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TEACHING LEADERSHIP FROM A COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

MICHAEL Z. HACKMAN AND CRAIG E. JOHNSON

Interest in leadership has intensified during the past decade. This heightened interest in leadership appears to be encouraging communication departments to offer leadership coursework. This article provides a model for a communication-based course in leadership. A sample syllabus, information on preferred teaching methods, and instructional resources are presented.

Interest in leadership has intensified during the past decade. Popular books addressing leadership, including *In Search of Excellence* (Peters & Waterman, 1982), *A Passion for Excellence* (Peters & Austin, 1985), and *Leadership and the One-Minute Manager* (Blanchard, 1985), appeared on bestseller lists in the 1980s. At the same time, academic interest in leadership grew. *Bass and Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership* (Bass, 1990), the most comprehensive guide to leadership research, added over 2,800 citations to an earlier edition published in 1981. Investigations into the role of communication processes related to leadership appeared with increasing frequency (e.g., Barge, Downs, & Johnson, 1989; Zorn, 1991; Zorn & Leichty, 1991). The heightened interest in leadership appears to be encouraging communication departments to offer leadership coursework. A survey of 169 departments listed in the Speech Communication Association *Directory* revealed that 74% of the

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departments included the topic of leadership in at least one communication course and that 10% of those surveyed offered an entire course devoted to leadership and communication (Johnson & Hackman, 1993).

Establishing the legitimacy of a communication perspective is the foundation for leadership communication coursework. Skeptical administrators and faculty may question why communication scholars should teach leadership. Students may wonder how a communication-based approach differs from other approaches to leadership. Communication instructors must be prepared to convince critics the primary act of leadership is the creation of a symbolic focus and as such, leadership may be legitimately viewed from a communication perspective.

UNDERSTANDING LEADERSHIP FROM A COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

Researchers in other fields are discovering that leading is a symbolic activity. Leadership scholars in business and management, psychology, sociology and other disciplines focus on such communication processes as the function of organizational symbols (Dandridge, 1983), the role of narrative in innovation and change (Kanter, 1983), and organizational culture (Schein, 1985). Communication is the foundation for the most recent leadership paradigm—the transformational approach. Transformational leaders inspire higher than ordinary levels of commitment and motivation in followers through the effective use of symbols. As Bass (1990) explains:

The transformational leader asks followers to transcend their own self-interests for the good of the group, organization, or society; to consider their long-term needs to develop themselves, rather than their needs of the moment; and to become more aware of what is really important. Hence, followers are converted into leaders (p. 3).



To achieve this conversion, transformational leaders must engage in a variety of communication activities, including the formulation of a symbolic vision (a desirable and attainable view of the future), the creation of an open environment for interaction, the establishment of source credibility as the basis for relational trust, and the demonstration of communication competence (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Nanus, 1992; Tichy & Devanna, 1986).

Elements of leadership communication coursework may already be integrated into some existing business communication and organizational communication curriculum. However, as research focusing on leadership proliferates and increasing numbers of scholars assert educators must teach their students and consulting clients to lead, rather than merely manage, the argument for an entire course (or series of courses) devoted to leadership and communication becomes more compelling (Kotter, 1990). As Nanus (1992) explains, the ability to communicate a symbolic vision of the future is central to leadership. Without the effective communication of vision, Nanus argues, groups and organizations are "doomed to failure" (p. 10). The leadership communication course allows instructors the opportunity to more fully explore the complex relationship between communication and leadership.

Implicit in the communication perspective on leadership is the notion that leadership competence is the product of communication competence. Leadership effectiveness is enhanced through the development of such communication skills as listening, critical and creative thinking, compliance gaining, encoding and decoding nonverbal messages, and public address. As a result, communication instructors are able to offer a leadership course that is well grounded in both principle and practice. By emphasizing the role of both communication processes and communication skills as the basis for leadership, instructors can direct students to research published in communication journals and books. Course assignments reflect a communication perspective, involving analysis of leadership communication behaviors and demonstration of communication competence through oral presentations, group discussions, and interviews.



COURSE ORGANIZATION

The following sample syllabus and discussion provides a suggested model for an upper-division undergraduate leadership communication course divided into three basic units. The depth of coverage in any particular unit will be determined by time constraints, course enrollment, and the interests of both instructor and students.

Sample Syllabus: Leadership Communication

Leadership Communication explores contemporary leadership communication theory and research. Topics include: symbolism, leadership communication style, theoretical approaches to leadership, transformational leadership, creativity, power, influence, team building, charisma, and the ethics of leadership.

