Principles Driven Leadership: Thoughts, Observations And Conceptual Model

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ABSTRACT

Leadership has as many definitions as it does books written on the subject. Discussions regarding the subject often migrate toward the differences between leadership and management.   The purpose of this paper is to provide a conceptual view of leadership based on experience, observation and lessons learned. A conceptual model and a comprehensive set of principles are presented that can be used as a blueprint toward developing a sound foundation of leadership.

Keywords: Leadership; Leadership Model; Decision-Making; Principles Driven Leadership

INTRODUCTION

*L*eadership is about principles. There are many key and seminal works regarding leadership. Transactional (Bass, 2008), transformational (Burns, 1978), servant (Greenleaf, 2002), participative (Lewin, LIippit, & White, 1939), behavioral (Barnard, 1968), situational (Hersey, 1984; Hersey & Blanchard, 1996), contingency (Fiedler, 1964), and Great Man (Carlyle, 1888) either introduce or build upon existing leadership theories, characteristics, traits, and practices. This paper, however, is based on participant observation methodology (Jorgensen, 1989) over a period of decades, being an integral part of organizations and serving in many different positions within those organizations. Although it may not be categorized as basic research it does provide valuable insight to key principles that can be used as a model for successful leadership and improving leadership quality.

The motivation for this paper, however, comes from Stephen Covey's work regarding Principles-Centered Leadership (Covey, 1991) and Cy Wakeman's Reality-Based Leadership (Wakeman, 2010). Both of these works, along with experience and observation, form a powerful combination with a notion that leaders must have a solid set of principles they operate by and use to lead.

PRINCIPLES-DRIVEN LEADERSHIP

Leadership Principles form a foundation that people anchor themselves to with a passion to initiate action and drive an effort or organization toward a common vision. Leadership often has no boundaries or organization chart biases. Leaders can be found at all levels in an organization and throughout society with varying levels of experience, skills, and values.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model of Principles Driven Leadership. This model is anchored to a foundation of key principles that help the leader assess, and in the decision-making process, based on specific situations and interactions.

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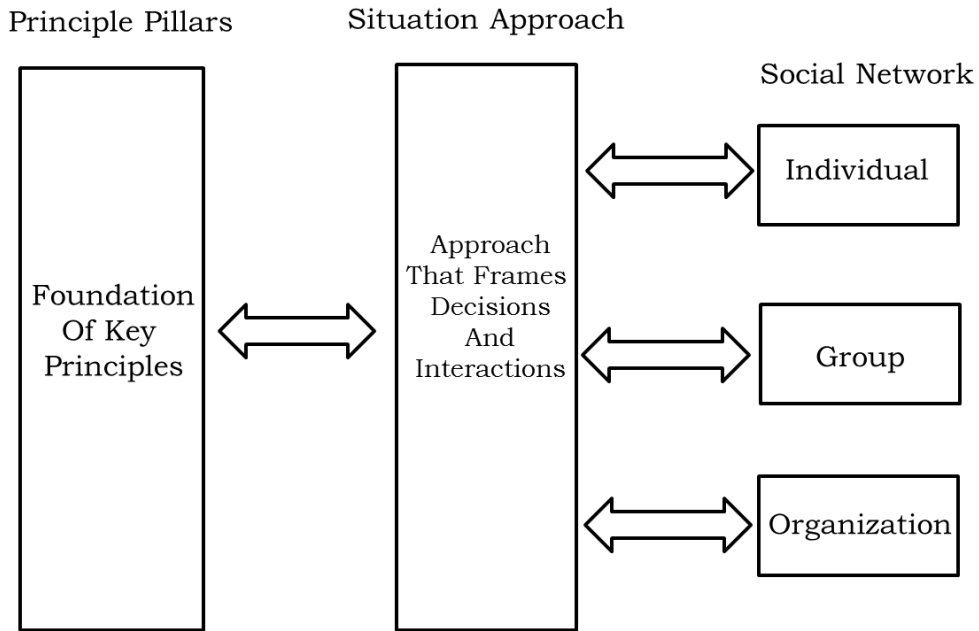situations and interactions

Figure 1: Principles Driven Leadership Model

Over the past several decades, while working in industry, the military, and now in academia, a list of key leadership principles have been compiled. These leadership principles provide an aggregate view based on years of experiences, observations, and the lessons learned.

The principles are based on observing both positive and negative aspects and actions of people in leadership roles. The principles have been organized around five (5) key guiding leadership disciplines - Decision-Making, People, Strategy, Productivity, and Self-Improvement.

