

Learning from Real Life 'Extraordinary' Outdoor Leaders

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Abstract

As we enter a new phase of being in the world, we are experiencing change at an ever increasing rate; faced with new challenges, traditional theories of leadership in isolation are proving to be inadequate, in particular when describing highly successful leaders in a number of sectors (business and management). This paper reports on early findings from doctoral research exploring the essence of 'extraordinary' outdoor leadership and the role of contemporary theories of leadership (transformational, authentic, and spiritual) in describing this level of leadership. Emerging from this research is a conceptual framework linking levels of leadership effectiveness (effective, exemplary and extraordinary) to the contemporary theories of leadership aforementioned. The framework was developed in order to aid the identification of characteristics, values, behaviours and skills of 'extraordinary' outdoor leaders. Early insights gleaned from the research thus far indicate the need to draw from a number of leadership theories when demonstrating 'extraordinary' outdoor leadership. Implications for how individuals approach their own leadership, as well as the development of leadership in outdoor education professionals will be discussed.

It is September of 1997, and I have been studying outdoor education at Griffith University for the past year. I am yet to graduate, but I have been called to work in the field for a week, west of Brisbane. The sun is shining, and the temperature looks like it will reach into the high 30s today. I am heading out to an outdoor education centre, where I will be employed for the week. I have been told I will find out all I need to know on arrival. It is my first time working there and I am very nervous. I have heard all about the outdoor education 'gurus' that work there. I arrive early, keen and eager to know what will be expected of me this week. I am eager to learn from them, see what they do, and how they do it. I pull into the driveway, and as I am gathering my belongings from the car, I am greeted with the smiling face of my boss for the week. He welcomes me so warmly, I feel equal, a professional, and like I have known him all my life. I am immediately aware that I am in fact in the company of an 'extraordinary' outdoor leader...

Introduction

The doctoral research, from which this paper emerges, came about as a result of direct personal experiences working with and for 'extraordinary' outdoor leaders. Since beginning as an outdoor leader many years ago, I have been privileged to work with a number of outdoor leaders who in the context of this study would be deemed 'extraordinary' in their leadership by their peers. While alongside them and observing their work, it was obvious to me that there was something about them that made them stand out from other outdoor leaders. They appeared to repeatedly achieve individual, group and program goals to an 'extraordinary' level, regardless of context, and they are repeatedly held in high regard across the profession. Being privy to these experiences with such effective leaders, has led me to question what it is about them that enables them to be so 'extraordinary' in their leadership.

This paper briefly addresses the background to this study and the literature related to effective outdoor leadership. It then goes on to attend to the contemporary theories of leadership; transformational (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003), authentic (George, Sims, McLean, & Mayer, 2007) and spiritual (Fry, 2003) leadership, and how these lend themselves to describing 'effective', 'exemplary' and specifically 'extraordinary' outdoor leadership. A conceptual framework is presented from the literature and initial findings are shared demonstrating early links to contemporary leadership theories. As the world changes, so do the ways in which we need to view leadership, and in turn teach leadership to others.

Background

Outdoor education saw its inception into Australia in the form of people passionate about the outdoors and taking their students out into the 'wilderness' to experience and learn from nature. The profession has grown over the years, and so too have the opportunities for universities, TAFE colleges and private organisations who prepare outdoor leaders to take our profession into the future. Traditionally, core competencies and iterations thereof, have driven the teaching and learning of outdoor leadership. Over the past 25 years, there has been considerable research into outdoor leadership in an attempt to improve its effectiveness (Brymer & Gray, 2006; Drury, Bonney, Berman, & Wagstaff, 2005; Gair, 1997; Graham, 1997; Hammerman & Hammerman, 1973; Kosseff, 2003; Miles & Priest, 1990; Priest & Gass, 1997, 2005; Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988). Priest and Gass (1997; 2005) and the twelve core competencies of outdoor leadership continue to remain largely unchallenged and influential in Outdoor Education.

Recently, Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, and Breunig (2006) continue the core competency approach in their exploration of leadership effectiveness in the outdoors, resulting in eight core competencies. While these eight core competencies describe the role of an outdoor leader well, they continue focus on tasks or skills required of an outdoor leader, rather than leadership itself. Ogilvie (2005) agrees that skills are inherently important in outdoor leadership due to the context in which it occurs. However, he highlights the need to focus on the individual within the leadership and explore both the interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of outdoor leadership in order to be effective.

