

ASSESSING LEADERSHIP STYLE: POLITICAL LEADERS IN THE MEDDLE EAST

Zahi K. Yaseen, PhD

AL Ghurair University, Dubai, UAE

Abstract

The concept of leadership has been a center of focus for many researchers in the recent past. The researchers would want to identify and recognize what constitutes an effective leadership. Most academic institutions have opted to include a study of leadership styles in their curriculum as a way of developing the concept among the individuals in the institutions and in the society. There is a need to establish a set of qualities that are characteristic of good leadership so that an organization can seek for quality leaders. The kind of leadership that is exercised at a given organization while greatly affects the performance of the organization. This paper explores the different kinds of leadership styles that can be adopted by political leaders and the effects of the styles. Much attention is given to the political upheavals that have been seen in the Arab nations.

Keywords: Leadership style, Middle East Leaders, Political Leaders, Arab Leaders.

Introduction

Different approaches have been provided by scholars that attempt to explain the multifaceted nature of leadership. Leadership has been viewed by others as a behavior or character by some scholars and yet others have seen from 'information processing perspective or relational standpoint' (Northouse, 2009, p.1). Leadership is considered from a large perspective ranging from small groups to very large complex organizations. Considering leadership as a trait or behavior implies that there are certain qualities that are characteristic of a good leader and that distinguish the leaders from other individuals. Effective leaders lead by example (Lussier & Achua, 2009, p.70). On the other hand, considering

leadership as a process refers to how the leaders interact with their followers and that it is a responsibility that every individual can assume.

Leadership styles

There are varieties of leadership styles that have been employed by the leaders in different organizations. The leadership styles adopted by political leaders, the management of various institutions and that of the for-profits organizations in a country will influence the overall achievements of their objectives.

Autocratic leadership

In this type of leadership, the leaders give the directives to the subordinate and allow very little input from the subordinates. The authority and power is centralized towards one position in the hierarchy (Daft & Lane, 2007, p.44). This kind of leadership is not absolutely undesirable, as it might initially appear to be. There are situations that may not allow for an input from the subordinates lest a whole action is delayed or completely derailed. It is appropriate for handling a hostile subordinate to ensure that the tasks are accomplished accordingly (Skinner, 1992, p.71). An example is in the military where the commandant provides directives to be followed without much ado from the service men. The style is also applicable if there is a big difference between the expertise in the leaders and that of the subordinates (Daft & Lane, 2007, p.44). Allowing for the contribution by such subordinates will not be essential in a proper decision making process.

Democratic leadership

The democratic leadership is a collective leadership system that allows for the contribution of various individuals towards a particular issue. Unlike the autocratic leadership style, a democratic leader 'delegates authority to others, encourages participation, relies on subordinates' knowledge for completion of tasks, and depends on subordinate respect for influence' (Daft & Lane, 2007, p.44). However, this kind of leadership has some drawbacks. Firstly, it requires

that the subordinates to be provided with roles in the leadership need to be conversant with the respective subjects of concern. The members need to be motivated and self-directed to allow for creative ideas. Besides, the consultations often take much time and it may not be effective for a decision that is to be made quickly (Marquiz & Huston, 2008, p.39). This leadership style is effective in the political scenario.

Participative leadership

The participative leadership style is that witnessed in the management of group work. The leaders are selected from among the members that are able to deal with different emerging issues (Griffin & Stacey, 2005, p.29). The leaders then spearhead various activities of the group with the participation of all members of the group. This leadership style resembles democratic since the subordinates of an organization are involved. The leader invites his subordinates in the decision-making processes and evaluates their individual contributions. The suggestions need to be integrated in the decision making process (Northouse, 2009, p.128).

Goal oriented leadership

In this leadership style, the leader challenges his juniors to strive to achieve the objectives of the organization. The leader sets the goals for the subordinates and ensures that high degree of excellence is achieved in the performance and he makes the appropriate improvements regularly. This leadership style is, however, only effective in managing smaller groups or organizations with less complex projects (Muller & Turner, p.18).

Situational leadership

Situational leadership is an approach to leadership that emphasizes the need to respond to different situations as they occur. It asserts that the appropriate leadership will be determined by the situations that arise. An effective leader will then be one that changes the leadership style according to the

requirements of a particular situation (Humphreys et al, 2010, p.4). In a given organization, this leadership style would require that the leaders examine the demands of the subordinates and other employees and the different arising situations and adjust their leadership accordingly. The style is thus concerned with providing directives as well as giving support to the subordinates.

This kind of leadership style has some strength. The style has been seen to survive over long time and remains firm. It is a style that has been highly recognized and often used by organizations for personnel training. The style is also seen to be prescriptive and not descriptive as the others. It tells the leader what should be done and what should not be done in the different arising situations. The style is also characterized by leadership flexibility (Farmer, 2005, p.2).