Figure 2 depicts a combined list of these key leadership principles. A brief description for each of these principles is provided that can be used as a blueprint for successful leadership. The paper integrates supporting seminal works and theories for each of the key principles.
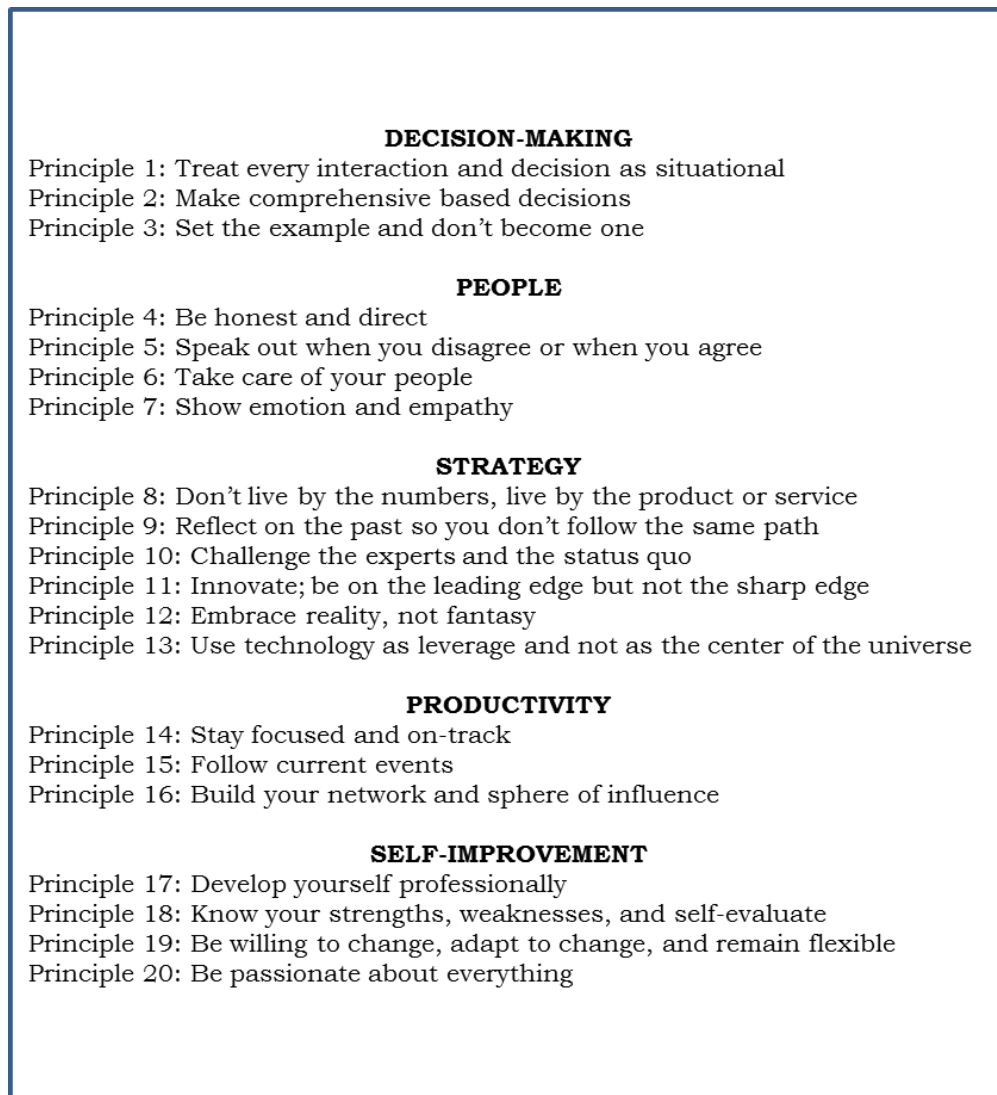
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DECISION-MAKING
Principle 1: Treat every interaction and decision as situational
Principle 2: Make comprehensive based decisions
Principle 3: Set the example and don't become one

PEOPLE
Principle 4: Be honest and direct
Principle 5: Speak out when you disagree or when you agree
Principle 6: Take care of your people
Principle 7: Show emotion and empathy

STRATEGY
Principle 8: Don't live by the numbers, live by the product or service
Principle 9: Reflect on the past so you don't follow the same path
Principle 10: Challenge the experts and the status quo
Principle 11: Innovate; be on the leading edge but not the sharp edge
Principle 12: Embrace reality, not fantasy
Principle 13: Use technology as leverage and not as the center of the universe

PRODUCTIVITY
Principle 14: Stay focused and on-track
Principle 15: Follow current events
Principle 16: Build your network and sphere of influence

