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UNDERSTANDING THE LEADER-STRATEGY INTERFACE:

APPLICATION OF THE STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP INTERVIEW METHOD

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ABSTRACT

The argument that leaders substantially affect organizational outcome is presented. In order to better understand the leader/strategy/environment interface, however, the question of what leaders do has to be supplemented with why they are doing it. It is argued that the assessment of a leader's preoccupations will make for more effective human resource planning by facilitating the match between leader and organization.

Unfortunately, the accurate assessment of a leader's preoccupations is still in its infancy. To fill the gap, this paper proposes a research methodology based on the clinical concept of transference, i.e., repetitive, consistent patterns of interaction which are unique to each individual. The Strategic Relationship Interview Method (a derivative of the Core Conflictual Relationship Theme Method as developed by Luborsky and his collaborators) is introduced as a relatively simple way to capture the essence of leadership. Using the Strategic Relationship Interview Method (SRIM), one systematically identifies the central relationship patterns of key executives by analyzing and scoring specific narratives. In order to illustrate its application, an example is given of the SRIM using as "text" the statements made by an entrepreneur.

The Leader: Marionette or Great Man?

A great deal of controversy exists in management literature about whether leaders really make a difference in the running of organizations (Lieberson & O'Connor, 1972). Population ecologists (Hannah & Freeman, 1977), resource dependency theorists (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), or attribution theory advocates (Calder, 1977; Lord & Smith, 1983; Meindl, Ehrlich & Dukerich, 1985) argue that factors other than leadership affect organizational performance. According to these researchers leadership explains very little of the variance in performance. Obviously, if this point of view is taken to the extreme, leaders turn into marionettes led by forces over which they have very little or no control.

In direct opposition to this point of view we find the "great man" orientation to leadership (Bass, 1981). Proponents of this research outlook (which has gone through various transformations over time) argue that, because of certain unique personality characteristics leaders greatly affect the levers of change and transformation (MacGregor Burns, 1978); according to them, leaders are the ones who make things happen. Unfortunately, this point of view may be somewhat one-sided. In this case insufficient attention is paid to the role of the followers and of situational forces.

Most likely, the "truth" lies somewhere in between. As Gupta

(1984) very appropriately argues, "...the discretion available to a G M [general manager] should be expected to vary across organizational contexts and across performance criteria" (p. 400). Leaders' characteristics, followers, and situational forces all affect organizational performance. Obviously, a complex process of interaction exists between leader, organization, and environment.

Drawing from their studies of the top executive-organization interface, Miller and Toulouse (1986) support this point of view. For example, they recognize the contingent nature of the process when they conclude that the relationship between the leader's personality and the environmental context will be especially strong in smaller companies and dynamic, unpredictable, and changing environments. What complicates the leadership question even further, is that in the leader-strategy interface, bounded rationality becomes the rule (March & Simon, 1958). It has become increasingly clear that a leader's ability to handle complex decisions is subject to certain cognitive limitations.

Realizing the importance of environmental forces as well as the human limitations present in rational choice has led to increasing evidence showing that leaders do substantially affect organizational outcome (Miller, Kets de Vries & Toulouse, 1982; Gupta & Govindarajan, 1984; Miller & Toulouse, 1986; Beatty & Zajac, 1987). This strategic choice orientation to leadership

(Guth & Taguiri, 1965; Andrews, 1971; Child, 1972; Bowman, 1986), somehow replaces the great man outlook and negates the claims of the population ecologists, the resource dependency theorists, or the extreme attribution theory advocates. It is also defended by practitioners (Business Week, 1980). The strategic choice orientation argues that strategies very much reflect the idiosyncracies of the decision makers. To support these claims, a considerable number of conceptual models matching leaders to strategies have come to the fore (Wissema, Van der Pol & Messer, 1980; Leontiades, 1982; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984, 1986; Szilagyi & Schwerger, 1984; Gupta, 1984; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Herbert & Deresky, 198x,; Smith, Mitchell & Summer, 1985).

