SKILLS APROACH TO LEADRESHIP

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ABSTRACT

The skills leadership theory defines effective leadership with a set of skills, instead of personality traits. It discusses leadership from the leader-centered perspective. It stresses on the abilities and skills that can be inculcated and developed rather than the innate personality traits that are generally fixed. Though personality traits are an integral part of leadership, but the requirement of abilities and knowledge to make leadership effective is stressed by the Skills Approach.

INTRODUCTION

For many past years, leadership skills are studied directly or indirectly by many researchers (see Bass, 1990, pp. 97–109). "Skills of an Effective Administrator.", written by Robert Katz, an outstanding article published in 1955 Harvard business review was the main inspiration for research on skills. His approach of professing leadership as being a developable skill was a venture to surpass the trait problem. The interest in this approach has re-energised recently. A series of researches have been published, starting from the 1990s, that validates that the ability of a leader to give solutions to difficult organizational problems decides his or her effectiveness. These researches resulted in an extensive leadership model based on skills.

This article discusses the skills approach by dividing it into two parts. The first part discusses the basic ideas given by Katz on the three main administrative skills: human, technical and conceptual. And in the second part, the organizational leadership model based on skills is discussed, which was a result of Mumford and his colleagues' work.

THREE-SKILL APPROACH

Based on his direct observations of executives working in the organizations and various field researches in administration, Katz (1955) proposed that three main personal skills affect the effectiveness of administration (i.e. leadership). **These skills are conceptual, human and technical**. He stressed that the traits or qualities of the leaders are very different from these skills. Traits are the innate qualities of the leaders, i.e. who they are, but skills the things which they can achieve.

 Leadership can be defined as the ability to use one's knowledge and competencies to accomplish a set of goals or objectives. This chapter illustrated that the skills to lead can be acquired and training can be given to the leaders to develop the necessary skills.

TECHNICAL SKILL

The expertise and knowledge about a specific or a particular activity of work is called the technical skill. It comprises of the proficiency in a specialized or technical field, ability to analyze and using proper techniques and tools (Katz, 1955). For example, knowledge about programming, software language, various software products available and their application for the clients are the technical skills required to work in a computer software organization. To produce the main product for which the company is designed, technical skills play a very important role.

Technical competencies don't carry much importance for higher level leaders like presidents, senior officers, CEOs etc. To solve the technical issues arising in the physical operations, higher level leaders have to depend on the followers who are skilled to handle them.

HUMAN SKILL

The ability and the understanding of how to work with people is called the human skill. It is quite different from technical skill, which has to do with working with things (Katz, 1955)." People skills" can be considered as the other name of human skill. Human skills form the ability of a leader to achieve the organizational goals with the help of his or her peers, superiors or followers. They help the leader to facilitate the followers to achieve the common goals by working in cooperation with each other. Katz is of the opinion that it is to be aware about other's perspective about an issue as well as being aware of your own perspective about the same. Adapting one's own ideas to the ideas of other people is the human skill possessed by the leaders. To add to this, an environment full of trust to make the employees feel secure and comfortable along with getting encouragement to become a part of the planning of goals which they are the stake holders of is created by the leaders. A human skills leader need s to be sensitive to the desires and motivation of his group members and while making decisions should keep them in his mind. To sum it up, the capability to take all people together while accomplishing the task is all that human skill is about.

CONCEPTUAL SKILL

The capability to work with concepts and ideas is called conceptual skills. Unlike technical skills which are related to things and human skills which are related to people, conceptual skills are related to the capability to work with various ideas. A leader is said to possess conceptual skills if he or she is able to talk about or explain his ideas well that develop an organization and deal with various complexities involved. The capability to articulate the goals of the company and comprehending and expressing the economic principles which may affect the company are the conceptual skills required by the leader. Conceptual skills make it easy for the leader to work with abstract and hypothetical conceptions.

Conceptual skills play a key role in developing a clear imaginative perspective and a well thought and calculated plan for the organization. For example, to change a unprofitable manufacturing unit into a profitable venture, the CEO will have to use his or her conceptual skills to word out his or her ideas and perspective about the series of new products to be launched to increase profits. In the same way, for a non-profit health organization with scarce resources to continue to stand successfully in the market along with the profit-making health organizations, its director needs to utilize his or her conceptual skills to plan everything strategically. Both these examples illustrate that the conceptual skills are related to the mental abilities to formulate the policy or organizational issues like comprehending the ideology of the organization, where is it standing currently and where should it be reaching in future.

