787/9789264195035-en
- Rosenbach, W. (2003). The essence of leadership. *New Zealand Management*, 50(3), 18-20.
- Sansone, C., & Schreiber-Abshire, W. (2006). A rare and valued asset: Developing leaders for research, scientific, technology and engineering organizations. *Organization Development Journal*, 24(3), 33-43.
- Schmid, H. (2006). Leadership styles and leadership change in human & community service organizations. *Non-Profit Management and Leadership*, 17(2), 179-194. DOI:10.1002/nml.142
- Shamir, B., & Howell, J. M. (1999). Organizational and contextual influences on the emergence and effectiveness of charismatic leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 10(2), 257-283.
- Stone, A. G., Russell, R. F. & Patterson, K. (2004). Transformational versus servant leadership: A difference in leader focus. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 25(4), 349-361. DOI:10.1108/01437730410538671
- Taggar, S., Hackett, R., & Saha, S. (1999). Leadership emergence in autonomous work teams: Antecedents and outcomes. *Personnel Psychology*, 52(4), 899-926.
- Vroom, V. H., & Jago, A. G. (2007). The role of the situation in leadership. *American Psychologist*, 62(1), 17-24.
- Zaccaro, S. J. (2007). Trait-based perspectives of leadership. *American Psychologist*, 62(1), 6-16. DOI:10.1037/10003-066X.62.1.6
- Zaccaro, S. J., Kemp, C., & Bader, P. (2004). Leader traits and attributes. In Antonakis, J., Cianciolo, A. T., & Sternberg, R. J. (Eds.), *The nature of leadership* (pp.101-124). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Zaccaro, S. J., Wood, G., & Herman, J. (2006). Developing the adaptive and global leader: HRM strategies within a career-long perspective. In Burke, R. J., & Cooper, C. L. (Eds.), *The human resources revolution: Why putting people first matters* (pp.277-302). Amsterdam: Elsevier.