Limitations of Previous Studies

Although we welcome the increased recognition of the importance of the leader in strategy making, the existing research studies have their limitations. To take a few examples: in the Wissema, Van der Pol and Messer study (1980), behavioral characteristics such as conformity, sociability, activity, pressure to achieve, and style of thinking are selected. According to the authors, these characteristics -- in different configurations -- make up six strategic archetypes which are matched with six strategies. How the authors arrive at these behavioral characteristics is, however, never made clear. Moreover, we can go one step further and question, whether these characteristics really reflect the

essence of an individual's personality. In the Leontiades model (1982) a distinction is made between a steady state and an evolutionary philosophy of management, each consisting of four prototypes. Unfortunately, Leontiades does not really develop the relationship between these prototypes and the various strategy-type activities. Herbert and Deresky (1987) propose four distinct generic strategies and make conjectures about the kind of personality factors necessary to implement each one. Interesting as this study may be, the linkage between the various strategies and the personality dimensions remains tenuous. The authors do not really describe the logic behind the selection of certain skills and personality orientations.

A number of researchers (Miller, Kets de Vries & Toulouse, 1982; Gupta & Govindarajan, 1984; Miller & Toulouse, 1986) have made an empirical attempt to link personality with strategy. Personality dimensions such as locus of control, need for achievement, flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity, and willingness to take risks were selected and related to strategy and structure. From a conceptual point of view these studies are a step in the right direction. However, one can question whether the use of a few standard personality dimensions suffices to grasp the complexity and richness of character and a CEO's preoccupations (Kets de Vries & Perzow, 1989). Furthermore, one can have reservations about the reliability and validity of data based on self-reports.

Another contribution to a better understanding of the link between leader, organization, and environment has been made through ethnographic, observational studies (Carlson, 1951; Stewart, 1967; Mintzberg, 1973; Kotter, 1982). Although this body of literature has opened our eyes to the richness and complexity of the leader-strategy interface, it may be argued that these studies have not gone far enough. In carefully monitoring various managerial roles they have remained at a purely descriptive level. The reason why leaders do certain things has been left largely unanswered.

A more ethnographic approach to the study of strategic decision making has been the analysis of the shared language of top managers (Sapienza, 1987). Although one can praise Sapienza's efforts in trying to find relationships between top management's imagery and its strategy, one can lament the lack of clinically based conceptual models, themes, concepts, and interpretations, leading not surprisingly (in spite of a seven months' effort) to very trivial findings. Unfortunately, Sapienza does not explore the reasons why certain executives come up with specific images.

Valuable as these studies may be, they do not answer the question of why leaders take certain action. If we want to reach a better understanding of the match between leader and organization we must now go beyond responding to what leaders do and explore <u>why</u> they are doing it.

Integrating Descriptive and Analytical Approaches

Kets de Vries and Miller (1984, 1986) have taken a more analytical clinical orientation and generated a set of complex hypotheses about relationships between different leadership styles, each style's predominant motivating fantasy, the emerging organizational culture, and the strategy and structure of the overall organization. In their conceptualizations, "fantasies" refer to complex and stable psychological structures that underlie observable behavior (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984). These hypotheses have been tested by Noel (1984, 1988), who observed and interviewed a number of CEOs over an extended period of time. His study is a first systematic attempt to supplement the question of what leaders do with the "why" they are doing it. Noel concludes that each CEO enacts (Weick, 1970) a very idiosyncratic product which he calls the strategic core. The core is a set of activities and communication patterns that a CEO sets in motion; it is central to the existence of the organization, its mission, and purpose. His work highlights the way in which issues or persons gain importance in organizations because of some kind of match with the underlying preoccupations of the CEO. Noel argues that each CEO is possessed of a "magnificent obsession," a certain Weltanschauung which is relatively rigid and which explains why certain activities are central to the strategic core. He demonstrates that these magnificent obsessions play a central role

in strategy making.

Although Noel's work is a commendable attempt to integrate the descriptive with the analytical and is much richer than the previously cited studies, his research methodology poses problems. The main one is that his study is very difficult to replicate, primarily because of its extremely time consuming nature. Obviously, it is very hard to find executives willing to collaborate in research of this kind. Thus, for reasons of practicality, other methodologies have to be found to understand a leader's main preoccupations and the linkages to strategy making without sacrificing richness of content. It is the objective of this paper to propose a research methodology that is relatively simple and reliable but captures the essence of leadership in order to better grasp the role of the leader in a strategy-making context. Understanding a leader's preoccupations will make for more effective manpower planning by facilitating the match between the leader and the organization.

