

Leadership Analysis of Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook
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Abstract

This paper explores two different leadership traits, the Trait Approach Theory and the Transformational Leadership Theory. These theories describe core traits that leaders typically demonstrate and how they influence the kind of leader a person becomes or has the potential to become. These two theories have similarities and tend to intertwine. Transformational leaders tend to exhibit a lot of the core traits described in the Trait Approach Theory. A great example of these two theories can be seen in Facebook COO, Sheryl Sandberg. This paper will explore Sandberg's leadership style and what characteristics she displays to her team.

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Leadership is not one size fits all. It does not only apply to men and it has many facets. There are several theories that define leadership. Some focus on traits that we as individuals are born with, and others focus on what we know and the environment around us. For the purposes of this analysis, I am going to focus on the Trait Approach to leadership as well as the Path-Goal Theory.

History of Leadership

The definition of leadership has changed over many decades. In the early 1900's, leadership revolved around power and control, sometimes even domination was referenced. In the 1930's, domination turned into influence and how a leader interacted with individuals on their team. It was also in the 1930's when people started to believe that not only could the leader influence the team, but the team could influence the leader (Northouse, 2016). The 1940's and 1950's focused on the group approach to leadership and shared goals. The 1960's seemed to be a turning point in defining leadership when behavior and traits were used to define leadership.

The 1970's brought us the organizational behavior, which is when leaders are tasked with using a group to accomplish organizational goals. The 1980's and 1990's began the discussion of traits, influence, and transformation tied in with the old definition of leaders are there to direct their followers (Northouse, 2016). Today, there is a question of how different the process of leadership and management differ (Northouse, 2016). There is focus on four leadership approaches: 1) authentic leadership, 2) spiritual leadership, 3) servant leadership, and 4) adaptive leadership. Despite the efforts to define these approaches, it is certain, there is no clear definition of leadership.

Analysis

For this assignment, I chose to analyze Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook. Currently, she is ranked as #16 on Fortune's 50 Most Powerful Women in Business list. If that is not impressive enough, Mrs. Sandberg attended Harvard Business School where she graduated summa cum laude with a degree in economics. She worked at the World Bank following graduation. She worked in The U.S. Department of the Treasury while President Clinton was in office and then, in 2000, she began her role as the Vice President of Sales Operations at Google. She took over as COO of Facebook in 2008, where she oversees the business operations and marketing on a global scale. While at Harvard Business School, Sandberg became passionate about inequities that women face in the workplace. In 2013, Sandberg authored a book called *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. The book led to a foundation called LeanIn.org, which supports women and helps them achieve their goals.

There are several leadership qualities that are repeatedly tied to Sheryl Sandberg. Just to name a few: compassionate, courageous, influential, ambitious, fierce, insightful, and driven. All of these descriptive words lead us to the Trait Approach Theory of leadership. This theory argues that the traits that an individual has influence what kind of leader they are and how successful they are as a leader across different situations. Thomas Carlyle, an early researcher in the Trait Theory believed that leaders are born, not trained (Cherry, 2018). His studies focused on how leaders and followers are different. However, researchers found that there are very few traits that set leaders apart (Cherry, 2018).

In 1948, Ralph Stogdill's study on the Trait Approach Theory suggested that leadership happens when there is interaction between an individual and the social situation, rather than a set of traits (Cherry, 2018). This finding indicates that leaders are not leaders just because of the

traits that they are born with. Rather, based on the situation, the leader must possess certain traits (Northouse, 2016). It is possible that one may demonstrate leadership qualities in one situation, but not in another. This finding led to a new leadership approach that investigated the connection between behavior and situations (Northouse, 2016). In 1974, Stogdill conducted another study that found that both predefined traits and different situations contribute to leadership (Cherry, 2018). This study generated a list of ten personality traits that are associated with leaders.

Later, researchers Kirkpatrick and Locke argued that six clearly defined traits separated leaders from non-leaders: drive, motivation, integrity, confidence, cognitive ability and task knowledge (Northouse, 2016). As stated earlier, the leadership descriptors used when talking about Mrs. Sandberg's leadership style, all of these traits can be identified. Kirkpatrick and Locke argue that leaders are not only born with these traits, but that they can be learned (Winch, 2015). There is some debate about this finding and is something that could be explored more. While several researchers each developed their own set of traits that leaders possess, there is a common set of traits associated with leaders. That list includes: intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability (Northouse, 2016). Sheryl Sandberg demonstrates all of these core leadership traits. Her graduation from Harvard Business with high honors, her drive to pursue positions that may have seemed out of her reach and the confidence to do so, along with her reputation as someone who talks to employees, actually listens to them and therefore is seen as involved and trustworthy, all demonstrate that she is a successful leader.

Being a successful leader means motivating the individual's team to help the organization succeed. Creating and managing a team that stands behind the organization's mission is a team that will feel intrinsic motivation to succeed (Denhardt, Denhardt & Aristigueta, 2016). Employees who feel that they have a voice and have autonomy to make decisions, tend to have

higher job satisfaction (Denhardt, Denhardt & Aristigueta, 2016). It's important for a leader to recognize that each employee is different and that they bring a different skill set. When leaders recognize that they can transform their team using emotions, ethics, goals, and values, they can, in fact, begin to create a strong team (Denhardt, Denhardt & Aristigueta, 2016). This theory, called the Transformational Leadership Theory, focuses on treating employees as human beings rather than just numbers. This theory requires that the leader be charismatic and is able to see success in the future and how to obtain it. It is successful when the leader assesses the employee's needs, what motivates them, and what satisfies them as an employee (Northouse, 2016).

