

TOWARDS LEADERSHIP AS APPLIED CONCEPT

Albena Taneva, Sofia University ¹

Abstract

This article aims to present the leadership approach as an applied concept. It is argued that the transformation of the “managerial approach” into leadership-type interaction is entirely due to the leader's self-management in a certain role. The case of a small IT start-up is outlined as an illustration of success based on a specific leadership approach.

Speaking of leadership, it is easy to start a panegyric for important or famous people. However, even the most famous and successful had to start with the first step towards their long journey. The article approaches the issue of leadership through the distinction between leadership as an achievement and leadership as an approach. The analysis is made based on an understanding of leadership as a specific interaction between a person in a leading position with a group (which is subject to mobilization as followers) within a certain situation (circumstances) to resolve a group issue. What is observed is the specific way of establishing the relationships between the elements involved in this process. They are developed based on a specific approach which can be defined as interaction between the participants mediated by self-management in the respective role.

Successful fulfilling a personal role is not a simple projection of individual traits but an approach based on a specific design, understanding and desired result in relation to it. Interaction with other participants presupposes the ability to self-manage oneself in a given role. It is this projected "I" that is the image perceived by others who interact with it to resolve the issues that have brought them together in a given interaction. The described case aims to illustrate how all this happens.

Is it possible to consider a case that has just begun and which we do not know how will end to be called leadership? This case presented in this article. It seems that such an approach will highlight something specific in it, which allows us to recognize the peculiarities of what is called leadership. The focus here is not primarily on the approach itself, but on its application to case that confirms its potential for successful decomposition of the process to its elements involved and recognition of those features that have contributed to its development as a leadership case. The follow-up of a currently developing case highlights one key feature – that the achievement of positive results for all parties involved is due to a specific approach and not to the availability of new resources.

In short, the sequence of steps that apply to an already existing case (or to an endeavor that is under construction) refers to the interaction of the elements in the process – leader, followers and situation, and topic (or problem) that puts them in touch (interaction), which plays the role of a “common denominator”. This is the basis of a description of a leadership case. In this sense, we will understand leadership as a specific way of doing things. What way? It is not a scheme that

¹ Albena Taneva currently works at the Department of Public Administration, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". Albena does research in Policy Studies, Holocaust Studies, Political Theory and Leadership. Her publications are "The Power of Civil Society in a Time of Genocide: Proceedings of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church on the Rescue of the Jews in Bulgaria 1940-1944"; "Leadership - Governance Beyond Domination"; Currently she works on the second renewed edition of her exhibition "The Power of Civil Society" and on Methodological Issues of Leadership.

must be applied to get a certain result. In fact, the opposite is true – these are specific attitudes towards entering the role on the part of the leading figure, which are a prerequisite for consolidating a community into followers.

This means telling the story of how the result was achieved thanks to the leader's approach, his/her way of interacting with the followers to solve their problem and to improve the situation. For example, this could be a mayor of a city who manages to organize the administration so that the city develops in spite of some obstacle (Taneva, 2014). This could be a director of a department, a teacher, a school principal, a conductor, a coach, simply a neighbor, who addresses the others concerning an issue of certain importance for their community, etc. The procedure of decomposition of a given case should start (1) with a definition of *the problem of the group*, in the name of which the interaction between the leader and group has been started. This means to answer the question *what* started the relationship between the leader and a certain group – namely the description of the *problem/topic* that puts in interaction the leader and those led by him/her.

Illustrations are to be found in countless examples. I have chosen to present the application of leadership analysis based on a story described by Eric Schmidt – an Erasmus student in Sofia University from the University of Leipzig. There are several reasons to dwell on this example. First, it describes the beginning of a relationship in a small IT start-up business that has no claim to be anything special, extraordinary, particularly bright, charismatic, or any of the things that stand out when it comes to leadership. Secondly, it is interesting to note that this is a case that is at the very beginning of its construction. We do not know how it will really develop in the future. However, it can be said that the sequence of actions of the participants is like a textbook. It contains all the potential to develop into a successful and sustainable company not because it started with large resources available, but on the contrary – missing such. What distinguishes it is the approach of its initiators. This is the focus of this article: the most important feature in leadership is the approach, or in other words, the way things are done.