Texts: Hackman, M.Z., & Johnson, C.E. (1991). *Leadership: A communication perspective*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press. Larson, C.E., & LaFasto, F.M.J. (1989). *Teamwork: What must go right/What can go wrong*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

UNIT I

- Week 1 Preview of course expectations and requirements
Leadership and communication
- Week 2 Leadership communication styles
READ: Hackman and Johnson Chapters 1 and 2
- Week 3 Leadership communication styles
- Week 4 Theoretical approaches to leadership
The Traits, Situational, and Functional Approaches
READ: Hackman and Johnson Chapter 3, pp. 42-60



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- Week 5** Theoretical approaches to leadership
The Transformational Approach
Creativity and innovation
READ: Hackman and Johnson Chapter 3, pp. 60-68,
Chapter 9, pp. 196-204
- Week 6** Leadership, power, and influence
READ: Hackman and Johnson Chapters 4 and 5
- Week 7** EXAMINATION
- UNIT II**
- Week 8** Leadership in groups and team building
READ: Hackman and Johnson Chapter 6
Larson and LaFasto Chapter 1
- Week 9** Leadership in groups and team building
READ: Larson and LaFasto Chapters 2-10
- Week 10** Leadership in organizations
Gender and leadership
READ: Hackman and Johnson Chapter 7
- Week 11** Public leadership
Charisma
READ: Hackman and Johnson Chapter 8
- Week 12** The ethics of leadership
READ: Hackman and Johnson Chapter 9, pp. 204-215
- Week 13** EXAMINATION
- UNIT III**
- Week 14** STUDENT PRESENTATIONS
READ: Hackman and Johnson Appendix A
- Week 15** STUDENT PRESENTATIONS
- Week 16** STUDENT PRESENTATIONS



Unit I

Unit one introduces the fundamentals of leadership. This unit focuses on four aspects of leadership and communication:

1. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATION.

The leadership communication course begins with an introduction to communication theory. Since the purpose of the course is to help students understand that leadership is a form of human communication, providing a theoretical grounding is essential. We emphasize the importance of symbols to the human experience. Kenneth Burke's (1966) definition of [hu]man as the "symbol-using animal" (p. 16) provides a useful point of departure. Symbolic ability separates humans from other animals and is the foundation for the relationship building, thinking, and influence functions of leadership (Dance & Larson, 1976). Definitions of leadership are also addressed in this unit. Definitional issues to be considered include: What is the relationship between leadership and power? Is there a difference between leading and managing? How are leadership and persuasion related? What makes a leader successful or unsuccessful? To complete this portion of unit one, we present a communication-based definition which recognizes the importance of communication in leadership:

Leadership is human (symbolic) communication which modifies the attitudes and behaviors of others in order to meet group goals and needs (Hackman & Johnson, 1991, p. 11).

2. LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION STYLE.

After a discussion of the communication process, leadership communication style is addressed. Over the past fifty years, researchers have identified a number of leadership communication styles. Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939) identified authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership communication styles. Other researchers note styles generally referred to as task and interpersonal leadership communication (Hackman & Johnson, 1991). As much of this material is covered in other management



and psychology courses, the focus on leadership communication style in the leadership communication course is on the verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors exhibited by leaders employing the varying leadership styles as outlined by Stech (1983).

3. THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO LEADERSHIP.

Four basic theoretical approaches for understanding and explaining leadership have emerged in this century. The *traits approach* focuses on innate qualities of leaders. This approach contends leaders have unique physical and psychological characteristics that predispose them to positions of influence. Traits, as a singular explanation of leadership, has been questioned in two literature reviews published by Stogdill (1948, 1974). From this skepticism, the *situational approach* emerged. The situational approach, also called the contingency approach, assumes that leadership is contingent upon variations in the situation. Some of the notable situational models include the Contingency Model of Leadership (Fiedler, 1967), Path-Goal Theory (House & Mitchell, 1974), and Situational Leadership Theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988). The *functional approach* looks at the communication behavior of leaders. This approach provides guidelines for leader behavior, suggesting necessary functions that a leader should perform. The most recent theoretical model of leadership is the *transformational approach* (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). This approach focuses on the actions of inspiring leaders as they attempt to meet the higher-level needs of followers. The transformational model, also sometimes referred to as the vision approach, emphasizes that effective leaders create a symbolic picture, or vision, of the future. Transformational leaders exhibit five key behaviors; they are creative, interactive, visionary, empowering, and passionate (Hackman & Johnson, 1991).

