

LEADERSHIP STYLES AS A MENTAL REPRESENTATION IN THE CONTEXT OF PERSONALITY SKILLS

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Abstract: The choice of leadership style demonstrated by people in managerial positions is conditioned by numerous factors and specific organisational situations. However, every manager has an individual inclination to act in a consistent way, which in science is referred to with the term *leadership style*. These personal tendencies are to a large extent determined by personality, therefore, it is worth considering the dimension of managers' cognitive functioning. The "ME as manager" construct is a cognitive representation that creates certain tendencies which are visible in a manager's working style and the resulting effectiveness of their actions.

Keywords: leadership style, personality, manager, mental representation, cognitive functions.

1. Introduction

A manager's functioning and influence on their subordinates' behaviour may be analysed in a multidimensional way in order to comprehend a wider range of variables and the dependencies between them. The latest psychological perspective emphasises the importance of personality predispositions in delivering managerial functions, even if their fulfilment is closely related to situational context.

The aim of this article is to present the idea of leadership style as a mental representation in a dimension individually determined by the dominant psychological functions of a particular person. If considered in the context of personality, a manager's style clearly reflects their cognitive representations. The construct of "ME as a manager", which refers to one's own interpersonal relations, can significantly determine a manager's working style.

2. Leadership style as a mental representation

The notion of leadership style first appeared in psychological literature in the 1930s. It was intended to enable and facilitate easier characterisation of the actual leadership circumstances in which managers manage their subordinates' work in many different ways (Kozusznik, 1985).

People in managerial positions in organisations are expected to effectively perform their management functions by behaving skilfully towards their subordinates. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that there is a need to determine the manners and methods of people in managerial functions that are the key functions when considering organisational goals and which actually contribute to the success or failure of every organisation (Kraczlá, 2013).

To put it simply, **leadership style** may be understood as a practical tool in management work. Usually "every manager has their own style of operation, work and behaviour in management circumstances" (Jadwiga, 2008, p. 164). With regard to the term 'style', as early as 1981, the Encyclopaedia of Organisation and Management (p. 503) defined the notion of *leadership style* as "the entirety of the superior's ways of influencing their subordinates aimed at fulfilment of their organisational roles". The idea of *leadership style* is perceived and presented very similarly by numerous authors who deal with scientific analysis of the leadership process; these authors always emphasise the importance of the superior's attitude towards their subordinates, although for its exact description one should consider different perspectives that take into account various factors and conditions.

There are scientific approaches which value simplicity and therefore depict *leadership style* succinctly as **the way a superior influences their subordinates** and which allow for great flexibility in describing the forms and methods of this influence (Strzelecki, 1995, p. 91). However, there are also broader definitions that emphasise very specific and clearly identified variables. For instance, Penc (2010, p. 90) accents the fact that a manager's influence on subordinates is executed in order to "trigger a desirable approach to their tasks and make them deliver them at their best". On the other hand, in his understanding of leadership style, Osmelak (1992) points to the importance of a manager's personality and the actual management situation. As a result, he understands *leadership style* as "the entirety of the relations between the superior and their subordinate team and which are determined by the manager's personality and leadership situation" (Osmelak, 1992, p. 87-88). A similar understanding of *leadership style* is offered by Sikorski (1986, p. 113) who says it is a "practically proven set of methods of managing people which remains in a strict relationship with the manager's personality traits" (Sikorski, 1986, p. 113). What clearly emerges from the quoted definitions is the aspect of a personal relationship between a superior and subordinates. Therefore, following Bartkowiak (1997, p. 67), one could assume that leadership style is a "category that comprises all a manager's behaviours and their interactions with other people in a course of action". At the same time, one should remember that much research, whether Polish or foreign, explicitly

confirms there is no single desired leadership style (Mroziwski, 2005). There is no doubt that managers differ considerably from each other in terms of the way they influence their subordinates as they each adopt a leadership style which is *different* or *characteristic for them*. When looking at the actions taken by a given manager and the behaviours they display, it is possible to come up with a detailed description which differentiates the behaviour style of the particular manager from other superiors and also describes the specific set of behaviours they exhibit most often (Bartkowiak, 1997).

Based on the subject literature review, one may distinguish leadership style theories whose basic assumptions stem from variables ranging from the superior's personality features, their behaviour style, to mainly external factors. There are also approaches that aim to reach a compromise between the determinants related to the manager themselves and to external circumstances (Kraczla, 2016).

This article does not try to classify existing leadership style concepts; however, considering the goal of the article, it provides a chance for readers to familiarise themselves with the approach that treats *leadership style* as a mental representation that determines preferences in terms of the conscious and responsible behaviours of those in managerial roles.

