THE ROLE OF OBSTACLES IN LEADERSHIP FORMATION

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is on the role obstacles play in the leadership formation process. Although the discussion of obstacles is not new to the field of leadership studies, much of the focus of the previous literature has either been on the need to remove obstacles for leaders or the role that leaders play in removing obstacles for followers. A dominant example of this latter thread is the work of House (1996) in path-goal theory. Although these threads in the literature are helpful, the authors believe focused treatment on the value and function of obstacles in leadership formation is an area that deserves further attention and exploration. If identifiable leadership competencies exist within this leadership formation process, implications exist for new forms of leadership training and formation.

In light of this perceived need, the authors will (a) provide an overview of the current leadership literature surrounding obstacles, giving special attention to identifying current strengths and limitations in this literature, (b) explore relevant literature sets outside of the field of leadership in order to identify studies focused on the role and function of obstacles in personal formation, and (c) provide recommendations for future research and exploration on this important topic. Based on this review, the authors also intend to provide an argument for why obstacles are a logical and necessary part of the formation process for leaders and suggest the importance of emerging leaders attending to this dimension of their own leadership formation journey.

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, theorist and researchers have identified the role that obstacles play in the leadership process. Perhaps, the most dominant work in the literature is House's (1996) development of the pathgoal theory. House asserted that part of the responsibility leaders have in the task of leadership is to remove obstacles that present themselves to subordinates or teams (House, 1996). Along with removing obstacles for followers, assertions have been made that an effective leader removes obstacles for leading change in an organization (Kotter, 1996). While the removing of obstacles may help followers accomplish goals or successfully transition through change, the authors posit that perhaps obstacles serve as an antecedent to leadership formation. Research and theory in this area seems to represent a gap in the literature. Perhaps some of the problem is terminology. A thorough search through the literature refers to obstacles as hardships, life circumstances, adverse events, trials, etc. While this may pose a problem, it also provides a broader scope of literature that touches on this aspect of obstacles in an individual's life.

Using similar descriptors, the research provides a little insight into this area of obstacles in a person's life. One such thread looks at the obstacles that face women in the workplace and how they can overcome these cultural realities (Rutherford, 2001). Also, while no research studies have been conducted on hardships or obstacles as a leadership formation building block, many theorists have mentioned the possibility of a link between successfully overcoming hardships early in life and effectiveness as a leader (Burns, 1978; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988; Conger, 2004). Even the charismatic leadership theorists have made very small or vague mentioning of a connection between obstacles and helping followers focus on collective interests versus self-interests (Bass 1985; House & Howell, 1992; Shamir, et al, 1993). Yet, within the leadership literature, no studies have focused on any sort of link between obstacles and leadership formation.

When expanding the search for research on obstacles or hardships, an interesting thread was discovered in the arena of positive psychology. Researchers in this area argue that positive psychology within an individual is rooted in their ability to overcome obstacles, which then leads to resilience or redirected paths to goals (Luthans et al, 2007). Other theorists demonstrated a link between overcoming hardships and the development of resilience (Masten & Reed, 2002; Kersting, 2003). This link between hardships and resilience or perseverance is at the heart of what the authors assert is a needed area of research. A final area within the literature is a look at obstacles in personal formation. Zaleznik (2004) makes the argument that twice-born individuals often become leaders. The theory posits that a twice-born individual is formed in the trials and hardships of life circumstances. Again, while the leadership research doesn't make a clear connection between an individual's ability or competence to overcome obstacles and leadership formation, the literature does note the importance of hardships or obstacles in an individual's life.

LITERATURE REVIEW: OBSTACLES IN LEADERSHIP

While House's work might be the most recognized, the research concerning leaders removing obstacles for followers is well documented. Kotter (1996) developed a process for how leaders could effectively lead change within an organization. His fifth step, which is stated as empowering broad-based action, includes having the leader removing obstacles to change (Kotter, 1996). Along this same line, Glickman (2002) discussed how leaders in schools that needed extensive reform used a given framework to overcome obstacles to change. Similarly, research has looked at how women can overcome leadership obstacles (Coronel, Moreno, & Carrasco, 2010). Organizational cultures have created obstacles to women advancing in leadership positions (Gherardi, 1995; Evetts, 2000; Rutherford, 2001). Part of the argument, for why cultures have developed obstacles for women in leadership, centers on life circumstances. Career goals are often adopted to meet life circumstances (Burke & Nelson, 2002; Perrewe & Nelson, 2004; Lyness & Brumit, 2005). Research has confirmed the 'glass ceiling' and its role as an obstacle for women in leadership (Fitzgerald & Weitzman, 1992; Betz & Hackett, 1997).