Case studies

Case study 3.1 Leadership in Egypt under President Mubarak

President Hosni Mubarak was the Egyptian Vice President under President Sadat and later succeeded him as the president after the latter was assassinated. Mubarak promised to continue with the reform policies established under Sadat, restored relationship with the other Arab nations, and maintained relations with US (Scharf, 2006, p.2). Mubarak started with better reform agenda but his dictatorship later emerged with the president enacting all the policies and forwarding to the Cabinet for implementation (Blaydes, 2008, p.3). Since assuming office in October 1981, the president was reelected in successive referenda in which there were no politicians allowed to compete with him. He later allowed the parliament to amend the constitution to allow for multiple candidates in a presidential election. The election that was held in 2005 was characterized by a lot of rigging towards the president's side with the government's property being used in aid of Mubarak. He was declared the winner and the runners-up who launched a complaint over irregularity was convicted and sentenced to five-year imprisonment.

His reign as the Egyptian president recorded high levels of corruption with reformists being thrown to serve some period in jail. The country gradually became tired of the political authority that the president had over constitutional matter and that were applied in protecting corrupt leaders and persecuting reformists. Wide rift grew between few rich and the poor majority in the country. Later on various groups in Egypt including the military turned against the leadership of Mubarak. There was a massive call for the president's resignation but he declined stating that he would complete his term and accomplish the reform processes that were still not in place. The antigovernment groups embarked onto an eighteen-day uprising that saw the Egyptian president thrown out of the seat. The military that had assisted the antigovernment groups took power and promised to establish a democratic system of government.

Case study 3.2 Tunisia Uprising case (Ibin Ali)

Ben Ali took the Presidency in Tunisia in 1987 from President Habib Bourguiba after the latter appeared to have health complications that could not enable him execute his duties effectively. Ali has been reelected into the office in the subsequent elections that have been held in the country. The earlier elections were conducted under a constitution that only allowed one candidate. The running side secured majority of the parliamentary seats.

The leadership of Ben had both positive and negative implications on the social, political, and economic developments in the country. The economy was seen to grow at a considerable rate. The president advocated for foreign policies that encouraged dialogue as the approach suitable for solving emerging issues. He maintained the strong tie with the western countries and strove to develop closer relationship with other Arab nations. However, the issue of unemployment among the youth continued to worsen and the worst feature of his leadership was a violation of the rights to freedom of speech and self-expression. Various critiques and analysts including journalists were imprisoned for pointing out the weaknesses in his leadership system. The denial of freedom of speech and the

rising unemployment resulting to poverty in the rural areas led to a mass protest that saw the president resign in January this year.

Case study 3.3 The situation In Yemen

The Republic of Yemen has recorded mass protests in need of democratic leadership early this year. Several opposition activists took to streets to protest against the leadership of President Ali Abdullah Saleh (Kasinof, 2011, para.1). The wave followed the political unrest that was prevailing in Egypt and Tunisia resulting from prolonged autocratic leadership that was seen in the two Arab nations. The opposition accused the Saleh leadership of being corrupt and characterized by intense suppression. They demanded that there be a new president and pointed out that they would strongly object the constitutional reforms that would see the president serve indefinitely (Kasinof, 2011, para.3). However, unlike the political revolution that was witnessed in Tunisia, the Yemenis protests were a little peaceful with the opposition side demanding that reform agenda be developed that reflect their interests.

Case study 3.4 The situation in Syria

Syria has been under the rule of one party, Bath Party, for the last five decades (Oweis, 2011, para.1). The current president Bashar al-Assad took over the leadership in 2000 from his father. The president has continued with the authoritarian leadership, the pace that had been set by his father.

There were fears early this year that the scenario in Egypt would be witnessed in Syria as both the countries operate under the emergency law with a wide rift between the rich and the poor. The country has high unemployment rates and corruption is witnessed in the government operations (Oweis, 2011, para.10). Some ethnic clashes claimed some lives in 2004 due to water crisis that was blamed on poor government.

However, when responding to such speculations, the president asserted that there were very little chances of the upheavals witnessed in Egypt and Tunisia to be seen in Syria. He claimed that his government had a close relation with the people and understood their needs (Oweis, 2011, para.4). He pointed that one of his key areas of focus was the security of the citizens followed by economic development in the country. He admitted that there was a need to include other stakeholders of the government in the decision making process and confirmed that they had engaged in empowering people through allowing for private universities and providing the freedom of expression by the media (Oweis, 2011, para.13).

