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Reflections on leadership, authority, and lessons learned

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Introduction

Over the course of many years Boas often wrote notes to himself concerning leadership. Like a photographer who captures the moment, Boas documented moments that caused him to reflect broadly and insightfully upon issues related to leadership. He wrote these notes as they occurred to him, whatever the time or place, with great precision and with whatever means that were at hand—whether computer, paper, or bits of paper—and he conscientiously saved all of these notes. It is evident that Boas used some of these notes as outlines for scholarly articles and for lectures, while the rest are testimony to a life's work dedicated to the study of leadership. At their core, Boas's notes capture a scholar and a man thinking deeply about his profession and his life in complete freedom.

The notes, with minor corrections for typographical errors, are brought here without revision or an attempt to analyze them. The selections from Boas's notes are organized under topic headings. It is hoped that the notes will give readers a “behind the scenes” look at the work methods and the ways of thinking of Boas Shamir, and that through them Boas's authentic voice will sound clearly.

This article contains three sections:

- 1) Notes on the field of leadership studies, including Boas's comparison between old leadership paradigms and post-modern ones.
- 2) Notes that depict what Boas calls “starting points” for his future work. Boas argues here for a reconsideration of the place of hierarchy and formal authority in leadership.
- 3) Notes where Boas considers various events in his life and what can be learned from them—what Boas calls “Leadership Lessons.”

1: On leadership studies

[Ever since 2012, Boas's notes are filled with a broad view of leadership studies. Below is what he calls an “overgeneralized” summary of his survey of “old” and “new” approaches to leadership, followed by some additional observations.]

Old and new approaches

- Older models of leadership in organizations distinguished between leaders and followers. This distinction was based on a hierarchy of influence.

Newer models do not use this distinction—some actively reject it.

- Older models relied on the social psychology of groups

Newer models (with the exception of shared leadership in teams) do not.

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- Older models focused on results at the individual level (e.g., motivation, commitment, trust, identification, satisfaction) and saw organizational-level results as stemming from the individual-level results.

Newer models directly focus on system-level results: integration, innovation, and adaptation.
The psychological side of leadership is abandoned.

- Older models were based on certain assumptions about why constituents (followers) need leadership and why they follow leaders.

Newer models either ignore constituents' needs and expectations or implicitly assume they have changed (if they have not changed, traditional leadership processes may interfere with the newly suggested models).

- Older models were called “new Leadership theories” 20 years ago.

“What counts as leadership?”

The term “leadership” has lost much of its distinctiveness and it has been weakened both in research and in application.

I think that the distinction between leadership and non-leadership is important for any useful theory of leadership; otherwise I would not know how to identify leadership or even why it's necessary or worthwhile to investigate it. We would lose the phenomenon that we want to understand.

To ask the question “what counts as leadership” means to go back to the starting point—only thus can it be possible to conduct a dialogue with new approaches and new applications.

I want to uncover new sources that deal with leadership, in research and in practice. And these can guide our thinking in research and in application and represent an intellectual challenge. All of this must be done so that we do not continue to do “more of the same.”

I have been working in leadership studies for more than 20 years, and the more I learn the less I know.

I am a party to the dissatisfaction with conventional theories of leadership and with conventional research into leadership. I am thirsty for new approaches and new applications.

Observations about the study of leadership

Knowledge creation is a collective effort and needs to be useful, and so all voices should be heard with the goal of contributing to the collective goal and for advancing leadership theories.

I believe that the phenomenon of leadership is to a large extent a built-in social phenomenon. The social structure exists both from a cultural historical aspect and from a micro aspect of groups, processes, and social relationships.

I also believe that it is worthwhile to concentrate on relationships and how they are created and work.

We should not look at leadership as a one-way street, but as a system of relationships that are produced by the two sides in relation.

2. Final work in progress: on leadership, hierarchy, and formal authority

[In notes for a 2013 presentation, Boas mentions that his recent work (2012) had given him “the opportunity to sharpen my thoughts concerning leadership and hierarchy.” Following are some of his initial forays on this topic.]

By definition leadership means informal hierarchy. I accept this as part of the phenomenon, and while I think that it is necessary to minimize the social, ethical, and practical damage, this is not to say that leadership can exist without disproportionate influence.

For purposes of illustration, I will consider the scientific community, which represents a type of organization. The process for the knowledge creation that is called science produced mechanisms for the creation and consolidation of knowledge. These mechanisms include criteria for estimating the value of contributions and are therefore hierarchical. True, some of these criteria have outlived their usefulness and are still with us only because they give certain groups and people a privileged standing in the hierarchy; however, without hierarchical norms and standards for the recognition of contributions and an assessment of their quality, we will get chaos whose result will be a slow and inferior process of knowledge creation.

Every day, we create and duplicate hierarchies: we use the title “professor,” we teach students, edit journals, judge articles and research proposals, write letters of recommendation, and sit on appointment and promotion committees. It is possible to change or to minimize the irrelevant and dangerous aspects of hierarchy, but its abrogation will not improve knowledge creation.

Collective action requires agreement.

The hierarchy of knowledge is connected to power and can have negative ramifications upon science—when it becomes too rigid, bars new ideas, extends to other areas than the one where it is useful, and when it excludes important voices from the discussion and doesn't grant influence to people and groups who have a right to participate and who can contribute. We have to be aware of the negative ramifications and try to minimize them, but to exchange the hierarchy of knowledge (because of the dangers) for a polyphony of equal voices means to compromise on knowledge and practices that are not as good. It is impossible to work in the field of knowledge creation without standards and criteria.

The divide between leadership and formal authority

[Beginning in 2014, Boas focusses upon the contemporary relationship between formal authority and leadership—which he saw

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