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DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP

Before we can understand and evaluate different aspects of democratic leadership, it is necessary to explain the roots and intention of democratic thinking. People are social entities, interacting in groups and societies. Evolution selected communities as the favorable environment because more advantages existed for members of communities than for isolated individuals. The strongest communities have been the ones that are able to maximize benefits for their people (or at least some of them) and are capable of defending themselves against the claims of others. However, communities face inherent problems, because although individuals have common goals (such as security), they also have different needs, motives, interests, and values, and these differences can provoke conflicts. The probability of conflicts increases if scarce resources (whether tangible or intangible) cannot be divided in such a way that all claims can be fulfilled.

Given the situation described above, it makes much sense to establish regulations that protect each individual from unjustified attacks by others and to guarantee a fair procedure for resolving conflicts. Different answers have been formulated during human history to satisfy this need for regulation. More than two thousand years ago the idea of handling one's own affairs as an individual responsibility arose: "From ancient times some people have conceived of a political system in which the members regard one another as political equals, are collectively sovereign, and possess all the capacities, resources, and institutions they need in order to govern themselves" (Dahl 1989, p. 1). This idea, the transformation of rule by the few to rule by the many, was put into action in the first half of the fifth century BCE among the Greek city-states (*polis*). This political order has been called democracy, although this type of democracy differs quite a bit from current understanding and practice. The word is derived from the Greek words for "people, nation" (*demos*) and for

“power, control, authority” (*kratein*). So, the political term *democracy* means nothing less than the power of the people, or the dominion of the many, whereby the people may participate in power directly or representatively. One necessary requirement for the idea of representation is that transferred power has to be used for the well-being of the people.

Democracy has not always carried the positive connotations it does today. The majority of philosophers and political scientists viewed democracy with suspicion for a long time, in large part because of their view that the mindless masses were capable only of creating riots and following false prophets. Democracy therefore appeared to be an unstable social system that would degenerate into tyranny. Even the great philosopher Plato (c. 428–c. 347 BCE), living next to the cradle of the origin of democracy, was critical of democracy, which he felt lacked order and responsibility. Later thinkers raised similar arguments. The French social psychologist Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931), for example, observed that in groups or masses, individual differences vanish and make it possible for strong leaders impose their will on others. For him and other thinkers, a leader’s legitimacy came from wisdom, birth, property, or God. These sources have lost much but by no means all their power to grant legitimacy, and their influence waned only gradually.

The most prominent changes that led to the displacement of those sources of a leader’s legitimacy were (a) a growing mistrust of an alleged divine order; (b) the success of the heliocentric worldview, which had serious consequences for existing political and social regulations; and (c) the overwhelming need to justify a lack of equality if it were to be allowed to persist. Important material changes occurred as populations and economic prosperity increased. Economic success for more and more people shifted values and provoked the claim that they had a political right to codetermination. However, not before the twentieth century was democracy seen in an increasingly positive light in such regions or countries as Western Europe, the United States, Australia, India, and Japan, to name but a few. Many countries—or at least their governments—still have different conceptions about regulating political and social order.

Nor should readers leave with the impression that democratic societies face no problems or that they are on all points superior to alternative conceptions. On the question of the relative merits of democracy, political scientists give different, often balanced answers. However, to mention some essentials of modern-day democracies, it is typical for democracies to have free, equal, and secret periodic elections, competition of parties, authentic freedom of thought and information, the possibility of coalition building, different kinds of checks and balances, protection of minorities, and the embeddedness of all procedures in justified and constituted law. Political leadership—which is outside the scope of our considerations here—can be, for most political theorists and probably for most people, characterized as democratic when it is based on institutional distributed power that is on the whole accepted.

Starting with the theories of Aristotle (384–322 BCE), many different normative or empirical theories about democracy have gained influence that specify requirements, contents, and procedures of and in democratic societies or that inform us about varieties of democratic cultures. Two very important threads in this discussion are whether subsystems of societies should, like the society at large, be evaluated by democratic standards and whether democracy should strive for participation as far as possible, beyond representative, mandatory forms. When it comes to legitimizing political systems, some theories focus more on the normative aspect of legitimation (these are characterized as input oriented), while others define desirable performance requirements for political systems first and then define corresponding conditions for them (these are characterized as output oriented).