The mental representation, i.e. "Me as a leader", refers to an individual's adaptation to motivating, developmental or cognitive challenges and tasks that are experienced in relation to the performed managerial role (Oleś, 2004). The tendency to prefer certain behaviours is a result of the specific cognitive representation that a manager adopts in their interpersonal contacts. Based on an integrative approach, it may be assumed that "Me as a leader" is shaped during interactions between one's own individual personality predispositions and one's social experiences. On building upon an integrative approach, it may be assumed that "Me as a leader" is shaped during interactions between one's own individual personality predispositions and one's social experiences, which enables both the formation and modification of this construct (Brzezińska, and Rafalak, 2015).

In contemporary science, it is ascertained that **managerial behaviours result from the mutual influence of a particular organisational situation and the manager's personality**. This interaction determines the ultimate outcome of the actions taken by a manager to achieve certain goals (Gliszczynska, 1991; Osborne, 2015). Contemporary leadership style researchers are attempting to develop personality–situation concepts, with special focus given to both personality traits and situational conditions (Mroziwski, 2005). Therefore, a manager's business and organisational efficiency is currently seen as a combined effect of their knowledge, skills, and personality, as well as their subordinates' personality and qualifications, plus numerous situational variables that build the context of the leadership process (Jadwiga, 2008).

The contemporary perception and definition of leadership styles is strongly embedded in the area of the manager's personal characteristics. Every individual in a managerial position is essentially distinguished by specific personality predispositions. While performing

a managerial function, they analyse organisational situations and choose methods of working with their subordinates depending on their personality potential (Kraczla, 2016).

Therefore, bearing in mind the personal mental representation of a manager, it is worth pointing out that development of their managerial competence can be achieved through the manager's perception of their own behaviour and their changes in particular organisational situations. "Leadership style is then the dynamic adjustment of an individual to the professional role they currently perform. It can be subject to alterations as leadership style is significantly influenced by motivational aspects, including the need for verification of one's own managerial effectiveness" (Brzezińska, and Rafalak, 2015). Thus, it is hard to talk of unconstrained flexibility of managerial behaviours in the face of occurring organisational situations as it can be naturally limited by the manager's personality factors (Oleksyn, 2010). However, if a manager understands what kind of superior they are and what actions help them deliver the desired effects, they can develop certain task schemes and interpersonal relationships more effectively and be aware of how various leadership styles can be characterised (Brzezińska, and Rafalak, 2015).

3. Personality predispositions of an individual

In psychology of personality there are many different understandings of the notion of *personality*. This term is described in numerous ways, with various definitions coming from different research streams and representing the varied theoretical approaches of the scientists behind them (Cervone, and Pervin, 2011). Definition G., which was coined a few decades ago, is considered to be one of the major classic definitions of personality. It describes *personality* as a "dynamic organisation of an individual's psychophysical systems which determine the way the individual adapts to the environment" (in Siek, 1982, p. 19). Therefore, personality may be considered a "full and complex set of the ways in which a given person reacts to and interacts with others" (Robbins, and Judge, 2012, p. 44). A modern and more precise understanding of personality is provided by L.A. Pervin (2002, p. 416), who concludes that "personality is a complex entirety of thoughts, emotions, and behaviours which set the direction and pattern (cohesion) to one's life. Just like a body, personality consists of both structures and processes, and it reflects the operation of nature (genes) and the environment. The notion of personality also includes the aspect of time as personality encompasses memories from the past, mental representations of the present, and also imaginations and expectations of the future". Both of the quoted definitions – one classical and one modern – emphasise the *integrative personality function* that depicts *personality* in terms such as "a dynamic organisation" or "complex entirety". As a result, in both definitions the perspective of personality focuses on the individual and variables within the individual (Oleś, 2003).

It is believed that the term *personality* has the largest number of meanings in science (Hall, Lindzey, and Campbell, 2013). Within psychology, three research traditions can be distinguished, with each having advantages and weaknesses. These are: clinical, correlational and experimental. Considering the scope of this article, the correlational approach seems to be most interesting as, through its use of statistical indicators, it allows interdependencies between traits to be determined. Therefore, the correlational method aims to recognise individual differences and the statistical dependencies between these differences (Pervin, 2002).

Thus, personality psychology sets a clear direction for how people and their behaviour are thought of. This approach usually relates to: (1) what all people have in common, (2) individual differences, and (3) the uniqueness of an individual. **“All personality psychologists apply the term *personality* with reference to psychological traits which contribute to a given individual’s patterns of emotions, thinking and behaviour, all of which are [relatively] constant and distinguish a given person”** (Cervone, and Pervin, 2011, p. 10). The notion of “[relatively] constant” refers to personality features that remain independent of the time and situation that a human is currently in. The term “distinguish” refers to the psychological traits that differentiate people from each other. The “contribute to” part is a reference to the psychological factors that explain tendencies which are characteristic of a given individual and are relatively constant. In turn, the term “emotions, thinking and behaviour” pertains to all the aspects of a particular person, their: mental life, emotional experiences and social behaviour (as described above). Thereby, it may be concluded that **personality is “the psychological features which affect the continuity of an individual’s behaviours in various situations and at different times”** (Zimbardo, Johnson, and McCann, 2010, p. 25).