As formulated by Eric Schmidt, how can a student technology startup become a successful company? Many young technology companies dream of their own startup's success inspired by American companies such as Facebook or Amazon. So, the topic of the case was about a technology startup.

Do we believe that it is eligible to address a small enterprise like startup endeavor through the categories of the leadership analysis? Actually, the following case speaks exactly about that – the beginning of a startup company in the field of hi-tech services. The idea in this case comes from two students who are approaching their MA graduation. Their profile as introduced by Eric Schmidt as leaders, says:

“Shortly before the end of their studies, Felix and Mattis decide to start a company together. Felix was already an experienced programmer at the time. Felix has been working part-time for a software company since school and has many other projects during his studies.

Mattis can also program. Both got to know each other at the beginning of their studies in economics. Mattis saw his strengths above all in the entrepreneurial area and switched to mastering business administration. The first projects were acquired and Felix decided to pause the postgraduate course and start working independently. Mattis has a Masters degree in Business Administration and will begin a 24-month training program at big company.”

Their small company is started. The division of their roles is divided into a role for Felix as a general manager and the main developer and for Mattis as supporter of the company on a strategic level. The university library is used as an office for the first few weeks of its foundation and thereafter. The project situation is very good and the first

projects have been completed. The two founders saw potential to grow. As per their own words, by that time their young company had the main goal of hiring more employees. It turns out to be difficult to find enough experienced employees. The founders themselves were students recently. So, their approach was to look for future employees in the universities, colleges and other platforms to find motivated students.²

Following the algorithm for analysis in the light of understanding leadership as interaction between individual in a leading role with a group transformed into followers in the frame of situation common for them in regard to solve a problem of those led, it should start with the *portraying of the leader*. Then, it is easy to deconstruct what is already known about these actors following a series of consecutive steps:

- 1) which of his / her *leadership qualities*³ are recognized as
 - attitude to perform the activity so that the problem/topic will be resolved in the best way for all parties concerned and mainly for those led (this is **optimism** or positivism); this is a **subjective** understanding that the current personal status and approach to the problem would bring the individuality of the leader to best performance as a leader in the particular case
 - the extent to which the given leader is prepared to do things (these are objective arguments) – how this person is really prepared for the given role (**intelligence**, specific experience for the particular role, complexity of the individuality)
 - the way the given leader establishes the relations with the group and how he/she communicates his/her ideas and how he/she organizes the group (**communication**);
 - in what way the leader withstands adversity and difficulties (**energy**)
 - how does he/she keep the support of his followers on (i.e. how he "closes" the opened expectations at the beginning of the relationship based on promises of the leader in the beginning of the process); how issues raised are resolved;
- 2) description of *the followers*:
 - who they are - what type of community it is;
 - what is the structure of the group;
 - what makes them a group - whether a common threat or a common job, etc.
 - how many are they and all relevant objective data (demographic structure)
- 3) description of the specificity of *the situation* based on SWOT analysis or other type of methodology.

The application of this approach should begin with the search for the initial impulse for the interaction between the leaders and those being led. In other words, the first step is the question, how does this case, which is stated as an illustration of a leadership approach, begin? Obviously, as described in the beginning of this article, this is the business intention of two students. They have an idea and no resources to implement it. Instead of focusing on what is missing, they are flexible and look for ways to overcome the deficit. Obviously, they need more staff to implement the projects they have acquired. However, they have nothing to offer in order to be competitive for

² The plot of the case is presented by the student Eric Schmidt from the University of Leipzig, who studied my course in Leadership in the Master's program in Public Administration at Sofia University in the framework of the academic exchange under the Erasmus program. The development is part of the written assignment, made according to the given algorithm.

