

**LEADERSHIP AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE THROUGH A SYSTEMIC APPROACH:
An Integrative Systematic Review**

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ABSTRACT

Tools, approaches and methods of leadership development are plentiful, and form a set of techniques that have evolved over time. The quest for self-knowledge allows the individual to realize that his or her points of view are personal and should not be taken as universal truths. This paper seeks to answer the following research question: 'How can self-knowledge, adopting a systemic approach, contribute to the development of leaders?'. Therefore, following a systemic approach, this review aims to identify the contribution of self-knowledge to leadership development. In order to achieve this goal, a systematic literature review was carried out. The results showed that organizations have a rather systemic view towards their employees, and acknowledge the importance of self-knowledge for the development of their leaders. However, there is also a lack of systemic thinking in relation to how self-knowledge can be thought and developed.

Keywords: *General Systems Theory; Self-knowledge; Leadership*

1 INTRODUCTION

(...) we are part of something much bigger and broader than our individual mind. Our mind is a subsystem of a universal hologram, accessing and interpreting this holographic universe. We are resonant and harmonic interactive systems with this self-organizing indivisible whole. We are this holo-informational field of consciousness, and not observers external to it. The perspective of external observers made us lose the sense and feeling of unity, or supreme identity, generating the immense difficulties that we face in order to understand that we are one with the whole, and not a part of it (Di Biase; Schweitzer; Rocha, 2004, p. 263).

In the era of knowledge, the key competitive advantage are the people working in the organization. Intangible assets are more valuable than physical assets, especially in service companies. Physical assets undergo constant monitoring in most companies, both in accounting and physical perspectives, aiming to appraise their

depreciation and condition. Intangible assets also need to be mapped and monitored, even though they do not depreciate, wear out or break.

Although technology offers organizations a great contribution towards competitiveness in the market, people are a key element, and their wide range of skills and talents developed and/or to be developed can be used as levers for organizational success. It is therefore essential to build a relationship of constant synergy between organizations and people.

Currently, it is acknowledged that individuals have different personalities and varied knowledge, and are seen as smart enablers of organizational resources. They are seen as boosters that impart talent and learning for constant renewal and adaptation to the context, as partners of the organization who are able to lead it to excellence and success. In this sense leadership has a key role.

The transition from industrial society to a knowledge society directly affected the organizations that are undergoing restructuring to ease communication and facilitate the flow of information between employees. Among other strategies, this requires a new management style in which leadership is a major strength. Thus, the issue of leadership has a strong appeal both to those who lead and those who are led.

According to Bergamini (1994, p. 114):

Under favorable organizational conditions, leaders are those who have the power to act as real agents of change. Highly knowledgeable about the meaning contained in the symbolism network of the organizational culture, leaders have the ability to act by tuning the expectations of individuals and groups with the sense of the organizational dimension they perceive.

Goleman (1999) and Bergamini (1994) emphasize the importance of self-knowledge in the leadership process, and state that self-knowledge, understanding of own internal states, preferences, intuitions, emotions, own values that guide the way one feels, as well as strengths and personal limitations of how to make choices and how to act, are essential factors for a leader.

Studies have shown that one of the major difficulties faced by organizations seeking internal changes towards greater competitiveness refers to the resistance related not to technical aspects, but to questions about aspects of attitude and relationships in the workplace (Lustaman; Triches, 1996; Roesch, 1994). Although change of attitude is a basic assumption that organizations and people should seek to develop – as it is expected in any environment regardless of the management program or model followed –, the awareness of such need is a personal internal process, and that is what one must seek in order to know his or her own limits, lacks, and ways to improve the process of individual change (attitudes) and organizational change (activities performed by companies). It is therefore a process of discovery, questioning and reflection towards self-knowledge which is the central point of this study.

The quest for self-knowledge allows individuals to realize that they see the world from their own points of views, which are only personal thoughts rather than universal truths. This awareness allows understanding the differences between people and the consequent decline of leaders' egocentrism, greatly increasing his or her own competence and that of his group.

Thus, adopting a systemic view of the human being for leaders in organizations would allow for more fluid personal and professional development, consequently improving the organization as a whole, and society.

2 SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Scientific research aims to fundamentally contribute to the evolution of human knowledge in all sectors, systematically planned and executed according to strict criteria of information processing. The search for information is essential in scientific research, and one of the tools to accomplish the present study is undertaking a systematic review.

A systematic review, as other types of review study, is a form of research that uses the literature on a certain topic as a source of data. This type of research provides a summary of evidence related to a specific intervention strategy by applying explicit and systematic search methods, critical appraisal and synthesis of the selected information. Systematic reviews are particularly useful for integrating information from a number of separate

studies on a particular topic, which may present conflicting and/or coincidental results, and identify issues that need evidence, assisting in the guidance for future investigations.