Therefore, while the core competencies continue to play a critical role in outdoor leadership development, it is time that other leadership theories are utilised in order to better understand leadership in the outdoors, in particular, 'extraordinary' outdoor leadership. This paper explores the potential links between contemporary theories of leadership (transformational, authentic, and spiritual leadership) and 'extraordinary' outdoor leaders and how these build on the more traditional approaches to outdoor leadership effectiveness.

Exploring the literature

In order to describe the essence of 'extraordinary' outdoor leadership, traditional theories of leadership namely situational and conditional theories of leadership, and contemporary theories of leadership specifically transformational, authentic and spiritual have been examined (Eagly et al., 2003; Fry, 2003; George et al., 2007; Hersey & Blanchard, 1993; Priest & Chase, 1989). Resulting from this

investigation is a conceptual framework that is being utilised in the doctoral research of the author, in order to better understand and describe ‘extraordinary’ outdoor leadership. In exploring ‘extraordinariness’, it is essential that we first look at how we define effective, exemplary and ‘extraordinary’ leadership. The next section explores the substantive and theoretical relations between these concepts and the theories of leadership that best describe them.

Effective, exemplary, ‘extraordinary’

Traditionally effective outdoor leadership has been described using situational (Hersey & Blanchard, 1993) and conditional (Priest & Chase, 1989) theories of leadership. More recently, transformational leadership theory and the full range leadership model (Bass & Avolio, 1997) have been identified as demonstrating strong links with effective outdoor leadership practice (Brymer & Gray, 2006). Transformational leadership theory is commonly used to describe effective leadership outside of outdoor education in the broader leadership context (Eagly et al., 2003). Outdoor education continues to rely heavily on situational and conditional theories of leadership, largely due to the context in which outdoor education occurs, and the impact this context has on its leaders. However, transformational leadership theory and its emphasis on, among other things, creating leadership in others, emphasise significant links to the role of an effective outdoor leader (Brymer & Gray, 2006). Therefore, a combination of the three theories might be best placed to describe effective outdoor leadership.

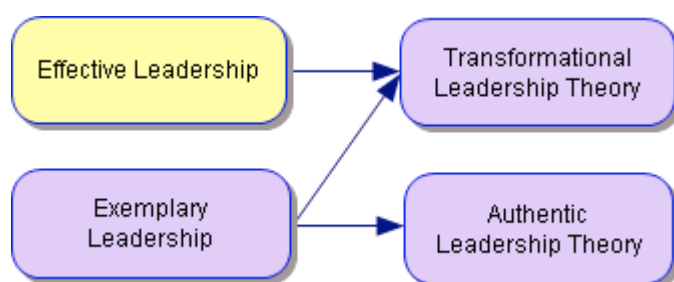


Figure 1: Evolution of Leadership Effectiveness – Exemplary Leadership (Smith 2009)¹

Exemplary leadership has been consistently described using components of both transformational and authentic leadership theories (George, 2003; George et al., 2007; Keller, 2006; Kouzes & Posner, 1999, 2004). While some authors explicitly name up these leaders as exemplary, others use the same language to describe leadership that is *above* effective leadership. They identify leaders who have clear personal values, and demonstrate these in their leadership practice (Kouzes & Posner, 2004). Their leadership stands the tests of time, and they actively seek to create leadership in others. With explicit links such as the creation of leadership in others, it can be noted that both transformational and authentic leadership theories are used when describing exemplary leaders. Therefore, exemplary leaders display characteristics, values, behaviours and skills of both transformational and authentic leadership theories (Figure 1).

¹ This model is included in the doctoral work of Smith, entitled: *Wisdom and Insights of ‘Extraordinary’ Outdoor Leaders: An Australian Case Study* at the University of Wollongong.