Source: https://sites.google.com/site/bus25001leadershipapproaches/skills-approach
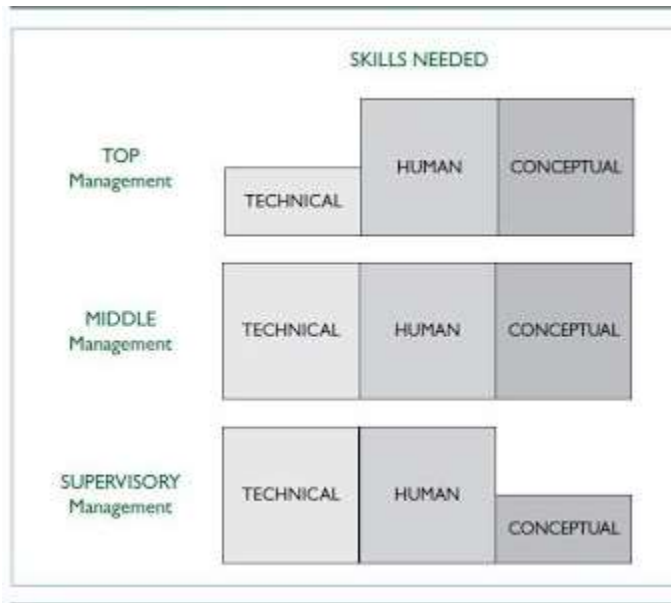
organization can be a complete failure in the absence of the conceptual skills in the upper managerial levels. These skills are equally important in middle management. The importance of conceptual skills keeps decreasing as we go to the lower levels.

SUMMARY OF THE THREE-SKILL APPROACH

To sum it up, the Skill Approach includes all three – technical skills, human skills and conceptual skills. The leaders should possess all the three skills; based on their position in the managerial structure, however, the importance of one skill may differ than the other.

The concept of skill-based leadership was a result of Katz's work done in the mid-1950s; however, the pragmatic skills approach got its due recognition in leadership approach only by mid-90s. the next part, the comprehensive skill-based model of leadership is discussed.

SKILLS MODEL

The skill-based model of the leadership was formulated by Mumford and colleagues on the basis of the detailed findings of their private project. The model is characterized as a capability model because it examines the relationship between a leader's knowledge and skills (i.e., capabilities) and the leader's performance (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, et al., 2000). Experience and education can help develop the leadership capabilities with time. As opposed to the "great man" approach which states that only specific people who are gifted can become leaders, the Skill Approach advocated that many people have the capability of becoming a leader. Leadership can be acquired by the ability to learn from one's past experiences. The skills approach can also be different from the leadership approaches. This will be discussed in the following chapters where more light will be thrown on the behavioral pattern of leaders (e.g., the style approach, transformational leadership, or leader–member exchange theory).instead of stressing on what leaders do, the skills approach shapes leadership as the capabilities (knowledge and skills) that make effective leadership possible (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, et al., 2000).

There are five components of Mumford's skill-based model:
1. Competencies
2. Individual attributes
3. Leadership outcomes
4. Career experiences

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5. Environmental influence.

Competencies
Problem solving skills, knowledge and the social judgement skills are the integral or main part of the skill model.
Problem-Solving Skills: what skills can be called problem solving skills? According to Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, et al. (2000), problem-solving skills are a leader's creative ability to solve new and unusual, ill-defined organizational problems. These skills comprise of the ability to define the main problem, gather information about the problem, developing new perspective about the problem and generating problem solving prototype plans of solutions. These skills are applied in the context of the whole organization and do not work in isolation. (Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, & Marks, 2000) Problem-solving skills demand that leaders understand their own leadership capacities as they apply possible solutions to the unique problems in their organization.

Ability to formulate solutions plays a very important role in problem solving. While formulating the solutions to the organizational problems, the leaders need to keep the following in mind: time period for formulating and implementing a solution, goals both short and long term, organizational and career goals, and all external issues which can influence the solution.

Social Judgment Skills: Social judgement skills are another requisite in addition to the problem-solving skills for a leader to be effective. In general, social judgment skills are the capacity to understand people and social systems (Zaccaro, Mumford, Connelly, Marks, & Gilbert, 2000). These skills help the leaders to solve problems along with working with others and to arrange support to bring about necessary changes in the company. Social judgement skills are the skills of the people which are important to solve specific problems related to the organization.

Katz's (1955) early work related to function of human skills in managing is very similar to the concept of social judgement skills. As opposed to Katz's work, Mumford and colleagues divides social judgement into the following
1. Perspective taking
2. Social perspectiveness
3. Behavioural flexibility
4. Social performance.

SUMMARY OF THE SKILLS MODEL
To summarize, the five components of the performance of leader are explained to shape leadership in the skills model. The three competencies: problem-solving skills, social judgment skills, and knowledge, form the heart of the model. All the three competencies are the key determinants of the performance and success rate of problem solving, though, individual attributes like environmental influences and career experiences also affect the leader's competency. The effectiveness of leaders can be enhanced and make them better leaders by job experiences gained and trainings.

How Does the Skills Approach work?
The skills approach is primarily descriptive: in this leadership is described from the skills perspective. The skills approach gives a framework to comprehend the essence of effective leadership instead of only being prescriptive about being successful in leadership. The work of Katz (1955) and Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, et al. (2000) explain the prescriptive base of the skills in the previous section of this chapter. What are the things suggested about the function and structure of leadership by each of these bodies?

As suggested by Katz in the three skills approach, the position of the leader in the management hierarchy affects the importance of different skills required in leadership. Human and technical skills are more important for leaders at lower managerial levels. Having all three skills: conceptual, technical and human becomes important for a leader as he or she progresses to the middle level of management. Exhibiting the human and conceptual skills become essential for the upper managerial leaders.

