

## AN EXPLORATION OF THE LEADERSHIP PRACTICE ENABLING OTHERS TO ACT: A CASE STUDY

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this study was to explore the leadership practice of “enabling others to act” as defined by Kouzes and Posner. Data collected using the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) have consistently shown a significant difference between leader scores on the LPI “self” and subordinate scores on the LPI “observer”. Using a multiple case study with embedded unit analysis, this research investigated why such differences exist. Three departments or centers located within Colleges of Agriculture at three midwestern land grant universities served as sites for the study. The study focused on identifying and confirming behaviors used by executive officers that enable subordinates to perform their duties. The appropriate LPI instrument was the embedded unit of analysis with three leaders and 21 subordinates. Findings were supportive of both the transformational theory of leadership and Kouzes and Posner’s emphasis on the leadership practice “enabling others to act.” The departments and centers were selected because of their reputation for outstanding leadership, and the LPI confirmed no significant discrepancies between leaders and the faculty. The exemplary leader can employ behaviors that impact faculty members’ perceptions of their ability to act in fulfilling their responsibilities,*

Efforts to cause organized action within others are practiced by a variety of individuals in a variety of settings. This phenomenon is commonly known as leadership and was defined by Tucker (1984, p. 41) as “the ability to influence or motivate an individual or a group of individuals to work willingly toward a given goal or objective under a specific set of circumstances.” Leadership became a major area of study within the areas of social psychology and organizational behavior in the 1930s (Bowditch & Buono, 1990). Leadership theories have evolved from the original trait theory, through behavioral and situational approaches, to today’s transformational theory. The focus has changed from the individual’s attributes, to the leader’s actions, to an examination of the relationship between leader and followers.

Transforming leaders are known for their ability to motivate and energize followers into a common vision that identifies super ordinate goals for the organization (Bass, 1981; Bowditch & Buono, 1990). Tichy and Devanna (1996) described transforming leaders as change agents because of their ability to translate their dream for the organization into a vision shared by followers. Burns (1978) advocated that a dynamic relationship between transforming leaders and followers can result in the establishment of new levels of performance exceeding the levels achievable by either individual independently. Kouzes and Posner (1992) identified and labeled five common practices of exemplary leaders: (1) challenging the process, (2) inspiring a shared vision, (3) enabling others to act, (4) modeling, the way, and (5) encouraging the heart.

Within the leadership practice “enabling others to act,” Kouzes and Posner (1987) identified two essential commitments that must be present: fostering collaboration and strengthen others. Leaders understood **that** they could not do it alone and formed teams with the spirit and cohesion necessary to carry out a shared vision. Collaborative goals and cooperative relationships between leaders and colleagues are essential. Leaders instilled an atmosphere where individuals felt empowered by the trust and human dignity available within the group environment. By empowering others, the leader enables followers to act in carrying out their responsibilities (Kouzes & Posner, 1992).

Kouzes and Posner (1992) provided seven suggestions for enabling followers to act: (1) get to know people, (2) develop your interpersonal competence, (3) use your power in service to others, (4) enlarge people’s sphere of influence, (5) keep people informed, (6) make connections, and (7) make heroes of other people. In their 1993 work, Kouzes and Posner (1993a) expanded on **the** leadership practice of “enabling others to act” by offering the following suggested actions to improve leader performance: (1) always say “we,” (2) delegate, (3) focus on gains, not losses, (4) involve people in planning and problem solving, (5) keep people informed, (6) give people important work on critical tasks, (7) be accessible, and (8) give people the opportunity to be autonomous and seek to use their discretion.

### **Purpose and Objectives**

Kouzes and Posner (1993a) have routinely found a significant difference between the response of “self” and “observer” (self being the highest) for the leadership practice “enabling others to act.” Spotanski (1990) assessed the leadership practices used by university agricultural education department executive officers (DEOs) in a national study. The results of Spotanski’s research supported the significant discrepancy between

DEOs and faculty for the practice, “enabling others to act.”

The ability to cause action in a group or individual to pursue a unified direction, purpose, or goal has been defined as leadership, while, “enabling others to act” was defined as the segment of leadership concerned with a leader’s ability to enlist the support of others to inspire work on their own accord for the betterment of the organization. This research studied the leadership practice “enabling others to act” as defined by Kouzes and Posner (1993a). Specific objectives included: (1) to identify “enabling others to act” practices manifested in three selected organizations, (2) to test for differences between LPI self and LPI observer “enabling others to act” scores, and (3) to identify departmental actions enabling others to act.