Case study 3.5 The situation in Libya

Libya has been under the rule of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi for over four decades since it gained independence in 1969 (Obama, 2011, p.1). During this period, the president struggled to develop some reform agendas including an attempt to unite the country to other Arab nations like Tunisia, Egypt or Sudan but the deals failed to succeed.

His long term presidency received opposition early this year following the uprising that were seen in the neighboring North African Arab nations. Mass protests by the opposition and from other enemy nations rocked the country. The stubborn president responded to the allegations that he had fled the country for security reasons stating that he would die while defending the rights of Libyans and he would not allow the external forces to have influence in the operations within the country.

An explanation of what happened in those leaders

Nearly all the leadership styles that have been witnessed in the case studies are of autocratic type. The leaders that have been seen in the cases are long-serving presidents who are not willing to receive a challenge from the other potential candidates. They only allow for elections when under pressure from the opposition and still use their powers to manipulate the results. The people often

take to streets to demand for a democratic kind of leadership. The generation Y (1982-200) is the major participant in such strike due to their different view of the leadership that needs to be adopted. This generation often wants to be recognized and respected (McCrindle, n.d, p.3). This means that the autocratic leaders do not enact policies that take into account the needs of the people. It is only the Syrian president that has seen a need to have a democratic leadership system that welcomes the contribution of other stakeholders like the media towards reformation of a nation.

The leaders have failed to identify the course that global politics has taken. Citizens would imitate the reform procedures that have been adopted by other nations that have proved successful regardless of its cost. Besides, they have failed to realize that combined force by international powers and various peace agreement deals that have been made by international unions have are effective in forcefully ejecting them from the office.

The future of other Arab States Regime

Most of the uprisings that have been witnessed in these Arab countries are due poor leadership that has been experienced in the regions. Countries like Egypt and Libya had a long time autocratic leadership characterized high level of dictatorship. Leaders like Hosni Mubarak of Egypt could not even appoint a vice president and remained the central authority for three decades. The power of united citizens has been seen to be effective, the other Arab countries experiencing these autocratic kinds of leadership are likely to face the upheavals characterized by excessive bloodsheds, and loss of lives as has been witnessed in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and other countries. The Arab regimes that are likely to survive are those that capitalize on Islamist movements (Wegner, 2004, p.7).

Conclusion: recommendation for the remaining leaders

It is, therefore, important to point out that a time has come that leadership style has to be adopted that takes into consideration the needs of the citizen of the country. The traditional hereditary leadership as in the case of Syria is no

longer applicable to the current generation that understands the human rights from a global context. There is need to have a democratic kind of government with regular, free and fair elections. The incumbent leaders with such old constitutions should establish constitutional reform programs. Besides, a leader who has seen signs of upheavals that have been witnessed in the Arab nations should resign to save the lives and the economy of the country. They should respond to the situations as they arise.

References

- Blaydes, L. Electoral Budget Cycles under Authoritarianism: Economic Opportunism in Mubarak's Egypt. University of California. 2008.
- Daft, R. and Lane, P. The leadership experience. 4th ed. South-Western: Cengage Learning. 2007.
- Farmer, L. Situational leadership: a model for leading telecommuters. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 13(6), 483–489, 2005.
- Griffin, D. and Stacey, R. Complexity and the experience of leading organizations. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005.
- Humphreys, J. et al. Situational Narcissism and Charismatic Leadership: A Conceptual Framework. *Journal of Behavioral and Applied Management*, 11(2), 118-136, 2010
- Kasinof, L. (2011). Are Yemen's protests going to bring another revolution? *The Christian Science Monitor*, 2011.
- Lussier, R. and Achua, C. Leadership: Theory, Application, & Skill Development. South-Western: Cengage Learning. 2009.
- Marquiz, B. and Huston, C. Leadership Roles and Management Functions in Nursing: Theory and Application. 6th ed. Beijing: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2008.
- McCrinkle, M. (n.d). Understanding Generation Y. The Australian Leadership Foundation, 2011.
- Muller, R. and Turner, J. Project-Oriented Leadership. Burlington: Gower Publishing, 2010

Northouse, P. Leadership: Theory and Practice. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2009.

Obama, B. Address to the Nation on the Situation in Libya. Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents 3/28/2011, 1-6, 2011

Oweis, K. 'Upheaval could not happen here' says Syria's authoritarian president. The Scotsman, 2011.

Scharf, M. From the eXile Files: An Essay on Trading Justice for Peace Wash & Lee L. Rev, 2006.

Skinner, R. 22 leadership principles. Bountiful: Cedar Fort, 1992.

Wegner, E. The contribution of inclusivity approaches towards the Islamist Opposition to Regime Stability in Arab States: The case of Moroccan Parti de la Justice et du Developpement. European University Institute, 2004.