Many personality researchers who adopt a correlational approach believe *traits* are the basic units of personality development; therefore, these researchers direct their attention more towards diagnostics of personality structure, dynamics and hierarchy (Hall, and Lindzey, 1990). What is more, even non-scientific casual observations may lead to the claim that people are characterised by specific psychological qualities which tend to be constant and become visible over longer periods of time. These relatively constant psychological features make up every individual’s personality structure, which in turn allows for the characterisation of every given person. The traits in question also enable differentiation between people as they determine their individual uniqueness (Cervone, and Pervin, 2011). Thus, it is possible to undertake research into and predict the dynamics of a given individual’s development in terms of their psychological traits; it is also possible to describe the mechanisms of how their uniquely identifiable behaviours are shaped (Robbins, and Judge, 2012).

Personality trait may be understood as a “predisposition to behave in a certain particular way” (Makin, Cooper, and Cox, 2000, p. 61), and “the more persistently and frequently a given trait occurs in various situations, the more relevant it becomes in describing a particular person” (Robbins, and Judge, 2012, pp. 46-48). A *personality trait* is measurable and is considered a basic element of personality structure. Thus, personality traits are the primary units by which

personality can be described and of which it is built. Thereby, personality qualities make it possible to create psychological characterisations of individuals through determination of their personal predispositions and inclination to certain behaviours. Thus, personality qualities may be treated as the psychological dispositions of an individual to react in a specific manner as they are all related to a “certain consistent style of emotional response or behaviour that a given person reveals in various types of situations” (Cervone, and Pervin, 2011, p. 13). There is also an abundance of scientific evidence that acknowledges the “constancy of individual diversification (...) over longer periods of time” (Cervone, and Pervin, 2011, p. 27). Such constancy refers to both the permanence of particular traits despite the passage of time, and the consistency with which these features are displayed in various situations (Pervin, 2002). Much scientific research recognises the constancy of personality, pointing out that personality changes prove to be negligible even over the course of decades (see Fraley, 2002; McCrae, and Costa, 1994).

Personality psychologists take different approaches to the subject and do not always agree on how personality traits should be defined and measured. However, despite the fact that they adopt various research perspectives, they acknowledge that the term *trait* denotes the basic regularities in a human that make it possible to identify major differences between people. What is more, capturing the differences in people’s behaviour by means of trait diagnostics also makes it possible to develop the principal units of personality description (Pervin, 2002). Contemporarily, the notion of *personality trait* is so commonly used and acceptable that it is assumed that a person’s behaviour is caused to a large extent by their personality (Makin, Cooper, and Cox, 2000).

4. Personality potential in shaping leadership styles

In contemporary personality psychology there is a strong conviction that although the traits theory accurately describes personality structure, it does not capture personality in a holistic manner and thus leaves room for the motivation theory or theories of the regulatory function of the Me system (Oleś, 2003). Therefore, it may be assumed that people display specific personality features, but what is equally meaningful is the context of the motivational and situational behaviour determinants as it evokes equally important preconditions of people’s behaviour in particular situations (Pervin, 2002). Actually, it is believed that the specific factors of a particular situation in which an individual find him/herself might act as a catalyst for the manifestation of a certain range of a given trait. On the other hand, in contexts that are not dominated by any specific situational factors, an individual’s behaviour is directly determined by personality traits (Chabris, and Simons, 2011). Therefore, it is worth extending the range of personality characteristics used to describe individuals by also considering the situational

context, as it is this that creates space for the factors that influence behaviour in a particular situation.

Taking into consideration the intentions of this article, it is justified to claim there is a direct link between personality traits and managerial attitudes. Therefore, it appears that personality is one of the key factors that shape managerial attitudes.

“Owing to diverse personality potentials, experiences, preferences and also situational possibilities, different people display different leadership styles” (Brzezińska, and Rafalak, 2015, p. 10). However, based on abundant empirical evidence, personality appears to be the strongest factor that determines and differentiates a manager’s leadership style (Hogan, and Kaiser, 2010). Numerous researchers highlight the issue of apparently insufficient reference to personality when trying to explain managerial behaviours – an oversight that might have often hampered the thorough interpretation of results obtained in empirical research (see Hughes, Ginnett, and Curphy, 1996).