### **Procedures**

The design used in this study was a multiple case with embedded unit analysis case study, using Kouzes and Posner’s LPI (1993b; 1993c) as the embedded unit. The case study format facilitated **the** study of a wide range of contextual variables. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in a synergistic effort to study leadership (Bryman, Bresnen, and Beadsworth (1988). Borg and Gall (1989) advocated that case study research was based on the premise that a case could be identified that was typical of many other cases. Upon in-depth evaluation of this single subject, group, or phenomenon, the researcher could provide insight into other situations similar to those from which the case was identified. Case study research can be classified as holistic design or embedded units of analysis. With the embedded unit of analysis, specific subunits of the phenomenon can be studied. Multiple case studies provides the researcher with additional information upon which to strengthen analytical generalizations (Yin 1989).

Three sites were selected, one to serve as a pilot case study and two to serve as major case studies. They were selected because of their reputation for

outstanding leadership. All sites were departments or centers within Colleges of Agriculture at Midwestern land grant universities, a limitation of the study.

The protocol used followed the recommendations of Yin (1989) to protect from bias concern about construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability in case study research. Data were collected through a visit to each site. Prior to each visit, correspondence with the leader asked for his/her participation in the study and the selection of approximately eight subordinates. (A total of 21 followers from the three sites actually participated in the study.) During a short introduction meeting at each site, the participants were given a copy of the appropriate version of the LPI and a General Demographic Survey to complete in private prior to individually scheduled interviews (about 45 minutes for each subordinate and one hour for the leader).

Kouzes and Posner (1992) have established the LPI as both a valid and a reliable measure of a leader's performance. The LPI consistently has internal reliability coefficients greater than .80. Factor analysis support the LPI's validity as five submeasures of leadership, including the practice of "enabling others to act." The LPI component "enabling others to act" included six leadership behaviors with a five-point Likert scale where 1 = "rarely or very seldom do" to 5 = "very frequently or almost always do."

The interview questions for the leader were designed to gain an understanding of the unit organization and communication channels, greatest accomplishments of the department during his/her administration, actions employed to enable others to act, and frustrations experienced when attempting to enable others to act. Interviews with subordinates followed a similar logic with questions related to the greatest departmental accomplishment while under the current administrator, who plays what roles within the accomplishment, their roles in

the accomplishment, their view of the departmental executive officers philosophy and actions toward enabling others to act, and frustrations of the subordinate when attempting to act within the department. Participants were asked to share documents, e. g., memoranda, organizational charts and committee assignments, related to the case study questions.

About one hour was also scheduled for general observations and informal interactions with the staff with a focus on identifying actual examples of the leadership practice "enabling others to act." The site visit concluded with an exit discussion with the departmental executive officer and the labeling of all data collected.

Since the pilot study failed to identify substantive changes needed in the protocol, data from all three sites (including the pilot) were used and analyzed independently. Percentages, means, and standard deviations were used in analyzing the data. The z-Test was used to test for difference between the LPI self and LPI observer scores (Microsoft Corporation, 1992). The explanation building analytical strategy was used to help interpret the findings of the study. This procedure helps identify similar patters among case study sites.

## Findings

All three leaders had advanced into their leadership role directly after serving within that institution. The leaders at sites X and Z were chairs and therefore elected by the faculty of the department. Site Y had a leader that was appointed and not elected by the faculty.

Table 1 presents the demographic data for the three sites. The percentage of subordinates with professorial rank ranged from 78 for site X to 17 for site Y. Site X had a more senior faculty, a leader with less tenure in current leadership role and a greater number of leaders over the years compared

to sites Y and Z. Site Z had the highest professional and social relationships among the faculty.

Tables 2, 3 and 4 report the data for the LPI leadership practice “enabling others to act” for the three sites. All except one of the self scores (site Z) for the three leaders were fours or fives, with five being the highest possible score. Likewise, the observer scores were relatively high, ranging from 3.67 (site Y) to 4.83 (site Z). For site X, the observer’s score was significantly higher than the leader’s score for one item, “gives people a lot of discretion to make their own decisions.” However, no significant difference was observed in the total

scores. Site Y also had one item, “gets others to feel a sense of ownership for the projects they work on,” where significant difference was observed in the scores, with the observer’s score being higher than the leader’s self score. Again, no significant difference was observed in the total scores for site Y. A significant difference was observed in the total scores for “enabling others to act” leadership practice for site Z. Again, the observer score was higher than the leader’s score. The two items within this practice with significantly different scores were “gives people a lot of discretion to make their own decisions” and creates an atmosphere of mutual trust in the projects he or she leads.”