³ I follow the notion of leader's qualities as introduced in Berkley and Rouse in their "The Craft of Public Administration"

attracting experienced staff. As substitution of this disadvantage they turn it into advantage. They look for candidates where they come from – in university platforms. They expect to find motivated students there, even if these potential candidates do not have sufficient experience and skills in the field of web programming. The strong point, however, is that students are usually highly motivated and ready to work for less money. Students often have theoretical knowledge and little practical experience. That is why the motivation for an internship when starting in the field of web programming is high. Here students can gain skills and experience to use in ongoing projects. This business project offers a full-time internship for a month and an internship fee of several hundred euros. With this approach, many of the first employees with valuable skills were found.

The next step after hiring staff, the two initiators of this start-up company is dedicated to the design of the business schedule, which is made on the principle of flexibility. Not only employees working in the "office" are hired, but also two who work remotely. The first employee is a full-time student at the end of his master's degree. The work is progressing fast and the situation is changing in the direction of business growth. For this reason, the first temporary office in the library is insufficient and must be replaced with a real one. The bigger problem, however, is ensuring the stability of the team. Despite the interesting projects, two of the hired students decided to find another job. Both were promising employees and had earned a reputation for being very useful to the company.

Here is the place to emphasize that the initial stage of the relationship between manager and employees can evolve into a relationship of leadership, if they are not limited to setting tasks, deadlines and control, but make constant efforts to consolidate employees as a team or even followers. This is exactly what is clear from the case presented here that was done by the two young boys in their start-up project. Despite their frustration with some setbacks and the loss of employees, they have devised a strategy to keep employees long-term. The focus of their efforts was to strengthen the employees' sense of belonging to the company. Their goal was to build a pleasant corporate culture. The tools in this regard can be very different. In this case, they choose to build their company as a community with a friendly corporate culture. Their staff is very young. This harmonizes well with the idea of incorporating initiatives for a pleasant time together. This includes the organization of a party attended by all participants in the company as a friendly community. Other activities include playing cards, playing football, having a barbecue or ordering pizza at the end of the day. There is, of course, a Christmas party with a program that includes everyone's participation, as well as a visit together to the Christmas market in Leipzig, where the action of this start-up takes place. A billiard table for playing together was also bought. The result of these efforts is the achievement of a family-type corporate culture. Other friendships have been made in the company, even outside of everyday work. Some of the rituals include eating lunch together with free drinks provided by the company. The evolving corporate culture has contributed to the fact that no employee has left the company in the last year.

It is worth noting that the motivation and energy for overtime also increases. As an illustration of the dedicated work of each member of the team is a banal moment related to overtime work due to changes in the task by the client. The day before the planned end of the project, a client made unexpected changes. For this reason, they had to work 14 hours late at night. With joint efforts and the shared pizza for all, they overcame the challenge. The feeling of teamwork in the interaction was a new level reached. Although the pleasure of work is an achievement, it is not enough for the competitiveness of the endeavor, which is a new challenge for it.

Although the company has already hired enough employees and has new customers, the effectiveness of the approach has not been achieved. It is clear that leadership in the organization of the work of a company is not an occasion to build friendly relations, but a way to achieve common goals together by all. In other words, the leader's relationship with those led is a way to achieve their common goals, not a way to replace them. It turns out that many of the working hours of employees come into conflict with other activities of this young company. The time budget

provides hours for additional training, as well as for other organizational tasks. For this reason, a solution was sought to improve communication to increase productivity. The decision was made on the basis of a discussion with the participation of all employees responsible for developing strategies. The problem is defined and everyone is invited to comment. The vision and methods of work are also discussed. The meeting turned out to be very useful, as a result of which it was incorporated as a permanent management tool and started to be held every month. Each employee receives a specialized field of activity in which he is active. Meetings serve to exchange knowledge and prevent information gaps. Two or three of the employees give a lecture on a topic of their choice. Topics range from various achievements in the professional field, new technologies, services to best practices in software development. This event also offers an opportunity for strategic discussions. From the point of view of leadership theory, this is a particularly important component in transforming a management approach into a leadership spirit. (Burns 1978, Bass 1995) From the other hand, as Joanne Ciulla says, “Leadership theorists express much less enthusiasm about protecting individual rights that could conflict with organizational goals. Things like freedom in the factory, unions, and constitutional checks on corporate policies are not generally what theorists have in mind when speaking of worker “empowerment.” (Joanne Ciulla, 131). Does this vision give a reason to assume that it might be exaggerated to believe that what is seen in the development of the given case is an example of leadership approach only because a small unit develops as a promising enterprise based on step by step development of togetherness of the managers and employees?

