

# Various Leadership Approaches And Their Functions In The Military

By: Ronnie Doomshow

Leadership is a relatively ambiguous term to define and conceptualize. Similar to terms such as *love* and *happiness*, leadership is characterized, displayed, and admired differently by everybody. One will find that through research on the subject of leadership and attempting to define by dismantling the term, reveals just how many aspects to leadership there are. However, at the very core root of the term, leadership can be described as a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.<sup>1</sup>

Many organizations display leadership characteristics in some form of hierarchy within their structural personnel composition, such as large companies, major political parties, and key humanitarian aid agencies, however, none of these display such a concrete, predefined chain of command as that of the military. The structure of the military leadership is dated back to the beginnings of all armies and has remained comparatively similar ever since with enlisted servicemen following all orders of their commanding officers, and the commanding officers following the intentions of their superior officers and so forth all the way to the top generals making executive decisions.

In an interview, Captain (N) Alan Orkos and Commander Gregg Hannah clearly and concisely summed up leadership in the Canadian Forces with the quote: “In life and death situations, good leadership makes the difference. Therefore, in the military, leadership is at the core of everything: process, goals, and outcomes. Leadership is what we do.”<sup>2</sup> The artillery is

---

<sup>1</sup> Northouse, Peter G.. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. 4th [rev.] ed. Thousand Oaks, CA [etc.: Sage, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Henein, Amal, and Françoise Morissette. *Made in Canada Leadership: Wisdom from the Nation's Best and Brightest on the Leadership Practice and Development*. Mississauga, Ont.: J. Wiley and Sons Canada, 2007.

no exception to this and as one of the combat arms trades of the Canadian Forces competent leadership is essential.

Leadership in the military is the most crucial environment for determining leader effectiveness. In order to maintain the essential leadership needed in the ever-changing nature of militaristic operation situations, an effective leader must have the knowledge of the various leadership styles and approaches and they must have the ability to apply these diverse leadership tactics in order to correctly match the setting. Using proper leadership techniques and approaches will ensure that mission command is maintained and ultimately success in the battle space will be achieved.<sup>3</sup>

In order to better understand the abstruse meaning of leadership, it is helpful to break it down into four main concepts. The first concept of leadership is defining leadership as being a process. This thinking implies that it is not solely a feature or mannerism of a person and that leadership is actually an interactive event that occurs between a superior and their subordinates. This two-way interaction results in not only the followers being affected by their leader, but also the leader themselves being affected and learning from their followers. Defining leadership as a process resulting in different forms of leadership and opportunities for everybody involved with the group, and can be tied in with distributive leadership.

The second concept of leadership is regarding the amount of influence a leader has on his or her subordinates. Influence is the theoretical tool that is absolutely necessary for a leader to

---

<sup>3</sup> Gen. Hillier, Rick. *Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Conceptual Foundations*.. Canada: Chief of the Defence Staff by the Canadian Defence Academy - Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, 2005.

possess to build any form of followership. Subordinates will not want to obey a leader without any semblance of influence, which will result in a failure of the core ideology of leadership that is influencing a group towards a common goal. Without influence there cannot be any progressive leadership.

The environment in which leadership occurs must be a situation involving a group or organized body, which makes groups the third concept in outlining leadership. In accordance with the core definition of leadership, a group must be the target of a leader to steer towards a mutual objective. The group could differ greatly in size and could be a small task force, a large and dedicated organization, or even up to a national population sized unit. When taking into consideration leadership in various group sizes, it is vital that a leader realizes that one cannot effectively lead a huge populace in the same way that one can lead a small group, such as the style of leadership the Chief of Defence Staff utilizes versus the approach of a Master Bombadier as the commander of his gun detachment.

The fourth concept of leadership includes the focus on the overall goal that is to be achieved. This can be understood as leadership being the guiding light that will allow a group to clearly make their way to accomplishing a predicted and desired ambition. Leaders focus their efforts on the group members who are working together to reach the common milestones. Without an anticipated, collective goal to strive for, there is virtually no conceivable way that any leadership can occur and will ultimately deem it unnecessary.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> The four concepts from Northouse, Peter G.. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*.

