The Leadership Quarterly 22 (2011) 239–258

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Leadership Quarterly

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

Leaders make mistakes: A multilevel consideration of why

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 21 March 2011

Keywords:
Leadership
Errors
Mistakes
Multilevel

ABSTRACT

Errors make up a substantial portion of the fabric of leadership, yet we know very little about how and why they occur. Using Fleishman et al.'s (1991) behavioral taxonomy as a foundation, we offer a multilevel theoretical framework for understanding the causes of leader error — discussing leader, group and organization level influences. The results of the effort reveal several key themes, including the negative impact of timeframe, complex influence of expertise, causes of rigidity in problem solving, and the key role of the subordinate in minimizing the negative impacts of error. A closer consideration of these themes reveals several practical and theoretical implications for reducing the frequency and severity of leader errors. We conclude with a discussion of directions for future research.

Leaders must make the difficult decisions — the "tough calls" few of us want to make. Some must choose between pursuing a radically new product line, or remaining on a current strategic path that may grow stagnant in the future (Rickard, 1995). Others must decide to engage in cutbacks with the hopes they will help the company survive, even when it is unclear if the same cutbacks will send the organization into a financial tailspin (Ettlie, 2006). Coaches pick the final play of the game, fire chiefs decide if a building can be saved, and military commanders choose where to position their troops. What must be realized is that these decisions are characterized by risk — and with risk comes error. Not every choice will prove correct and no leader, regardless of how successful, lives an error free life (Bedell-Avers, 2008). Thus, an understanding of how and why these errors occur is a pressing matter for leaders, and for the vast majority of us who must live with their decisions.

Evidence of the negative impacts of leader errors is readily available and, in many cases, highly visible. Case studies of Three-Mile Island, for example, reveal a number of management errors occurring in the early stages of the disaster — errors that might have been avoided under more careful leadership. A widely cited example of leader error is also seen in reports on the Challenger space shuttle explosion (Violanti, 2006). Despite having evidence of likely equipment and material failure (e.g., O-rings), team leaders either chose to disregard warnings or failed to receive such warnings — errors resulting in a launch that proved disastrous (Reason, 1990). One need not only focus on large-scale disasters to witness the impact of leader errors. In his review of three organizations and the leaders within them, Nutt (2004) illustrated just how impactful leader errors can be to business. An overzealous CEO at Quaker foods, for example, let his overconfidence after prior successes drive strategic decision making resulting in an acquisition of a product-line, Snapple, incongruent with the strategic plan and culture of the organization. The end result was an initial 10% loss in Quaker foods and a 1.4 billion loss in the eventual sale of Snapple.

Although additional cases exist, the above should suffice to make our basic point: the examination of leader errors and their causes is essential. More centrally, gaining an understanding of error antecedents will help to establish comprehensive theoretical models of error as well as, more pragmatically, to develop interventions aimed at limiting the frequency, severity, and negative impact of error. Thus, the thrust of this effort is twofold: 1) to propose a definition and taxonomy of leader error and, more

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doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2011.02.001

centrally, 2) offer some guidance on why leader errors occur. Our examination of error antecedents will be in a multilevel format, examining leader, group, and organization levels of analysis. Finally, we will consider the interplay of these antecedents, discussing notable cross-level effects that might not have been observed without multilevel exploration. We begin with a careful consideration of what, exactly, constitutes an error.

1. Defining leader errors

1.1. Previous definitions

The investigation of human errors is a highly active research area, having its own rich history with input from cognitive psychology, human factors, military research, medical research, organizational behavior, and others. Not surprisingly, errors have been defined in a number of ways by a wide array of researchers. Fortunately, examination of these definitions reveals several common themes among them. First, an error must have been avoidable; that is, if an action was a result of wholly extraneous events it cannot be considered an error on the part of the leader (Reason, 1990; Senders & Moray, 1991). Second, an error may come in the form of an action *or inaction*. Thus, failing to take appropriate action may be considered an error. Third, errors result in unintended or unpredicted events; events that were not part of the original goal or plan of action (Zapf et al., 1992). Most often, these outcomes are undesired, but at times these outcomes can be serendipitous and positive (Sitkin, 1996; Van Dyck, Frese, Baer, & Sonnentag, 2005). Fourth and finally, errors may be domain specific, making it necessary to develop unique error taxonomies for varying professions, contexts, or domains (Senders & Moray, 1991).

