

Mirror up to leadership and Strategic Human Resource Management: An Exploratory Account

Rana Zamin Abbas
Research Associate & MS Management Student
University of Management and Technology, Lahore – Pakistan
zamin.abbas@umt.edu.pk

Muhammad Ashraf
M. Phil Student, Superior University
Lahore-Pakistan
ashraf.scholar@gmail.com

Hassan Mobeen Alam (Corresponding Author)
Assistant Professor, Hailey College of Commerce
University of the Punjab, Lahore – Pakistan
hassanmobeen@yahoo.co.uk

&

Abdul Rafay
Assistant Professor, University of Management and Technology,
Lahore – Pakistan
abdul.rafay@umt.edu.pk

Abstract

Purpose

This paper focuses upon exploring the contribution of constructionism and existential perspective for the strength and value of subjective perspective of leadership as well as strategy. It also advocates the value of subjective perspective when we give due status to this approach. It invites the reconsideration of objectivist approach to leadership on logical grounds.

Methodology

This paper begins by considering the valuable input of an existentialist perspective and then explores the worth and value of social constructionist approach in leadership studies and also highlights the importance of strategy making from humanistic/ existential approach.

Findings

This paper takes a new and fresh approach about reconsidering the objectivist approach to leadership and discusses the worth of subjective approach for the value of leadership as well as humanistic/ existential approach to strategy.

Originality / Value

The real worth of this paper shines out when we strategically combine the two perspectives into one i.e. social constructionist and existential perspectives. These two perspectives act like two head lights of the vehicle of leadership from which rays of light come out for illuminating the concept of leadership. Moreover, it also presents humanistic/ existential approach to strategy. From this paper long term future implications will be beneficial both for practice and it will also provide an opportunity of understandings how people view leadership. Moreover, this paper highlights ideas that might be explored in near future.

Key Words

Leadership, Strategy, Existentialism, Constructionism, Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Paper Type: View point

Rationalist Viewpoint

Traditional approaches of leadership just focus upon distilling the essence of leadership. The fascinating questions are discussed beautifully by Grint (1997), some key statements from ancient philosophers and some from management thinkers. According to Kakabadse “from the ancient philosophers to Hobbes and Nietzsche, to current scholar, finding out what makes the visionary hero, the superhuman, the great man or woman, tick, has become an obsession”. The study of Adler and House and Aditja focus upon the limitations of such approaches. The study of Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe highlights the grave risk when we apply these very remote and out of context model of leadership and it is nothing but absolute truth that one model good for America may not be good for Pakistan. It would be a blunder when we try to seek for standard accounts/ models of leadership.

Collinson (2005), Pye(2005), Wood(2005), Dodge(2001), Popper(2004) writings focus on incorporating subjective elements. Cooper argued that the objective approach lead to the standard account of the world and yes this is useful when some constants like, physical forces, some chemical reaction, gases and stones are under discussion, but the question is this, do these models capture the lived leadership experience? The fact is that our world is very much human. Its whole existence are the functions of human beings. These standard accounts/models miss the subjective voice which is the voice of followers. This thinking further strengthens the approach which labels Leader as an active and followers as passive

agents and goes on saying that leaders are revolutionary and the followers are narrow-minded.

Existentialism and Constructionism Viewpoint:

According to existentialist our self is not a static but quite dynamic and conscious being, who is constantly in the process of becoming and constructionist call it a social construction.

According to Holy Quran Sura/Chapter 53 An-Najm, V.No.39 “That man can have nothing but what he strives for;” In other words we are conscious being to participate in a construction of reality (Yablon, 1980, p. 24, cited in Klugman, 1997, p. 303).

So when we combine these two perspectives in order to reap the benefits of both sides. At one hand existentialism perspective provides consciousness of the present as well as the future intentions to act while on the other hand constructionist gives reflection or awareness about influential factors which shape up both past and present. (Klugman 1997 p. 304)

In this way, combining these two perspectives give us complete range of present, past and future.

When we evaluate management and leadership thinking, we find that most of researchers say that the essence of something precedes its existence e.g. as we see in the case of feminist debate over essence. At this point of juncture existentialism raises the questions and asks, to which extent the spirit of human nature is measurable and essence comes first our existence. This view further get strengthened from the fact that the human nature is having inscrutable depths and can never be measured accurately only with few apparent characteristics. Here, the existentialist would argue that the reductionist approach to leadership will not consider each individual as unique and the uniqueness of each relationship.

Now we would focus upon consciousness which is the most important part of existentialism. We would summarize this and which may be gross over simplification of the concept as follows: see for detail Sartre, 2000).

- Being-in-itself: acting unreflectively;
- Being-for-itself: acting reflectively; and
- Being-for-others: reflecting on being objectified by another(s).

