

Case 2.1: Choosing a New Director of Research

Case Synopsis and Analysis

Sandra Coke must select a new director of research. Three candidates with differing leadership traits are being considered for the position. Candidate one is persistent and insightful; candidate two is extraordinarily intelligent and sociable; and candidate three has high levels of integrity. All three candidates seem to have adequate experience.

The case study provides interesting opportunities for discussion of trait theory. Students will debate which candidate has the best traits to lead the research team simply because of their own internal biases regarding leadership traits. In addition, without knowing more about the director of research position, it is difficult to determine the “best” traits for this job. For that reason, the case offers an opportunity to not only apply the trait approach but also understand its shortcomings.

Learning objectives:

- Students should be able to decipher prominent traits based on three different job candidates while understanding the tenets of the trait approach.
- Students should gain a better understanding of the weaknesses of trait approach.

Answers to questions in the text:

1. Based on the information provided about the trait approach in Tables 2.1 and 2.2, if you were Sandra, whom would you select?

It is very difficult to select a candidate without more information about the director of research position and each individual candidate. Alexa Smith seems to have high levels of determination, persistence, and responsibility. Kelsey Motts has high levels of sociability, intelligence, and social intelligence. Thomas Santiago has high levels of integrity and is a strong problem solver. Seemingly, all three would have some level of intelligence, self-confidence, and determination since each completed successful projects in the past and seems well liked by their peers.

Some students will argue that persistence is crucial for success, and Alexa should be chosen for that reason. Others will claim that Kelsey surely has persistence as well but should be hired because she is already seen as a leader and has high levels of sociability and intelligence, two of the top five most common traits of leaders. A few may state that integrity is fundamental for a research job and argue for the selection of Thomas. Based on the limited information and solely applying the trait approach, Kelsey or Alexa may be a better selection.

2. In what ways is the trait approach helpful in this type of selection?

The trait approach allows us to identify key traits that make each candidate unique. Through application of this approach, we are able to accurately define Kelsey, Alexa, and Thomas's differing traits and decide who may be best for a particular job.

3. In what ways are the weaknesses of the trait approach highlighted in this case?

The trait approach has limited utility because it offers an almost endless list of traits and fails to adequately prioritize those traits. Also, as society changes over time, certain traits become more important than others. In this case, we can imagine that all three of the candidates likely possess a number of the traits listed in Tables 2.1 and 2.2. However, it is difficult to determine which trait is most important in a given scenario.

Through discussion, students should be able to see that sociability may be important for the director of research position if the role requires considerable collaboration. However, if that role is rather isolated, it may call for a leader with integrity and persistence over one who has high levels of sociability.

Potential teaching approaches:

This case study is conducive to group discussions and exercises.

Below is a way to structure a class, based on the trait approach and Case Study 2.1:

- First, break the class into small groups and ask the groups to develop a list of the top 5 (or 10) major traits they believe are important for a strong leader. Students should prepare this list without referring to the book, based on their experiences.
- Large-group discussion of the top 5 (or 10) lists, followed by a lecture on the trait approach.
- Students then read Case 2.1 and make a list of the major traits of each candidate (again, in small groups). Students should discuss the traits in these groups for a few minutes.
- Professor discusses the questions from the case study. Large-group discussion should center on the limitations of this approach regarding this case.
- Finally, the professor may choose to conduct in-class exercises listed below.

Exercises for this case study:

- 1) In small groups, students will write a job description for the director of research role. Each group is assigned a candidate (Alexa, Kelsey, or Thomas). They are to write a job description that would lead to the selection of their candidate. Students should be careful to write a description that not only lists traits but also describes work that requires the traits of their candidate to shine through over and above the other traits.
- 2) In small groups, students can write 10 interview questions aimed at helping them discover other leadership traits of the candidates. If time permits, students can role-play interviews (below).
- 3) Students role-play interviews with each of the candidates. Here, students are assigned a role: Two students can be Sandra Coke and her assistant, with the others acting as each of the candidates. Coke and her assistant develop questions for the candidates and conduct 5-min interviews in order to determine each one's leadership traits and suitability for the job. Students then report their findings to the wider class and discuss the hires.

The trait approach is considered intuitively appealing as leaders are viewed as special people with special qualities. Ask student to pick one of the candidates from the case and argue that this person does possess special qualities. Ask students to write down their thoughts in 150–200 words. Do not allow students to sit on the fence. They will focus on one candidate only and then share with their small group.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 1: Introduction

1. Give the definition of leadership used in this text, and then explain the following components of leadership: process, influence, group context, and goal attainment.
2. Distinguish between assigned and emergent leaders. Give an example of an instance in which you “emerged” as a leader. Explain how your communication might have facilitated your emergence as leader.
3. How does gender affect leadership emergence? What is the relationship between likability and leadership?
4. According to Social Identity Theory (Hogg, 2001), leadership emergence is fostered when a person fits with the identity of the group as a whole. What are some implications of this theory for minority members who aspire to become leaders of a group?
5. Define power as it is explained in the text, and then distinguish between position power and personal power. Next, define coercion as a specific type of power. Give examples of a leader or leaders you have observed using each of these forms of power.
6. Define/describe each of French and Raven’s bases of social power. Now, give a personal example of each as you have experienced or applied them in your life.
7. Contrast leaders and managers from Kotter’s perspective, then from Zaleznik’s perspective. Can someone be a leader and a manager?
8. In this chapter, leadership is described as noncoercive influence. For what reasons might followers be motivated to respond to a leadership initiative? List as many as you can. Can you give a personal example?
9. Burns’ view is that power resides in the relationship between leaders and followers and is used by both parties to promote their collective goals. Do followers have other power bases besides referent and expert power?
10. Should there be boundaries between leaders and followers?
11. “Leaders change the way people think about what is possible.” How do they do that?
12. Give an example of a time you were in a follower role and exerted influence on the group’s positional leader. What was the outcome?
13. Fairhurst (2007) argues that the leadership process can be negotiated through the communication between leader and follower, and not solely stem from a leader’s traits, skills, and behaviors. Give an example (hypothetical or real-life) of *how a leader and follower can talk together* to mutually understand an issue and see how it should be dealt with.

Review Questions

Chapter 1: Introduction

1. Who are some of the scholars known for leadership research?
2. Describe the leadership classification scheme proposed by Bass.
3. Explain the four components identified as central to leadership.
4. Explain how the trait approach and the process approach differ.
5. Describe the differences between assigned leadership and emergent leadership.
6. Explain the six types of power identified by French and Raven.
7. Explain coercion and some of the leaders identified with coercive leadership techniques.
8. Describe the similarities and differences between leadership and management.
9. What is the relationship between leadership and power? Leadership and influence?
10. What does it mean to lead oneself?
11. What do the emerging leadership approaches (authentic leadership, spiritual leadership, servant leadership, and adaptive leadership) have in common?
12. How has access to technology empowered followers today?
13. What is spiritual leadership? How does it differ from the other leadership approaches mentioned in this chapter?
14. Explain how leadership in a group can become available to all members, and not belong just to the formally designated leader.