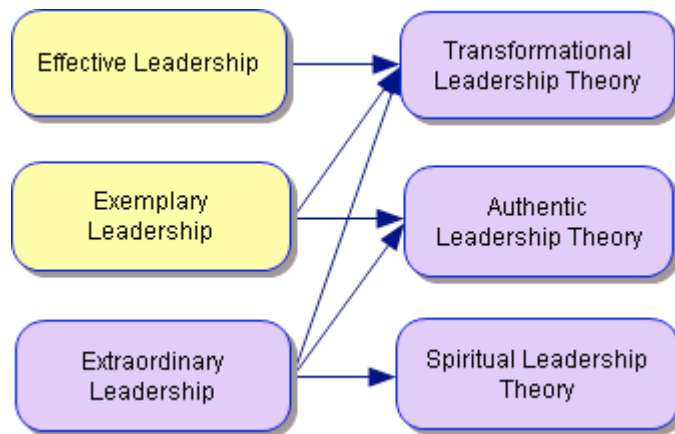


Figure 2: Evolution of Leadership Effectiveness – Extraordinary Leadership (Smith, 2009)²

Limited exploration of 'extraordinary' leadership has been articulated in the leadership research. Here the focus is on 'extraordinary' leadership in the context of outdoor leadership and related literature. It is the least well defined level of leadership, and terms such as 'exceptional', 'ideal' or 'golden' are often used when describing leaders who perform *above* those deemed exemplary. While authors agree that 'extraordinary' leaders exist, they remain unclear as to what it is that distinguishes these leaders from others. Therefore, by engaging with this notion of 'extraordinary' leadership, links to spiritual leadership theory have been identified through this research project (Figure 2).

Descriptors that feature in spiritual leadership theories (including ethical and moral leadership) have been used when describing these 'exceptional', 'ideal', 'good' or 'golden' leaders (Daft, 2005; Graham, 1997; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Ogilvie, 2005; Priest & Gass, 1997, 2005; Scharmer, 2007). Spiritual leadership theory encompasses the integration of the mind, body, heart and spirit (Fry, Vitucci, & Cedillo, 2005), and emphasises leadership as a learning journey, where leaders experience a sense of calling to the task and commitment to a greater cause (Fry, 2003; Fry et al., 2005). In this interpretation of spiritual leadership, 'spiritual' refers to a particular way of being in the world that is difficult to observe and define. It is this difficult to define notion that lies at the heart of this research. With a strong connection to self, others and the environment, in conjunction with a positive culture central to spiritual leadership theory, it has been stated that the 'extraordinary' leader leads from a deep place within (Scharmer, 2007; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2005).

Therefore, in order to better understand this notion, a conceptual framework has been developed in order to identify and describe the characteristics, values, behaviours and skills displayed by 'extraordinary' outdoor leaders. While the contemporary theories (transformational, authentic and spiritual) are being investigated in relation to 'extraordinary' outdoor leadership, it is also important to be conscious of the function of both the core competencies of effective outdoor

² This model is included in the doctoral work of Smith entitled: *Wisdom and Insights of 'Extraordinary' Outdoor Leaders: An Australian Case Study at the University of Wollongong.*

leaders in conjunction with situational and conditional leadership theories (Priest & Gass, 1997, 2005), and the role of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002) in ‘extraordinary’ outdoor leadership. With emotional intelligence identified as underpinning the three contemporary theories of leadership, it is important to be mindful of its role in the investigation into ‘extraordinary’ outdoor leadership. The following conceptual framework (Figure 3) has been developed from the literature, and is proving useful in exploring ‘extraordinary’ outdoor leadership.

