Leadership and swift trust
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Introduction

To begin on a historical note, two of the most remarkable leaders during the previous century by most standards were likely Winston Churchill and Ronald Reagan. To me, just thinking about these extraordinary individuals and what they accomplished answers the basic question “does leadership matter?” They both played a vital part in defeating two different totalitarian ideologies when it mattered the most (Churchill – nazism, and Reagan – communism), and an important aspect when it comes to both these leaders, and I will try to build on that further on, is that even if a lot of people considered them naïve and perhaps even dangerous at the time, history proved them right. I will not go into detail on their actions, but when history proves a leader was right something else has come into play, namely the aspect of time. Tyrstrup (2002) looks at leadership through the prism of time in a perspective that strikes me as interesting in several ways, and I will elaborate on the relationship between leadership and time further on.

That said, my topic for this paper will be the relationship between leadership and swift trust in temporary working groups. I have been interested in this field for a while, and during this course I have had the opportunity to look at some new and interesting perspectives on critical questions and issues that comes to mind. Since I work and do my research at the Swedish National Defence College, it becomes natural to try to discuss some of the literature for this course from a military perspective. In particular, I will reflect on the course literature and its possible relations to swift trust in temporary groups. Indeed, one of the research questions I will try to keep present when I work my way through the literature in this paper is possible relations between the literature and swift trust.
Swift trust – a brief introduction

Temporary groups have become regular in the 21st century. In working life, temporary groups engaged in various projects have turned natural in many companies. In armed forces around the world temporary groups have become a natural course of action on missions in foreign countries (famous examples are the Israeli raid in Entebbe and the American lead mission in Mogadishu). Previous research has shown that trust, specifically considering the group’s leader, influence how well a group is working (Larsson, 2005). These days, considering the fast pace of work in many organizations, there is often little time to develop trust in traditional ways. These new circumstances have led scholars into studying a new form of trust that fits today’s context in a better way - swift trust.

Results/Discussion

An interesting perspective on how leaders influence subordinates was presented by Sy, Côté and Saveedra (2005). In their research they have shown how the mood of a leader has a substantial impact on the group in a number of ways. Among their conclusions were that when leaders were in a positive mood their subordinates also experienced more positive mood, and groups with leaders with a positive mood had also a more positive tone. Furthermore, they also discovered that these groups were better coordinated and more effective in some ways than groups with leaders in a negative mood. Do these results have any implications for researchers who are interested in temporary groups where swift trust is an important factor? Perhaps, one of the key assumptions concerning swift trust is that under time pressure individuals will increase their use of category-driven information handling that is aimed at speed and confirmation, rather than fact-driven information handling that is aimed objective examination (Larsson, 2005). This assumption is based on that under time pressure speed will win over precision. The assumption
can also be related to military experiences, under stress and uncertainty individuals tend to be more focused on trust examination of those who give information than towards verifying the information itself.

Furthermore, category-driven information is closely related to selective perception, that is, one sees things that confirm previous conceptions which could enhance trust. I take the freedom to speculate a bit here, but there could well be a connection between category-driven information handling and the mood of a leader during time pressure – and this connection has the possibility of affecting the group’s performance. Based on previous experience, individual group members who are about to start working on a difficult task could well reason: “Let’s see, the leader seems to be in a good mood, which means he believes in our ability to carry out the task. Good, now I feel more confident.” Likewise, a leader in a negative mood could have a potentially damaging effect on trust, especially under time pressure when category-driven information handling comes into play and there is not enough time to check the facts.

Moreover, Sy et al. (2005) also noticed that the leader’s mood had an impact on the affective tone among group members in such a way that the leader’s mood was transformed to the group members. It doesn’t seem too far-fetched to assume this phenomenon has the potential at least in some respect to benefit or damage the development of trust among members in a temporary group.

