Concepts of Leadership and Management in a Free Agent World

John O’Leary, Master of Arts Candidate
Human Dimensions of Organizations, The University of Texas at Austin

Introduction

• In the 21st Century organizations have to be flexible in a dynamic and often highly uncertain environment.
• Many employees are prepared to work for multiple organizations in a career, and are willing to move as part of pursuing one or more careers in their lifetime, effectively becoming “free agents”.
• How do people in positions of authority approach leading and managing this type of “free agent” employee?
• On a deeper level, how do men and women in positions of authority understand the concepts of leadership and management?

Methods

• The first phase of the study was a literature survey focused on theories and studies of organizational leadership and management practices.
• The second phase was a qualitative research project based on interviews with eight participants: four from corporate and public organizations; and four from an NCAA Division I university athletics department.
• Participants were asked to describe their thoughts about leadership and management in separate parts of their interview. Their responses were systematically coded using a thematic framework derived from the literature survey.
• Data with the same code were grouped into sub-themes and themes, and shown in hierarchical content trees.

Results

Systematic analysis of the interview transcripts yielded 975 data (each 2-3 words to several sentences). The data were coded into categories (Concepts, Behaviors, Activities, Traits, Theories, Morality/Ethics and Gender) that were taken as supra-themes. Supra-theme data were analyzed and correlated to produce 66 themes and 191 sub-themes. The supra-themes of Concepts, Behaviors and Activities dominated the results for both leadership and management (84% data collected). The results dealing with Concepts and Activities are shown here.

Literature Cited


Conclusions

• The participants describe leadership as being different from management when asked a direct question.
• Analysis of the interviews reveals a more nuanced distinction in the participants’ understanding of the difference between leadership and management.
• The participants’ responses about concepts, behaviors and activities indicate a distinct difference of focus within these foundational elements of leadership and management.
  - Leadership themes center on the character of the leader and the positive effects that her character, behaviors and activities have on her followers.
  - Management themes focus on dealing with people for the efficient delivery of performance and the successful achievement of results.
• The participants conceptize leadership and management distinctly when talking about concepts and behaviors. When they consider their daily activities this distinction is significantly less well defined.
• When describing their professional roles, the participants clearly described and identified “role conflict”: the challenges faced by having to perform leadership and management in the same organizational role.
• Leadership and management may be easily articulated as distinct ideas, especially in an abstract sense. The actuality of roles that call for both leadership and management creates a deeper conceptualization of those topics, built upon critical components that are shared by leadership and management. Most of those common components focus on the human dimensions of organizational authority.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to the eight participants who agreed to take part in my research study and who gave freely of their time, thoughts and feelings. I thank Professors Paul Woodruff, Clay Spinuzzi, and Betty Sue Flowers for their interest and advice. My deepest thanks go to Mandy for her unfailling support over the last 16 months.

Further Information

Please contact me via e-mail (john.oleary@utexas.edu) for further information or to discuss the findings of this study.