Strengths

The skills approach facilitates are understanding of leadership in a positively in many ways.

First, it focusses on enhancing specific leadership skill this making it leader specific. Skills approach is the first approach to conceive and design a framework of leadership process based on skills. Although all the researches done in the past stressed on the value and importance of skills according to the position of a leader in the managerial hierarchy, the recent researches made learned skills as key for effective leadership across all managerial levels.

Second, this approach is naturally alluring. The availability of leadership increases for everyone assist explained in terms of skills. As opposed to personality traits, the competencies which can be learned or developed by people are skills. It is like playing some sports like basketball or cricket. Practice and following instructions these games can be improved even if a person don't have the natural capability to play them. This stands true in case of leadership too. Shaping leadership as a set or structure of skills, makes it a process which people can use to enhance their job performance by studying and practicing it.

Third, the skills approach gives a wide view of leadership which includes a huge variety of components like social judgment skills, career experiences, problem-solving skills, knowledge, environmental influences and individual attributes. There are several subcomponents of each of these components. An illustration of leadership that includes a variety of factors is the outcome of this approach. Unlike other approaches, many complexities and intricacies of the leadership are captured by skills approach as it includes many variables.

Last, the framework provided by the Skills Approach is highly compatible with the curriculum of almost all leadership education programmes. Creative problem solving, teamwork, listening, conflict resolution etc are taught traditionally to classes in leadership education programme throughout the country. Many components of the skills model are exactly similar to the content of such classes. Evidently, the framework of skills approach facilitates the designing the curriculum of leadership development and education programmes.

Criticisms

The skills approach also has some weakness as all others approaches of leadership have. First, it looks that the skills approach crosses the boundaries of leadership. For example, skills approach talks about more than just leadership as it includes critical thinking, motivation conflict resolution and personality. The other example which shows it breadth is, that it includes two types of intelligence (i.e. crystalized cognitive ability and general cognitive ability). Both areas are rarely discussed in the leadership researches inspite of being studied widely. This model given by Mumford and others becomes more generalistic than being precise in discussing leadership as it includes a wide variety of components.

Second, similar to the first weakness, this model's predictiveness is weak. The impact of variation in problem solving skills and social judgement on performance is not specifically discussed in this model. It advocates that these aspects are related, but do not describe that how it works precisely. To summarize, the model can be criticized as the how effective leadership performance is led by skills is not described by it.

To add to this, another criticism of skills model is that it cannot be said to be a trait model even when the individual attributes similar to trait form the major component of this model. Factors like motivation, cognitive abilities and personality are described to be enhancing competencies by Mumford and colleagues, but these factors can also be taken as trait variables. The point of consideration is that trait drives the individual attributes of the model, which drifts the model apart from being completely skills approach to leadership.

The last criticism of the approach is it might not be applied to other aspects of leadership in a very suitable or appropriate way. This model was designed by studying a huge group of military personnel and observing their performance in the armed services. This gives rise to a very obvious question: Are the findings true for other organizations or population? Some researches support that the derivatives of the study done on army personnel can be generalised to other groups too (Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, et al., 2000), however, more research work is required to support and validate this criticism.

Application

Although theorists and academics are appealed by the skills approach, but it has limited application in the leadership settings. For example, leadership skills cannot be taught to people through this approach as there is no specific programme framed to do so. Though, there are many packages framed to train the people about the leadership skills from a general self- help point of view.

Skills Approach gives important information about leadership, which can be used by leaders at all different levels of management.

SUMMARY

The skills approach is leader- centric stressing upon the competencies of leaders, best represented in the early work of Katz (1955) through a three-skill approach of Mumford and his colleagues (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, et al., 2000). Here, efficient leadership depends on three personal skills:

Technical,
Human, and
Conceptual

Also, each skill set varies for different management levels. At lower management levels, technical and human skills are foremost. For mid level, all three are equally important while for upper management levels, conceptual and human skills is foremost while technical skills are less important. Here, the model represented five elements for efficient leader performance:

Competencies,
Individual properties,
Leadership results,
Vocation experiences, and
Environmental determines.

The leader competencies hold problem- solving skills, social assessment skills, and knowledge directly affected by the leader's individual attributes, including leader's cosmopolitan cognitive ability, crystallized cognitive ability, motivation, and personality. These are also affected by career experiences and environment. While the effective problem-solving capability and performance can be explained by leader's competencies and which in turn are affected by the leader's attributes, experience, and environment.

There are several capabilities in conceiving leadership from a skills perspective such as being a leader- centered model, describing leadership in a way that it makes it available to everyone, furnishing an advanced map to explain efficient leadership performance, and providing a structure for leadership education and development programs with creative problem solving skills, conflict resolution, listening, and teamwork. Also, there are also negative facets to the skills approach such as these are extended beyond the boundaries of leadership, dispute management, decisive, motivation theory, and personality theory. Also, it is weak in predictive value and claims to be a non- trait approach with weakness in general application. Until the model is tested with other populations, and businesses, its basic policies must be kept in question.

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