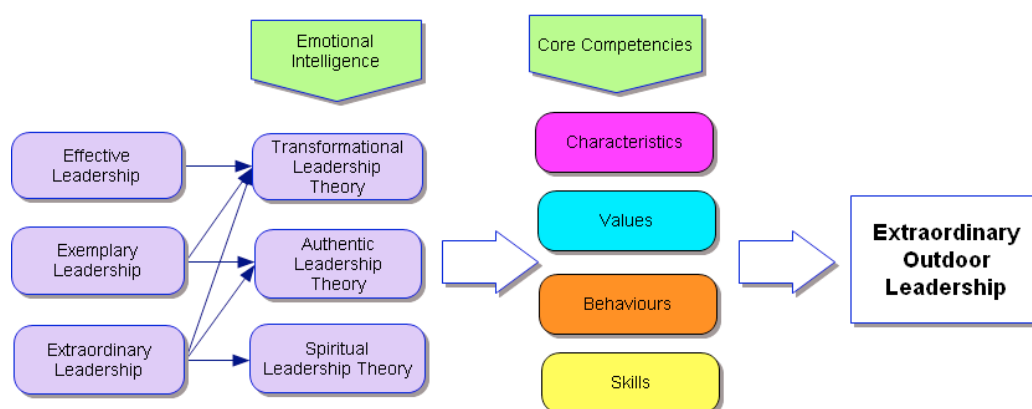


Figure 3: Conceptual Framework - Extraordinary Outdoor Leadership (Smith, 2009)³

According to the literature, some commonalities and differences exist across the contemporary theories. Commonalities include the need for self awareness, a clear sense of purpose and inspirational leadership. Obvious differences between them include the development of leadership in others (transformational leadership), strong internal moral values, they lead with their head and their heart (authentic leadership), and a sense of calling to the task and a greater sense of purpose beyond their own (spiritual leadership).

Method

The doctoral research from which this paper emerges is a qualitative case study, using narrative to report on the essence of ‘extraordinary’ outdoor leadership in six ‘extraordinary’ outdoor leaders as nominated by their peers. Utilising the conceptual framework presented here, the characteristics, values, behaviours and skills of ‘extraordinary’ outdoor leaders and how these are demonstrated in practice are explored. The data collection is conducted across 2 phases. Phase 1 incorporates online/phone semi-structured interviews. Phase 2 consists of an observation period in the field and a follow up unstructured interview with each of the six participants. The initial findings presented here are the result of the first phase of data collection, namely the online/phone interviews where participants responded to a number of semi-structured questions that arose out of the review of literature.

³ This model is included in the doctoral work of Smith entitled: Wisdom and Insights of ‘Extraordinary’ Outdoor Leaders: An Australian Case Study at the University of Wollongong.

Initial Findings

All the participants in this study come to outdoor leadership for a variety of reasons and motivations. What they all have in common is a love for and belief in the potential outcomes of outdoor education, and a commitment to a greater cause. They come to the research project humbly and demonstrate a clear insight into who they are and where their strengths and weaknesses lie. This section briefly shares the initial findings of phase one of this study, whereby participants were invited to respond to a number of semi-structured questions about their outdoor leadership. There are some commonalities across the participants which are presented below. Links to leadership theories are presented in brackets highlighting links across the three contemporary theories of leadership explored here.

Characteristics

Characteristics that have emerged from the data in these initial stages suggest that awareness of self, others and the environment are central to all participants in this study (transformational, authentic, and spiritual leadership).

The outdoors teaches us many things on many levels. We learn about ourselves continually in its ever varying conditions, scenery and grandeur. (Participant 4, Interview 1)

They lead with their heads and their hearts (authentic leadership).

...anyone can do anything, if they set their mind to it. But the heart's got to be behind the mind. If the heart's not there as well, then the mind doesn't retain it. (Participant 1, Interview 1)

They are experienced based learners who speak of reflective practice (authentic leadership).

I reflect on my most valuable learning experiences and the people that showed them to me and realize that they were all delivered by people I either admired or respected. Just to clarify that I have learned things from a couple of people I did not like on a number of levels. (Participant 4, Interview 1)

Values

Values these leaders identify with include an underlying love of and belief in outdoor education and what it can offer participants. They value a need to leave the world a better place, through developing a culture that is positive and welcoming of all (spiritual leadership), and centres on the development of positive relationships (authentic leadership).

I don't push them as much as facilitate a very supportive and safe social environment with a foundation of solid skill and experience development on which they are able to push themselves. This takes careful management of group dynamics and the development of an underlying ethos/philosophy of group support and striving to push one's own limits within the knowledge and appreciation that a person can pull out when they become uncomfortable. (Participant 2, Interview 1)

Ultimately, they are altruistic and value the self implicitly. They speak of honesty, openness, respect and positive connections to the natural world. Their stories tell me about how they are in the world, and how they speak about their role as a leader in the outdoors indicates certain behaviours they believe they demonstrate (spiritual leadership).