For Higgins (2008), a systematic literature review, through the gathering of empirical artifacts previously classified according to criteria of choice, ensures reliable results for reduction of the studied reality, obtained by a transparent scientific method. Following the same line, Transfield, Denyer and Palminder (2003) claim that a review is a reproducible, explicit process which follows the scientific rigor, where the author writes his conviction.

The central idea of this review was thought prior to the selection of the database(s), targeting the relationship between Leadership, Self-knowledge and General Systems Theory, which were later determined as keywords for the search. This brings up the following research question: 'How can self-knowledge, adopting a systemic approach, contribute to the development of leaders?'. Therefore, following a systemic approach, this review aims to identify the contribution of self-knowledge to leadership development. In order to achieve this goal, a systematic literature review was carried out.

2.1 Procedures and sequence of steps

The search strategy for carrying out this review was formulated in five steps, as follows:

First step - definition of the research question and keywords.

Second step - selection of scientific production sources, whose expected result was the definition of multidisciplinary electronic databases of abstracts and citations, allowing for a systematic search, review and analysis of the literature. Collections of papers published in books were also considered, and likewise contributed to this study.

Third step - development of bibliometric analysis with the search results. By entering keywords in the pre-defined multidisciplinary electronic databases, scientific productions were found, especially those pertaining to the category of scientific papers.

Fourth step - analysis of the search results considering the focus of the papers in order to filter according to utility and contribution to the functional title.

Fifth step - completion of the systematic review with remarks on the state of the art of the researched topic according to analysis of the selected papers, finding the gap that served as object of study for the present review.

The systematic review of literature was conducted in January 2014. The words "General System Theory", "self knowledge" and the keyword "lead*" were defined according to the central idea and the research question of this review. This strategy was used so that the researched universe could include records with the word "leader" and those that addressed the terms "lead", "leadership", "leading", thereby creating a more comprehensive field of search.

After identification of the keywords, the next activity consisted in the selection of scientific production sources. The focus encompassed the possibility of systematic searches in the electronic databases. In this systematic review, the searches were performed in the databases *Scopus* and *Web of Science* because they are the largest peer reviewed databases of abstracts and references in the scientific literature. Such databases allow a multidisciplinary view of science, and integrate all relevant sources for basic applied research and technological innovation through patents, web sources of scientific content, open access journals, memoirs and conference proceedings. They identify and index the top journals in the areas of science, social sciences, arts and humanities, and cover all kinds of relevant documents.

As a first filter, the most relevant areas to the review were determined: Multidisciplinary, Undefined, Psychology; Social Sciences; Decision Sciences; Business; Management and Accounting; Philosophy. As a second filter, papers published up to five years ago were filtered because the researcher noted that the timeline coincided with the years when there was an increase in the number of publications on the topic and in the search for more recent records. As a final filter, the most relevant records were selected according to the databases which took into account the SNIP (Source Normalized Impact per Paper) and the SJR (SCImago Journal Rank) indices, which aimed to measure the impact of contextual citations based on the total number of citations of a particular subject, and on the quality and reputation of the journal. However, it is worth mentioning that these criteria did not exclude the records searched in other areas which were considered relevant to this review.

In a first moment, the search was made with each single keyword. In a second moment, refinement was carried out with two keywords at a time, and subsequently three words.

2.2 Results of the Searches

Table 1 shows the total number of matches per keyword retrieved in both databases using the filters previously mentioned.

After the search of every word, the following step was the intersection of the keywords. The first search was conducted by the intersection of the constructs “General Systems Theory” in titles, abstracts and keywords. Within the results found, as a second filter, the keyword “self knowledge” was entered. This search resulted in 0 records in both databases. It is worth noting that no filters were used in the intersection between keywords.

Subsequently, the intersection of the keyword “General Systems Theory” was made in titles, abstracts and keywords. Within the results found, as a second filter, the keyword “lead*” was entered. This search found 69 records in Scopus and 9 in Web of Science.

According to the defined methodology, the intersection of the keyword “self knowledge” was made in titles, abstracts and keywords. Within the results found, as a second filter, the keyword “lead” was entered. This search found 138 records in Scopus and 77 records in Web of Science.

In addition, the intersection of the three keywords “General Systems Theory”, “self-knowledge” and “lead*” was made in titles, abstracts and keywords without the use of other filters; and no record was retrieved in both databases.

After reading 753 abstracts of the selected papers, a selection was made according to adherence to the proposed topic. Table 2 shows the records that were selected after the analysis. Some papers were found in more than one record and were cited only once.

The analysis of focus and content of the 106 selected records was performed according to adherence to the researched topic. Table 3 below shows the number of papers that were selected after analyzing their content and focus.

