Chapter 2

Why Do We Fall for Positional Leaders?

Why do we attribute so much power and authority to positional leaders? Look at any printed or televised news magazine, newspaper, national government, company, or other well-known organization, and it is likely positional leaders are the main focus of attention. Even professional athletes receive the designation of "role model" or "community leader" for simply telling children to "stay in school," "say 'no' to drugs," or "go after their dreams." Why do we attribute the combined accomplishments of numerous organizational members to the positional leader? What did they actually *do* to deserve such credit?

Our position is that positional leaders really have little to do with the accomplishments for which they receive so much credit. Consider the example of an automobile manufacturer. What does the CEO of the company actually *do* to make the company profitable? They certainly don't build the cars. That job falls to a highly skilled, but less well-compensated, group of workers. The CEO certainly does not control the national or world economies which have a great influence over the number of individuals who can afford to buy new cars. Recently, one of the most prominent roles of CEOs has been to "downsize" the number of workers in a company. This kind of strategy may benefit some individuals such as stockholders and executives whose pay is tied to profits, but it does not benefit the fired workers or those whose economic livelihood depends upon business generated by these workers. One could argue that a more efficient economy has some benefit to us all and that the "downsized" workers may find better jobs, but the CEO or other positional leader has little to do with these long-term results. Yet, CEOs who reduce the number of workers in a company are credited with the resulting improved financial results. Really, the fired workers are the root cause of the improvement because it is their wages that contribute to the financial improvement of the company. The question remains as to why positional leaders receive so much credit (and blame) for events over which they have no control and little influence.

The nature of human behavior and thinking processes reveals several reasons positional leaders might receive more credit than they deserve. First, compared to other cultures in the world, U.S. culture is highly individualistic which results in a tendency to favor individualistic explanations for outcomes over explanations that emphasize circumstances and collective efforts. A parallel tendency is called the *fundamental attribution error*, which describes a bias in labeling the causes of behavior. The bias is the tendency to explain behavior as resulting from internal characteristics of individuals instead of circumstances. A complimentary phenomenon is the tendency of individuals to take credit for positive outcomes and attribute negative outcomes to circumstances. This is called the *self-serving bias*. Together, the individualistic nature of American culture, the self-serving bias, and the fundamental attribution error provide powerful reasons that positional leaders are given so much credit for the accomplishments of an organization.

The nature of human memory also contributes to the illusion that positional leaders are responsible for the accomplishments of an organization. Human memory is an amazing phenomenon. However, it is highly manipulable. The ease of manipulating human memories make it relatively easy for positional leaders to consciously or unconsciously associate themselves with the primary accomplishments of an organization. This association is one that occurs in memory but is not backed up by the facts and realities of leadership in a complex world.

Finally, there is the issue of bias in the study of leadership. Leadership has been studied and written about for centuries. Even a cursory examination of the leadership literature reveals that the research has been dominated by the assumption that positional leaders should be the focus of investigations. If every study is an attempt to justify the value of positional leaders, it will lead to a lot of studies that justify positional leaders, in much the same way the view that the earth was flat received a lot of support based upon common sense and observation. However, once the view that the earth was round became part of our cosmos, whole new vistas of exploration and understanding could evolve. Similarly, by encouraging the view that positional leaders are not central to the accomplishments of an organization, a more useful and realistic view of leadership will evolve.

The Individualistic Bias of U.S. Culture

U.S. culture generally places more emphasis on individual accomplishment and personal goals than other world cultures.[i] In contrast, four-fifths of the world's population places greater emphasis on group goals and group identity. This does not imply that U.S. culture is entirely individualistic. It is not. However, cross-cultural comparisons show the U.S. to have higher average scores on scales designed to measure individualism than any other cultural group. Although average differences can be deceiving, they may also capture key characteristics that differentiate groups.

Geert Hofstede, who is responsible for describing some of the key concepts in cross-cultural comparisons of positional leader behavior, described the Japanese culture as lacking in the American type of manager. In American business, he says, the "core" of the organization is the "managerial class," whereas, in Japanese culture, the core of the organization is its "permanent worker group." The permanent worker group remains with the organization with more or less guaranteed tenure in contrast to nonpermanent employees who are laid off during down times. Graduates of the Japanese university system are hired into the permanent worker groups and change positions within the organization according to organizational needs. Seniority, not position, determines salary. Important decisions are made in group sessions and it is the peer group which has the greatest influence on individuals rather than a manager or positional leader. These characteristics flow out of the cultural history of Japan which, in general, is low in individualism and high in collectivism.[ii]

In contrast, U.S. companies are known for their lack of loyalty to any but the highest-level executives. Workers and middle managers are "downsized," "let go," or fired in order to decrease costs and increase efficiency. Our cultural hero is the executive who has the "skill" to accomplish this task and "save" the floundering company. We then attribute the executive's performance to

his (rarely her) internal characteristics or personality. In other words, we say the executive has the "right stuff" to be a positional leader and take control of the fate of the company. This tendency is related to another reason that we tend to fall for leaders called the fundamental attribution error.