It is worth emphasizing that the complexity of circumstances in which managers have to perform their managerial functions calls for an appropriate personality, which is understood as an internal source of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of their actions (Osmelak, 2008). Personality is the foundation on which leadership style is based, which in turn facilitates or inhibits the development of strong and efficient teams, acceptance of constant organisational changes and achievement of challenging goals (Osborne, 2015). The leadership style adopted by a manager is also reflected in various forms of motivational influence towards their subordinates (Wziątek-Staško, 2016).

If the core personality factors are understood, a manager’s behaviour can be comprehended and its efficiency evaluated because these factors determine the characteristic patterns of reacting to surroundings in terms of thinking, feeling and behaving in a specific way (Roberts, 2006). Thus, assuming that personality variables constitute the basis for the preferred patterns of managerial behaviour, personality diagnostics may be applied in developing descriptions of the leadership styles of particular managers (Kraczla, 2013).

What may be treated as the starting point of the development of a particular leadership style is an individual’s personality potential, as it is this that preordains a person to performing a managerial function or not. Constitution and further development of a personal leadership style occurs following individual experiences across a range of social interactions (Brzezińska, and Rafalak, 2015).

In science, there are an increasing number of theoretical models of leadership style that take personality factors and environment variables into account. Particularly interesting is the contemporary approach of understanding leadership styles as a mental representation. This is due to the fact that shaping and improving a leadership style stems from the assumption that people continuously verify their personal perceptions of themselves and their surroundings; this is the so-called ‘mental representation’, understood as the construct of “ME as leader”. Personal constructs, in turn, are subject to constant modification depending on the personal

interpretations made by every individual. Although “Me schemes” are not always fully predictable, they might confirm and sustain the way individuals develop and see themselves, as is demonstrated in the selectivity of cognitive functions, i.e. attention or memory, to self-reaffirm the personal “truth about oneself” (Pervin, and John, 2002).

Following the assumption described above, i.e. perception of personality as a complex entirety of thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, all of which set the direction of how an individual’s life is fulfilled, it may be concluded that mental representation plays a special role in shaping a leadership style.

There is a lot of research on personality traits in strict relation to the cognitive (mental) functioning of people. Many of the resulting theories refer to the classical theory of Jung, who lists four basic psychological functions that influence the process of perception and judgement of information (Jung, 1997; Nosal, 1990, 1992, 2000, 2001). These functions include sensation and intuition (related to reception of information) and then thinking and feeling (responsible for assessment of received data). According to Jung (1997), these functions make up the foundation of individual differences as dominance of one trait over others shapes a specific mentality type: thinking, feeling, sensational or intuitive. The four psychological types resulting from Jung’s theory are associated with specific and unique cognitive styles. It is worth mentioning that a remarkable Polish scientist, Cz. Nosal (1990, 1992, 2000), worked on the operationalization of Jung’s theory and conducted extensive research into human cognitive activities and relevant mentality types that determine leaders’ cognitive preferences. Nosal claimed that variables related to the conceptual style of thinking may be the roots of a given leadership style and might influence its effectiveness. As a result of his studies, Nosal (2000) created detailed psychological portraits of managers representing different intellectual styles. By doing so, he proved empirically the dependence between personality qualities, cognitive predispositions and the action style of a manager in leadership situations. Nosal and Piskorz (1998) think the choice of leadership style should be understood as a kind of intellectual game which occurs in the manager’s mind. This game could be referred to as “personality features predisposed for monitoring the strategic appropriateness of one’s behaviour in a situation” (Nosal, and Piskorz, 1998, p. 89). As these authors emphasise, making a decision regarding the choice of a particular course of action is preceded by a process of solving problems of a cognitive nature. Therefore, what should be analysed then is the cognitive mechanisms, which should be seen as personality correlates of the game (Nosal, and Piskorz, 1998). A similar theoretical model that relates to Jung’s theory has been recently developed by Brzezińska and Rafalak (2015); this is called the WERK Model of Leadership Styles and includes the four cognitive modalities indicated by Jung: sensation and intuition (perceptive functions), and feeling and thinking (judgemental functions). In consequence, a four-field dependency model was developed to order to model the four leadership styles of WERK (Brzezińska, and Rafalak, 2015).

5. Conclusion

Having a specific cognitive representation in the form of the “Me as manager” construct influences one’s personal preference of certain behaviours. All theoretical constructs of leadership styles that emphasise cognitive modalities point to leaders’ tendency to adopt consistent and coherent managerial behaviours that are determined by their dominant psychological features. Therefore, when judging a manager’s individual personality predispositions, it is worth considering the aspect of cognitive functioning to help predict their working style and managerial effectiveness.

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