The presentation at this stage of the company's development aims to highlight the importance of communication for the development of relations in the spirit of leadership. The ability to communicate at every stage of an endeavor is a key element for the integration and consolidation of the leader and those led in a cohesive community.

The growth of the company leads to another innovation. This is the introduction of team leaders. The division of labor and the specialization of tasks is a classic management tool from the time of Emerson, Taylor and Fayol. The idea of consolidation of team spirit can be rediscovered in the classic texts of scientific management – for example, in the famous twelve principles of productivity: clearly defined ideals; common sense; competent counsel; discipline; a fair deal; reliable, immediate and adequate records; dispatching; standards and schedules; standardized conditions; standardized operations; written standard-practice instructions; efficiency-reward. (Emerson, 1973) In the case described the activities are distributed according to the needs of the company profile. Some specialize in projects based on the Java programming language. Others are involved in other specific activities of the company. However, all of them keep communication and interaction active. If this approach should be granted a title of a specific leadership approach, it might be connected with the Rost's revelation of leadership as good management: “Under the surface, I found a consistent view of leadership in the background assumptions (Gouldner, 1970) and in the meanings behind the words used in the definitions and the models. This school conceptualizes leadership as good management. I will call it the industrial paradigm of leadership” (Rost, 1990, p. 9). Still, every step taken by the young initiators of this company is performed according to the good standards of transformational leadership. They have made efforts for continuous training, for the integration of all to the common goals of the endeavor, have ensured participation based on team spirit, and joint achievements have changed the situation for each of them in the face of a new, promising and sustainable company. Development is guaranteed through constant feedback and recognition of personal strengths and weaknesses. Creativity and innovation are also key drivers for solutions to improve organization and work processes and to create a work environment that encourages creative thinking and innovation. The leadership style is open and flexible to change. Behavior and work methods are adapted to the circumstances, as an option for a home office. The company's reputation is improving and includes opening up new technological areas, winning larger orders and giving every employee the opportunity for personal growth in the

organization. This is young IT company, described by a student in the Leadership course, who is familiar with this development as employee and in his own words, has been hired fifth in line and who has no intention to leave it.

It is easy to predict that the approach presented secures good future for the company of this kind not because it necessarily will be forever successful. What has been achieved so far is the success itself. The initiators of the company have proved to be leaders as their results were reached basically through step by step approach of building business project involving employees as partners and not simply hired who fulfil orders. "My key observation was that the leaders I admired and trusted most were effective were those who were consistent with their values, kept their word, and actively built caring relationships... I learned that there isn't one generally accepted definition of leadership and that the stable of leadership theories continues to grow. (Laguerre, 2010, p 3-4). These young initiators of the IT company advanced without resources but in excellent cooperation between leaders and the led based on communication, flexibility and inspiration for all involved.

REFERENCES

- Bass, B., Theory of Transformational Leadership Redux, in: Leadership Quarterly, 6(4), 463-478, 1995, JAI Press Inc.
- Berkley, G. and J. Rouse (1991). *The craft of public administration*.
- Burns, J., Leadership, 1978
- Ciulla, J., The Heart of Leadership, 1998
- Emerson, H., 12 The Twelve Principles of Efficiency, 1912
- Laguerre, Joshua C., "Can Leadership Be Developed by Applying Leadership Theories? : An Examination of Three Theory-based Approaches to Leadership Development" (2010). *Honors Projects Overview*. Paper 42. http://digitalcommons.ric.edu/honors_projects/42
- Rost, J., Leadership for the Twenty-First Century, 1991
- Taneva, A., Application of Leadership Approach in Local Public Policy Implementation: Three Cases, paper presented at 22nd NISPA annual conference, 2014