The Fundamental Attribution Error and the Self-Serving Bias

Imagine that you are in the "express" line at the grocery store and someone abruptly pushes past you, goes to the head of the line, quickly pays for several items, and leaves without a word. How would you explain the behavior of the person who just "cut" into the line? Research by a number of social psychologists has indicated that the most likely explanation is to label the person with some internal characteristic such as "impolite," "a jerk," or "aggressive." The tendency is to apply such a label, while ignoring situational or temporary characteristics that might explain the behavior. For example, the person might have been purchasing medication needed for a sick child. The phenomenon is called the *fundamental attribution error*[iii] because the observer ignores the possibility that circumstances may have caused the behavior. In general, observers seeking an explanation for the behavior of another are likely to overestimate the importance of personality factors and underestimate the importance of situational factors. Why do people have this bias? One explanation is that it is a relatively easy and effortless to come up with an explanation based on personality compared to the complexity of developing an explanation based upon circumstances and history.[iv]

We are exposed to the behavior of positional leaders almost constantly because of the nature of hierarchical organizations and the media. The fundamental attribution error, then, would almost certainly bias observers to attribute the behaviors of these individuals to an internal characteristic such as "leadership." For example, we see a positional leader in the front of the room speaking to a group of "followers" and the most likely attribution to be made by the "followers" is that the person possesses leadership ability which both gives them the "talent" to make the public speech and the ability to "lead" the group in the future. In fact, this point of view has been developed in a formal theory known as the *attribution theory of leadership*.[v] In this theory, "leadership" is no more than a characteristic that observers infer exists in certain individuals. These individuals are "leaders" not because of any special attributes or behaviors, they are leaders because others simply say that they are.[vi] As might be expected, given the fundamental attribution error, people have a tendency to attribute organizational performance to leadership.[vii]

James Meindl[viii] has argued that leadership is a "social construction" that occurs among "followers." His view is that the social construction of leadership is complementary to theories that focus on positional leaders and the process through which followers construct leadership are much more important than the behavior of the positional leaders. He also says (p.333) that positional leaders practice their craft by manipulating the context and constructions of the followers. The goal of positional leaders, then, is not to control the behavior of followers, but to create the "right impression" or "spin," because the individual and group level processes that lead to a social construction of leadership, in turn, lead to commitment to the positional leader and followership.[ix] While we admire a perspective that attacks the assumption that positional

leaders should or can be in control of an organization, we can not accept the division of organizations into "leaders" and "followers," regardless of whether the "followers" are "constructing" the role of the positional leader. Such a view works to the advantage of those who wish to attain the power, status, and compensation of positional leaders and encourages the myth of positional leadership. Instead, we argue that the first step in developing healthy leadership processes is to attack the belief that leaders control organizational outcomes, not encourage it.

Is it possible to counteract the tendency of observers to attribute organizational performance to "leadership?" We certainly believe so. By subjecting the belief in leadership to detailed scrutiny, it should be possible to determine what credit positional leaders deserve for the successes or failures of organizations. In fact, research demonstrates that the fundamental attribution error, the tendency for observers to attribute behavior to internal characteristics rather than circumstances, can be countered by letting individuals know that they will be asked to explain their conclusions. However, this works in the laboratory only if the observers know they will be asked to justify their conclusions before the observations take place. If observers are not asked to justify their explanations until *after* the event, they have a difficult time letting go of their attribution errors.[x]

There is also evidence that the beliefs of individuals about leadership are associated with attributing influence to a positional leader.[xi] If individuals believe strongly in the importance of leadership in organizations, they are likely to attribute *influence* to positional leaders. This seems to set up a situation in which positional leaders are very likely to receive credit for organizational accomplishments regardless of their actual role in them. A combination of the fundamental attribution error plus any beliefs that an individual already has about the importance of leadership make a hard to resist combination that would bias people in favor of seeing the influence of leaders, even when a critical evaluation of the situation might not provide evidence that positional leaders influenced an organization's success or failure.