I think I really connect well with my students. I am always trying to interact with them on the level they're at, and that gives me the ability to develop a rapport with them and eventually get inside their heads and find out who they are and how they think – what they're good at and not so good at – and it gives me the opportunity to help them out. (Participant 3, Interview 1)

Behaviours

These 'extraordinary' outdoor leaders speak of looking for, and acting on, teachable moments.

I am constantly looking for teachable moments [or constructing them] that provide opportunities for participants to learn about themselves and how changing their behaviour and thinking can impact positively on their lives. (Participant 3, Interview 1)

They are on their own learning journey all the while attempting to foster growth in others (authentic leadership).

All are equal in the outdoors. We are forced to look at ourselves and reflect on who we are. The simple existence of life out of a pack, kayak or dry bag has been some of the sweeter moments in my life. A desire to share some of this with young people and get paid to have a good time is still burning pretty strong. (Participant 4, Interview 1)

'Extraordinary' outdoor leaders are committed to a greater cause than their own and they speak of a clear sense of purpose (transformational, authentic and spiritual leadership). They have the courage to not know what is going to happen. Supported by their experience, they try new things regularly.

If you get something that works, I like to try and make it happen again, but saying that, I'm not actually that good at repeating it. I've found that if I end up saying a similar thing or doing something in a similar way, I don't have the same passion. So I guess I try and build on what I've learned to try and change it a little bit more. (Participant 5, Interview 1)

They speak of 'walking their talk', enacting their core values in order to be respected by their participants (transformational, authentic). Linked closely to relationships, they value the need to be who you are (authentic leadership).

A group will quickly stop listening to you if you say one thing and model something else. What is good for the group is good for you. (Participant 4, Interview 1)

Skills

Skills that emerged from the first round of interviews indicated that these leaders are skilled in storytelling, their use of intuition, and their ability to consistently empower others to actively engage in the learning process.

Guessing what is going on for groups and individuals. Often the unconscious processing seems to hit the nail better than thinking it out. (Participant 6, Interview 1)

I use my intuition constantly in my leadership in terms of my awareness of safety and the necessity for precautions and also in my judgement about participants' capabilities. As the program I am involved in teaches people how to independently carry out a range of activities rather than just providing them with a one off experience I manage their journey towards competent independence. (Participant 2, Interview 1)

They are competent across a range of skills, such as the core competencies (Priest & Gass, 1997, 2005) including all skill areas in which they lead, e.g. paddling, climbing, bushwalking. They are inherently aware of their strengths and weaknesses and they appear to be committed to continuously working on both strengths and weaknesses to become more effective in their leadership. The initial findings above suggest that these leaders do in fact draw on a number of leadership theories when they lead.

Conclusion

This paper reflects a view that the use of existing theories is instrumental in developing new insights and understandings of 'extraordinary' outdoor leadership. Both theory and research have been utilised to propose the key factors surrounding how 'extraordinary' outdoor leaders lead. The early findings of this research into the essence of 'extraordinary' outdoor leadership suggest that while the core competencies of effective outdoor leadership describe the tasks associated with effective outdoor leadership well, they do not address 'extraordinary' outdoor leadership. In contrast, the contemporary theories of leadership discussed in this paper, in particular spiritual leadership, are appearing to be potentially instrumental in the development of an increased understanding of 'extraordinary' outdoor leadership. With many links identified across transformational, authentic and spiritual leadership theories in this paper, the next phase of this project proves to be an insightful and exciting one.

With such successful leadership occurring in outdoor education, it is time that these, and other, 'extraordinary' outdoor leaders are celebrated for their leadership and their contributions not only to leadership in outdoor education, but in their contributions to the world. Their approaches to, and practice of leadership will be influential in teaching others about how to lead in the outdoors and other fields (business and management), as well as for those of us who are already leading and wish to improve on our own leadership practice.

About the Author

Heidi Smith is the coordinator and lecturer of Outdoor Education at the University of Tasmania. She is currently undertaking her doctoral research entitled “Wisdom and insights of ‘extraordinary’ outdoor leaders: An Australian case study” through the University of Wollongong, supervised by Dr Tonia Gray and Ass Prof Dawn Penney. Heidi.Smith@utas.edu.au

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