However, research literature has not just focused exclusively on a leader's need to remove obstacles for followers or the role they play in the removal of obstacles. Some research looks at the link between hardships and leadership formation. Conger (2004) mentions factors that might shape an individual becoming a leader, including hardships. This rationale is reinforced by business leaders who point to experiences in their childhood, often periods of intense hardship (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988). This theme of hardships was also noted by Burns (1978) as well. He noted the frequency of hardships in the lives of great historical leaders and a willingness to endure hardships among influential people across cultures and periods of time (Burns, 1978). A number of charismatic leadership theories have discussed a leader's ability to shift a follower's focus from self to collective interests as a side effect of having learned to overcome hardships (Bass, 1985; House & Howell, 1992; Shamir, et al, 1993).

Closely aligned with the literature on a leader's removing obstacles for followers is the literature on positive psychology. Luthans et al (2007) affirms that positive psychology birthed from overcoming obstacles leads to persevering toward goals or redirecting paths to goals. Kersting (2003) continues this thought by noting that positive psychology capital is developed through a pattern of overcoming hardships that leads to resilience. Masten and Reed (2002) likewise discuss the link between hardships and resilience building, and Wagnild and Young (1993) developed a measure for it. Each of these studies added to the positive psychology literature, specifically proving that resiliency can be developed. Resilience, in positive psychology, is recognized by positive coping and adaptation (Masten, 2001; Masten and Reed, 2002). In an organizational setting, resilience is characterized as one's ability to bounce back from adversity or hardships (Luthans, 2002a). According to clinical psychologists, resilience can increase once an individual has bounced back from an adverse event (Richardson, 2002). In other words, individuals likely become more resilient to an adverse event each time they bounce back effectively (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). This is where a link can be drawn between overcoming obstacles and leadership formation. For example, in discussing the positive impact of efficacy, Bandura (1998, p.62) notes, "success usually comes through renewed effort after failed attempts," Luthans et al (2007) assert that resiliency combined with hope assists the individual in bouncing back while also building selfefficacy levels to handle future hardships. Overcoming hardships enables a leader to empathize and sacrifice for their followers. Similarly, Conger and Kanungo (1987) list the ability to sacrifice for followers as one of the critical elements of leadership.

LITERATURE REVIEW: OBSTACLES IN PERSONAL FORMATION

Obstacles—often in the form of pain, difficulty, and struggle—provide a shaping influence on any life. In his book entitled *Tell Me a Story: The Life-Shaping Power of Our Story*, Daniel Taylor presents a case for the power of story by emphasizing how the many-textured stories of our lives, including stories of both joy and hardship, have a profound impact on the human experience. Taylor writes, "The point is not to tell only Pollyanna tales about one's beginnings. It is to see tales of pain in the context of a larger whole. We should marvel as much that pain coexists with and even stimulates good as we lament pain's destructive consequences" (2001, p. 62) While such considerations are arguably important for any individual, these certainly are important considerations for leaders whose formation was shaped by struggle and obstacles.

Zaleznik (2004) makes such an argument in his discussion of the twice-born leader. Zaleznik points to "once-born" and "twice-born" personalities, and argues that it is twice-born personalities who tend to be leaders. While once-born individuals have fairly straightforward and relatively peaceful experiences in adjusting to life, Zaleznik describes twice-born individuals as often not having an easy time, and have lives marked by continual struggle to attain some sense of order. The result of this is twice-born individuals having a sense of separateness from people and organizations around them, and this, Zaleznik argues, is often the very reason twice-born individuals emerge as leaders. This sense of feeling separate from their environment, including other people, provides a basis for being able to lead without being dependent on what others think about their decisions and actions. Zaleznik puts it this way: "They may work in organizations, but they never belong to them. Their sense of who they are does not depend upon membership, work roles, or other social indicators of identity" (79).

Using different language, but referring to a related concept, Friedman (2007) argues for the importance of self-differentiation in leaders. At a basic level, self-differentiation is a concept that describes a person's emotional capacity to function in a manner that is not overly-dependent on the opinions of others, and thus the self-differentiated person is able to maintain a non-anxious presence in the face of differing opinions and realities external to themselves both inside and outside their organization. In some ways, a self-differentiated leader is the result of someone who has navigated the waters of the twice-born experience in a healthy manner such that differentiation from others is not a commitment to coldness and lack of community, but rather wholeness that is not emotionally bolstered by the opinions of others. In

Friedman's words, "Thus, self-differentiation is shown to be a force that is not anti-togetherness; on the contrary, it is a force that modifies the emotional processes within any group's togetherness so that a leader actually promotes community through the emerging self-differentiation (autonomy, independence, individuality) of the other members" (p. 25).