LEADERSHIP AND ITS PROBLEM WITH DEMOCRACY

Like democracy, the phenomenon of leadership has been studied since antiquity, and different approaches characterize the landscape of research. Many articulate positions from the leader’s perspective. Starting with trait theory in the early 1930s and ending in the 2000s (at least temporarily) with trans-

formational and neo-charismatic theories, the focus has been on the person of the leader. Special traits or a combination of traits (such as energy, intelligence, and prosocial behavior) or a distinctive behavior (such as initiating structure) generate particular effects that are associated with leadership. Sometimes situational variables are taken into account, too, as with path-goal theory. Only very few approaches, such as attribution theory or implicit leadership theory, consider the follower position and try to answer leadership-related questions from the followers' perspective.

Conventional views of leadership assume a kind of natural downward gradient of maturity, according to which the leader as a superior person leads followers to the goal. Those who are led are seen as less active, less knowledgeable, and less willing to take responsibility. Although the (moral) superiority of the leader is not theoretically and empirically reasoned (consider, for example, the fact that in most organizations most leaders are also followers), it dominates leadership thinking, teaching, and practice. Certain myths are passed from one generation to the other. The presence of these seldom questioned presuppositions shows that democratic ideas are not central to the understanding of leadership yet. Rather, a relationship is constructed in which autocratic leader behavior—or at the very least behavior that is determined by the leader's values, attitudes, and aims—seems to be functional. Accordingly, most leadership approaches that are action oriented try to develop techniques by which the leader's intentions can be realized. This thinking is—or was—very compatible with the functioning of social entities, particularly business organizations, in which the hierarchical principle is seen to be necessary for the coordination of divided work and for efficiency.



Destoolment of a Chief

The following extract of ethnographic text describes how and why an Ashanti chief in Ghana might be removed from office. Although the Ashanti political system is not democratic in general, democratic principles are used to ensure that the chief is effective and competent.

The Ashanti had a constitutional practice which ensured that the will of the people was given consideration. They had ultimately the constitutional right to destool a chief. As the fundamental principle was that only those who elected a chief could destool him, a destoolment required the consent of the elders. Sometimes they initiated a destoolment themselves when, for example, a chief repeatedly rejected their advice, or when he broke a taboo, or committed a sacrilegious act. The kind of offences for which chiefs were destooled may be gathered from the following instances of destoolments recounted in the traditional histories of the Divisions.

Chiefs Kwabena Aboagye of Asumegya, Kwabena Bruku, and Kwasi Ten of Nsuta were destooled for drunkenness; Kwame Asonane of Bekwai for being a glutton (adidifurum); Kwame Asona, also of Bekwai, for dealing in charms and noxious medicines; and Akuamoa Panyin of Juaben for his abusive tongue, and for not following the advice of his elders. In Kokofu, Osei Yaw was destooled for being fond of disclosing the origin of his subjects (i.e. reproaching them with their slave ancestry), and Mensa Bonsu for excessive cruelty.

A chief was also destooled if he became blind, or impotent, or suffered from leprosy, madness, or fits, or if his body was maimed in a way that disfigured him.

Source: Busia, K. A. (1951). *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of the Ashanti: A Study of the Influence of Contemporary Social Change on Ashanti Political Institutions*. London: The Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, p. 22.

This dominating view has been challenged for two reasons. First, from an economic point of view, some have suggested that more democracy could, under specified conditions, lead to more efficiency. Second, from a moral point of view, some are of the opinion that democracy is not a principle that is only valid in certain areas (such as political leadership) and not in others (such as organizational leadership). While the first point addresses the risk of suboptimality in performance, the second point, which questions the presupposed superiority of leaders, leads to a debate about ethics that is grounded in moral philosophy. In the first case, democracy is an instrument that supports economic organizational goals; in the second case, democracy is a moral value.

