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Self-Action Leadership:
A qualitative, nomological expansion of self-leadership theory rooted in atmospheric and astronomical metaphor

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Abstract

This paper introduces an expanded, qualitative, nomological theory of self-leadership – referred to as Self-Action Leadership – that employs metaphorical analogues rooted in atmospheric and astronomical science. The theory was designed to achieve three primary goals: 1) Assist individuals in bolstering personal growth and development; 2) Aid organizations in enhancing the overall effectiveness and productivity of work teams – especially self-directed work teams; 3) Positively influence nations of the world that have, in recent years, given way to a troubling trend of moral back-peddling in relation to the value placed on human life and other issues impacting the growth, development, liberty, and freedom of individual human beings.

Keywords: self-leadership, nomological, self-action leadership, leadership, existential growth, existential intelligence, existential gravity, existential crabs

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1. Self-leadership

Successful project execution and organizational development hinges on the self-leadership efficacy of the leaders, managers, and workers who undertake and make them up. Self-leadership (S-L) is defined as: "A process through which individuals control their own behavior, influencing and leading themselves through the use of specific sets of behavioral and cognitive strategies" (Neck and Houghton 2006: 270). S-L involves the conscious direction of self to get results and otherwise "perform in desirable ways" (Houghton and Neck 2002: 672). It is an umbrella topic with subordinate relationships to many related concepts that have been studied and researched since the late 1960s. These concepts include:

- Self-control (Cautela 1969),
- Behavioral self-management (Luthans and Davis 1979),
- Intrinsic motivation theory (Deci and Ryan 1980; Steers et al. 1996),
- Autonomy and control of behavior (Deci and Ryan 1987),
- Mental practice (Driskell et al. 1994),
- Self-awareness and self-discipline (Goleman 1995),
- Self-development (Zenger 2002),
- Self-esteem, self-concept, self-fulfilling prophecy, self-reinforcement, self-respect, self-confidence, self-monitoring, self-assessment ability, self-talk, and self-reliance (Kreitner and Kinicki 2004),
- Self-regulation (Forgas et al. 2009).

Self-leadership is uniquely ubiquitous in the sense that, "Everyone practices self-leadership" (Manz 1983: 289). Moreover, the scope of self-leadership training and

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lifting the existential station of India's most impoverished citizens. Siddhartha Gautama likely reached the Actualization Stage in his late twenties when he realized he must renounce his royal life and take up an ascetic existence in order to access true enlightenment. Jesus entered the Actualization Stage once he knew His life's purpose was to categorically conform to the will of His father. For anyone who reaches this stage of Self-Action Leadership development and Existential Growth, it is usually a welcomed arrival – as most lingering diffidence and inadequacies have been transcended and resolved in the Refining and Polishing stages. Becoming actualized empowers a self-action leader with the knowledge of who they really are. This knowledge effectively disempowers the influence of X-crabs. While X-crabs no longer have much sway on a self-action leader in the Actualization Stage, this does not mean they do not exist, nor does it mean one has entered into a safe haven free from all adversity. To the contrary, some of the greatest adversity a self-action leader can face may appear in the highest levels of Existential Growth. Despite such adversity, self-action leaders who reach this stage typically do not regress. Instead, they grow more confident in and peaceful about their chosen direction, come what may.

While technically labeled a "stage," the Actualization Stage is much more of a "state" or an "arrival" than a stage. This is because most people who advance to the Actualization Stage transition almost immediately to a role of influence upon or leadership of others. While it is true that some self-action leaders may choose to wander off into the "desert" and spend the rest of their lives meditating or otherwise seeking states of constant solitude, the vast majority of individuals will, in some way, choose to influence others through their work, and thereby enter the next stage of Existential Development – the Leadership Stage.

Level 7. Leadership stage. While elements of leadership can and will be learned on lower levels of Existential Growth, the real-world practice of leadership in an executive oriented role cannot truly be applied until one is an executive. The Leadership Stage is therefore inhabited by leaders at the highest levels of organizations. One does not necessarily need to be an executive of a large organization to qualify for the Leadership Stage. A father or mother of a small family could very well reach this stage without any other formal authority to their name. The status of reaching any existential level is not determined primarily by the size or scope of one's influence, but by the authenticity and profundity of that influence on others.