Three biases make us likely to attribute organzational success or failure to positional leaders: the individualistic nature of U.S. culture, the fundamental attribution error, and the attribution theory of leadership. Now, what happens when we look at the behavior of positional leaders, themselves. Does their behavior tend to reinforce or undermine a belief in the influence of positional leaders?

When a positional leader paints a self-portrait, what does it look like? Is it full of self-effacing words and humility? No, not usually. The self-portrait a positional leader paints most often points toward themselves as deserving credit for the success of the organization. This can clearly be seen in U.S. Presidential politics where the two main political parties fight to be credited with any positive news in our country while simultaneously pointing the finger of blame for any negative events. In fact, this tendency to take credit for positive outcomes and blame others or circumstances for negative outcomes has been given a name. It is called the *self-serving bias*, a tendency to take credit for success and blame failures on the circumstances, a characteristic which is particularly prevalent in individualistic cultures such as in the U.S..[xii]

The self-serving bias heightens the illusion that positional leaders have control over the events that affect an organization because the claim of a positional leader that they deserve credit for the accomplishments of an organization is not challenged by a more realistic perspective. In

fact, it would be difficult to explain all the variables that affect a complex system such as our national economy. Thus, it is easier to give credit or lay the blame on positional leaders.

Scapegoating

A scapegoat is a person or group blamed for shortcomings or failures when they are innocent or only partly responsible for a problem. Although positional leaders are most often given credit for the positive accomplishments of an organization, it is perfectly consistent with the idea that positional leaders are somehow responsible for the accomplishments of an organization to blame them for organizational failures. Whether positional leaders are blamed for failures or given credit for organizational successes, responsibility for the organization is taken away from the other members.

Khanna and Poulsen[xiii] performed an interesting study of the activities of firms that filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy which would represent the end point of a failed company. They compared the actions of positional leaders in the three years prior to filing for bankruptcy versus the actions of a group of similar companies that did not file for bankruptcy. The goal of the research was to "distinguish between scapegoating and poor or excessively self-serving management." With the exception of acquisition and expansion announcements, the Chapter 11 companies and the control companies essentially took the same actions with the same effects on the market value of the companies' stock. Thus, there was no significant evidence that positional leader incompetence or bad decision-making was related to the performance of the Chapter 11 or the control companies. Thus, factors responsible for the financial difficulty of the companies were outside the control of positional leaders.

Another study[xiv] compared attributes of colleges and universities under conditions of turbulence and decline. Under conditions of decline, attitudes of organization members were likely to include scapegoating of positional leaders, resistance to change, low morale, conflict, and curtailment of innovation. There was no association between these characteristics and high or low levels of organizational turbulence. In contrast, positional leaders were likely to be affected by turbulance but not organizational decline. The authors speculated that the characteristics of organiational members under conditions of decline could actually perpetuate the decline.

Scapegoating can also be observed at the national level in U.S. politics. It is well known that national elections hinge, at least partially, on the state of the economy. If the economy is doing well, the incumbent party tends to remain in power whereas when the economy is poor the incumbent party is likely to lose. The variables that control an economy as large as the United States' can not be controlled by a single national leader or group of leaders. These individuals can influence its direction but not control it. Therefore, losses suffered by the incumbent party in a time of economic decline also represent scapegoating on the part of the electorate.

Scapegoating, which would be associated with poor or declining organizational performance may represent a worst case scenario with respect to overdependence upon positional leaders. When an organization most needs its members to contribute to innovation and problem solving, scapegoating puts the burden of responsibility upon positional leaders lacking the ability to control or change organizational outcomes.

Stereotyping

Is there a stereotypical positional leader? It seems to us that it is difficult to escape the images of positional leaders that appear when the word "leader" comes to mind. The U.S. President, certain members of congress, other political figures, positional leaders in business, and positional leaders in religious organizations seem to be associated with this word. Furthermore, do we have stereotypical ideas of what a leader should do and how they should behave and do these ideas make it more difficult to think differently about leadership?