Yammarino, Dionne, Chun and Dansereau (2005) have in a qualitative review of the literature focused on leadership and levels of analysis. They describe levels of analysis as “the entities or objects of study about which we theorize, and are integral parts of the definitions of constructs, operationalizations of measures, and empirical tests of theoretical associations” (Yammarino et al., 2005. p. 880). They describe the key levels of analysis as individuals, dyads (two-person groups and interpersonal relationships) groups, and organizations. Since their
analysis covers so much ground and different perspectives on leadership, I will concentrate on their findings concerning transformational leadership, which one could argue is the dominating paradigm in leadership today. To make a long story short (and somewhat simplified), transformational leadership derive from the work of Bass (1985) and is by and large defined in terms of the leader’s behaviors and its effect on followers. Transformational leadership is largely about making the followers feel trust, admiration, loyalty and respect toward the leader, and as a result they become motivated to accomplish more than they originally expected to do (Yukl, 2006). An examination of the studies on transformational leadership revealed that most of them had been done on a single level of analysis, namely the individual (Yammarino et al., 2005). The individual leader is of course a key factor when dealing with issues such as trust in a temporary group, but important contributions from all levels could probably help to explain what factors that contributes to swift trust and which don’t. For example, if the mother organization is characterized by trust (the organizational level) then one could assume that has a positive effect on swift trust in a temporary group consisting of individuals within the organization. At the same time, also the opposite seems likely, i.e. that a mother organization characterized by low levels of trust breeds a lack of trust in temporary groups within the organization.

Another way to look at levels of analysis is presented by Gronn (2002). Instead of looking at leadership from the classic individual perspective, the single leader, Gronn sheds new light on the idea of distributed leadership. While the idea of distributed, or shared, leadership isn’t new, it has never been studied as much as leadership on an individual level.

Bryman (2004) examines qualitative studies of leadership and what kind of contributions they have offered to the field. The author also looks at studies that have combined qualitative and quantitative methods. Personally, I find that approach promising since swift trust is a relatively
new area of research and perhaps it’s too early to say how it should be studied and measured most effectively.

In another interesting study of transformational leadership by Bass, Avolio, Jung, and Berson (2003) were the use of transformational and transactional leadership examined under normal conditions in order to test the predicting effect of the units’ performance in a more stressful situation. They examined the leadership in 72 infantry platoons two weeks before an exercise in order to compare the relation with the platoons’ performance. The results showed that both transformational and transactional leadership among platoon leader’s positively predicted the unit’s performance, at the same time passive and avoidant leadership were negatively related to the platoons performance. They also discovered that the relation between the leadership in a platoon and performance was partly mediated by the units’ level of potency and cohesion.

“Leaderships theory has not lived up to its promise of helping practitioners resolve the challenges and problematics that occur in organizational leadership (Zaccaro & Horn, 2003, p. 769). A major reason for their complaint is that much of the research that has been done in the field of leadership has not been contextualized.

When transformational leadership is applied to different contexts interesting questions arise. For example, how successful is transformational leadership in organizations dealing with research and development (R&D)? In a review of the literature by Elkins and Keller (2003), they found that transformational project leaders who “communicate an inspirational vision and provide intellectual stimulation and leaders who develop a high-quality leader-member exchange (LMX) relationship with project members are associated with project success” (Elkins & Kerry, 2003, p. 587). Obviously, this is valuable news for proponents of transformational leadership, but I also find these results interesting for other reasons that have to do with a clear connection to my own research. As seen in the above quote, Elkins and Kerry are specifically talking about project
leaders and what benefits a transformational leadership style brings to those situations. This is interesting since project leaders are often leading temporary groups, it could be consultants working on the production of a new factory, scientists in R&D organizations, or as in my case, temporary groups within a military context. Of course, it may be too soon to connect the dots here, but at least it’s interesting that transformational leadership have proven successful in a context that bears strong resemblances with my own focus of research.

Another possible point of contact, although a bit more far-fetched, might be that R&D organizations to a large extent are about innovations in various forms, and also, leading creative and innovative individuals (Elkins & Kerry, 2003). And, if I might add, having the capacity to adapt to rapidly changing customer needs. The reason for this connection is that a number of scholars have found adaptability to be an important factor for success in military operations under unclear conditions (e.g. Tilson, Freeman, Burns, LeCuyer, Scales & Worley, 2005).