When we consider these dimensions/ aspects of leadership process, we observe a range of possibilities and spectrum of unique subjectivities when people interact with each other. But there is no clue of such subjectivities in objective approaches. In objective approaches to leadership these subjectivities are utterly neglected and no proper attention is given to them at all.

Social Constructionist Viewpoint

Literature provides evidence of the roots of social constructionist perspective which stems from sociology, history, anthropology, women studies, psychology, literary studies and cultural studies. According to Burr, (1995, p.2), there is no one single characteristics from the multiple disciplines about constructionist viewpoint and so there is no clear classification of this viewpoint.

It is credit of Harding (2003) who identifies the consideration of power as salient and key force in Leaders and Leadership studies. When we view leadership, as socially constructed, features like local circumstances, local practices, local processes, local situations and local ideas become noticeable. These may create a hostile climate or tend to create creative atmosphere of leadership. One such practice is dependency on leadership. In the words of Gammill and Okaley. “Dependency of leadership is a serious sign of social pathology that induces massive learned helplessness among members of a social system”.

Constructionist and existentialism gives birth to the social dynamic process of leadership and we will gain the following insights:

- Researchers’ role will be changed
- Less dependency on leaders
- management of meanings will be developed when leader and led will interact

- Consideration of the Individual perspective
- Importance of interrelated and dialogical self will be utmost

- Encouraging more open dialogue
- Character of Relationship will be discussed

Viewpoints About Strategy

The significance of utilizing people as a sustainable competitive advantage is touching the zenithal point of fame day by day, and this approach to strategy is the token of their real successes and financial viability. According to Daniel Burger, there are three salient features of strategy.

- Processes
- Leadership
- Effectiveness.

People as a Competitive Advantage viewpoint

According to Jack Welch, “the only thing that will uphold a company’s competitive advantage tomorrow is the caliber of people in the organization”.

According to Barney (1991), the resources of competitive advantage which fulfill the criteria of sustainable competitive advantage must be able to have the following features: value, scarcity, imperfect immutability, and non-substitutability. That’s why in the modern time most of the organizations are changing their perspectives and focusing upon the Heil’s declaration that “their enduring source of competitive advantage rests within their human capital” (Heil et al., 2000, p. 4) and “knowledge, experience, skills and energy of their people” (O’Reilly & Pfeffer, 2000, p. 3).

A humanistic/existential Viewpoint on strategy

Bartlett and Ghoshal (1994) gives invitation of change of perspective with his full vitality when he asserts that “[s]enior managers of today’s large enterprises must move beyond strategy, structure, and systems to a framework built on purpose, process, and people (p. 79) ... purpose – not strategy – is the reason that organizations exist (p. 88)”.

Values in humanistic/ existential psychology are not just concepts but play very central role in humanistic/existential psychology. That’s why it is the faith of French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre that individuals find meaning in life through the commitment to values (Westen, 1996). Again in the study of Maslow (1998), we observe that all humans struggle to the optimum level for their all kinds of achievements and growth and in this phenomenon, one’s independence and free decision-making are keys to open up the doors of organizational success. The study of Kilcourse (1994) provided us again the idea of “*value leadership*” that organizational intelligentia can utilize to apply the philosophy of existentialism, for financial viability and organizational success. SHRM is a long term financial planning and token/symbol of organization financial /commercial viability. So, CEOs focus upon this aspect so

that their organizations can become another 500 fortune companies and touch the zenithal point of organizational prosperity, fame and luck. Finance is an integral part of SHRM and in present time everyone is discussing quantitative aspects of finance but we are very first time discussing the qualitative factor for the successes of organization, in this paper, through the concepts of human capital, existential and constructionist approaches to leadership, link of financial viability to SHRM and value leadership. Financial viability will be adversely affected by non existence of such qualitative factors and spirit of SHRM will be deeply hurt and damaged. In research, this concept is highlighted with different names and brands e.g. intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, employee satisfactions, drive, employee retention, employee development, human capital, talent development, intellectual development, organizational effectiveness.

It is clear from the above discussion that organizational strategy is incomplete without the healthy contribution of HRM. These two are the chips of the same coin and not contradictory to each other rather complimentary to each other just like wearing the coat without trouser is humorous and funny, same is the case with organizational strategy without HRM. What will happen to organizations when HRM does not integrate with strategy? Certainly, organizations will become neurotic and will go to their natural death. Resultantly, chaos will prevail in every inch of the organizations and there will be no concept of direction and effectiveness will totally disappear from the beautiful face of organization. This beautiful face of organizations will present a very gloomy picture which is horrible and terror stricken and this is the direct contrast with the existential/humanistic face of organization. In the manner of John Keats, the organizational heart will ach and the drowsy numbness will pain the organizational sense as they have drunk hemlock.