How does this all related to leadership formation? Friedman (2007) argues that without self-differentiation, leaders are held captive to reactive models of leadership that are characterized by a core failure of nerve. In contrast to this type of reactive leadership, self-differentiated leadership is able to provide direction and guidance that is not primarily looking to the opinions of others. Self-differentiated leaders, often formed through twice-born experiences of pain and struggle, possess the capacity to lead courageously and effectively because their sense of self is not immediately connected to their position or the opinions of those around them. We would argue that the seeds of such twice-born and self-differentiated leadership often sprout to life in the soil of adversity, pain, trails, and obstacles. These obstacles become an essential pathway for the formation of deep leadership capacity that is able to weather the storms of organizational and societal chaos that surrounds today's leaders.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM & RESEARCH QUESTION

The problem in the literature is obstacles have not been clearly looked at as an antecedent to leadership formation. Conger (2004) notes that the degree to which an individual develops into a leader is shaped by many factors. These factors include personality traits, family background, educational experiences, hardships, job experiences, supervisors, organizational motivation, and leadership training (Conger, 2004). Comparably, business leaders when asked what factors influenced their leadership formation pointed to periods of intense challenge or hardship (McCall et al., 1988). Research conducted on managers and leaders identified that the job tasks, supervisors, hardships, and special projects were considered the most significant for leadership development (Conger, 2004). If hardships or obstacles in the early life of an individual represent a significant role in leadership formation, then should not the leadership literature explore this as a potential step, which may even be determined to develop into a leadership competency? Everyone experiences some sort of hardships in life; however, future leaders utilize these obstacles as a training ground by overcoming them. Perhaps leadership researchers, theorists, and practitioners need to rethink these steps within leadership formation that may grow into leadership competencies. As stated previously, the recognition of overcoming hardships by leaders is not new to the literature. However, assigning it as a competency that is a critical factor in leadership development is new. Burns (1978), in looking at great leaders, noticed a great frequency of hardships and suffering. Comparable examinations about the hardships overcome by great leaders have also been observed by Barber (1977) and Merton (1946).

If overcoming obstacles is a necessary leadership competency within the formation of a leader, does it begin the process or is it simply another determination factor of effective leadership. Yorges et al (1999) raised a similar question concerning whether or not positive effects of overcoming obstacles results in leader "benefiting." They assert that by going through hardships, a leader might obtain or expect to attain something valued (Yorges et al, 1999). This leads to another question concerning whether past hardships cause leaders to be able to make current sacrifices. According to their study, leaders who sacrificed became more influential to followers and increased in positive perceptions among followers (Yorges et al, 1999). Can a leader decide to be sacrificial without having learned the art of overcoming obstacles earlier in life?

LEADERSHIP FORMATION: A MODEL

The aforementioned problem within the literature and resulting questions has led the authors to formulate the following model for leadership formation. As discussed previously, the first step is overcoming obstacles. Life is full of obstacles. Often times, strong leaders overcome adversity at young ages.

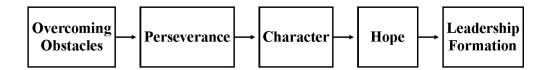
"Leaders tend to emerge from problematic family backgrounds, which honed their conscious coping skills. These skills included self-sufficiency and taking care of others. These leaders also had to learn to deal with crises and uncertainty early in their lives. Some were subjected to upheaval, domestic relocations, and adjusting to new circumstances, people, schools, and infrastructures several times." The type of obstacles and level of intensity are not necessarily of importance, as much as, the individual's ability to actively engage in the process of learning while navigating successfully through these obstacles. An argument can be made that the current leadership gap exists because of this missing critical piece of the leadership formation process. An argument could be made that the current U.S. culture despises obstacles. Individuals try to figure out ways to quickly get through a hardship or navigate ways around them.

This lack of overcoming obstacles has led to the missing factor of perseverance, which is the second step in the leadership formation process. An individual cannot persevere if they do not have obstacles or adversity in their lives. Perseverance comes from the continued overcoming of obstacles of various degrees. Again, the process takes time. Learning to persevere through tough circumstances may take a lifetime. Some never learn this skill. President Calvin Coolidge famously stated, "Press On. Nothing in the world can take the place of perseverance. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Perseverance and determination alone are omnipotent." However, an in depth look at a strong leader's story will uncover the development of this trait. The authors argue that the leadership competency of perseverance can only be developed through these early obstacles or hardships in life. In looking at the development of this competency, it would not be advisable to create obstacles or hardships, but rather to not shelter developing leaders from all obstacles and hardships. Life is full of trials. The formation of leadership only requires that the individual actively engage in learning during these times.