Table 1. Demographic results for the three sites (N=21 followers and 3 leaders)

Variable	<u>Average</u>		
	Site X	Site Y	Site Z
Position			
Professor	33.3%	0.0%	16.7%
Assoc. Prof.	33.3%	16.7%	16.7%
Asst. Prof.	11.1%	0.0%	0.0%
<b>Staff</b>	11.1%	66.6%	50.0%
Grad. Assist.	11.1%	16.7%	16.7%
Years under current leadership	3	5	5
Number of leaders served under	6	3	3
Age Relationship 1 younger,  older	3.22	2.33	2.67
Professional Relationship 1 distant, 5 older	3.89	3.17	4.00
Social Relationship 1 distant, 5 close	2.00	1.83	2.83

Table 2. Results from z-Test for difference (.05 level) between LPI self and LPI observer scores for site X, “Enabling Others to Act”

Question	abbreviated context	Score		probability
		self raw (N=3)	observer mean (N=21)	
3.	involves others in planning	4	4.11	0.27
8.	respects others	5	4.66	0.98
13.	allows others to <b>make</b> decisions	4	4.56	0.00
18.	develops cooperative relationships	4	4.22	0.16
23.	creates atmosphere of trust	4	4.22	0.16
28.	creates a sense of ownership	4	4.25	0.16
Total	for practice	25	25.56	0.22

Table 3. Results from z-Test for difference (.05 level) between LPI self and observer scores for site Y, “Enabling Others to Act”

Question	abbreviated context	Score		probability
		self raw (N=3)	observer mean (N=21)	
3.	involves others in planning	4	4.00	0.50
8.	respects others	5	4.33	0.16
13.	allows others to make decisions	5	4.67	0.94
18.	develops cooperative relationships	4	3.83	0.71
23.	creates atmosphere of trust	5	3.67	0.99
28.	creates a sense of ownership	4	4.50	0.01
Total	for practice	26	25.00	0.77

Table 4. Results from z-Test for difference (.05 level) between LPI self and observer scores for site Z, “Enabling Others to Act”

Question	abbreviated context	Score		
		self raw (N=3)	observer mean (N=21)	probability
3.	involves others in <b>planning</b>	5	4.50	0.99
8.	respects others	5	4.83	0.84
13.	allows others to make decisions	4	4.50	0.01
18.	develops cooperative relationships	4	4.33	0.06
23.	creates atmosphere of trust	3	4.50	0.00
28.	creates a sense of ownership	4	4.00	0.50
Total	for practice	25	26.67	0.03

An analysis of the qualitative data revealed that the concepts of “collaboration” and “empowerment” were operating in the three case study sites. Evidence of collaboration included the “we philosophy” and an understanding between the activity of an individual and the departmental mission. Empowerment was observed in the ease of accessing information, open communication systems, flow of information between leader and the followers, and followers acting as leaders themselves. These findings support Kouzes and Posner’s (1993a) leadership practice “enabling others to act.”

Through the analytical pattern building analysis of the case study, the concept of leader expectations emerged. Though no pattern could be clearly developed, an association may exist between the followers’ perception of “enabling others to act” and the expectations given by the leader. When followers were expected to produce at ever increasing levels of quality and given the freedom to

be creative in the finished product, they appeared to perceive more enabling to act opportunities. In contrast, when followers were expected to perform at a high level of quality but produce a similar product in both appearance and quality, they appeared to perceive some limitations on their ability to act. It appeared as if leaders could be perceived as limiting the ability of followers *to act* by having a defined expectation of what products should be produced.

### Conclusions

The results of this study support the transformational theory of leadership and Kouzes and Posner’s (1993a) emphasis on the leadership practice “enabling others to act.” The data, both qualitative and quantitative in nature, clearly depicted similar relationships between different leaders and followers at each case study site. The leader follower relationship observed supports the transformational theory of leadership. The

departments and centers were selected because of their reputation for outstanding leadership, and the LPI confirmed no significant discrepancies between leaders and the faculty. The exemplary leader can employ behaviors that impact faculty members' perceptions of their ability to act in fulfilling their responsibilities.

Exploration into the leadership practice "enabling others to act" revealed several interesting conclusions. First, the embedded unit analysis failed to replicate the significant difference commonly found between self and observer LPI scores (self being the highest). The significant difference in scores found at the one site was opposite of Kouzes and Posner's (1993a) findings (observer score was higher than self-score). Sites were selected for their past leadership reputation and finding no significant differences in total scores at two of the three sites supports the concept that subordinates can be empowered to act. Secondly, the qualitative analysis also supported the theory behind "enabling others to act." Though no specific pattern could be identified, the concept of leader expectation did emerge. Leader expectation of similar products as evidence of performance may be perceived by followers as limiting their ability to act.

### Recommendations

As research continues to support the transformational theory of leadership and Kouzes and Posner's leadership practice "enabling others to act," educational programs are challenged to incorporate these elements into the study of leadership. Since leadership is an important component of agricultural education (Hughes & Barrick, 1993; Buriak & Shinn, 1993), the findings of this study have relevance to it and other disciplines in which leadership is studied and practiced.

There are many questions still unanswered concerning the relationships that exist between leader and follower. This study adds one additional

question: Does leader defined expectation of what product the followers should produce limit followers ability to act creatively? Additional research is needed to better understand the complex relationships that exist between the leader and follower in this phenomenon called leadership. Only as these relationships are better understood can the educational process be modified and the students of leadership be better prepared for leading organizations in the future.

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