SELF-IMPROVEMENT
Principle 17: Develop yourself professionally
Principle 18: Know your strengths, weaknesses, and self-evaluate
Principle 19: Be willing to change, adapt to change, and remain flexible
Principle 20: Be passionate about everything

Figure 2: Summary of Leadership Principles

DECISION-MAKING

Principle 1: Treat Every Interaction and Decision as Situational

Failures of perspective in decision-making can be due to aspects of the social utility paradox, but more often result from simple mistakes caused by inadequate thought. (Herman Kahn)

When making decisions, a leader quickly learns that one size does not fit all. Each decision is as often as unique as the number of people on the planet. There is no one best leadership style, as suggested by leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). The leader must treat each decision as situational, and more than likely, it will require that a different approach be used for each decision. Along with each approach, the leader needs to apply a sound and consistent decision-making process for each situation.

Principle 2: Make Comprehensive-Based Decisions

Effective leadership is not about making speeches or being liked; leadership is defined by results not attributes. (Peter Drucker)

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Focusing on bits of information and not the entire scope and impact of the decision often leads to bad decisions. A leader must be rational and consistent, collect the best information available, and consider all major factors of a decision.

Indecision and putting off critical decisions that need to be made is a bad habit to acquire. Many decisions require a timely and proactive response. Not all decisions will be received positively; however, the more informed a decision is, the easier it will be to get people behind it and support the decision.

For a leader making a decision is a process which includes impact, effect, and resources, it should take into account the ethical aspects of the decision. The area where leaders have concerns is how to weigh the ethical and legal aspects of a decision. The decision process sounds simple and pretty straightforward. How the leader explains ethical-based leadership is a matter of narration, examination, and analysis (Konig & Waistell, 2012).

Principle 3: Set the Example and Don't Become One

Leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character. But if you must be without one, be without the strategy. (Norman Schwarzkopf)

People rely on leaders to set an example and not become one; they will often mimic your actions and behavior. Leaders that operate without integrity and ethics will set the tone for the organization. A leader must act with integrity and show ethical behavior in almost everything they do, say and in every decision they make.

Rolling up your sleeves and being ready to help if needed is a mark of a leader that believes in what they do and is not afraid to pitch in to contribute to the success of the entire organization. 'Do as I say and not as I do' is not an effective strategy.

PEOPLE

Principle 4: Be Honest and Direct

Leadership is solving problems. The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them. They have either lost confidence that you can help or concluded you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership. (Colin Powell)

Once a leader is viewed as dishonest, it is very difficult to overcome this perception. Don't lie; people are smarter than you think. The problem with lying is most people cannot remember what they said to what group of people or individual.

A leader needs to be open and honest and direct with everyone. Talking around issues or lying will not facilitate trust. Leaders need to constantly communicate with everyone and be consistent in the message delivered. This includes both positive and negative messages and communication.

Principle 5: Speak Out When You Disagree or When You Agree

I said what I wanted to say. You heard what you wanted to hear. (Evette Carter)

This principle applies to everyone and not just leaders. A leader should never dampen a person's input, whether positive or negative. Remember, your perception of negativity may be someone else's passion. Don't feel pressured to only agree or go with the flow. Always be professional, but say what is on your mind. Provide your opinion and ideas. If everyone always agrees or disagrees then there's no need to even have the discussion. Some of the best ideas come from both sides of the conversation or argument.

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Principle 6: Take Care of Your People

Powell's Rules for Picking People: Look for intelligence and judgment and, most critically, a capacity to anticipate, to see around corners. Also look for loyalty, integrity, a high energy drive, a balanced ego, and the drive to get things done. (Colin Powell)

People are the most important asset, but sometimes it appears we know little about them. For many leaders, their interest is focused on "serving others first" or in "serving rather than being served" (Boone & Makhani, 2012). When they understand the vision, have clear objectives, and respect leadership, each other and the organization, they will move mountains. Leaders should never demand respect; it is something that must be earned, and quite often position or title does not impress them.

Some good practices include: listen, coach, don't micro-manage, respect and challenge, praise good behavior, and reward and admonish when necessary. Most importantly, a leader should ensure that compensation, rewards, and recognition are equitable. If not, it will undermine, or even destroy, an organization's productivity. Sometimes eye-to-eye contact and a sincere thank you is all that is necessary.

Principle 7: Show Emotion and Empathy

When you start to develop your powers of empathy and imagination, the whole world opens up to you. (Susan Sarandon)

Everyone has good days and bad days. Don't be afraid to show excitement and passion. Be understanding and, above all, listen and help when needed. Watch for signs of potential problems with morale, discontent, and behavior.