The Centrality of Transference in Leadership Research

The "royal road" to the understanding of a CEO's preoccupations to paraphrase Freud -- the diagnosis of his or her style -- goes through the transference. Transference is a term known foremost in the clinical setting. It refers to the interface between therapist and patient and can be described as a confusion in time

and place. Transference patterns have an early origin and derive from the kind of relationships which develop between parents and children. It can be described as the projection or displacement upon another person of unconscious wishes and feelings originally directed toward important individuals in childhood (Greenson, 1967; Langs, 1976; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984). Transference is the determining factor in understanding an individual's style. In the therapeutic setting transference reactions offer the therapist an opportunity to observe in the here and now the patterns of interaction which are unique to the patient. In response to Freud's question about the importance of transference Jung is said to have replied, "It is the alpha and omega of treatment," to which Freud responded, "You have understood" (Storr, 1979).

As early as 1912 Freud argued that each individual possesses "...what might be described as a stereotype plate (or several such), which is constantly repeated -- constantly reprinted afresh -- in the course of a person's life" (pp. 99-100). In studying individual patients he was struck by the consistency of this pattern over time. Freud's insight led the way to understanding that the accurate assessment of transference patterns in psychotherapy is the key to successful intervention and change. The identification of transference patterns becomes the shortcut to an individual's major preoccupations and will facilitate comprehension of behavior and actions.

From quite a different perspective, the political scientist Nathan Leites (1951) introduced the concept of the "operational code," meaning those rules of conduct and norms of behavior that are relatively stable. To some extent one can look at his operational code as a derivative of transferential patterns. It "...can serve as a useful 'bridge' or 'link' to psychodynamic interpretations of unconscious dimensions of belief systems and their role in behavior under different conditions" (George, 1969, p. 195). Leites even went so far as to apply his operational code not only to individuals but also to nations at large.

The notion of "stereotype plates" was also recognized by the pioneer in the development of the analysis of symbolic statements, Henry Murray (1938), who, from his studies of human lives, concluded:

> Experience was to teach us that, though the reasons for many of the subject's responses were mysterious and much of his past entirely out of reach, it was possible to find in most individuals an underlying reaction system, termed by us <u>unity-thema</u>, which was the key to his unique nature. I say "key" because if one assumed the activity of this unity-thema many superficially unintelligible actions and expressions became, as it were, psychologically inevitable. A <u>unity-thema</u> is a compound of interrelated -- collaborating or conflicting -- dominant needs that are linked to pressures to

> which the individual was exposed on one or more particular occasions, gratifying or traumatic, in early childhood...
>
> As soon as we realized the force of the unity thema its importance... began to dawn upon us. For if every response is the objectification of an aspect of a particular personality and the most fundamental and characteristic determinant of a personality is a unity-thema, then many responses cannot be fully understood except in terms of their relationship to the unity-thema... (pp. 604-605)

Murray tried to operationalize the identification of these unity themas through his Thematic Apperception Test -- analyzing narratives in response to fictional scenes depicted on cards.

A more recent and very promising approach to teasing out a person's main preoccupations (influenced by Murray's work) has been developed by Luborsky and his associates (Luborsky, 1984; Luborsky et al, 1985; Luborsky and Crits-Cristoph, 1985; Luborsky, Crits-Cristoph & Mellon, 1986). Luborsky introduced a system for assessing central relationship patterns by analyzing narratives and looking at consistencies across narratives. The primary data used in what he calls the Core Conflictual Relationship Theme Method (CCRT) is short episodes related in psychotherapy sessions. In contrast to the Thematic Apperception Test where fictional stories are used, Luborsky's approach may be more appropriate

since real, personal episodes are dealt with: the researcher is, consequently, closer to the primary data. In applying their system Luborsky and his co-workers discovered that the focus on specific narratives (with the obvious advantage of being less time consuming) did not entail a significant loss of information.

In order to operationalize a system of scoring, transcripts of these narrative episodes are given to a number of independent judges who are asked to identify three components within each episode: the person's main wishes, needs, or intentions vis-a-vis the other person in the narrative (W); the responses of the other person (RO); and the responses of the self (RS) (Luborsky et al, 1986). In summarizing their system, Luborsky and his collaborators argue that "...the steps in the CCRT method represent a formalization of the usual inference process of clinicians in formulating transference patterns" (Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1985, p. 13). One may add that studies of CCRT application have shown remarkable agreement in CCRT scoring among the judges.

Eventually, Luborsky and his associates wanted to make the method available to a wider audience for research purposes. They wished to go beyond a purely psychotherapeutic setting and develop "...a new method that would elicit relationship anecdotes in the course of any interview situation, not just in psychotherapy" (1985, p. 4). They therefore developed, what they called, the Relationship

Anecdote Paradigm Method (RAP). According to them, the CCRT and RAP approaches provide comparable results. Given this widening scope, an obvious application of the RAP approach is the study of leadership and strategy, where it presents an opportunity to develop a much better understanding of strategy-leadership content issues.