Transformation leadership was first introduced by Downton in 1973, (Northouse, 2016). Following along with what Downton proposed, another researcher by the name of James Burns added to the Transformational Leadership Theory by proposing that leaders are successful because they are good at recruiting good employees and recognizing skills and talents in each employee and using that to help the organization reach its goals (Northouse, 2016). Burns argued that transformational leaders are attentive to their teams needs and what motivates them, and that helping employees reach their full potential is beneficial to not only the employee and the leader, but the organization as well (Northouse, 2016).

According to Burns, in order to be a transformational leader, the individual must be charismatic (Northouse, 2016). This is where the trait theory and transformational leadership theory begin to intertwine. Charismatic leaders exhibit many of the traits mentioned in the trait theory. What is charisma? Weber (1947) defines charisma as, "...a special personality characteristic that gives a person superhuman or exceptional powers and is reserved for a few, is of divine origin and results in the person being treated as a leader," (Northouse, 2016, p. 164).

Weber argued that being charismatic as a leader is just as important as being validated as charismatic by employees. One characteristic defined in the transformational leadership theory is having a sense of the individual's own personal moral values. Leaders that believe in and stand behind their moral values tend to influence others (Northouse, 2016). Sheryl Sandberg's dedication to equality for women in the workplace is a great example of a leader standing behind her moral value.

While charisma plays an important role in the transformational leadership theory, so does behavior. According to Bass (1999), transformational leaders appear competent to their followers, they are role models for values and morals, they ensure that goals are clear, they set high expectations, and they motivate their followers. Leading by example, there is a story in Sheryl Sandberg's book about her time at Google when she attended a meeting with top level administrators and when asked why she did not attend the previous meeting, she firmly replied that she had attended a school function for her daughter. A few weeks later, one of her top performers missed a meeting and when she got back to her desk there was an email waiting for her from that employee stating that he had missed the meeting for a school function for one of his children and thanked her for recognizing the importance of work-life balance (Green, 2013). Another name for this action, according to the Transformational Leadership Theory is idealized influence (Northouse, 2016). Idealized influence is when a leader is seen as role model and followers want to imitate that behavior. According to Northouse (2016) transformational leaders have the respect of their followers and their followers place a lot of trust in the leader.

Northouse (2016) describes four factors of transformational leadership. The first one is idealized influence, which was just discussed. The second factor is inspirational motivation. Inspirational motivation describes leaders who set and communicate high expectations for their

followers. This leader inspires his/her followers using motivation to get them on board with the organization's mission and vision (Northouse, 2016). The third factor is called intellectual stimulation, which describes a leader who encourages followers to seek out creativity and innovation (Northouse, 2016). The last factor, called individualized consideration, refers to leaders who take the time to talk to and listen to each of their followers and treats them with respect and dignity (Northouse, 2016). It was reported that when Sheryl Sandberg began her job at Facebook, she visited the desks of every employee she could to introduce herself, ask questions about their role and changes they would like to see (Doyle, 2017). Sandberg's actions clearly demonstrate individualized consideration. Sandberg believes that when leaders show vulnerability, their followers trust them more and identify with their actions more so than if a leader is always dictating and giving instructions (Doyle, 2017).

Sheryl Sandberg's book, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, addresses what used to be a taboo subject: women in leadership positions. She works diligently as an advocate to encourage women to "think like a man." Her comments have caused some backlash from feminists, but she argues that a person can still be a woman and think like a man. She encourages women to have the tough conversations, to speak with confidence, ask for more money, and "*address the white elephant in the room*," meaning do not be shy about the hard-to-talk-about subjects (Doyle, 2017). Most recently, she has expressed thoughts on women vs. men when it comes to salary differences. She argues that while this gap has improved in the last 50 years, there is still a long way to go. It is my opinion that when we look back at Sheryl Sandberg's career decades from now, her leadership accomplishments will show great strides for women in leadership roles.

Bernard Bass (1999) stated, “Transformational leadership refers to the leader moving the follower beyond the immediate self-interest through idealized influence (charisma), inspiration, intellectual stimulation, or individualized consideration. It elevates the follower’s level of maturity and ideals as well as concern for achievement, self-actualization, and the well-being of other, the organization, and society,” (p. 11). One can see that transformational leaders are influential, charismatic, confident, intelligent, driven and insightful; all core traits as described in the trait theory and all the traits demonstrated by Sheryl Sandberg.

Richard Branson, founder of Virgin Group, says, “Nobody is successful alone – and you cannot be a great leader without great people to lead. The trick is in striking the right balance between empowering your staff and being an example to follow,” (Pirouz, 2017). This quote summarizes the leadership theories I have addressed and just how important it is that the two theories intertwine. Leading people is easy, but being a leader takes skill.

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