

MODULE

2

Great Man Theory

"No great man lives in vain. The history of the world is but the biography of great men."

- Thomas Carlyle

Historical Snapshot

The Great Man Theory of leadership is centered around the ideas of prominent historians of the 19th century. The literature of the century, including Frederick Adam Woods's book *The Influence of Monarchs: Steps in a New Science of History* and many like it, analyze the influence of major rulers primarily in the Western world. The Great Man Theory thrives on the notion that most of history can be explained by the influence of male leadership figures. These men often appeared to rise to power out of nowhere and lead their people to success, and their "greatness" was often derived from military leadership. While they weren't exactly sure what traits contributed to their success, scholars of the era attributed leadership to something inherent that Great Men were born with, thus founding the theory. Great Man Theory reigned as the most popular theory of explaining leadership well into the mid-20th century, supposedly explaining the influence of big names such as Abraham Lincoln, Julius Caesar, and Alexander the Great.

Facilitation Notes

- Link to slideshow with supplementary images and videos

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1lO0azkw2AJWUAAO7U_y9y-UYeDOxOyEduG-NzSTVhY/edit#slide=id.g5df4e2eb33_0_0

1. Be sure to emphasize that this theory was developed in the early 20th century and that it's the first theory associated with conceptualized leadership, so it is largely unaccepted today but still holds merit in analyzing leadership developments over time.
2. Because this theory doesn't have any activities, it can get a little too lecture-y and bore people. Make sure you do a little extra research on the people to include some aspects of the leaders that we haven't included here that are more interesting, fun-fact type things. Make them sound really cool, and encourage a lot of discussion!
3. In discussion, play devil's advocate! Try to counter what your students say from another perspective (when appropriate).
4. Utilize the slideshow to supplement your speaking. Strictly verbal facilitation can be

very boring and visual aids can make a huge difference.

5. When speaking of controversial topics and individuals be sure to remain as non-partisan as possible. We want to create an environment that fosters all ideologies.

Agenda

1. Icebreaker (15 minutes)
2. Picture It Activity
3. Great Man Theory
 - a. Trait Approach
 - b. Skills Approach
4. Reverse Debate
5. Examples
 - a. Kemal Ataturk (peter)
 - b. Catherine the Great (jm)
 - c. Donald Trump (jm)
 - d. Supplemental: Jamie Dimon

Student Objectives:

1. Students will understand Great Man Theory and its origins.
2. Students will be able to connect trait and skills approaches to the foundations of Great Man Theory.
3. Students will identify the shortcomings of Great Man Theory and the nuances in its relevance today.

Theories

Great Man Theory

- a. Leadership derived from the innate characteristics a person is born with. Traits are left largely undefined and are often attributed to divine inspiration or military power. The success of these leaders is based on the traits they are born with, which can be physical and behavioral, and therefore cannot be developed. (Villanova University)
 - b. Although theorists are thought to have largely disproved Great Man Theory, it is crucial to our understanding of the development of leadership theories that follow it. As the 20th century progressed, leadership research focused on identifying the specific traits that shaped great leaders. (The Future Leaders Institute)
 - c. **Great man theory is essentially when a leader is recognized as “great” by their followers, however, the reason they are recognized as a leader is undefined.** For example, if you were to see a firefighter saving a family, you would think “hey, that’s a leader”.
2. Connection: Trait Theory
 - a. Trait Theory is derived from Great Man Theory and follows the same concept that successful leaders are those that possess a certain list of traits that enhance their abilities. Contrary to Great Man Theory, Trait Theory identifies the specific characteristics that leaders hold, and suggests that some traits are only useful when specific to the situation, while others are universal among leaders. Among the universal traits conducted in 20th-century studies are **intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability**. (Northouse 20-23)

3. Connection: Skill Theory
 - a. Skills Theory takes a slightly different approach to the Great Man Theory and Trait Theory. While it is still focused on the leader as a person rather than their relationship to the follower(s), Skills Theory centers around the skills and abilities of a leader. In contrast from both of the previous theories which are based around largely innate and fixed characteristics, Skill Theory thrives on the idea that while the personality of a leader is important, there are also certain abilities of the person that may or may not be learned and developed that are just as crucial. Skills, **defined in this context as things a leader can accomplish**, are divided into three sectors in this theory: **technical, human, and conceptual**, all of which are crucial to an efficient leader. (Northouse 43-45)

Examples of Great Man Theory

Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938)

Resources:

1. http://www.defence.gov.au/ADC/Publications/Geddes/2003/Publcnsgeddes2003_300310_MustafaKemal.pdf
2. www.britannica.com/biography/Kemal-Ataturk

CORE Crash Course (CCC):

Mustafa Kemal Ataturk was the son of a military lieutenant. Although his father died when he was still a child, his father ensured quality military education for Ataturk. He attended military schools from a young age and was an outstanding student, being nicknamed Kemal by a teacher, which means, "The Perfect One." Ataturk is still considered today as a national hero and great leader of Turkey, where he was a commander of war and the first president.

His leadership capabilities were first recognized during his period of military leadership, where he led his country in the Turkish War of Independence. He was known for being ambitious and decisive while having a clear vision, integrity, and determination. All of these traits among others contributed to his success as a leader and his ability to gain liberation for the country of Turkey. Following his military leadership, he became the first president of Turkey, advocating for a more European national system with heavy education reform. Ataturk was able to lead his country from its restricted state following World War I to an independent and thriving nation. Today, he is still heavily memorialized and respected throughout the nation. (Encyclopedia Britannica, Byrne)

Discussion Questions:

1. Can traits be developed or are they innate to an individual? Do you think it varies per trait?
2. What aspects of military leadership may potentially benefit political leadership? What aspects may harm it?
3. In what ways could Great Man Theory not apply to Ataturk? Are there any other aspects of him as a leader that might otherwise contribute to his success?