Once the conceptual foundations of leadership have been understood, it is possible to begin analyzing different styles of leadership by looking at various approaches that leaders take. There are four main approaches that researchers have related to leadership; the trait approach, the skills approach, the style approach, and the situational approach.<sup>5</sup> The trait approach states that ‘great’ leaders are born with certain desirable traits and characteristics. The skills approach entails that a convincing leader must have applicable skills and abilities in his or her field. The style approach focuses wholly on the behaviour and actions of a leader and how they treat their subordinates depending on varying contexts. As the name implies, the situational approach emphasizes how fundamental it is for a leader to adapt his or her style of leadership to match fluctuating situations.<sup>6</sup> The above definitions of the distinctive approaches of leadership are quite concise and in order to achieve a full understanding of leadership it is necessary to analyze these approaches in a more thorough manner.

One of the first organized efforts to study leadership involved the creation of the trait approach. Throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, researchers developed models that were called “great man” theories because they focused on effective political, social, and military leaders and the characteristics and traits that they possessed to understand what made them successful.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, during the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, several major studies doubted the legitimacy of the previous ‘great man’ theories. As a result, the focus of these researchers shifted to situational and style approaches of leadership and how efficient leadership was less reliant on traits. Oddly

---

<sup>5</sup> Northouse, Peter G.. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*.

<sup>6</sup> Northouse, Peter G.. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*.

<sup>7</sup> Stogdill, Ralph M., and Bernard M. Bass. *Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership: A Survey of Theory and Research*.. Rev. and expanded ed. New York: Free Press, 1981.

though, more recent findings have orbited back to the original ideologies of leadership and how effective leadership is largely correlated with necessary traits.<sup>8</sup>

Numerous studies created throughout the years, with the intention of determining which traits are most desirable for a leader, have concluded that there are many characteristics that contribute to leadership. The research has exhibited a consistent group of traits that have been constantly attributed to leaders that individuals have deemed to be prosperous. These traits include intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability. Supplementing these characteristics examiners used the psychological theory of the ‘five-factor personality model’ that provided an excellent means of examining leadership.<sup>9</sup>

The five-factor personality model is a psychological theory that has been agreed upon by researchers as the universal basic characteristics that make up an individual's personality. These characteristics, commonly known as ‘the big five’, include neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Neuroticism is the tendency to be depressed, anxious, insecure and hostile. Extraversion is the tendency to be social and confident while exhibiting a positive aura. Openness is the concept of an individual who is informed, creative, insightful, and inquisitive. Agreeableness is the tendency to be empathetic, trusting, and nurturing. Conscientiousness is the tendency to be thorough, organized, controlled and decisive.<sup>10</sup>

Researchers have utilized the five-factor personality model in many studies to try and determine if there is any correlation between those characteristics and an effective leader. They

---

<sup>8</sup> Northouse, Peter G.. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*.

<sup>9</sup> Northouse, Peter G.. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*.

<sup>10</sup> Northouse, Peter G.. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*.

found that there is a correlation between some of the traits of the five-factor model and effectual leadership. Studies showed that people who displayed high levels of extraversion and agreeableness positively predicted transformational leadership. Openness was also positively related to leadership when it was paired together with other traits, however, when the influence of the other traits were controlled, and openness was the sole determining trait, its correlation to leadership became negligible. The research group found that neuroticism and conscientiousness was unrelated to predicting the leadership ability of an individual.<sup>11</sup>

With the recently rediscovered interest in the trait approach of leadership, new practical applications of the approach have appeared within organizations. An example of this is organizations using personality assessment instruments to determine if a potential leader candidate will synchronize smoothly within an organization. Groups have also been known to use the trait approach in personal awareness and development training because it allows leaders to scrutinize themselves and emphasize their strengths and correct their weaknesses to ensure effective leadership in their roles.

Using the trait approach to understand leadership has several benefits. Firstly, it is deemed a quite appropriate approach because it coincides with people's instinctive thoughts of leaders being social individuals who lead from the front. Next, it is effective for comprehension of leadership because it focuses solely on the leader and provides standards that the leaders should be achieving. Lastly, a strong advantage of the trait approach is that it has been validated by many studies. There are, however, some negative attributes associated with the trait approach. The main problem with this approach is that it does not take into consideration the

---

<sup>11</sup> Judge, Timothy A. and Joyce E. Bono. 2000. "Five-Factor Model of Personality and Transformational Leadership." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 85 (5): 751-765

varying situations where a constant leadership style would not be ideal. Furthermore, the approach does not display the relation between the leader's traits and group performance. Finally, although using the trait approach to help leaders better themselves can be helpful, traits are inherently fixed and quite constant which results in leaders having a difficult time trying to change themselves to conform to the group trait norms.<sup>12</sup>