The Strategic Relationship Interview Method

The strategic relationship interview method (SRIM) is a system (really an outgrowth of the CCRT) designed to help the researcher uncover a leader's main preoccupations and strategic orientation. As with the CCRT and the RAP methods, narrative episodes become the raw material for the researcher. In order to place the episodes in the context of the organizational world and better understand the strategy-making process, top executives are asked to talk not only about their personal lives but also about their business dealings. Studies of executive activities (Mintzberg, 1973; Kotter, 1982; Noel, 1984) always conclude that CEOs spend on average 80 percent of their time communicating with people. Communication episodes are thus central to the exercise of their leadership. Moreover, Porter's (1980) attempt to systematize the behavior of corporations within their industries suggests that we should focus on relationships to suppliers, competitors, clients, and eventual new entrants if we want to properly assess the generic strategies that are formulated by leaders.

In order to facilitate the gathering of material about strategic orientation specific instructions are given by the interviewer (see Appendix). In short, the leader is encouraged to tell three or four narratives relating to each of three categories:

1) Parents, spouse, lover, children, friends or other important people in their private sphere.

2) Subordinates.

3) Other stakeholders such as board members, bankers, customers, suppliers, competitors, union members, or government officials.

For the purposes of assessment diversity in the narratives is important. Also, the period of the narrator's life during which these episodes take place should vary. He or she should be encouraged to recount incidents from both present and past in order to allow the researcher to arrive at a complete assessment of his or her preoccupations. In addition, in order to facilitate the rating process, it is desirable for the incidents to be rather specific. The task of the assessors is to identify the themes that repeat themselves by rating wishes, needs, or intentions, responses from others and responses from self. The frequency with which certain themes occur will signal certain preoccupations and give insight into strategic orientation.

Example of the SRIM

An example of the application of the SRIM follows. For the purposes of demonstration the narratives have been condensed. The subject of investigation is a very visible European entrepreneur who is running an extremely successful enterprise. Three narratives are presented. In the first narrative the entrepreneur talks about a Mr. X, a former business associate. The second narrative concerns the entrepreneur's mother, and the third has to do with his dealings with Mr. Y, his new managing director (he himself holds the position of chairman).

In the first episode we can see how the entrepreneur receives an unusual business proposal which gets him quite excited but also makes him anxious. It is clear that it offers an excellent opportunity to pursue his desire for recognition. However, quite a few people he deals with appear to be critical of this unconventional venture and, in his opinion, become unhelpful and interfering. Their intrusion makes us alert to his main wish to assert himself, and be independent and autonomous, which is also central to episodes two and three.

TABLE 1

EXAMPLE OF CONDENSED NARRATIVES AND TYPICAL SCORES

Relationship Episodes	Inferences about W, RO, and RS
Object: Mr X (a former associate)	
"I received a friendly telephone call from X who had a wonderful idea for an unusual business venture"	RO: Treats me respectfully RS: Feeling happy, excited
"I got interested since I had a real chance to succeed in something quite exciting"	RS: Feeling self-confident
"My associates thought I was foolhardy and a megalomaniac to get into this venture"	RO: Critical, disapproving
"I had sleepless nights because of lack of time to get the venture off the ground"	RS: Feeling anxious
"I had to get personally involved in a major public relations campaign to publicize the venture"	RS: Being assertive W: To be recognized
"I had to get rid of X, he wasn't delivering"	RS: Being assertive RO: Being unhelpful, uncooperative
"X tried to block the appointment of my people on the board; he wants to put me in a corner"	RO: Interfering W: To assert my independence and autonomy
Object: Mother	
"My mother is trying to get me involved in one mad idea after another	RO: Interfering
"I would sometimes like to put her in	W: To assert myself

her place"

"She would say that nothing is impossible, the only person making it happen is yourself"	RO: Being concerned W: To assert myself
"She also told her friends that one day I would be Prime Minister"	RO: Being supportive

Object: Mr Y (new managing director)

"My 'cottage industry' days were over. I had to get more financial expertise"	RS: Feeling less confident
"The first thing he told me was that I needed more capital to get the American operation up and running"	RO: Dominating
"Y helped me in my negotiations with banks to arrange flotation on the stock exchange"	RO: Being Supportive
"I told him I didn't want any non-executive director on the board"	RS: Fear of control W: To assert my independence and autonomy
"Y can be rather nitpicky telling me that I shouldn't do certain things"	RO: Dominating

Ten similar episodes were collected from our entrepreneur. After studying the narratives, three assessors were asked to specify the wishes, the responses from others, and the responses from self in each episode -- as we did in our example. The frequency with which each assessor noted a given sentiment was subsequently summarized in a table in which responses from the self and from others are also classified in "negative" and "positive" categories. The frequency tallies as reflected in Table 2 highlight the entrepreneur's main preoccupations.