Atmospherically speaking, the Leadership Stage is likened to the exosphere, the final level of the atmosphere, where Gravity is virtually absent and atmospheric particles are few and far between. The farther one progresses in the Leadership Stage, the closer one comes to Self-Transcendence ~ deep outer space.

Self-Action leaders can still digress to lower levels after reaching the Leadership Stage. This is because Existential Gravity still exists in the Actualization and Leadership stages, albeit on a much smaller level. Moreover, external problems persist for all self-action leaders – even those in the gravity-free zones of Self-Transcendence and Creation – as the lives of Jesus, Joan of Arc, Sir Thomas More, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and others like them amply illustrate. Nevertheless, whatever challenges arise are strictly external roadblocks as opposed to the result of any internal ineptitude or moral deficiency on the part of the self-action leader.

Level 8. Self-transcendence. Self-Transcendence represents the pinnacle of existential self-achievement as a self-action leader. It is represented by the gravity free zones of deep outer space. At this point in your existential journey you have finally escaped all of the gravitational pull of lower levels. You have also moved beyond the reach of all Existential Crabs. While X-Crabs may still vocally taunt and harm one's physical person, they have no impact over the confident bearing and existential homeostasis a self-action leader has achieved at this stage. Upon reaching Self-Transcendence, a self-action leader will not digress again to lower levels. The very thought of doing so is anathema to those rare few who manage to achieve this extraordinary level of Existential Growth.

Siddhartha Gautama reached the Actualization Stage in his mid-thirties. After several years of desperate seeking and a near self-imposed starvation, he eventually reached the profound state of enlightenment he had quested after and meditated for with such discipline and zeal. Jesus may have entered the Actualization Stage much earlier, perhaps as young as age 12, when he, with a profound sense of authority and knowledge, taught the learned in the temple. One does not need to start a new religion to advance to this penultimate stage of existential development. Sadly, however, those who earn this elusive stage represent only a small fraction of the overall population.

Level 9. Creation stage. Having reached Self-Transcendence, a self-action leader is sure to do everything in one's power to create new messaging and processes by which other, willing self-action leader's on lower levels can follow in the footsteps of the leader on a quest to eventually realize Existential Growth for themselves. Such creations are the metaphorical analogue to celestial bodies throughout the Universe (i.e. asteroids, comets, planets, stars, galaxies, novas, supernovas, and in the case of the dark shadow [see next page], black holes).

Relatively few individuals ever reach Level 9 in their lifetimes, and even fewer individuals end up impacting large numbers of people. Jesus, Siddhartha Gautama, Socrates, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Teresa are some of the best real-world examples whose achievements qualify them as having reached Level-9 in their Existential Growth. Such leaders literally changed the world by "creating" new dogmas and movements rooted in moral, non-violent paradigms for others to join and follow that had lasting, positive and constructive results. It is highly likely, however, that many more individuals reach Level 9 over the course of their lifetimes, but never have an opportunity to extend their reach to a large audience. Perhaps you know someone, most likely someone in his or her later years, who has achieved this elusive stage. Such a person may or may not be well known to the general public. Such a one could even be your father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, teacher, pastor, etc. While the scope of their influence may be small on a global scale, their influence has truly been "global" on whatever audience it has impacted – a result of dedicating one's life to personal integrity and service to others.

Prior to reaching Self-Transcendence, it is possibly for a self-action leader to digress from a higher to a lower stage of development. This process of digression is referred to as Existential Atrophy.

Existential atrophy (x-atrophy): The digression from a higher stage of X-Growth to a lower stage.

This digression results from wrong, or immoral, thoughts, speech, and actions over time. Immoral actions can also produce an entirely different sort of progression throughout a metaphorical "dark side" of the atmospheric hierarchy. This "dark side" of the hierarchy is referred to as the "dark shadow."