Trait Theory: is Catherine the Great (1729 - 1796)

Resources:

1. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Catherine-the-Great>

CORE Crash Course (CCC):

Catherine the Great (also known as Catherine II and Yekaterina Velikaya) was the empress of Russia from 1762 to 1796. At age 14, she was married to Karl Ulrich who was to be heir to the throne of Russia as the “grand duke Peter.” Peter was neurotic, rebellious, an alcoholic, and an avid fan of Frederick II of Prussia - the foe of the current empress. When it was time for Peter to take the throne, he was already widely hated by the public. Catherine, on the other hand, was widely liked. Her traits were what allowed her to gain much support. She was considered to be clear-headed, ambitious, and intelligent. Shortly after he inherited the throne, Peter was assassinated by Catherine’s supporters (it is not known whether or not Catherine ordered the assassination). In September of 1763, Catherine was crowned as empress of Russia.

As empress, Catherine was completely dedicated to her country. Her intent was to make Russia a prosperous and powerful state through establishing order, spreading education, creating a court, and developing a national culture. Her projects were far too many, and she was not very successful in accomplishing her goals. However, the same traits that allowed her to gain support at the start of her career, allowed her to maintain support throughout her role.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you have to accomplish your goals in order to be considered a leader?
2. Does Catherine fit the mold of a “great man”? Why or why not?
 - i. What social factors contributing to your response?
3. In what way does Catherine exhibit the trait theory?

Donald Trump (1946 - Present Day)

Note: Avoid political conversation and speak very neutrally

1. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/12/donald-trump-is-making-the-great-man-theory-of-history-great-again/>

CORE Crash Course (CCC):

Donald Trump, the 45th and current president of the United States, is a prominent business figure and former reality TV star. His election in 2016 triggered discussion among leadership theorists. While Great Man Theory has been nearly put to sleep across the board, the controversy surrounding President Trump has reawakened the idea. Throughout history, major leaders have been elected largely on the premise that their strong leadership characteristics would help pull the country out of a bad situation (i.e., Great Man Theory). Theorists stand to point out that Trump stood out

from his opponent with his drastic willfulness, self-confidence, and unrepressed spontaneity. Regardless of whether he was elected for his personality or not, these theorists argue that his characteristics are crucial to the results of his presidency.

Even though recent years have considered Great Man Theory dead and the personality of the leader more or less irrelevant to the success of a group, President Trump's personality has been shown to play a major role in his actions as our nation's leader. This contrasts from most of the presidents we've seen throughout history, who have relied on the advice and ruling of their cabinet and strict systematic processes, which made the impact of their personalities quite small. In this way, theorists suggest, Great Man Theory has made a comeback to the modern world (Bell).

Discussion Questions:

1. How much of an influence do the characteristics of a leader really have on their role?
2. Can characteristics have different connotations in different settings? For example, can someone with a personality trait viewed negatively in a social setting, maybe bluntness, be viewed positively in a political setting? What other traits have different connotations in multiple settings?
3. Do you see Great Man, Trait, or Skills Theory applied in other modern settings? (ex.: job applications)

Activities

Picture it

Materials: Whiteboard/paper, expo markers/writing utensil, timer

Directions: Have each of the students grab a marker(if using whiteboard)or writing utensil (if using paper). With little direction simply instruct the students to illustrate a leader.

Purpose: The purpose of this activity is to create a discussion on why certain physical traits were drawn or why certain personality traits were written. This will act as a bridge to the great man theory, trait theory, and skill theory.

Discussion Questions:

What characteristics define a leader? Why?

What are some common traits amongst your illustrations?

How has our perception of leadership qualities developed over time?

Reverse Debate

Directions: Students will be asked to answer two questions on a yes or no basis on a sheet of paper and turn these in. Facilitators will then turn this into a debate where students must argue for the reasoning behind the alternative option.

Purpose: The purpose of this activity is to bring to light the relevance of the Great Man theory to present day figures. Additionally, this activity will provide an opportunity for the students to play devil's advocate and realize both sides.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you see Great Man, Trait, or Skills Theory applied in other modern settings? (ex.: job applications)
2. Can characteristics have different connotations in different settings? For example, can someone with a personality trait viewed negatively in a social setting, maybe bluntness,

be viewed positively in a political setting?

- a. What other traits have different connotations in multiple settings?

Supplemental Content

Jamie Dimon (1956 - Present Day)

2. <https://www.chase.com/news/111614-jamie-dimon-hallmarks-of-a-good-leader>

CORE Crash Course (CCC):

Jamie Dimon, the CEO and chairman of J.P. Morgan Chase Bank, has made multiple appearances in Time Magazine's "Most Influential People of All Time". According to Forbes, his current net value is 1.4 billion dollars. He came from a wealthy family and attended the Browning School, a private independent boy's high school in New York City. He went to Tufts University and Harvard University for his primary education. He is tall, at 5' 11".

Discussion Questions:

1. Does one's education change the perception of them as a Great Man?
2. Does one's wealth change the perception of them as a Great Man?
3. How do one's physical traits relate to the Great Man Theory?

References

1. Future Leaders Institute:
<https://fli.institute/2014/08/19/the-great-man-theory-of-leadership/>
2. Northouse
3. Byrne:
http://www.defence.gov.au/ADC/Publications/Geddes/2003/Publcnsgeddes2003_300310_MustafaKemal.pdf
4. Villanova University:
<https://www.villanovau.com/resources/leadership/great-man-theory/>
5. David A. Bell:
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/12/donald-trump-is-making-the-great-man-theory-of-history-great-again/>