Society has seen the many corporate scandals, lack-luster performances, and lack of responsibility in both corporations and their leaders. The result has been a steady deterioration of the respect that society has for corporate leadership (Pless, Maak, & Waldman, 2012). Society is looking for today's leaders to demonstrate leadership and a responsibility to the society that it supports.

STRATEGY

Principle 8: Don't Live By the Numbers; Live By the Product or Service

He that is of the opinion money will do everything may well be suspected of doing everything for money. (Benjamin Franklin)

In today's fast and turbulent environment, it is extremely difficult not to base everything we do on numbers, such as revenue and earnings. This numbers-focused approach has even made it into our process and procedures, such as performance metrics. It can be argued that leaders, who have the feeling of belonging to the organization and the group they supervise, are less likely to focus on the metrics alone and be more focused on the goals of the organization as a whole (Hoogervorst, Cremer, Marius, & Mayer, 2012; Margues, 2012).

While we must acknowledge that in order to sustain our organizations in the market, numbers and metrics often become the focus and consume the organization. The focus should be on the product and service and quality of the offerings. Having a strong belief in the product or service will rub off. Don't keep asking the customer if they will buy more; this is tacky and unprofessional.

Principle 9: Reflect On the Past So You Don't Follow the Same Path

I'm always sort of reflecting on what I do on what I've done. Usually before I make a new album, I'll listen to the previous albums just to see where I've been. (Lenny Kravitz)

Time and time again, we hear not to look at the past but only focus on the future. Leaders need to assess past actions and events so the same mistakes aren't repeated or, for that matter, so we can reuse things that are positive and successful. Knowing where you have been will help you map where you need to go. It will help determine what worked and what didn't work.

Principle 10: Challenge the Experts and the Status Quo

When the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to view everything as a nail. (Abraham Maslow)

A good practice is to challenge the status quo. Just because we have always done something one way does not mean there isn't room for improvement.

Challenge consultants, elites, and experts; they are external to the organization with no operational responsibilities or accountability. Look within the organization for creativity and innovative ideas. You might be surprised what you find.

Principle 11: Innovate; Be On the Leading Edge but Not the Sharp Edge

Creative thinking is not a talent; it is a skill that can be learnt. It empowers people by adding strength to their natural abilities which improves teamwork, productivity and, where appropriate, profits. (Edward de Bono)

Simply put, those who fail to innovate will die due, in large part, to a marketplace that is progressing and they are not. The leader is the one who creates and builds upon a culture of innovation and creativity. The leader and the organization must embrace emerging technologies and then learn how to leverage the new technology. A word of caution - the organization and its leaders should or must refrain from being on the bleeding edge of a new technology or other innovation.

Principle 12: Embrace Reality, Not Fantasy

I'm not crazy about reality, but it's still the only place to get a decent meal. (Groucho Marx)

Don't tell people everything is beautiful; they are smarter than you think and it is insulting. Embrace the situation and not what you want it to be. Living in reality will help you see things more clearly and provide a better path to the future.

The successful embracing of reality is a double-edged blade; the leader must believe in their decision process and the employee must belief in the leader and the decision. The foundation of the embracing of a leader's decision-making is based on their established credulity with their employees and others. The employees and people must believe in the leader and trust that the leader is making a decision that is ethical and worthy of their trust (Boone & Makhani, 2012).

Principle 13: Use Technology as Leverage and Not as the Center of the Universe

The first rule of any technology used in a business is that automation applied to an efficient operation will magnify the efficiency. The second is that automation applied to an inefficient operation will magnify the inefficiency. (Bill Gates)

Do not build process or business models around technology. When the technology changes, it can be extremely disruptive to the organization and often requires a massive change and alignment with the new technology. Instead, learn how to leverage technology in that it supports the processes and business model. This approach will allow for a much quicker retooling as the technology changes will provide a quicker path to competitive advantage. Do not implement new technology because it's new. Get rid of the old technology when the new is implemented.

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PRODUCTIVITY

Principle 14: Stay Focused and On-Track

If you chase two rabbits, both will escape. (Anonymous)

Leaders must avoid being sidetracked by project hobbies and trivial activities. All too often, leaders cannot produce a list of activities occurring within an organization and provide a solid reason for doing them. Stay focused on activities that drive success and the end objectives. Prioritize all projects and initiatives. The leader must maintain a strategy-focused organization (Kaplan & Norton, 2000) in order to move the organization closer to the vision.