CLOTHING LEADERSHIP IN DEMOCRATIC VESTMENTS

Bearing the previous discussion in mind, it is not surprising that there is no clear definition of *democratic leadership* within academia. On the contrary, there is a conceptual ambiguity and operational inconsistency: Content, degree, form of, and pretension to democracy differ. This has led to the same phenomena being discussed under different terms (for instance, consensual leadership or superleadership). However, everyone seems to agree that democracy has something to do with self-determination. In this context, the Kantian principle that every man should be treated as an end and not as a means is to be remembered. Self-determination itself implies (primarily) participation in decisions about one's own affairs. It is a question of distributing power.

The term *participation* is used here in its original, political meaning because within the leadership discussion participation is often downgraded to mean a form of mere articulation or a standpoint. Articulating something is different from deciding something. The psychologists Edwin Hollander and Lynn Offermann argue that the area of subordinate participation is "one of the clearest bridges between the study of power and leadership in organizations" (1990, 183). This leads to the conclusion that if one wants to know something about the influence of democracy on leadership, one has to question the leadership discussion about the integration of participation (as well as delegation), which in turn requires an understanding of the main streams of leadership theory. Grounded in the logic of traditional leadership, the aspect of performance and efficiency dominate these theories directly or indirectly.

THE BEGINNINGS

It was the social psychologist Kurt Lewin who, at the end of the 1930s, introduced scientific research into the thinking about democracy in leadership. The main idea in a series of studies was to investigate "democracy" and "autocracy" as group atmospheres and observe the consequences for different social and performance behaviors. Lewin and his col-

leagues at the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station shared the opinion that success in the classroom depended not only on the skills of the teacher but to a great extent on the atmosphere that was created. The atmospheres of the two experimental groups was manipulated as follows: In the authoritarian group, which was seen as the opposite of a democratic group, all decisions were made by the authority. In the democratic group, common determination was preferred; explanations and advice were given by the authority, and children were free to work with one another. The findings indicated that in the democratic group more cooperative and constructive behavior was found, the feeling for group property and group goals was higher, and the group structure was more stable. In addition, the products of the democratic group were superior.

The scholars Robert Tannenbaum and Warren Schmidt offered a more conceptual approach at the end of the 1950s. They tried to enrich the polarized spectrum of leadership styles by introducing gradations between the extremes. They stated that direction (authoritarian style) and participation (democratic style) are only two halves of a continuum, and they differentiated between the behavior of leaders who make and announce decisions without offering reasons and leaders who permit followers to function freely within limits. This opened the way for a more sophisticated discussion.

THE SPREAD OF DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP THEORIES

The organizational psychologist Rensis Likert, who advocated democratic approaches in organizations in the late 1960s, had not only leadership but also organization structure and climate on his agenda. The so-called human relations movement proposed that democratization could increase effectiveness and satisfaction, particularly in the long run. Empirical studies supported the satisfaction hypothesis but could not demonstrate overall superior effectiveness.

Also in the sixties, the scholars Robert Blake and Jane Mouton presented their renowned managerial-grid model. They, like many others, built on the find-

ings of the so-called Ohio school and Michigan school of leadership, where two main independent dimensions of leadership behavior were identified empirically: initiating structure (task orientation, concern for production) and consideration (relations orientation, concern for people). For Blake and Mouton, the ideal leader scored a 9.9 on their “management grid.” This style is characterized not only by participation, but also by openness, trust and respect, mutual support, and much more. The authors are convinced that this style has a positive effect on many performance criteria.

Around 1970, the scholars Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard introduced a situational leadership model in which the maturity of followers was connected with four different leadership styles: telling, selling, participating, and delegating. The maturity level of followers differs by task and experience. What is required is a match between the leadership style and the followers’ maturity. It is worth mentioning that the maturity level is defined by the leader, and that he or she has the undisputed power to determine the amount of follower participation. In this sense, participation is treated as purely functional.