4.3. e dark shadow of the SAL hierarchy

Pursuing thoughts, words, and actions that are immoral, regardless haw mentally, physically, socially, politically, militarily or culturally savvy, leads an individual away from Existential Growth, thus incurring Existential Atrophy. Despite such X-Atrophy, immoral actions can sometimes lead to personal, professional, social, cultural, military, and political popularity, hierarchical advancement, and financial success. Individuals progressing through this "dark shadow" will experience internal and external difficulties, realities, and successes that, viewed objectively, may appear strikingly similar to those experienced by authentic self-action leaders journeying to the top of the authentic hierarchy. The key difference is the long-term results garnered by moral self-action leaders and immoral self-leaders. For example, one could rightly argue that both Adolf Hilter and Nelson Mandela progressed to the highest level – the Creation Stage – in that they both ended up creating movements and re-making entire nations in transformational ways. The difference, of course, is that Mandela's creations benefited citizens in his country and around the world in the long-run. He essentially created a light that continues to shine forth after his death – much like a new star in the firmament. Hitler, on the other hand, and the Third Reich he founded, eventually collapsed within itself to form a historical "black hole" that all enlightened societies avoid like the plague and hold up as an example of darkness and evildoing. While the movement Mandela created has remained – and continues to grow after he died a natural and noble death that was lauded the world round, the movement that Hitler created, while physically impressive, eventually crumbled to ash, punctuated by his own ignominious suicide.

Another striking difference between the SAL hierarchy and the dark shadow is the absence of any consultation of conscience by those progressing up through the dark shadow. By constantly ignoring and disregarding one's conscience, an evil self-leader develops mechanisms that dull, and eventually exterminate, its voice. By squelching the voice of one's own conscience, a person may, by degrees, become self-deceived to the point that whatever he or she thinks, says, or does, will – in the deluded mind of the individual – be judged as right simply because he or she performed it. Rather than submit one's will to universal law and recognize the duty one holds to that law (Kant 2002), the fully immersed citizen of the dark shadow has become a polluted law unto oneself whereby one sees oneself as a godlike figure whose own selfish, hedonistic, terrorizing will reigns true, good, and supreme. It is the sorry endgame of all liars, evildoers and narcissists. Society is unfortunately strewn with individuals who have made extraordinary progress in advancing to higher levels of the dark shadow.

If not checked and reversed, progression through the dark shadow always ends in ignominy, as the fall of Hitler's Third Reich and his cowardly suicide so eloquently illustrate. From Hitler, Lenin, Stalin, and Pol Pot on the darkest side of the spectrum to Richard Nixon, Janis Joplin, Bill Clinton, and Ken Lay on the lighter side of the spectrum, the passage of time has a way of powerfully tainting the legacy of individuals who pursue fundamentally flawed moral pathways – no matter how erudite one's ideology, how popular or financially wealthy one may have become, or how temporarily productive one's efforts may have been. As such, all self-action leaders should take heed to not mistake

evil self-leaders who rise up through the dark shadow of the hierarchy for authentic self-action leaders progressing up the SAL hierarchy. Such a mistake has, and will yet, spell disaster – for anyone bamboozled by the pied pipers of the dark shadow – which have always existed in this world.

Unfortunately, it often requires years, decades, generations, centuries, or even millennia to fully flesh out the long-term results of a given decision, philosophy, ideology, movement, or religion. Consequently, it can be quite easy to become seduced by a false dogma that is presently popular – either personally, professionally, socially, culturally, religiously, or politically – but existentially flawed all the same.

4.4. In summary

To review, the nine stages of Existential Growth (including their dark shadows) included in the Self-Action Leadership theory is likened to the surface of the Earth, the six levels of the Earth's atmosphere, deep outer space, and astronomical bodies throughout the Universe.

As a self-action leader progresses to higher levels of Existential Growth, he or she becomes increasingly influential toward others. On lower levels, more people are outside of a self-action leader's sphere of influence. On higher levels, more people are inside of a self-action leader's sphere of influence. This is one reason why persons who reach the highest level of Existential Growth (i.e. Jesus, The Buddha, Gandhi, etc.) sometimes absorb millions or even billions of people into their personal sphere of influence.