The art of perseverance aids in the development of the third step in the leadership formation process which is character. Strong leaders have unwavering character. Too often, we read about politicians, business leaders, athletes, and others who have made glaring mistakes, which are a direct result of this missing competency of character. John Luther asserted that, "good character is more to be praised than outstanding talent. Most talents are, to some extent, a gift. Good character, by contrast, is not given to us. We have to build it piece by piece – by thought, choice, courage, and determination." Having strong character does not mean the leader is perfect. However, character is witnessed even in the handling of a mistake. In U.S. society, these leaders, who lack character, utilize the skills of a public relations expert and marketing professionals to say and do the "right" things after they have made a mistake in character. Often, we are quick to forgive these mistakes of character due to this "professional" handling of the situation. Yet, make no mistake about it, these individuals will often suffer the same fate again in the future. The authors would argue that an individual can't fake strong character and one certainly can't develop it over night. Again, this character competency is developed in the midst of persevering through many trials or obstacles.

The obtaining of the competency of character leads to the fourth step of the leadership formation process which is hope. Many times we lament the lack of inspiration in our leaders. When followers catch a glimpse of it, they jump in with little restraint to what the leader is championing. Leaders who possess the competency of hope have a way of inspiring followers. However, inspiration or hope that is not based on character has the potential to be destructive. Take Hitler for example. He was very persuasive and inspiring. Many Germans got caught up in the rhetoric and the hope of a strong Germany. However, due to the lack of character, Hitler's inspiration centered around the destruction of others to obtain the vision for Germany. According to Chesterton (1912), "hope is the power of being cheerful in circumstances which we know to be desperate. It is true that there is a state of hope which belongs to bright prospects and the morning: but that is not the virtue of hope. The virtue of hope exists only in earthquake and

eclipse . . . exactly at the instant when hope ceases to be reasonable it begins to be useful" (p. 159). The competency of hope translates into a leader creating an inspiring vision.



According to the presented model above, the development of these four leadership competencies forms important steps or markers that are involved in the leadership formation process. These four competencies lead to a type of leadership that produces empowerment, role-modeling, community, loyalty, and trust among followers. According to DeCremer et al (2009), a function of leadership is to inspire followers to think of the group's efforts over their own self-interest. The effectiveness of this type of leadership could be measured through loyalty of followers. In other words, what is the longevity of followers within the organization? The second measure would be the level of replication. How many individuals have developed these competencies with the assistance of the leader? A third measure would be ethical behavior observed regardless of circumstances. Again, together these competencies create the process of leadership formation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Given the discussion concerning the importance of obstacles in the formation process of a leader, several implications become evident for future research. The first recommendation is to conduct research specifically aimed at looking at the relationship between obstacles in an individual's life and the leadership formation process. Within this study, research could focus on the types of obstacles, as well as, the intensity and duration of the hardships. In addition, the study could define what constitutes actively engaging in the process during these hardships and what signifies successfully overcoming the obstacle. Finally, this specific research recommendation could determine what specific by-products are developed within a leader who successfully navigates through these various hardships in life. A second recommendation for future research would be to study the connection between hardships and the development of perseverance. There might be several traits or competencies developed from overcoming obstacles, but this research would look at the link between hardships and perseverance. Within the study, research could focus on whether the intensity and duration have an effect on the development of perseverance, as well as, whether hardships in a given area develop a general competency of perseverance or a specific perseverance in that specific area. A third recommendation for future research would be to study the connection between perseverance and character. The literature champions many attributes or traits of a leader with character. Research even reinforces the reality that character can't be taught, but rather, it can be molded or shaped. Therefore, a significant amount of research has focused on mentoring and coaching. While the authors would agree that mentoring and coaching are valuable methods for developing leaders, they would champion research that helps determine the roots of character development. A fourth recommendation for future research would be in the area of hope. A study is needed to look at the link between character and the development of an inspiring vision. The research could examine the various components of character as each relates to a compelling vision or hope.

SUMMARY

The leadership formation process is complex. In this paper we have engaged the current leadership literature surrounding obstacles, briefly explored the literature focused on the role and function of obstacles in personal formation outside the leadership literature, and have provided recommendations for future research in light of this literature. In addition to this, we argue that there are markers or major components of this leadership formation, the first of which is the development of a leadership competency that is gained and shaped through the active engagement in hardships or obstacles. By overcoming obstacles, a person builds a competency to successfully deal with and bounce back from future hardships. This leadership competency would enable a leader to empathize with followers and create assistance for handling obstacles within an organizational setting. Because of this, we encourage further study in this area in order that the importance and function of obstacles in the leadership formation process may be better understood and may shape how individuals foster healthy leadership formation processes in their community and organizational contexts.

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