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Survey of Research on East Asian Leadership Patterns and Disaster Management

Abstract:

This research paper is focused on the qualities of leadership exhibited by public administrators in the field of emergency management in East Asia, particularly in the Chinese and Japanese cultures, and how they navigate the uncharted waters of this new field in a traditional culture. Beginning with a general examination of the cultural and societal influences on the position of leader and the qualities demanded of that position, the research narrows to the specific field of emergency management and how administration in this realm is accomplished given a) the relative newness of the field itself, and b) the cultural barriers in East Asia to the widespread embrace of such disaster mitigation initiatives.

By using a comparative approach, the differences between organizational needs and hence leadership styles is more easily highlighted, and therefore a comparison of leadership in Taiwan, as representative of Chinese culture, with Japanese leadership becomes instructive. How do public administrators in these cultures see their leadership roles, and what are the salient differences in these perceptions? Such research has important implications for the growing field of disaster management studies, practice, and multinational interoperability.

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VALLIS AUREA

Introduction

Taiwan today is both a very traditional culture, as well as a modern one. On the one hand, a strain of superstition remains, influencing the decision-making process of the people of Taiwan, particularly as regards the purchasing of insurance such as disaster insurance, as this may be seen as courting bad luck. [1] Leaders in the ROC must therefore find ways of balancing the modern needs of this modern nation with traditional preferences of this traditional society. Taiwan's public administrators must be innovative and bold if they are to successfully adopt new and innovative disaster response programs and do what is required to provide the population with the advantages of the modern world without neglecting the cultural sensitivities which can often serve as impediments to such efforts.

By using a comparative approach, the differences between organizational needs and hence leadership styles is more easily highlighted, and therefore a survey of the literature allowing a comparison of leadership in Taiwan with Japanese leadership becomes instructive, especially when juxtaposed against an American leadership ideal that is perhaps more widely understood, and which has certainly received more attention from researchers. How do public administrators in Taiwan and Japan see their leadership roles, and what are the salient differences in these perceptions?

It should be acknowledged in advance of undertaking such a comparison that nations do not equate to cultures, and therefore it would be disingenuous to assert that "all managers in Taiwan do this" or "all Japanese leaders behave that way." Not only are there different personal styles among leaders within a particular culture, and different organizational values defining the context of the leader's role, but there are different cultures within a nation, and so any observations contained herein with regard to Taiwan, Japanese or American leadership styles run the risk of being accused of dealing in generalizations. While Japan is a culturally homogeneous nation, Taiwan is somewhat less so. It is therefore important to read these results not as a guide for understanding all managers or managerial decision-making within that particular country, but as an attempt to distill the importance of the culture in which leaders must operate. As amply demonstrated by the work of Hofstede, such cross-cultural comparisons not only have value to the researcher but are extremely instructive in more practical applications as well. Unlike Japan, there has traditionally been a low general expectation in Taiwan of the ability of individuals to work together effectively in large groups, or to maintain solidarity for long periods of time. Moreover, the predominant cultural attributes within which a leader operates are arguably one of the least ephemeral influences with which he has to contend, and thus are worthy of greater study.

Private Sector

Given the exalted position that the leader holds in the estimation of his subordinates, it is considered extremely bad form for a subordinate to question a decision made by the leader. In terms of communication, the focus is on positivity and positive outcomes, as it is only through a positive attitude that thought can be translated into action. Thus, negative communication (bad news, opposing viewpoints, or suggestions that run counter to the leader's perception) are often greeted with negative reinforcement. Such expressions of alternate opinions are taken, at best, as expressions of a lack

of trust in the leader and, at worst, as an attempt to "take down his table," or attack him [2].

The only exception to this rule is in private communication by trusted interactors (interaction time with the leader, and not rank or seniority, is considered a better measure of influence), who will agree with the boss in public, but then tactfully express their honest opinion afterwards, and only in private. Thus, the hierarchical model assumed to be the default structure of East Asian organizations is less representative in the case of Taiwan, with power concentrated at the top, and the most influential power brokers at lower levels not necessarily inhabiting the penultimate rungs of the corporate ladder, but rather those interactors—individuals of any rank—who have access to face time with the leader.