1.2. Proposed definition

Drawing from the error literature and applying it to leadership, we define a leader error as occurring when: *An avoidable action (or inaction) is chosen by a leader which results in an initial outcome outside of the leader's original intent, goal, or prediction.* A few points should be borne in mind when considering the proposed definition and focus of the present effort. First, the definition is applicable only to those leaders working towards outcomes or goals associated with their role as a leader. Thus, for example, leaders operating in a purely laissez-faire fashion would not be committing errors of "inaction" in that they lack intended end-states or goals associated with leadership. Second and along related lines, our definition applies to those leaders whose goals are typically formed for the good of the group or organization (socialized leaders), as opposed to leaders with more self-serving intentions (personalized leaders). The investigation of personalized leaders appears better suited to efforts examining deviance, abuse, coercion, and other forms destructive leadership (e.g., Mumford et al., 2007; Padilla et al., 2007). As such, it should be expressly noted that our focus is domain specific and discussion applicable only to socialized leaders. Third, although some mistakes do "work out in the end" we have chosen to define error based on proximal rather than distal outcomes of an error — a decision based largely on conceptual clarity. More specifically, distal outcomes are often influenced by a number of extraneous factors outside of the leader's influence and as such have less utility in providing direct understanding of error antecedents. It is not our intent to discount the importance of long-term outcomes, as they do stand as important topics for leader error and multilevel research more broadly (e.g., Dansereau, Yammarino, & Kohles, 1999). Rather, we chose to limit the definitional scope to a manageable focus; a focus particularly important when constructs are in early stages of multilevel theoretical development (Klein, Tosi, & Cannella, 1999). Fourth and finally, the definition stands as an initial starting point for understanding leader errors and their antecedents. Researchers such as Senders and Moray (1991) have noted the need to specify error types within various research domains for substantive gains to be made in the understanding of error. Accordingly, to more accurately define leader error it will be necessary to consider the specific type of errors committed by leaders — a task that first requires a careful consideration of the behaviors that comprise leadership.

1.3. Leader behaviors as a precursor to understanding leader error

Even a cursory consideration of leader behaviors reveals that that they engage in unique activities — activities that may not have been considered in previous examinations of error. For example, leaders certainly engage in behaviors such as decision-making which have been studied extensively (e.g., Reason, 1990) — but they also spend a substantial amount of time relating to, and interacting with, their subordinates (Kurke & Aldrich, 1983; Mintzberg, 1973; Tengblad, 2006). Thus it appears relevant to consider errors related to interpersonal interactions in addition to more commonly investigated errors. To illustrate, in a recent survey over 1400 leaders reported that their most common mistakes are interpersonal in nature, and 80% of the respondents reported that they had failed to provide appropriate feedback, such as praise or redirection, and that this was their biggest failing as a leader (Galea, 2006).

Examining the specific taxonomic frameworks of leadership, it is evident that the study of leader behaviors is just as rich, if not more so, than the study of error. In fact, there are at least 65 differing classification systems for leader behaviors (Fleishman, Mumford, Zaccaro, Levin et al., 1991). Notable models include the two factor approach emerging from the Ohio State and Michigan studies (Likert, 1961, 1967; Stogdill, 1974) as well as expanded three-factor versions offered by Yukl and colleagues (Yukl, 2007; Yukl, Gordon, & Taber, 2002). Although the two and three-factor approaches have empirical and theoretical merit, they ultimately stand as two conceptualizations among many and have been criticized for focusing on those behaviors most salient to subordinates rather than what is essential for performance (e.g., Hunter, Bedell-Avers, & Mumford, 2007). In an