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What leadership means to me?

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1. Introduction

Although leadership is recognised as being an important construct, it is not a concept that holds one single definition. What leadership actually is, or how to define it correctly is still regarded as a mystery by many. Leadership is something that may differ depending on the people involved, the situation at hand, and the goals being pursued, and is therefore open to subjective interpretation. Stogdill (1974: 259) concluded that there are 'almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept'. It could be argued that everyone has their own understanding of what constitutes leadership, based on personal and learning experiences, and situations and people, which is exactly why it is difficult to capture in a succinct definition. Grint (2004) narrows down the key reasons as to why it is so difficult to find a single and agreed understanding of leadership: process problems, position problems, philosophy problems, and purity problems. These problems refer to whether leadership is derived from traits or a social process, whether a leader is automatically in charge with formally allocated authority, and the questions as to whether a leader has intentional influence on the behaviour of followers, and is leadership embodied in individuals or groups and is it a purely human phenomenon.

This essay seeks to explore what leadership means to me, drawing on personal experience of leadership as a social phenomenon, and discussing my views from the perspective of both a leader and follower. In order to make sense of my understanding of leadership, a critical review and commentary on leadership theory is included in the discussion.

2. Personal Experience of Leadership Within the Workplace

For the past five years I have had a part time job at Marks and Spencer, and thus come across many types of leaders and managers. The question often asked is whether a manager can automatically be assumed to also be a leader? Zalenznik (1977) was one of the first to contrast leadership and management as he argued that a leader uses creativity and intuition, whereas a manager solves problems using rationality and control. Since then, many academics have agreed and argued that 'good management brings about a degree of order and consistency to organisational processes and goals, whilst leadership is required for dynamic change' (Kotter 1990: 104 cited in Bolden 2004: 6). In an organisation such as Marks and Spencer then, it is essential that they have both good management, who offer stability, consistency, order and efficiency, and good leaders who produce important change by keeping employees focused and motivated to achieve the vision communicated. In my workplace, I would say we have good 'managers' based on the above assumptions, however, I would not say that every manager is also a good leader. For this reason I agree with Kotter and Zalenznik, leadership and management differ from one another substantially.

In the workplace context I am a follower, and so from this perspective I have seen what I would consider to be good leadership, and poor leadership styles. The authors who have focused on followers suggest that they are active participants in the leadership relationship...

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