Transformational leaders are creative and foresighted. They constantly challenge the status quo by seeking out new ideas. Transformational leaders are not afraid of failure; they realize that failure is an important part of success. Without experimentation and failure, no worthwhile innovation can be developed. Transformational leaders are also masterful communicators transmitting ideas through images, metaphors, and models that organize



meaning for followers. Transformational leaders communicate a vision to their followers. A vision is a mental model of a desirable or idealistic future for a group, organization, or society (Nanus, 1992). Transformational leaders encourage participation and involvement and empower followers to take responsibility for outcomes. Finally, transformational leaders are passionately committed to their work. This passion serves to motivate others. Transformational leaders are able to encourage others because they, first and foremost, encourage themselves.

4. POWER AND INFLUENCE.

Bennis and Nanus (1985) note that power is “the currency of leadership.” This makes the study of power and influence a central part of the leadership communication course. Students identify both the sources of power (French & Raven, 1959) and the consequences of using various types of power. Students also work toward developing communicative strategies which encourage empowerment. Conger (1989) suggests leaders empower followers when they provide information that enhances followers’ sense of self-efficacy. Empowering leaders convey information through positive emotional support and words of encouragement, by providing models of successful performance, and by structuring tasks so followers experience success. The remainder of the discussion of power and influence is devoted to the examination of specific influence techniques. Verbal compliance-gaining strategies are of particular interest to communication scholars (Goss & O’Hair, 1988). These strategies illustrate how each type of power is exercised through the use of language.

Unit II

The second unit provides an overview of leadership in specific contexts. Group, organizational, and public leadership are discussed. Possible topics in the small group leadership sub-unit include models of group development, decision-making formats, leadership emergence, team building, group roles, and the characteristics of successful groups. Assignments serve to demonstrate basic principles of group leadership. Groups are given problem-solving tasks that require team coordination and are asked to



analyze patterns of leadership emergence. A particularly effective strategy is the “fishbowl” technique where members of a small group engage in group interaction while other class members observe. The group in the “fishbowl” receives feedback from the observers. This sub-unit should provide ample opportunities for students to work in groups as a means for developing group leadership competencies.

Possible topics in the organizational leadership sub-unit include the functions of organizational symbols, organizational cultures, gender and leadership in organizations, mentors, Pygmalion and Galatea effects, communication climate, communication networks, and leadership training. This sub-unit can be taught using a case study and role play model. Instructors establish a mock organization in which all students act as leaders. Participants deal with various internal and external organizational leadership issues such as down-sizing and restructuring, labor disputes, product recalls, environmental protests, and changes in governmental regulations. This format can be extended to other units as well.

Possible topics in the public leadership sub-unit include political leadership, presidential leadership, public address, persuasive campaigns, leadership ethics, charismatic leadership, servant leadership, minority leadership, and leadership across cultures. Rhetoric of public and political leaders serves as a central theme. Activities in this sub-unit might include developing persuasive messages for a political campaign or social movement, analyzing the messages of public leaders, or isolating differences among public leaders in various cultures. Either local, prominent, or historical figures may be used for analysis.

Unit III

The final unit is experiential. Students deliver oral presentations on topics related to the study of leadership and communication. Presentations focus on specific sub-areas of leadership or on a particular leader.¹ Some activity designed to offer experiential development of communication competencies is useful in the leadership communication course. Possible assignments include the



analysis of specific organizational cultures, group interaction, interviews with leaders, and oral presentations.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

The upper-division leadership communication course outlined herein includes two examinations (one after each of the first two units), an oral presentation, and two case study analyses. The case study analyses provide students with the opportunity to directly apply material discussed in class. Case studies may be obtained from secondary sources (Hackman & Johnson, 1991; Haney, 1986; Peterson, 1994; Sypher, 1990) or may be generated by the instructor. Also, students can be asked to develop case studies for analysis. To be most effective, cases should be concise and raise only one central issue. Alternatives to case studies include critical essays in which students apply course material to personal experience, research papers, or original research conducted either individually or in groups.²

TEACHING METHODS

The most appropriate format for the leadership communication course is lecture/discussion combined with in-class activities and exercises. Suggested exercises and activities include:

1. BRAINSTORMING.

Brainstorming offers students the opportunity to discover alternative ways of looking at leadership. Students brainstorm by creating lists of charismatic leaders, credibility building behaviors, ethical guidelines for leaders and so on.

2. ANALYSIS.

Analytical exercises involve interpretation and application of leadership research and theory. These exercises might include analyzing the effectiveness of a speech given by a political or social leader, discussing mentor/protege relationships or other similar assignments.



58 **3. SKILL BUILDERS.**

Skill building exercises help students to develop communication competencies. Skill building may be accomplished by having students prepare a speech, plan a meeting agenda, or participate in group problem-solving.

4. CASE STUDIES.

In-class case study analyses offer students an opportunity to apply leadership research and theory to “real-world” situations. Students can be assigned roles and present the cases in class.