Research indicates that the stereotypical view of a positional leader is someone who is masculine, aggressive, rational, self-confident, competitive, and independent.[xv] Do these stereotypes of leaders contribute toward the tendency to fall for positional leaders? Three phenomena seem particularly relevant to stereotypes of positional leaders: self-fulfilling prophecies, priming, and assimilation effects.[xvi]

A self-fulfilling prophecy is a prediction about the behavior of others that tends to be reinforced by our own behavior. In other words, if a person is labeled a "positional leader," the behavior of others in the organization or group may then adjust to confirm the stereotype. Imagine that you are in a small group that has been formed to raise funds for a new school playground. Often, the group comes with an appointed leader such as a designated chairperson. Then, the remainder of the group members typically behave in a way that reinforces the role of the chairperson such as waiting for him or her to call meetings, set an agenda, guide discussion, call for votes, and similar tasks. Group members behave in a way that reinforces and fosters the positional leader's role. This behavior, in turn, reinforces the stereotype of the typical leader as one who performs these behaviors. On a larger scale, the way that the media and large groups of people are likely to pay attention to the words and actions of positional leaders also reinforces the stereotype that these individuals are actually responsible for organizational accomplishments.

Priming is another phenomenon that may be related to positional leader stereotypes. This word is used in the sense that a pump is primed. Once primed, a pump operates more efficiently and quickly to deliver liquid. In an analogous manner, our prior knowledge has a pervasive influence on the way we interpret events. It is a well-known principle of memory that the best way to remember new information is to actively process it and relate it to what we already know. However, the disadvantage is that what we already know may overwhelm new information so that we only remember things in a way that confirms what we already know. It has been suggested that stereotypes can be maintained by random incoming information from everyday experiences and news stories. Furthermore, individuals are primed by their pre-existing stereotypes to process incoming information in a way that is consistent with these existing stereotypes.[xvii] Consequently, individuals that maintain stereotypical views of positional leaders are not likely to process information that contradicts the stereotypical views of leaders while these stereotypes will be reinforced by information consistent with the stereotype.

A third cognitive phenomemon that assists in the development and maintenance of stereotypes is assimilation. Assimilation is the process of categorizing people according to stereotypes. Research indicates that if a person resembles a stereotypical category, they are likely to be assimilated into the stereotype providing even more reinforcement to it. Thus, even if a

positional leader tends to behave differently from the stereotype of the positional leader, they are likely to be assimilated, that is, regarded as representative of the stereotype.

It almost seems that resistance to the stereotypical view of positional leaders is futile. However, it is possible to change stereotypes. Two general approaches to changing stereotypes seem to be prevalent. First, when an individual behaves in a way that contradicts the stereotype is is possible that a subtype of the general stereotype may form. As more subtypes are formed, the stereotype, itself, may break down. With respect to positional leadership, it is possible to observe that positional leaders behave in many different ways. At one extreme are hierarchical, top-down, positional leaders who tend to reinforce the sterotype of the positonal leader. On the other hand, individuals in leadership positions may have a cooperative style that places more varying levels of responsibility on other organizational members, contradicting the stereotype. As an individual assimilates more and more positional leader subtypes, the stereotype breaks down.

Hierarchical and Individualistic Bias in Leadership Research, Reporting, and Theory

Both the empirical and philosophical study of leadership has focussed on positional leaders.[xviii] The focus on positonal leaders has acted as a lens through which the entire construction of leadership has been viewed. With a focus on nothing but the positional leader, is it at all surprising that the findings have been highly supportive of the power, influence, and control of positional leaders? The very techniques of measurement and study have influenced the findings. What would happen if the lens were changed to take in other apects of leadership, such as its systemic context and the adaptive challenges faced by all organizations? In the present context of leadership studies it is difficult to see leadership as anything but position-based.

Our view is that we need to move beyond our individualistic, position-based, self-serving, stereotyped, and scapegoating attributions about leadership and view it through a lens that is more attuned to the complex, systemic world that we live in. The reality is that the world is far more complex than can be controlled by any positional leader or leaders. It is time to move beyond the positional bias of leadership studies into a more encompassing view that allows us to see other possibilities.

Conclusion

Gary Gemmill and Judith Oakley wrote an extremely interesting essay titled, "Leadership: An Alienating Social Myth."[xix] In this essay, they argue that "leadership" is a social myth which functions to provide individuals with a source of blame for societal problems (e.g., the absence of "leadership"). Furthermore, the myth of leadership causes us to look toward individuals who can control events instead of our own personal behavior for solutions. In essence, these writers argue that we fall for positional leaders because they provide us with a sense of security and protection in a frightening, unpredictable, and uncontrollable world. In a very Freudian argument, Gemmill and Oakley state that our anxieties and fears are projected onto positional leaders which causes us to withdraw from our own responsibilities for making the world a better place. They call this process "deskilling" or the taking away of our personal skills and ability to influence the world. As a substitute for the alienating myth of positional leadership, Gemmill and Oakley suggest a

radical feminist definition of power, moving away from a definition of power as the ability to induce people to act according to the goals and desires of the leader to a re-definition of power as the ability to induce people to act "in their own interests" (p. 124). Although we would argue that there is more depth to the myth of leadership, we would agree that positional leaders have been elevated to a status that goes far beyond their ability to influence and control events with the result that the complexity of our world has been ignored.