A few years later, the theorist Fred Fiedler proposed his contingency model of leadership. Using the attitude of the leader’s least-preferred coworker as a measure, leaders are characterized as being either task or relations oriented. Taking into account three situational variables (position power, task structure, leader-member relationship), the theory proposes that in favorable situations in which the leader has full control over the situation and in unfavorable situations in which the leader has little control, task-oriented behavior promises higher success. In situations that fall between those extremes, a relational style should be effective. This is, Fiedler notes, the conclusion of many empirical studies. In short, it appears that follower participation is a necessity under certain conditions if the leader wants to be effective. However, participation has no value on its own.

The path-goal theory of leadership, strongly associated with the management scholar Robert House, tried to reconcile conflicting empirical findings concerning task- and relations-oriented behaviors. The

problem was that the effects of prescribed style recommendations were found to be contradictory. To address the problem, new situational moderators of the relationships between the main behavior dimensions and their effects were developed. In sum, four leader behaviors (including participative style); a number of moderators of task, environmental, and follower traits; five intervening variables; and two dependent variables were used. Nevertheless, in this theory too, the focus is on the functionality of the leader’s behavior.

The decision process theory put forward by Victor Vroom, Philip Yetton, and Arthur Jago is probably the most explicit leadership style theory that includes participation. This prescriptive model indicates when leaders should be directive and when they should be participative. The overall question is in which situations the superior can take complete responsibility for decisions and in which situations the subordinates should take part in the decision. The effectiveness of a decision depends basically on two, not completely separable variables: the quality of the decision and the degree to which the decision is accepted. The decision procedure will affect these two variables differently. In 1988 more outcome variables were considered (concern for subordinate development and concern for the time it took to make a decision). A basic assumption of this model is that subordinates’ participation increases the degree of acceptance of the decision—assuming acceptance is necessary. Thus, acceptance will be low for autocratic decisions and high for joint decision making. A functional perspective assumes that acceptance is a must when the subordinates are to implement the decision or when the decision has long-term effects on motivation.

The question of decision quality, in contrast, relates to how well the decision helps the organization meet its goals. The authors take five types of decision making into consideration: two varieties of autocratic decision making and consultative decision making, and one variety of joint decision making. Joint decision making, in this theory, involves generating and evaluating solutions to problems and attempting to reach a consensus on a solution. In some situations there is more than one acceptable

decision-making style; in those cases, the leader's preferences are significant.

CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

New organizational developments—in particular, market competition—in the late 1980s forced renewed thinking on the topic of follower participation. Organizations were finding they lacked the ability to adapt and respond successfully; qualities previously associated with effective management were insufficient. Leadership theorists answered in two ways. First, whereas the previously effective behaviors had required leaders simply to react to changes in markets and competition, theorists now proposed that leaders needed a more proactive stance. It would also be necessary to elicit from followers higher levels of loyalty, trust, and performance. The theory that addressed that angle, well-known under the label *transformational leadership*, envisions a more skilled, more fulfilled follower, but doesn't address the question of democratic leadership. Rather, the downward gradient of maturity mentioned earlier is presumed: The leader is acting on behalf of the followers.

Second, some theorists suggested that more decision making and responsibility should be decentralized and delegated to followers. Empowerment and superleadership are important catchwords for this development. Although it is assumed that leaders control this process and have, accordingly, the power to determine the amount of shifting of decision power down the hierarchy, the aim is to enable another person to act more strongly on his or her own. One might call this a form of paternalistic democratization in social relationships. However, this development too is forced by the desire to achieve greater efficacy. Moral aspects may be an additional motive but are not the driving force.

The situation is seen totally differently by people who claim a moral right to participation. They stress the principle that all who are affected by a decision have a right to participate in the decision making. Their claims are grounded in moral philosophy. Ethics, they argue, are not a matter of situational variance or economic success. The only important point

is that one person, the leader, due to his or her hierarchical position, can fall back upon the right to exercise power that is denied to followers. Because this course of action has empirically provable consequences regarding subordinates' personal work satisfaction, it cannot be ignored. "The key question is how to ensure that such significant consequences are positive and beneficial to all concerned" (Singer 1997, 147). From the days of Aristotle in the fourth century BCE, philosophers have asked what obligations result from an asymmetrical dependency relationship, particularly for the stronger party. For the most part these days, however, that line of thought is passed over in favor of one in which steps toward more participation are required and always positively valued, and contingency factors are worked out to increase the probability of successful participation. It is fair to state that a clear normative position lacks wide support in the leadership discussion. This is, of course, not proof against its appropriateness.