Given this cultural predisposition, the American example and not the Japanese may be a more appropriate one for Taiwan administrators to follow. Writing on the topic of collectivism, Huo et al. [3] note that the old truism of America being a culture that embraces and rewards individualism, in this case, is accurate. Leaders are not averse to soliciting opinions and different viewpoints from the group, especially in the modern organizational environment in which this is often taught as good management practice. In reality, however, such inclusiveness in the American decision-making process is usually employed merely as a method of overcoming group inertia and defusing resistance, rather than a genuine attempt to seek alternative perspectives. In this way, it differs from the Japanese leader's building of consensus and is more akin to the tendency in Taiwan for the leader to avoid delegating authority, except insofar as even the mere appearance of soliciting input would seem to go against the traditional dynamic at play in Taiwan.

This dynamic may seem counterintuitive, especially considering the work of Hofstede [4], whose research identified an even higher level of collectivism in Taiwan than in Japan. He defined "individualism" as the degree to which people prefer to act as individuals rather than as members of a group [5], the definition of "collectivism" being the converse to this. And indeed, Huo [3], who interviewed corporate managers in Taiwan, noted that leaders emphasized the importance of securing cooperation from employees, but this is distinct from the consensus-seeking employed in Japan. In Taiwan, it is the duty of the employee to avoid any perception of disagreement with the leader—a practice that preserves the outer appearance of harmony—and hence all employees are cooperating in the endeavour [2]. How this collectivism is expressed therefore is different in the two countries. One of the most oft-cited qualities in a good leader is the ability to communicate, and yet even within this relatively straightforward concept there is significant room for deviation among cultures. Leaders in the United States tend to equate the ability to communicate with the ability to speak well, and thus there is a skewed perception about the importance of giving speeches compared to the ability to listen. In Japan, in contrast, leaders with good communication abilities are widely perceived as being good listeners. Taiwan walks a middle path between these two extremes. The idea that subordinates might have valuable input that must be taken into account in the decision-making process assumes a worldview wherein the leader does not have a monopoly on wisdom. Huo [3] credits the influence of Confucianism for this tendency among Eastern administrators to hold the view that

71

VALLIS AUREA

leaders are not necessarily smarter than their followers. This is expressed in different ways, however; In Japan there is the aforementioned leadership prerequisite of being a good listener and seeking input from all members of the group, whereas in Taiwan, leaders are wary of overtly competent subordinates and those with leadership potential. Both paradigms assume the existence of wisdom and leadership abilities among the group, yet react to this in different ways.

Americans, meanwhile, believe strongly in the individual and his ability to rise to great heights in a system that rewards virtuous traits such as intelligence, ability and tenacity. In such a meritocracy—and opinions differ on whether the American meritocratic system is a reality or a myth—the leader is promoted over others because he is more deserving, and therefore the one most qualified to make the hard decisions unaided. As a result, the importance of listening is overlooked in favor of being a good motivator. As a result, the leadership quality of communication is often conflated with the ability to speak well—to articulate the corporate vision, or verbally rally the troops to work toward a common goal. This focus on effective speaking abilities is found in Taiwan, as well: Once an individual assumes a leadership role within a group, there is the tendency to attribute his success to the ideological or value-oriented beliefs that he holds, and it is part of his job as the morally superior individual to effectively verbalize these beliefs for the betterment of his subordinates [2].

Emergency Management Leadership

In a comparison of the effectiveness of the "transformational" style of leadership in the United States and Taiwan, Spreitzer [6] likewise invoked Hofstede's power distance, expanding the variable to a construct of traditionality, built upon that employed by Farh [7], to encompass "expressive ties among people manifested in values such as respect for authority, filial piety, male-domination, and a general sense of powerlessness" [7]. The values represented by traditionality identify that every relationship is hierarchical, with a power holder and a submissive, each with clearly defined roles and a range of appropriate behaviors permitted to them. Leaders in traditionalist societies such as Taiwan's value harmony and conflict avoidance over productivity or performance.