5. Implications for practice and research

The next step in the development of Self-Action Leadership theory will be to publish a follow-up paper that introduces a practical construct of cognitive and behavioral actions and habits that support the Existential Growth of self-action leaders. This construct, known as the Self-Action Leadership model, is rooted in action research theory. Beaulieu points out that while action research is often "misunderstood" in the "academic world" (Beaulieu 2013: 1), it is in fact, "solidly rooted in scholarly research" (Beaulieu 2013: 1), and, "as a growing [research] tradition, it fits well with scholarly research agendas that are aimed to improve the quality of life" (Beaulieu 2013: 6). As Self-Action Leadership philosophy was developed explicitly to improve quality of life through the Existential Growth of self-action leaders everywhere, it is appropriate that an action research approach was taken (both theoretically and practically speaking) in the development of the SAL model.

According to Kuhne and Quigley (Kuhne, Quigley 1997) there are "four core processes of action research" (Kuhne, Quigley 1997: 25). These four stages include: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Kuhne, Quigley 1997: 25). In the development of the SAL model, Jensen (Jensen 2013) utilizes action research theory to frame a construction metaphor with explicit cognitive-behavioral analogues to the four steps of action research. In addition, twenty-one (Jensen 2013: 21) cognitive-behavioral sub-steps are included underneath the umbrellas of these four main steps. The author's organization of these sub-steps was derived from an interpretive synthesis of data collected from extensive literature reviews and a number of self-action research projects conducted in his own life as a self-action leader. Several of these projects have been carefully chronicled (Jensen 2013).

Self-action research (SAR): Action Research applied by, to, and for the self to gain self-awareness, aid self-improvement, and solve personal problems.

Given the recent emergence of the SAL Theory, no research has yet been formally conducted to empirically test the efficacy of its constructs in theoretical laboratories or practical organizational settings. Enormous anecdotal evidence exists, however, to corroborate both its validity and efficacy. This nascence, in concert with the comprehensiveness and depth of its concepts, translates into expansive potential for future research. Moreover, because strong connections exist between self-leadership and self-directed, or self-managing, work teams (Manz, Sims 2001) it is likely that such teams could derive a variety of theoretical and practical knowledge and value from SAL training.

Areas of practical research likely to be pursued in the future involve how an understanding of the SAL theory's nine stages of Existential Growth may positively inform human resource methodology and success as it relates to hiring, firing, training, retaining, and the promotion/demotion/termination of executives, managers and employees. This likelihood is based on implicit assumptions about the theory, such as: individuals on different levels of Existential Growth may be better suited to some roles than others (e.g. successful executives and other leaders will almost certainly possess characteristics of those who inhabit higher levels of Existential Growth).

To illustrate how SAL theory could specifically inform an executive's insight into hiring practices, consider the following advice about hiring from one leadership expert (Ellis 2012) – a former Vietnam POW imprisoned for five-and-a-half years at the infamous "Hanoi Hilton": "Because wisdom and maturity are forged in trials, I would think twice before hiring someone for an executive leadership role who has not been humbled through significant struggles. Leaders devoid of crucible experiences are

likely to be overly confident about their ideas, less sensitive to those of others, and surprisingly more susceptible to fears. Leaders motivated by fears and selfishness tend to make choices and cultivate attitudes that undermine the growth of the organization and its people" (Ellis 2012: 183).

Based on Ellis' (Ellis 2012) advice, leaders and executives could screen applicants in part by determining who had demonstrated entrance in, and successful passage through, the Refining Stage, and who had not. Those who had not successfully passed through this phase of Existential Growth, and much less those who had not yet entered in, might then be readily identified as poor candidates for executive positions.

Another assumption of SAL theory is that individuals with an internal locus of control may rise higher and faster in their Existential Growth than those with an external locus of control, and are therefore more likely to become highly skilled content experts and leaders over time than their externally motivated counterparts. Ample research opportunities exist in this and other components of SAL theory.

6. Conclusion

SAL training has the potential to provide executives, managers, and workers with a stronger foundation of character and integrity, and a greater vision of their capacity both as individuals and team-members. It may also empower individuals and organizations to set goals, define and cultivate visions, plan and prepare, and then follow through with the hard work, patience, and determination necessary to realize targeted objectives and steadily earn Existential Growth over time.

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