Table 4 shows the papers selected in the databases.

3 RESULTS

The purpose of a systematic review is to sum up the state-of-the-art research on a specific question, as well as to find, evaluate and synthesize the results of relevant research and approaches, to identify gaps that may exist and offer opportunities for further work on the topic.

The procedures and sequence of steps taken for the development of this systematic literature review showed to be fairly consistent as a scientific method. It can be said that it achieved a high degree of objectivity and consistency over the step sequence, especially with regard to the scope of the review and the expected objectives.

The intersection of the constructs demonstrated that no publications met the areas of interest of this study, thus proving the existence of a gap. The focus on systemic approach, self-knowledge and leadership, is undoubtedly an unprecedented research branch as evidenced in this systematic review. Thus, it is clear the importance and the originality of this topic, whether for the lack of specific scientific research work or for the significance and practical relevance of the study which can effectively support organizations and leaders.

According to Boal; Hooijberg (2000), many of the new leadership theories appear in a free context, that is, they do not consider the environmental or organizational context and its influence on the process.

Through a systemic approach, this systematic review showed that one can both understand people and organizations from the following perspective: “(...) the employee begins to be thought of and seen according to his or her most human characteristics and tends to overcome psychiatric barriers that separate body and mind, and understands it in its entirety. (...) The employee will no longer be understood from a broken constitution, he is now ‘one’” (Soares; Cervelin, 2009, p. 83).

For Trinidad and Cato (1997, p. 2), based on a systemic organizational view:

it is excluded the possibility of understanding the human being, working conditions and work organization separately. Individuals and work collectives as well as the environment that is internal and external to the work organization should be considered as inseparable elements within the work system, considering that the process and the product of work are resulting from this relationship.

The selected papers have shown the importance of carrying out studies on the topic of self-knowledge as a strategy to help leaders to become more efficient and effective.

Highly self-conscious leaders are thought to be more aware of their own emotions and impacts they can have on others, and they can use this emotional awareness to develop and set goals and collective objectives, develop specific messages for the public, and solve problems in a flexible way and with less rigid decisions (George, 2000). Also according to this author, such leaders engender a feeling of trust and cooperation in their subordinates, and improve their own capability of being effective leaders.

Carlson (2013) points out that there are many blind spots in self-knowledge, and these can lead to negative consequences for individuals. Drosdek (2008, p. 101) states that “(...) those who know themselves can better understand and evaluate others.” Lindsey (2010) emphasizes that it is necessary to have, in any kind of work, a view of what is happening within us. London (2001 apud LINDSEY, 2010) cites self-perception as one of the three psychological processes underlying the leadership behavior, and states that self-awareness is the key to being an agile and an effective leader.

The results showed that organizations have a rather systemic view towards their employees, and acknowledge the importance of self-knowledge for the development of their leaders. However, the results also revealed a lack of systemic thinking in relation to how self-knowledge can be thought and developed.

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Companies need to be more and more prepared to grow in the current competitive market, aiming at improvement in all of their processes. But it is impossible to overcome all the barriers imposed by the market if people, as the central key, are overlooked. If there is no concern for the people who constitute the organization, there will be a serious risk of failure. To achieve results through people, it is necessary to attract them and invest in them from the hiring moment, by correctly defining a desired profile, and maintain and develop this intellectual capital.

Leadership development must respect the uniqueness of each organization and its individuals, pointing to the need for an integrated and flexible leadership framework.

The present times demand a broader understanding of ourselves. The importance of self-knowledge has been acknowledged and researched in several areas since long ago. But why so much scientific development if people may still not feel well about their (personal and professional) lives? Self-knowledge impoverishment is also associated with intrapersonal negative consequences such as personal unsuccessfulness, and emotional problems. Likewise, lack of knowledge about how you may feel or behave in the future tends to result in poor decision making, disappointment with unpredictable outcomes and lower life satisfaction.

Several integrative practices play a central role in building new ways to see the human being, respecting individuality without making a massification of the processes of health and disease.

An integrated image of leadership and management is a kind of leadership that sees the organization, and the people who are part of it, from a systemic view, with reported values. It is a form of leadership that recognizes and accommodates, in an integrative way, the legitimate needs of individuals, groups, organizations, communities and cultures; not just the organizational perspectives.

To set the current globalized and competitive scenario, it is necessary to develop new perspectives, new ways of thinking, new knowledge and attitudes towards the people in the organization. This can be a tool to help maximize the results and stay in the market, considering the fact that everything that is new involves a lot of uncertainty.

Research work by itself is never enough, thus a follow-up to previous studies is necessary. Therefore, for future research, it can be suggested the use of other databases and the development of empirical research, in a systemic approach, focused on self-knowledge for leadership and its impacts on employees in general.

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