A study by Larsson, Sjöberg, Vrbanjac and Björkman (2005) examined indirect leadership in a military context. Among the authors conclusions were the importance of trust in the higher management at lower levels. Higher amounts of trust were found to be related to enhanced commitment and active participation among employees, and vice versa. Adding to some previous speculation, this phenomenon could have implications regarding swift trust. It seems possible, if not plausible, that higher amounts of trust between levels in an organization have a positive relation with swift trust in temporary groups within the organization. However, further research is necessary to investigate this hypothesis further.

An original way of looking at leadership and related issues is presented by Tyrstrup (2002) who examines these topics through the prism of time. According to the author, the “what” and the “how” are relatively easy questions for top-level managers to handle, it is issues related to “when” that are most problematic. I found that interesting and will ponder on its significance in
my own research. Looking at leadership by making time a key factor might also shine new light on questions related to swift trust. In fact, one could well argue that swift trust as a concept is strongly related to time, and especially the lack of it. Indeed, in a temporary group there is often little time to develop trust in traditional ways and a leader must make the most of it under time pressure to gain trust from subordinates.

Wheelan (2005) has many interesting things to say regarding group processes, especially from a developmental perspective. According to Wheelan, the average group passes through five stages (1) dependency and inclusion, (2) counterdependency and fight, (3) trust and structure, (4) work, and (5) termination. When the group has reached the second stage, Wheelan argues that conflict arises in a way that is positively related to trust, “on a more psychological level, conflict is necessary for the establishment of a safe environment. While this may seem paradoxical at first glance, conflict is helpful to the development of trust” (Wheelan, 2005, p. 17). Wheelan says this is based on the presumption that it is easier to trust a person we know we can disagree with without being abandoned. She continues, “it is difficult to trust those who deny us the right to be ourselves” (Wheelan, 2005, pp. 17-18). Naturally, this is highly related to the development of trust in temporary groups, and the individual leader plays an important part in navigating the group through these initial stages as swift and effectively as possible.

To me, successful leadership (and the avoidance of destructive leadership) is not just about training, it’s also about selection. One important instrument in the process of selecting a leader is personality tests, and recent meta-analyses based on studies using the Five Factor Model of personality have shown significant correlations between several dimensions of personality and leader effectiveness (e.g. Judge, Bono, Ilies & Gerhardt, 2002), and between personality and the motivation to lead (Judge & Ilies, 2002). However, an interesting way to increase the value of personality tests during selection could be to make the psychologist involved in the selection
process understand the context, organization, and goals in a better way. Such an approach was tested by Sandahl, Birgersson, Janson, Sundlin and Åkerlund (2003), and their result seems promising, especially when it comes to the feedback to the clients. One of the things I found especially interesting with performance-based personality tests are the described relation between them and general mental aptitude. Intelligence is an area of research I find to be most fascinating and possible relations between cognitive ability, leadership effectiveness, and the ability to gain swift trust is something I will look at in more detail in the future.

An issue studied by sports psychologists, and in this case highlighted by Giges, Petitpas and Vernacchia (2004), is related to coaches’ self-awareness and their coping strategies. For certain, being in charge of a temporary group under stressful conditions unlocks several essential questions concerning the leader’s coping skills, which in turn seems likely to be related to both trust and the group’s performance. An essential component in the literature related to stress is that the truth lies in the eyes of beholder, for example, what one individual perceives as threatening another might see as a challenge. Substantial amounts of research has been done in this field (e.g. Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and the way a leader confronted with danger handles the situation, I am thinking about how successful his or hers coping strategies are and how that is reflected in the leader’s behavior, could have a major impact on how group members view the leader’s ability to lead. At least partially, that in turn provides an answer to one of the most fundamental questions related to leadership - namely - “Do I trust this person?”
References