End Notes

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i. W. Weiten, *Psychology: Themes and Variations, 3rd Edition* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1995). G. Hofstede, "Cultural constraints in management theories." *The Academy of Management Executive*, Feb. 1993, vol. 7(1), 81-94. Triandis, H. C. (1994). *Culture and social behavior.* New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc..

ii. G. Hofstede, "Cultural constraints in management theories." *The Academy of Management Executive*, Feb. 1993, vol. 7(1), 81-94.

iii. The fundamental attribution error is described in most psychology textbooks such as C. Wade and C. Tavris, *Psychology, 5th Edition* (New York: Longman, 1998); or W. Weiten, *Psychology: Themes and Variations, 3rd Edition* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1995). See, also, J. H. Harvey and G. Weary, "Current Issues in Attribution Theory," *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 35, pp. 427-459, or L. Ross (1977), "The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings: Distortions in the Attribution Process," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 10, pp. 173-220.

iv. Y. Trope and A. Liberman, "The use of trait conceptions to identify other people's behavior and to draw inferences about their personalities." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 19,* 553-662.

v. See S. P. Robbins, *Organizational Behavior: Concepts, Controversies, Applications, 8th Edition* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), for a summary of this theory.

vi. J. C. McElroy, "A Typology of Attribution Leadership Research," *Academy of Management Review,* 1982, vol. 7(3), 413-417.

vii. J. R. Meindl, S. B. Ehrlich, and J. M. Dukerich, "The Romance of Leadership," *Administrative Science Quarterly,* March 1985, pp. 78-102.

viii. J. R. Meindl, "The Romance of leadership as a follower-centric Theory: A Social Constructionist Approach," *Leadership Quarterly, 6*(3), 329-341.

ix. Similar ideas are expressed in Kerr and Jermier's "substitutes for leadership" theory (see S. Kerr and J. M. Jermier, 1978, Substitutes for leadership: Their meaning and measurement. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 22,* 375-403.) and "implicit leadership theory" (see, for example, D. Eden & U. Leviatan, 1975, Implicit leadership theory as a determinant of the factor structure underlying supervisory behavior scales. Journal of Applied Psychology, 60, 736-741).

x. J. C. McElroy, *ibid*.

xi. Boas Shamir, "Attribution of Influence and Charisma to the Leader: The Romance of

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Leadership Revisited," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 1992, *22*, 386-407.

xii. W. Weiten, *Psychology: Themes and Variations, 3rd Edition* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1995). C. Wade and C. Tavris, (1998). *Psychology, 5th Edition.* New York: Longman.

xiii. Khanna, N., & Poulsen, A. B. (1995). Managers of financially distressed firms: Villains or scapegoats. *Journal of Finance*, 50, 919-940.

xiv. Cameron, K. S., Kim, M. U., & Whetten, D. A. (1987). Organizational effects of decline and turbulence. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 32,* 222-240.

xv. Fagenson, E. A. (1990). Perceived masculine and feminine attributes examined as a function of individual's sex and level in the organizational power hierarchy: A test of four theoretical perspectives. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 75,* 204-211. See also, J. A. Kolb (1997). Are we still stereotyping leadership? A look at gender and other predictors of leader emergence. *Small Group Research, 28,* 370-393.

xvi. J. L. Hilton and W. von Hippel, "Stereotypes." *Annual Review of Psychology*, 1996, *47*, 237-271.

xvii. J. L. Hilton and W. von Hippel, "Stereotypes." *Annual Review of Psychology*, 1996, *47*, 237-271.

xviii. The literature on leadership is vast, to say the least. For a discussion of the poistional leader bias of the leadership literature see K. E. Allen (1990). "Diverse Voices of Leadership: Different Rythms and Emerging Harmonies." Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of San Diego. For a more recent example see the integrative review of the positional leadership literature by M. M. Chemers (1997), *An integrative theory of leadership.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

xix. G. Gemmill, & J. Oakley (1992). Leadership: An alienating social myth. *Human Relations, 45,* 113-129.