A qualitative analysis of charismatic leadership in creative teams: The case of television directors

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ABSTRACT

Leadership continues to play an important role in team effectiveness [Burke, C.S., Stagl, K.C., Klein, C., Goodwin, G.F., Salas, E., & Halpin, S.M. (2006). What type of leadership behaviors is functional in teams? A meta-analysis. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17(3), 288–307.]. A special type of team, television show production, utilizes an intact team of highly specialized and creative members. Charismatic leadership theory provides a useful lens from which to study how television directors facilitate the team's work and creativity. In this study we used two types of qualitative software to analyze interview transcripts from 21 television directors. Semi-structured interview protocol resulted in transcripts coded for the six factors of charismatic leadership [Conger, J.A., & Kanungo, R.N. (1988). Behavioral dimensions of charismatic leadership. In. J.A. Conger and R.N. Kanungo (Eds.), Charismatic Leadership (pp. 78–97). San Francisco: Jossey Bass Inc.], and aspects of leader distance [Antonakis, J., & Atwater, L. (2002). Leader distance: A review and a proposed theory. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 13, 673–704.; Shamir, B. (1995). Social distance and charisma: Theoretical notes and an exploratory study. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 6, 19–47.], shared leadership [Pearce, C.L., & Conger, J.A. (Eds.) (2003). Shared leadership: Reframing the hows and whys of leadership. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.], and leadership self-schema [Gardner, W.L. & Avolio, B.J. (1998). The charismatic relationship: A dramaturgical perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, 23(1), 32–58.; Murphy, S.E. (2001). Leader self-regulation: The role of self-efficacy and "multiple intelligences". In R. Riggio, S. Murphy, & F. Pirozzolo, (Eds.) Multiple intelligences and leadership, (pp. 163–186). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.; Wofford, J.C., & Goodwin, V.L. (1994). A cognitive interpretation of transactional and transformational leadership theories. *Leadership Quarterly*, 5, 161–186.]. In addition, a computerized content analysis program DICTION was used to identify factors of charismatic speech content such as optimism and reference to collectives following the protocol used by Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl [Bligh, M.C., Kohles, J.C., Meindl, J.R. (2004b). Charisma under crisis: Presidential leadership, rhetoric, and media responses before and after the September 11th terrorist attacks. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 15, 211–239.]. Results of the present study revealed that charismatic leadership can be important in explaining the leadership role of television directors in teams. Directors showed vision, sensitivity to member's needs, and other charismatic behaviors. Moreover, some charismatic leader behavior differed by leader distance from followers. Leadership self-schema appeared to be an important prerequisite for shared leadership.

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1. Introduction

Ensuring that effective leaders are selected, trained, and developed is of significant importance to today's organizations. Leadership remains very important to successful organizations even when it comes at a premium. In fact, popular business

magazines that criticize many of today's business leaders for exorbitant salaries or ethical lapses, still feature the accomplishments of business managers with the celebrity once reserved for heads of state. Many management practices implemented by organizational leaders do improve the bottom line and employee satisfaction (Pfeffer, 1998). In fact, in a recent meta-analysis of experimental and quasi-experimental leadership research Reichard & Avolio (2005) showed support for the positive effects of leadership. However, other research suggests that leadership has less of an impact on organizational performance than do many other factors such as competitive market forces, changing economic circumstances, or highly motivated employees. We merely use leadership as a simple and convenient explanation for outstanding or poor organizational performance (Meindl, 1995, 1990; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985). Perhaps the issue, however, is not that leadership has little impact, but that the manner in which we study leadership is not consistently uncovering when and how leadership does make a difference.