The next approach to leadership is the skills approach. This approach, similar to the trait approach, is a leader-focused evaluation that gives credit to a leader's skills and abilities for determining the ability of their leadership. The skills perspective can be explained using the three-skill approach that states that the three main skills a leader must have are technical, human, and conceptual. The skills theory notes that all three skills must be present in leaders, however at varying levels of leadership different skills are more essential than others.<sup>13</sup> For example, at a low management level, such as a Master Bombadier who is a gun detachment commander, the leader must have high technical and human skills. In this case, the MBdr must be highly skilled in the technical drills on the gun line combat because he will be the one his detachment members look to during the heat of a fire mission, and he must also be skilled when dealing with his few troops that are underneath him on a personal level because he is in direct contact with them all the time and they rely on him for social support. However, the MBdr does not need to possess strong conceptual skills in order to be a great leader because he is operating at a lower level and a grand overall understanding is not as crucial as the previously mentioned skills are.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Northouse, Peter G.. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*.

<sup>13</sup> Northouse, Peter G.. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*.

<sup>14</sup> Gen. Hillier, Rick. *Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Conceptual Foundations*.

At a middle level of management, such as a Lieutenant who is an artillery troop commander, this leader must use all three skills equally in order to be successful. The Lt must be very skilled in the technical aspect of his trade because, for the most part, he will be employed in various technical positions on the gun line and will need to be an effective at all of them during a fire mission or otherwise. At his level, he will also need to be very familiar with the human skill because he will still be dealing subordinates on a somewhat personal level, although not as much as the MBdr does. This is the level where conceptual skills become essential for a proper leader. As a troop commander, he needs to know how the firepower in his battery is associated into the grand scheme of the overall battle plan and act accordingly.

Lastly, at the high level of management there is a different skill set that is required for an effective leader. Someone at this level, such as a Brigadier General in charge of a combat operation, requires high abilities in the human and conceptual skill sets. The BGen must have high conceptual skills because, as the commander, he must take into account all the actions of the numerous companies and platoons as well as all his other assets and their impact on the desired intention of the country and must manage them accordingly. He must also be proficient in his human skills because he is the figurehead of the operation therefore he must be positively presentable and he must be able to communicate his intent and manage his subordinate commanders in an effective way. At this high level of management, very little technical skill is required because his role is more focused on overall management of the people and not of completing the actual, on-the-ground job himself.<sup>15</sup> According to this approach, a leader will be at his or her peak operating efficiency when his or her skill set matches accordingly with his or her management level.

---

<sup>15</sup> Gen. Hillier, Rick. *Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Conceptual Foundations*.

The skills approach to leadership has several advantages for conceptualizing leadership. Firstly, it allows leaders to easily scrutinize and improve themselves because it is a leader-centered model that places emphasis on the leader's skills and abilities. Next, this approach describes leadership in a way that everyone can utilize and, the fact that it emphasizes skills not built in traits, allows for leaders to easily identify and work on increasing their efficiencies in the desirable skills. The skills approach also allows leaders to create a refined map that effectively displays how their leadership performance can be reached. This approach is not perfect and has a few flaws given the nature of the approach. The first reason being that the skills model cannot accurately predict whether a leader will be effective by just basing it off of skills, for example if a logistics captain is always on time with her paperwork, is very organized, and intelligent, she will be deemed an effective leader according to the skills model. However, if she has anger issues, problems with drugs and alcohol, and poor dress and deportment, she will not be able to properly inspire and influence her team towards the common goal, which would deem her an ineffective leader. Another aspect of the skills model that can cause doubts to its validity to the mass public is that it was designed using statistics based solely off of a military population and has not yet been proven with information from civilian businesses and organizations.<sup>16</sup>

The next method of understanding to leadership is called the style approach. The style approach focuses more on how a leader acts and his or her behaviours towards the team and goals. This model states that there are two distinct forms of behaviour; task behaviour and relationship behaviour. Task behaviour is related to how the leader acts in order to achieve the group's common goal. Relationship behaviour depicts how the leader helps his or her subordinates achieve self-satisfaction, a positive relationship with members of the team, and a

---

<sup>16</sup> Northouse, Peter G.. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*.

feeling of comfort within the situation. The intent of researchers who have been using this model is to determine which sets of leadership behaviours are effective in all situations.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly to the previous leadership approaches, the style approach has both positive and negative benefits for utilization. Perhaps the most positively influential aspect of this approach on the study of leadership is the fact that it has allowed researchers to broaden their perspectives and statistics on the effectiveness of leaders by taking into account their behaviours and means instead of just their skills and traits. It is also beneficial for leaders to focus on their behaviours because it will enlighten them to the idea that their impact on their subordinates is two dimensional in the task and relationship behaviours. A negative aspect of the style approach is that researchers have not been able to correlate leader's behaviours with certain outcomes such as subordinate morale, job satisfaction, and team goal productivity. It is also hard to determine which set of universal task and relationship behaviours are the most effective when using the style approach. In summary, the style approach may not be as sophisticated as other approaches, however it does provide excellent framework for leaders to consider and utilize.<sup>18</sup>

