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The WICS approach to leadership: Stories of leadership and the structures and processes that support them ☆

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the WICS approach to leadership and relates it to other approaches. Effective leadership is viewed as a synthesis of wisdom, creativity, and intelligence (WICS). It is in large part a decision about how to marshal and deploy these resources. One needs creativity to generate ideas, academic intelligence to evaluate whether the idea are good, practical intelligence to implement the ideas and persuade others of their worth, and wisdom to balance the interests of all stakeholders and to ensure that the actions of the leader seek a common good. The structures and processes underlying WICS work in concert to produce and maintain stories of leadership. These stories in turn enable leaders to fulfill their mission in leading followers.

1. Introduction

Leadership is essential to the successful functioning of virtually any organization. Scholars of leadership attempt to understand what leads to success in leadership.

The WICS approach proposed here draws on much that is old, including trait, situational, behavioral, contingency, and transformational approaches. What do these approaches have to say about leadership? First, I present WICS. Then I relate it to past approaches. Finally, I draw conclusions.

1.1. The nature of WICS

WICS is an acronym that stands for *w*isdom, *i*ntelligence, and *c*reativity, *s*ynthesized. The approach attempts to show how successful leadership involves the synthesis of the three qualities. In particular, creativity is used to generate stories that serve as a focal point for followers who are trying to understand leaders' goals. When followers do not understand the story underlying the work of the leader, they often become confused and feel that the leader is aimless or confused; when they do not like the story, they are likely to feel that the leader is off-course.

In the center of the approach is intelligence, traditionally defined as the ability to adapt to the environment (Cianciolo & Sternberg, 2004; Wechsler, 1939). According to the approach used here, successful intelligence is one's ability to attain one's goals in life, given one's sociocultural context, by adapting to, shaping, and selecting environments, through a balance of analytical,

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[1] My work on intelligence has been collaborative with many people over the years. My work on practical intelligence has particularly relied on the contributions of Anna Cianciolo, Elena Grigorenko, Jennifer Hedlund, Joseph Horvath, Cynthia Matthew, Richard Wagner, and Wendy Williams. My work on creativity has also depended on the contributions of many people, especially Elena Grigorenko, James Kaufman, Todd Lubart, and Jean Pretz.

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creative, and practical skills (Sternberg, 1997). Underlying this ability are fundamental executive processes, or "metacomponents" (Sternberg, 1985): recognizing the existence of a problem, defining and redefining the problem, allocating resources to the solution of the problem, representing the problem mentally, formulating a strategy for solving the problem, monitoring the solution of the problem while problem solving is ongoing, and evaluating the solution to the problem after it has been solved. Analytical intelligence is involved when one applies these processes to fairly abstract problems that nevertheless take a relatively familiar form (e.g., intelligence-test items). Creative intelligence is involved when one applies the processes to relatively novel tasks and situations. Practical intelligence is involved when one applies the processes to everyday problems for purposes of adaptation to, shaping, and selection of environments.

Creativity is the ability to formulate and solve problems so as to produce solutions that are relatively novel and high in quality (Amabile, 1996; Sternberg & Lubart, 1995). Creativity involves creative intelligence in the generation of ideas, but it also involves more, in particular, knowledge; a desire to think in novel ways; personality attributes such as tolerance of ambiguity, propensity to sensible risk taking, and willingness to surmount obstacles; intrinsic, task-focused motivation; and an environment that supports creativity (Amabile, 1996; Sternberg & Lubart, 1995). At the base of creativity, again, are the metacomponents. Crucial to creativity are one's creative-intellectual skills in recognizing and finding good problems to solve, and then defining and redefining the problems until they are understood in a way that allows a novel solution. Creative individuals are good problem finders who devote their resources to solving problems that are worth solving in the first place. Intelligent individuals are good problem solvers, but they do not necessarily devote their resources to solving problems that are important to solve. Analytical and practical intelligence, and not just creative intelligence, are important to creativity. Analytical intelligence is used to determine whether one's creative solutions to a problem are good solutions, and practical intelligence is used to implement the solutions and to convince others that one's solutions are, indeed, good ones that they should heed.

Wisdom is the ability to use one's successful intelligence, creativity, and knowledge toward a common good by balancing one's own (intrapersonal) interests, other people's (interpersonal) interests, and larger (extrapersonal) interests, over the short and long terms, through the infusion of positive values, to adapt to, shape, and select environments (Sternberg, 1998b). Thus, wisdom involves both intelligence and creativity, but as they are applied not just to serve one's own ends, but also, the ends of other people and of larger interests as well. At the base of wisdom, as of intelligence and creativity, are the metacomponents. One needs to recognize when problems, such as of injustice exist, and to define them in a way that is respectful of multiple points of view (dialogical thinking). One then needs to solve them in ways that take into account the needs of all stakeholders as well as the resources at hand.

Intelligence, wisdom, and creativity build on each other. One can be intelligent without being creative or wise. To be creative, one must be intelligent at some level, using one's creative intelligence to formulate good problems, one's analytical intelligence to ensure that the solutions to the problems are good, and one's practical intelligence to persuade other people of the value of one's creative ideas; but one need not be wise. To be wise, one must be both intelligent and creative, because wisdom draws upon intelligence and creativity in the formulation of solutions to problems that take into account all stakeholder interests over the short and long terms.

WICS holds that the best leaders exhibit all three of intelligence, creativity, and wisdom. It also holds that these skills can be developed. Now consider each of creativity, successful intelligence, and wisdom in more detail. They are presented in this order because usually, generation of ideas comes first, then analysis of whether they are good ideas, and then, ideally, application of the ideas in a way to achieve a common good.

2. WICS: wisdom, intelligence, and creativity, synthesized

The approach proposed here views leadership as in large part a matter of how one formulates, makes, and acts upon decisions (Sternberg, 2003b, 2004b; Sternberg & Vroomm, 2002). According to this approach, the three key components of leadership are *wisdom, intelligence,* and *creativity, synthesized* (WICS). The basic idea is that one needs these three components working together (synthesized) in order to be a highly effective leader.

One is not "born" a leader. In the framework of WICS, one can speak of "traits" of leadership (Zaccaro, Kemp, & Bader, 2004), but properly, they should be viewed as flexible and dynamic rather than as rigid and static. Wisdom, intelligence, and creativity are, to some extent, modifiable forms of developing expertise (Sternberg, 1998a,b) that one can decide to utilize or not in leadership decisions.

Leadership involves both skills (i.e., facility in thought, action, and the translation of thought into action) and dispositions (i.e., attitudes toward oneself, others, and tasks). The dispositions are at least as important as the skills. One needs creative skills and dispositions to generate fresh and good ideas for leadership, intellectual skills and dispositions to decide whether they are good ideas as well as to implement the ideas and convince others of the value of the ideas, and wisdom-related skills and dispositions to assess the long- as well as short-term impacts of these ideas on other individuals and institutions as well as oneself. The discussion will consider the elements of creativity, intelligence, and wisdom, in that order.

3. Creativity

Creativity refers to the skills and dispositions needed for generating ideas and products that are (a) relatively novel, (b) high in quality, and (c) appropriate to the task at hand (see Sternberg, 1999a). Creativity is important for leadership because it is the component whereby one generates the ideas that others will follow. A leader who lacks creativity may get along and get others to go along—but he or she may get others to go along with inferior or stale ideas. Creativity involves both processes and contents. The processes operate on the contents, which in the case of leadership, are stories. Both processes and contents are considered below.