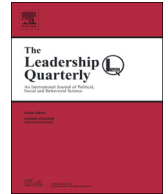




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Leadership Quarterly

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/leaqua

Adding dynamics to a static theory: How leader traits evolve and how they are expressed

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 April 2014

Received in revised form 30 August 2014

Accepted 2 October 2014

Available online xxxx

Editor: Chet. Schriesheim

Keywords:

Leader trait

Trait evolution

Trait expression

Trait activation

ABSTRACT

Leader's traits evolve over time and are expressed differently under different situations. To capture both the evolution and expression of leader traits, we propose a dynamic model. We argue that the evolution of traits consists of changes in intensity and nature. Based on data on five publicly acknowledged Chinese leaders collected from various sources, we identified three patterns (homological, converse, and composite) by which leader traits evolve. We also discovered that leader's traits can be intrinsic or extrinsic. The intrinsic traits change in intensity; whereas the extrinsic traits are replaced by other traits over time. Factors influencing these changes include both internal (e.g., leaders' own learning and introspection) and external (e.g., major social events and subtle cultural influences). The results of our study show that the traits leaders demonstrated under specific situations are composite in nature, which also supports the notion that traits evolve. Based on our finding, we generated a few propositions for future empirical studies.

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Introduction

Studies on leader traits – general characteristics distinguishing leaders from non-leaders or from ineffective leaders – can be traced back to 1869 when Galton stated that leader's traits were inherited and unchangeable (Galton, 1869; Zaccaro, 2007). In the decades that followed, most people believed great leaders were born, not made. When it became obvious that some traits could be learned (Funder, 1991), researchers started to look into behaviors and later into situational factors that affected leadership effectiveness and results showed that any effect of traits on leadership behaviors depended on the situation (e.g., Diener, Larsen, & Emmons, 1984; Kenrick & Funder, 1988; Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992). Nevertheless, to this day, there are still researchers believing that leader's traits are stable (e.g., Garzia, 2011; Zaccaro, 2007; Zaccaro, Kemp, & Bader, 2004).

Trait activation theory, which focuses on the person–situation interaction, argues that people behave in response to trait-relevant cues (Tett & Guterman, 2000) and leaders react (consciously and sub-consciously) and express suitable traits according to different situations to secure leadership effectiveness. As Tett and Guterman (2000, p. 398) explained, people high on aggression “do not always behave aggressively; they do so only in certain situations”. However, studies that use trait activation theory do not explicitly link specific types of traits with particular situations, offering little knowledge on how leaders express their traits based on trait-relevant situations (Kenrick & Funder, 1988). Therefore, despite the numerous studies on or involving leaders' traits, to this day, it is still unclear which types of traits are likely to be activated and which transcend situations.

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According to the theory of evolution, characteristics of all species arise through a process of mutation and selection in their development (Judge, Piccolo, & Kosalka, 2009; Scarr, 1992). We believe this is also true with leaders' traits, as evidenced by the research on trait development in psychology literature. According to Kogan (1990), there are three main approaches to the study of trait development. The first approach is the five-factor personality theory that argues that traits develop and reach maturity in adulthood and then remain stable (McCrae & Costa, 1999). This perspective believes that traits are governed by temperament or genetic factors and are impervious to the influence of the environment. The second approach emphasizes the influence of the environmental contingencies on the development of traits across the life span (e.g., Brim, 1965). It focuses on micro-analytic social-cognitive units defined as contextual constructs, such as social skills, competencies, and personal goals (e.g., Zelli & Dodge, 1999), but ignores the initiatives people take. The third approach emphasizes the interaction between traits and contexts across the life course (e.g., Levinson, 1978). "People are open systems and they exhibit both continuity and change in personality throughout the life course" (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006, p. 3). Under this approach, adaptation is the primary focus (Baltes, 1997; Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 1998) and the development of an individual is an interaction between the person and the external environment (Erikson, 1968; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Levinson, 1978). The last approach inspires us to examine how leaders' traits interact with the environment, and how they evolve over time.