Lastly, one of the most common approaches to leadership is the situational approach. This method takes into consideration that leadership can only be effective at all times if it is adapted and modified to the suit the current situation and group. It breaks leadership down into two dimensions; directive and supportive behaviours. Directive behaviours will allow the group to achieve its common goals. Directive actions include the leader telling the subordinates how to achieve the goal, setting timings, and defining roles. The goal of directive behaviours is to have

---

<sup>17</sup> Northouse, Peter G.. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*.

<sup>18</sup> Northouse, Peter G.. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*.

the followers 'buy in' to the intention that the leader establishes which is dependant on how the followers perceive the intentions<sup>19</sup>, therefore directive behaviours must be strongly present. Supportive behaviours are actions that a leader takes with his or her subordinates to make them feel comfortable with themselves and the team. This support can be achieved by having strong two-way communication and visible effort being applied by the leader to help the subordinates.<sup>20</sup>

Different situations require varying levels of supportive and directive behaviours. For example, new recruits arriving at CFLRS St. Jean for the course Basic Military Qualification will require high directive behaviour due to the fact that they are completely new to the Canadian Forces and must quickly learn the change of lifestyle. They will also require a high level of supportive behaviour because they will feel overwhelmed and nervous at first. Contrary to that situation requiring high supportive and high directive behaviour, some situations require low levels of the two behaviours. For example, in the situation of an experienced gun detachment, each member of the team knows his or her job and does not need such harsh direction as the new recruits. The experienced team will be comfortable on an individual level as well as a team level because they are familiar with their jobs and with their teammates. The situational approach to leadership is very effective because it can be easily understood and it takes into consideration that there is not one perfect style of leadership and that leaders must be flexible depending on the situation they are in.

---

<sup>19</sup> Henein, Amal, and Francoise Morissette. *Made in Canada Leadership: Wisdom from the Nation's Best and Brightest on the Leadership Practice and Development*. Mississauga, Ont.: J. Wiley and Sons Canada, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Northouse, Peter G.. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*.

In order for an individual to be an effective leader and inspire his or her subordinates to become the best they can be and guide the team to its common goal, the leader must have a thorough understanding on the various concepts and approaches of leadership. He or she must take into consideration the numerous approaches to establish the framework that one can utilize to build a motivating figurehead that can lead a team. An effective leader in the Canadian Forces will create a team that embraces the military ethos, can achieve any tasks given, and will pursue the highest standards of the required expertise.<sup>21</sup> It is in this way that the knowledge of leadership and its ambiguous tendencies, will allow an individual to lead a successful team. As a combat arms trade in the Canadian Forces this is exceptionally pertinent to the artillery as effective leadership at all levels is essential to its continuing success.

---

<sup>21</sup> *Duty With Honour: The Profession of Arms in Canada..* Kingston, Ontario: Chief of Defence Staff, Canadian Defence Academy, Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, 2003.

## References

Northouse, Peter G.. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. 4th [rev.] ed. Thousand Oaks, CA [etc.: Sage, 2007.

Henein, Amal, and Françoise Morissette. *Made in Canada Leadership: Wisdom from the Nation's Best and Brightest on the Leadership Practice and Development*. Mississauga, Ont.: J. Wiley and Sons Canada, 2007.

Gen. Hillier, Rick. *Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Conceptual Foundations*. . Canada: Chief of the Defence Staff by the Canadian Defence Academy - Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, 2005.

Stogdill, Ralph M., and Bernard M. Bass. *Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership: A Survey of Theory and Research*. . Rev. and expanded ed. New York: Free Press, 1981.

Judge, Timothy A. and Joyce E. Bono. 2000. "Five-Factor Model of Personality and Transformational Leadership." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 85 (5): 751-765

Henein, Amal, and Françoise Morissette. *Made in Canada Leadership: Wisdom from the Nation's Best and Brightest on the Leadership Practice and Development*. Mississauga, Ont.: J. Wiley and Sons Canada, 2007.

*Duty With Honour: The Profession of Arms in Canada*. . Kingston, Ontario: Chief of Defence Staff, Canadian Defence Academy, Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, 2003.