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Leadership During Personal Crisis

GILL ROBINSON HICKMAN AND ANN CREIGHTON-ZOLLAR

DURING A SEMINAR INVOLVING KELLOGG LEADERSHIP SCHOLARS and fellows, the presenters asked participants to identify areas of study that were absent from leadership research (Concepts in Leadership seminar, 1997). Participants at this session indicated that studies involving *personal aspects* of leadership, among others, were noticeably absent from the literature. Leadership studies students have echoed similar sentiments about the literature and curriculum. They wanted research that focused on individuals in the leadership process as *people*, who must live, learn, experience, and cope with all of the issues of life, while fulfilling their roles as effective leaders and followers.

In this article we briefly discuss some of the issues that are involved in one personal aspect of leadership—*leadership during personal crisis.* The purpose of the study is to describe how individuals in leadership roles handle personal crisis—that is, how the leader handles her or his leadership role during the crisis, including interactions and relationships with followers—and to describe how the leader handles the crisis personally. When this initial study, which is both exploratory and descriptive, is concluded, we hope to carry out additional research designed to provide findings and insights that will help make a positive difference in the lives of those who are involved in leadership. This article, however, has the specific goal of discussing the work in progress. In the first part of this article, we list some of the important questions that have arisen about leadership during personal crisis. In the second part, we concentrate on our evolving understanding of what constitutes the most appropriate methodological approach.

Exploration of Issues

All of our informants occupy either appointed executive level positions in business, nonprofit, governmental or community organizations, or are elected officials. Since

there is not a large body of existing literature that deals with leadership during personal crisis, our ongoing research is exploratory. Furthermore, since there is no discernible theory from which to deduce testable hypotheses about how individuals in leadership roles handle personal crises, our research design is essentially descriptive. We did start the research with a list of descriptive questions that we hope to answer, and we have used social science literature to derive some definitions and to uncover other questions that are important in this area of study.

The initial research questions we posed were:
1. How do our informants handle personal crisis?
2. Among our informants, does the approach to handling personal crisis vary according to leadership style?
3. Do our informants handle personal and professional (i.e., role or work-related) crisis the same or differently?
4. Does leadership style affect whether the leader handles personal and professional crisis the same or differently?
5. How does the leader's approach to handling personal crises affect followers?

The definitions and issues derived from the literature include:
- **Personal Crisis** — The term personal crisis is used in academic journals but it is often undefined. Instead it is treated as a part of general knowledge or described in terms of events such as illness or injury, marital or interpersonal difficulties, and death of a loved one.

Fahlberg, Wolfer & Fahlberg (1992) described an emerging theoretical framework for viewing a personal crisis as an upsetting experience that occurs as a part of human growth and development across the life span, in contrast to the traditional psychological/psychiatric view of this experience as a symptom of psychiatric disorder. We searched related areas of research concerning *stress, stressful life event, transitions,* and *spillover effect* to provide further insight into the concept of personal crisis. Appendix A contains a description of these concepts. A personal crisis, in our working definition, is "a disruptive event or emergency that affects the leader in a private or intimate area of his or her life."

- **Leader as "Person" in Crisis** — Most often we found references that linked personal crises and leadership in popular or professional journals for business officials, lawyers, and executive women. However, there is limited social science research that links leadership and personal crises.

Concepts related to managing personal crisis in the literature include *coping* (approach and avoidance); *support; posttraumatic growth* and its related concepts resilience/resiliency, sense of coherence, stress inoculation, toughening, and hardiness; *turning point,* and *spiritual growth.* Tedeschi, Park and Calhoun (1998) describe a process of transformative growth called posttraumatic growth (PTG), in which individuals experience positive growth and development after facing a life crisis. It is comprised of a dynamic interplay of factors—the nature of the crisis, personal and

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environmental resources, and how individuals perceive and choose to cope with the crisis (Tedeschi, et al., 1998). Additionally, the conception of personal mastery and mental models (Senge, 1990) provide leaders with enhanced capability to manage personal crises. In our attempt to describe how leaders handle personal crises, we will also attempt to describe the processes and/or approaches they use as well as which of them they see as most effective.

- Leader's interaction and relationship with followers during personal crisis— Allen, Bordas, Hickman, et al. (1998) assert that leadership in the 21st century has a threefold purpose: to create a supportive environment where people can thrive, grow, and live in peace with one another; to promote harmony with nature and thereby provide sustainability for future generations; and to create communities of reciprocal care and shared responsibility —one where every person matters and each person's welfare and dignity is respected and supported (p. 1).

In the third component, the concepts of *reciprocal care* and shared responsibility are significant with regard to leader-follower relationships during a leader's personal crisis. Traditionally, we have considered the responsibility for care (if it is considered at all) as a paternalistic function of the leader; that is, a good leader cares for his followers. Congruent with the new era philosophy of shared power and responsibility is the collective capacity to engage in a mutually reciprocal relationship of care from leader to follower and follower to leader. We will also include in our description of how leaders

handle personal crisis whether they can and do receive reciprocal care during times of personal crisis. If they receive such care, we will describe how it is given and received. If not, we will try to describe why there is an absence of mutual care.

We have also drawn on the leadership literature concerning *shared power or empowerment* (Rost, 1994; Howard, 1998), *effective followership* (Kelley, 1988), and *partnership* between leader and follower (Kelley, 1992; Rost 1994). Based on these concepts, leaders and followers share responsibility and accountability for leadership roles and functions. We will describe whether settings that manifest partnerships and shared power promote reciprocal care for leaders in crisis.

Methodological Approaches

Over a nine-year period, Dr. Hickman experienced a succession of crises while in leadership positions. She was raised in a tradition that allows, even values, the sharing of stories about life's trials and tribulations and how they can be overcome. When she told her story to others in leadership positions, some of them responded by sharing their own stories. She decided that these rich descriptions of life experiences should be written down and shared. She created her first interview instrument and whenever she came in contact with people in leadership positions who were willing to describe their experiences, she asked to interview them.

At the end of the interview, she asked these leaders if they knew of others who could be interviewed. The very first respondents were actually interviewed face to face. Soon, however, referrals were being made to people who lived and worked in other states. At that point, potential respondents were mailed the survey instrument on computer disks so that they could enter their responses and send them back. They were even offered the option of tape recording their responses.

We are certainly aware that, with our current methodological approach, we will not be able to generalize to the larger "population of leaders." But that is not the purpose of the current research. As we mentioned at the start of this article, the purpose of the current research is to describe how our informants handle personal crises while in positions of leadership. We want to describe both how the leader handles her or his leadership role during the crisis, including interactions and relationships with followers, and to describe how the leader handles the crisis personally.

When we have examined and written our interpretations of these descriptions, we will be ready to explore additional methodological options. We have, in fact, already explored and rejected a variation on a "phenomenological" theme and a "discovery of grounded theory approach." We believe, in fact, that if we can find a way

to identify a sample of sufficient size, then we will be ready to employ a survey research design to test hypotheses.

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