Fortunately, many psychologists (e.g., McGue, Bacon, & Lykken, 1993; Roberts & Mroczek, 2008; Roberts et al., 2006; Robins, Fraley, Roberts, & Trzesniewski, 2001) are supportive of the third approach. They argue that the developmental change processes of traits are a combination of inner psychological processes and external social and cultural forces. While those studies show us the effect of idiosyncratic life events on one's traits, they do not help us identify the patterns of trait evolution.

We agree that traits evolve over time. They can become stronger (judged by the frequency they appeared in the qualitative data we analyzed: higher frequency indicates the particular trait becoming more distinctive) or weaker (the opposite tendency), or turn into a different one (change in nature). For example, a leader who used to be very powerful may become gentle later as a result of a major event or some unusual experiences; vice versa, a gentle leader may also change into an autocratic dictator in due time. With the evolution of traits being a key to leader emergence (Judge et al., 2009; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991) and trait expression as a key to leadership effectiveness (Tett & Guterman, 2000), adding dynamics to the static trait theory or adding the dynamic approach to the study of traits development will enable us to understand how leader traits evolve over time and how they are expressed in different situations. The dynamic approach will also help us examine the relationship between evolution and expression of leader traits, which has not been touched by the previous studies.

There are three perspectives in the dynamic approach: longitudinal, situational and progressive. The longitudinal perspective, observing the same phenomenon over a long period of time (Babbie, 1992), looks at the lifespan of the leader. For example, Avolio and Gibbons (1988) took a lifespan perspective to study the development of transformational leadership, but there has been limited follow-up research over leaders' lifespan (Murphy & Johnson, 2011). The situational perspective takes into consideration the situation that activates certain types of leader traits and explains behaviors on the basis of responses to trait-relevant cues found in situations (Tett & Guterman, 2000). Trait activation theory supports the examination of the effect of situational factors on leader traits, while the progressive perspective looks at the mechanisms guiding the process (e.g., Choi & Mai-Dalton, 1998; Dinh & Lord, 2012; Turner, 1993).

Table 1

Examples of definitions in the literature.

Word	Examples of definition/author/year
Trait	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. An individual's general characteristics including capacities, motives, or patterns of behavior (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991) 2. A variety of individual attributes, including aspects of personality, temperament, needs, motives and values (Yukl, 2010, p. 43) 3. Habitual patterns of behavior, thought, and emotion (Kassin, 2003), which are (i) relatively stable over time, (ii) different among individuals, and (iii) influence behavior (Garzia, 2011) 4. Relatively stable and coherent integrations of personal characteristics that foster a consistent pattern of leadership performance across a variety of group and organizational situations (Zaccaro et al., 2004)
Characteristic	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. An indemonstrable force or what others have referred to as core eternal principles (Emerson, 1904, cited in Hunter, 2000) 2. A transcendent, metaphysical quality (Emerson, 1904; James, 1920) 3. Character could best be considered as those particular mental and moral attitudes that leave us feeling most deeply and intensely vibrant and alive (James, 1920) 4. Character of a leader involves his or her ethical and moral beliefs, intentions and behaviors (Bass & Bass, 2008). 5. A disposition or trait, a way of thinking, being guided by a set of rules or principles, and a behavior or action (Hannah, Avolio, & May, 2011) 6. The locus of leader character represents internal aspects of the leader such as his or her personality, values, moral reasoning and identity (Eberly, Johnson, Hernandez & Avolio, 2010; Lord, Hannah, & Jennings, 2011). 7. ...being integrated within a leader's identity and therefore differentiated across a complex identity structure that is developed across a leader's life-span as the leader interacts and learns from assuming various social roles (Hannah et al., 2011)
Attribute	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No exact definition about attribute was found, but papers studying general attributes, such as self-esteem and narcissism, which are identical to leader traits, are included in the table.
Personality	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A particular combination of emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral response patterns of an individual (Margets, John, Reissfelder & Hale, 2011) 2. ...has five dimensions, e.g., extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness (Barrick & Mount, 1991; John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991)

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