The task-oriented dimensions of transformational leadership (those of articulating a vision, setting high performance expectations, and intellectual stimulation) were found to be perceived as less effective given the Taiwan concept of leadership, at least among traditionalists. The relationship-oriented dimensions (providing individualized support, an appropriate model, and fostering group goals) showed much stronger support among traditionalists, as these would seem to support Confucian-influenced values such as preserving harmony. In short, a transformational leadership style, so effective in the United States, is not regarded as particularly useful among Taiwan's more traditionalist leaders.

In Western nations, governments take the view that the wide-ranging effects of almost all types of emergencies and disasters render these events too large and too all-encompassing for a single agency or jurisdiction to handle alone. As a result, there has been increased attention paid to the practice of using Community-Based Strategic Planning (CBSP) techniques to draw other stakeholders into the process. An example of this process is very much in evidence in the city of Vancouver, Canada, with the emergency

72

VALLIS AUREA

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management (EM) structures they have in place. The emergency management infrastructure in the Canadian province of British Columbia (BC), especially in the City of Vancouver, is one with which the author is intimately familiar, and while it may not represent a standard used across North America, it is nonetheless a fairly typical example and therefore useful as an illustration of the Western method of using CBSP in EM.

Western Model

In BC, various governmental and non-governmental stakeholders contribute to the common task of emergency preparedness from the very beginning of the process; that of mission focus. Through negotiation and consultation, a mission statement is composed in such a way as to ensure buy-in by all stakeholders, mitigate mission-drift and heighten the capacity for inter-jurisdictional and inter-agency cooperation. An example of such a mission statement could be to develop and maintain a comprehensive plan to prepare for, respond to, and recover from, all types of major emergencies that might occur in the jurisdiction.

This process is known in BC as a "Framework for Cooperation," and it illustrates very neatly how duties and responsibilities are portioned out to various stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), businesses, charities and various agencies in the federal, provincial and municipal governments. In order to aid Emergency Social Services (ESS) of Vancouver, BC, in its work, various organizations, charities and public and private bodies are actively involved in all aspects of emergency planning and callouts. This pattern is not provided as a template that should be followed, nor as a standard that must be met. Rather, it is to illustrate the depth and breadth of CBSP structures

within the EM community in one part of North America and how this theoretical construct is expressed in a real-world application.

In contrast, the public governance concept of CBSP is not widely employed in EM structures in Taiwan. Indeed, the practice of emergency management and disaster response are solely within the purview of the government, and private sector actors are kept at arm's length. Moreover, EM is primarily seen as the responsibility of the central government, with elected leaders expected to handle such concerns, or at the very least to take a leadership role.

Unlike Western nations, in which local governments generally enjoy a high-degree of autonomy (although they often receive support) from the central-government level, Asian nations in general, and East Asian nations in particular, are partial to a very centralized system. Governments at Taiwan's county, city and township level are often not tasked with establishing, on their own, the kind of emergency plans and response frameworks that their Canadian counterparts are mandated to establish by federal law. Rather, such plans, including the charting of escape routes and rally points for citizens fleeing a disaster, are produced at the central-government level and passed down to the towns and villages. This is in direct opposition to the practice in North America, wherein the first step of composing a municipality's emergency plan is to gather stakeholders (citizens' groups, business interests, even the disenfranchised) and begin negotiations about what should be included in that plan. This process is as much to secure buy-in from all sectors of society as it is to develop a workable plan that suits the unique life patterns of the people actually living in the community in question. It is generally accepted EM practice that communities

73

VALLIS AUREA

take ownership of their own emergency plans and preparations, albeit with material and financial help from higher-level governments, because it is these communities that intimately know what their needs are, as well as exactly what hazards, risks and vulnerabilities they face. In BC, it is believed that, were this job left to a central authority, a standardized, one-size-fits-all plan would be imposed upon disparate communities, and such a plan would stand a very slim likelihood of achieving its mission.

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74

VALLIS AUREA

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