Principle 15: Follow Current Events

A well-informed mind is the best security against the contagion of folly and of vice. The vacant mind is ever on the watch for relief, and ready to plunge into error, to escape from the languor of idleness. (Ann Radcliffe)

A leader needs to be well-informed and abreast of current events. Collect and synthesize things that are important and pertinent or may impact the vision, objectives and strategies. Determine the potential impacts of national and global events. We do not live or do business in a vacuum. We now live in a globalized environment, thanks to technology.

One method a leader can employ to follow current events and activities is to engage the customer and employees in your business and products. Involvement can be internal (employees suggestions) and externally (customer sessions). Wilson-Burns, Smith, & Ulrich (2012) explained the need for leaders to connect with the customer to retain currency of the business. "A strong leadership brand is where you make the firm brand and the employee brand real by identifying, for leaders in your company, what it is that customers and employees expect and the organization wants you to deliver." Being current with products and services is how a business retains its viability and sustains its business.

Principle 16: Build Your Network and Sphere of Influence

Technology does not run an enterprise; relationships do. (Patricia Fripp)

Not everyone will like you and some will never like you. Try not to burn bridges and be sure to patch ones that have been hurt. Get ideas and opinions from everyone; you never know what you might learn. Don't just select colleagues and friends that agree with you. Leaders should consider networking with a broad breadth of people and experiences, ideas, and values.

Some of the people in a leader's network will be followers, some will be senior executives, and yet another group can be external to the organization. Building a successful network of contacts takes time and can be a trial-based process and selection. One group especially important to a leader is contacts or followers within their organization or industry. The leader's relationship with their followers is a relationship that must be nurtured and managed to be effective and successful (Whiteley & Johnson, 2012).

SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Principle 17: Develop Yourself Professionally

Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire. (W. B. Yeats)

It is critical that a leader advances his or her education. Reflect and set goals, keep up with the latest trends, and map out a professional development plan. There is not much less than a leader who does not have a good grasp on the subject or is extremely shallow and superficial.

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A leader should strive to achieve Personal Mastery (Senge, 1990). Personal mastery is not a one-time event, but a lifelong and continuous journey. Leaders must develop a vision and drive themselves toward that future state. A leader that is content with today and the competencies and skills they currently possess will be left with only his or her reality of today.

Principle 18: Know Your Strengths, Weaknesses, and Self-Evaluate

For the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself, 'If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?' And whenever the answer has been 'No' for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something. (Steve Jobs)

Sense shines with a double luster when it is set in humility. An able, yet humble, man is a jewel worth a kingdom. (William Penn)

Know yourself and your limitations and don't be afraid to honestly evaluate yourself. Seek input from others; they may view you differently. Set improvement goals and strengthen your weaknesses. When you look in the mirror, you may be happy with what you see, but others may view you in a different manner.

To be an effective leader requires an ability to self-evaluate your personal skills and abilities and to be humble and honest about what they know and do not know. There has been more intensity placed on the leader and their humility given corporate scandals, generous bonuses, ego issues, and running the corporation as a fiefdom (Owens & Hekman, 2012). A leader is someone who can live and work within their skills and abilities and then be able to identify the need for help from others.

Principle 19: Be Willing To Change, Adapt To Change, and Remain Flexible

People don't resist change; they resist being changed. (Peter Senge)

Change is good, IF the change is good. Don't change just for the sake of changing. Know what needs to be changed, why, and what the change will impact. Establish a target or objective and know when you are finished.

Change is a portion of the evolutionary process of an organization; embrace change to build a better tomorrow. Change will build a better and stronger organization as long as the change is focused on a reason, not done for the sake of change (Smet, Lavoie, & Hioe, 2011). Effective change is accomplished when the goal or objective is clearly defined and simplify stated.

Principle 20: Be Passionate About Everything

Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world. (Harriet Tubman)

Don't be afraid to show passion. Some may view it as negativity; however, someday they will grow up or get left behind. Have fun with everything you do.

Show interest in many things not just ones that might be comfortable.

Being a passionate, balanced, people-oriented, and caring leader has grown over the past years to be the desired direction of future leaders (Marques, 2012). The leader should be passionate about the business, products or services, people, and the customer.

CONCLUSION

Twenty key principles of leadership have been presented. If it seems overwhelming, it is. Leaders are women or men that have aspired to be the focal point for the decision-making process. Some leaders are born, but

most leaders are developed through a process of "leadership development" that can take many forms and formats (Schyns, Kiefer, Kerschreiter, & Tymon, 2011).

Leadership is not an easy task and it often requires a high-level of stamina, flexibility, and consistency. More importantly, it requires a set of key principles that serve as a foundation. A title does not make you a leader but, rather, your actions and passion toward achieving a vision.

Leadershp is the blending of vision, values, and contributon to society, turning ideas into reality through others that share the same vision.

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