RESOURCES

Burns (1978) noted that leadership is one of the “most observed” phenomena on earth. Consequently, there are a great many resources available to teachers and students of leadership communication. *Bass and Stogdill’s Handbook of Leadership* (1990), for example, cites 7,500 sources. The *Handbook* is an invaluable resource for both instructors developing leadership units and students completing class assignments. Unfortunately, this guide contains only a few references to research published by communication scholars and does not provide in-depth coverage of such topics as nonverbal communication and compliance-gaining. Instructors and students interested in these subjects will need to consult publications from the field of communication.

Three possible primary texts for the leadership communication course are *Leadership in Organizations* (Yukl, 1989), which offers an in-depth examination of leadership theories and their application in organizational settings; *Leadership: A Communication Perspective* (Hackman & Johnson, 1991), which focuses on leadership communication as it applies to group, organizational, and public contexts; and *Leadership: Communication Skills for Organizations and Groups* (Barge, 1994), which provides an advanced-level exploration of group and organizational leadership. A number of inexpensive paperback books can be used as supplemental sources, including *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge* (Bennis & Nanus,



1985), *Teamwork: What Must Go Right/What Can Go Wrong* (Larson & LaFasto, 1989), and *Leadership is an Art* (DePree, 1989). Such significant leadership works as *Leaders* (Burns, 1978), *On Leadership* (Gardner, 1990), *The Leadership Challenge* (Kouzes & Posner, 1987), and *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations* (Bass, 1985) can also be assigned to students.

Due to corporate interest in organizational leadership, many publishers rent and/or sell leadership training videos. The Video Publishing House features presentations by Ken Blanchard and Tom Peters. CRM films offers a leadership video series to accompany *The Leadership Challenge* by Kouzes and Posner as well as a video called *The Credibility Factor: What Followers Expect From Leaders* which identifies source credibility as the critical difference between effective and ineffective leaders. Documentaries on historical figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy, and Adolph Hitler are useful for illustrating topics such as the impact of public address, charisma, and the use of symbols. Feature films such as *Stand and Deliver*, *Twelve Angry Men*, *Norma Rae*, and *Ghandi* can serve as the basis for class discussion and written analysis related to topics such as transformational leadership, group leadership, and campaign leadership.

Paper and pencil instruments are important instructional tools. For instance, Fiedler's (1967) Least Preferred Co-worker Scale illustrates the major elements of contingency theory. Hersey and Blanchard's (1988) LEAD instrument helps students identify their leadership styles. The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire developed by Bass (1985) provides a useful point of departure for discussing transformational leadership. The Power Orientation Scale reveals attitudes toward power and influence (Goldberg, Cavanaugh, and Larson, 1984).

CONCLUSION

There are many variations available to instructors who wish to teach the leadership communication course. The sample syllabus presented herein offers one alternative. The ideas presented in



this article may be adapted to meet individual pedagogical goals and to align with preferred theoretical and methodological frameworks. Instructors who wish to either develop new courses or expand existing offerings in leadership communication would be well advised to consult the sources referenced in this article.

The study of leadership and communication is an emergent area within our discipline. For many years those of us in communication have, in the words of Thayer (1988), "been strangely silent" on the topic of leadership. This silence appears to be coming to an end (Johnson & Hackman, 1993). The primary benefactors of interest in leadership by communication scholars are our students who may now gain a clearer understanding of the importance of communication to effective leadership. The most effective leaders of the day appear to be those who are the most cognizant and competent communicators. As our students gain an understanding of the communication skills and strategies of leadership, they become better prepared to be the leaders of tomorrow.



APPENDIX

Possible critical essay topics include the following:

1. Discuss the relationship between communication and leadership. Detail specific strategies you can employ to communicate like a leader.
2. Discuss the authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership communication styles. Identify the style to which you most favorably respond. Provide an example of a group or organization in which you have encountered this most favored style.
3. Discuss specific actions you can undertake in developing a transformational approach to leadership. What impact might adopting the transformational approach have on a group or organization in which you are involved?
4. Max DePree suggests that leaders should act as “servants.” How do you respond to this assertion? How important do you feel empowerment is to successful leadership?
5. Discuss French and Raven’s Bases of Power. Which power base(s) do you use most often to influence others? Are your attempts to influence others generally successful? Why or why not?
6. Provide examples of the symbols present in an organization with which you are familiar (where you work, where a parent, relative, or friend works, the university, etc.). Detail a strategy for using language, stories, rituals, rites and routines to the greatest advantage in this organization.
7. Choose a well known leader. Discuss why you think this individual has been successful or unsuccessful.



NOTES

- ¹ A list of one hundred possible presentation topics is available from the first author.
- ² Possible critical essay topics are listed in the appendix.

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