FUNCTIONS AND REQUIREMENTS OF DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP

In addition to the two developments mentioned above, there is a growing body of literature that focuses on the active roles of followers in the leadership process. This literature is not about democratic leadership, but it indirectly builds foundations for a stronger regard for it, because it asks how followers perceive leaders and under what conditions legitimacy is ascribed. This is an old question. Historically, following the famous German sociologist Max Weber, three types of legitimate power are identified: legal (for example, an elected government), traditional (for example, a monarchy), and charismatic (personal). It is important to stress that all these forms are based on the hierarchical principle but that this does not determine how the internal control processes work. For instance, both in a legal and in a traditional order, democratic coordination is allowed to occur. The amount differs. In contrast, command and total control represent only a very extreme position.

What we can learn from this is that followers' perceptions constrain the behavior of the leader.

Suppose that—and there is empirical evidence for this, for instance, in value research—followers expect to be able to participate. The attribution of leadership depends on how far people are allowed to set goals, make decisions, solve problems, and are involved in change processes. In this sense, leadership is a socially accepted influence process, with followers defining if and when it occurs. Leadership becomes democratic when this acceptance relies on “basic democratic principles and processes, such as self-determination, inclusiveness, equal participation, and deliberation” (Gastil 1994a, 956). John Gastil identifies three primary functions that a democratic leader should fulfill: distributing responsibility, empowering others, and aiding others in their deliberations. These obligations are equally valid for both large and small social groups. Members differ in needs, skills, time, and availability. Therefore, a variety of opportunities for involvement should be built into the structure of the organization. Leaders and other members of the organization must tolerate some members’ refusal to take their full share of responsibility.

Leaders should help members to develop technical and emotional maturity and should avoid a know-it-all attitude. Leaders should foster the emancipation of consciousness and pursue the ideal of making members into leaders. Problems must be analyzed by the group, and therefore information must be shared. Disagreement has to be dealt with in an open and constructive way. Groups must make concerted efforts to address existing inequalities based on gender, age, race, or formal education and must try to consider the consequences any solutions they propose will have. Possible solutions should be reflectively discussed without using coercion. The collective interest of the group should be revealed. A spirit of congeniality should be developed, and accepted norms must be actively in the collective mind. Because no leader will be able to act on this alone, the narrow (organization) and broader context (society) should assist leaders in this task. Here it is important to remember that behavior is produced by values, motivation, skills, and structures. Bearing that in mind, clear, accountable and transparent structures, the democratizing of knowledge, better

communication techniques, and deliberate leadership development programs make sense.

LOOKING AHEAD

This entry has shown that democratic leadership can be viewed from both an economic and an ethical perspective. Both perspectives are vibrant in the leadership discussion although the economic viewpoint prevails. At present it is not clear how widely democratic behavior is practiced or what effects it has under various circumstances. Nor is it known how willing either leaders or followers are to embrace it, or what behavior and institutional precautions support or inhibit democratic leadership in different situations. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that the democratic style of leadership fits quite well with personal values and organizational necessities. This may be a practical consequence of the statement of the philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952), who declared that democracy was not a mere political form but a way of being, living, and relating.

We must bear in mind, however, that democratic leadership is an ideal toward which an organization can strive but that may not be entirely achieved, as serious barriers to success exist. Moving toward democracy means that some people lose their advantages, and for others leading becomes more difficult. This is not easy to accept and not easy to manage; there is evidence that it will take time for people to learn new leader and follower roles (rights and duties). There is no doubt that certain social, economic, and political environments increase the chances for democratic solutions. In any case, one need not be a prophet to predict that the clamor for democratic leadership in organizations will not fall silent.

—Jürgen Weibler

See also Apartheid in South Africa, Demise of; Aristotle; Congressional Leadership; Green Parties; Plato; Politics; Presidential Leadership, U.S.; Tiananmen Square; United States Constitution; War on Terrorism

Further Reading

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