In this way, the whole fabric of organizational life will be shattered and dejection with frustration will prevail everywhere. Resultantly, meaninglessness and alienation with a sense of irresponsibility will stigmatize the whole sphere of organization. This directionlessness will germinate again an ugly stream of chaos, creating an abyss of dismal agony and collapse everything. This is not something fictional but a something directly from the bottom of well-thought hearts like Jane Paul Sartre, Simon Debour from France, Martin Hedgier from Germany, Kafka from Czech Republic and Erich Fromm from Germany.

Summary and conclusion

Consequently, today organizations have deep realization that “their enduring source of competitive advantage sets within their human capital”(Heil et al., 2000.p.4) and the “knowledge, experience, skills and energy of their people” (O’ Reilly & Pfeffer, 2000,p.3). According to Weir and Smallman (1998), conventional view of strategy depicts “highly formalized or mechanical strategic planning” that seems a “snare”. Now, it is a high time of converting the contractual employees into the committed employees of purposeful organizations. Through the journey of HRM evolution, a new concept of integrated HRM has evolved in management thinking and has become a source of competitive advantage. This can be applied further on all levels of strategy i.e. functional level, business level, corporate level and network level, covering the range from micro to macro level. This integrated HRM approach may be instrumental for applying the existentialist principle to strategy. All CEOs, change agents, managers and leaders must be well aware and knowledgeable of these principles, so that organizational effectiveness may reach to its optimal levels and only then people’s talent will be fully utilized as a sustainable competitive advantage.

References

- Adler, N. (1999), “Global Leaders: women of influence”, in Powell, G. (Ed.), *Handbook of Gender and Work*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Alimo-Metcalfe, B. and Alban-Metcalfe, R.J. (2001), “The development of a new Transformational leadership questionnaire”, *The Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, Vol. 74 No. 1, pp. 1-27.
- Barney, J. (1991). Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage. *Journal of Management*, 17(1), 99-120.

- Bartlett, C.A. & Ghoshal, S. (1994). Changing the role of top management: beyond strategy to purpose. *Harvard Business Review*, 72(6), 79-88.
- Burr, V. (1995), *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*, Routledge, London.
- Collinson, D. (2005), "Dialectics of leadership", *Human Relations*, Vol. 58 No. 11, pp. 1419-42.
- Cooper, D.E. (1999), *Existentialism: A Reconstruction*, 2nd ed., Blackwell, Oxford.
- Daniel Burger (heil at al.(1999)A Humanistic/Existential Approach to Strategy
- Gemmill, G. and Oakley, J. (1992), "Leadership: an alienating social myth?", *Human Relations*, Vol. 45 No. 2, pp. 113-29.
- Grint, K. (Ed.) (1997), *Leadership: Classical, Contemporary and Critical Approaches*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Harding, N. (2003), *The Social Construction of Management*, Routledge, London.
- Holy Quran Sura/Chapter 53 An-Najm, V.No.39
- House, R.J. and Aditja, R.N. (1997), "The social scientific study of leadership. Quo vadis?", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 23 No. 3, pp. 407-73.
- Heil, G., Bennis, W. & Stephens, D.C. (2000). *Douglas McGregor, revisited: managing the human side of the enterprise*. New York: John Wiley.
- Hunt, J.G. and Dodge, G.E. (2001), "Leadership de'ja` vu all over again", *Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 11 No. 4, pp. 435-58.
- Jackie Ford, John Lawler, (2007) "Blending existentialist and constructionist approaches in leadership studies: An exploratory account", *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 28 Iss: 5, pp.409 - 425
- Kakabadse, A. and Kakabadse, N. (1999), *Essence of Leadership*, International Thompson Business Press, London.
- Kilcourse, T. (1994). A human resource philosophy. *Management Decision*, 32(9), 37-42.
- Klugman, D. (1997), "Existentialism and constructivism: a bi-polar model of subjectivity", *Clinical Social Work*, Vol. 25 No. 3, pp. 297-313.
- Maslow, A.H. (1998). *Maslow on management*. New York: John Wiley. 145-153). New York: John Wiley.
- O'Reilly, C.A. & Pfeffer, J. (2000). *Hidden value: how great companies achieve extraordinary*

- results with ordinary people. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Popper, M. (2004), "Leadership as relationship", *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, Vol. 34 No. 2, pp. 107-21.
- Pye, A. (2005), "Leadership and organizing: sensemaking in action", *Leadership*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 35-40.
- Sartre, J.P. (1981). *Existential psychoanalysis*. In W.S. Sahakian (Ed.). *History of psychology: a source book in systematic psychology* (pp. 441-445) (revised ed.). Itasca, IL: F.E. Peacock.
- Sartre, J-P. (2000), in Barnes, H. (transl.) (Ed.), *Being and Nothingness*, Penguin Classics, London.
- Weir, D. & Smallman, C. (1998). Managers in the year 2000 and after: a strategy for development. *Management Decision*, 36(1), 43-51.
- Wood, M. (2005), "The fallacy of misplaced leadership", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 42 No. 6, pp. 1101-2.