One suggested method for closing the gap between leadership research and practice is to continue to use qualitative research methods to gather information-rich data that contributes significantly to our knowledge of leadership processes (Bryman, 2004; Conger, 1998; Conger & Toegel, 2002; Van Maanen, 1983). In fact, key paradigm shifts in the study of leadership have come from qualitative studies (Conger & Toegel, 2002 cite Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Mintzberg, 1973 as examples of this type of research). According to Conger & Toegel (2002) qualitative methods are an important tool specifically for the study of leadership for three reasons. First, this tool can help us understand how leadership is differentially exercised at various organizational levels. Second, as leadership is a dynamic process, qualitative research methods can add depth and richness that is lacking in data gleaned from questionnaires. Finally, because leadership is considered by some researchers and theories to be a socially constructed role, qualitative methods can aid in understanding the construct from multiple perspectives.

Lee, Mitchell, & Sabylnski (1999) describe four purposes for qualitative research that have implications for the study of leadership: theory generation, theory elaboration, theory testing, and critical theory development. Each of these aspects has been investigated in specific examples of qualitative leadership research (Bryman, 2004). For example, Elsbach & Kramer (2003) studied the creative process in Hollywood pitch meetings to uncover what methods creative leaders use to convince investors or managers of the importance of their ideas. Their work generated a new theoretical model for looking at creativity that has practical implications for a wide range of industries. Another qualitative study added to our knowledge of leadership requirements by uncovering the importance of external leaders to the development and functioning of self-managing work teams (Druskat & Wheeler, 2003). Kan & Parry (2004) used qualitative methods to investigate nursing leadership with respect to organizational change within a transformational leadership theory framework. Hirst, Mann, Bain, Pirola-Merlo, & Richver (2004) used both qualitative and quantitative data to develop and test a model of leadership learning. And finally as an example of critical theory development, a qualitative study of charismatic leadership and values in an advertising firm by Cha & Edmondson (2006) showed that although a charismatic leader's values were an important addition to charismatic theory, values could have a negative effect in the organization and cause employee disenchantment. In sum, qualitative research is a flexible tool that can enable researchers to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice in new and exciting ways, and is particularly useful for understanding leadership.

The purpose of the current study is to understand leadership processes within a specific type of creative team, television production crews, by using the qualitative research tool of in-depth interviews for the purpose of theory elaboration in the area of charismatic leadership and teams. Although the entertainment business and the TV industry in particular are vibrant components of the U.S. economy with undeniable world-wide influence (Ensher, Murphy, & Sullivan, 2002), it is surprising that there is so little research in organizational behavior that draws from this arena. Therefore, we contribute to knowledge of charismatic leadership, not only in real-world teams, but in an under-researched industry, to add richness to the understanding of the process underlying charismatic leadership. We also investigate the contribution of three additional concepts for the successful leadership of creative teams: distance between leaders and followers (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Shamir, 1995); the compatibility of charismatic leadership behavior with shared leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003); and the role of leader self-schema for charismatic leadership behavior (Wofford & Goodwin, 1994; Wofford, Goodwin, & Whittington, 1998).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Charismatic leadership of creative teams

Charismatic leadership theory is a popular and much researched approach to understanding effective leadership (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2003). Although the term charisma was initially used to describe the characteristics of religious figures and political and military leaders (Weber, 1947), charismatic leadership theory was expanded by a number of researchers who have produced complementary, yet somewhat different, conceptualizations of charismatic leadership (House, 1977; Sashkin, 1988; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; Trice & Beyer, 1986), and charismatic leadership is one of the components in Bass' transformational theory of leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Each of these theoretical offerings links a leader's influence on group members or followers to important positive outcomes such as group performance, organizational performance, improved follower motivation, satisfaction, and effort. Charismatic leadership is not merely reserved for CEOs or Presidents of organizations even though much research has focused on high profile leaders such as U.S. presidents (House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991) or CEOs (Beyer & Browning, 1999; Trice & Beyer, 1986). Instead, it can be found at various levels in an organization (Conger & Kanungo, 1987; House, 1977; Klein & House, 1995; Shamir et al., 1993), and charismatic leadership can operate either as an individualized or a group level phenomenon depending on organizational context (Avolio & Yammarino, 1990).