TABLE 2

SRIM SUMMARY OF NARRATIVES*

Assessor	1	2	3
Wishes, Needs, Intentions			
To assert oneself (independence and autonomy)	15	13	11
To be recognized	3	5	4
Responses from Object			
NEGATIVE (Dominating, intruding, interfering	9	8	11
NEGATIVE (Critical, disapproving	4	5	5
NEGATIVE (Unhelpful, inconsiderate	3	4	4
POSITIVE (Supportive, reassuring	4	6	8
POSITIVE (Respectful	3	6	8
POSITIVE (Helpful, cooperative	4	8	5
POSITIVE (Being concerned	5	6	3
Responses from Self			
NEGATIVE (Dominated, fear of control	7	9	10
NEGATIVE (Feeling less confident	4	6	3
NEGATIVE (Feeling anxious	3	5	4
NEGATIVE (Obligated	4	3	3
NEGATIVE (Frustrated	3	2	4

P (Being assertive	9	12	13
O (			
S (Feeling self-confident	6	9	10
I (			
T (Feeling happy	6	8	9
I (			
V (Feeling close to others	5	7	6
E			

* 10 Narratives are scored.

The scores underline what was already obvious in our analysis of the first three episodes: the main preoccupation of this person is asserting himself, being independent and autonomous. A secondary preoccupation centers around the wish to be recognized. It appears that other people are considered to be dominating and sometimes as critical or unhelpful. However, others are not just seen as being negative. There are quite a few people who are perceived as supportive, respectful, helpful, and concerned, factors which must be a great source of strength and confidence to this individual. But despite these positive impressions one thing is clear from the frequency distribution and that is that this person experiences a strong fear of control. Feelings of obligation and frustration also play a role in his personality make-up as demonstrated in his leadership behavior. He responds to these sentiments mainly with assertiveness. Finally, we can note how his feelings of self-confidence oscillate. Although as a rule he exudes self-confidence, happiness, and a sense of community with others, at times, in spite of his cockiness, he is less confident and anxious.

This individual's personality make-up and major preocccupations explain his venturesome behavior. Our executive has a great need to assert himself and seeks recognition through bold moves in the business realm. His personal endorsement of his products has made him a familiar face throughout the country. In spite of having gone public with his company, his need for control is indicated by the fact that he has kept a majority position in the business. It is interesting to note how his sense of obligation mixed with his feelings of being close to others has come out in the open through his involvement in a number of social causes.

An individual with this personality make-up is obviously not suited for a traditional enterprise. Rules, regulations, and other constraints are anathema to him. His forte is the entrepreneurial mode. When he cannot get his way (when he cannot be in control), frustration follows. His venturesome behavior may be detrimental at a certain phase of growth of the enterprise. For example, does he have the willingness to subject himself to the financial discipline that comes with accountability to shareholders? Will he accept the constraints put upon him by his new managing director? Will he be able to delegate sufficiently with the increasing complexity of the enterprise? Given his need to be in the limelight will he be able to plan for management succession? We can predict from his SRIM scores that these issues will be problematic.

Concluding Remarks

The above example demonstrates how, by using the Strategic Relationship Interview Method, we can not only can systematize responses but also retain the complexity of an individual's personality make-up. In a fairly simplified way we can obtain very rich data. It permits us to go beyond mere observation and creates awareness about deep structure. The interpretation of the preoccupations behind symbolic statements will be of great help in understanding the leader-strategy interface.

Another supporting argument for the use of this method is that in studies comparing self-report of main preoccupying themes with clinician-based identification, the individuals interviewed varied greatly in their ability to self-report (Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1985). The subjects being studied had difficulty in discriminating between themes of more or less importance to them. Moreover, in responding to certain "loaded" questions, specific defenses (of which the person was not necessarily aware) became operative, causing serious distortions. Exclusive reliance on self report and questionnaire studies for the generation of data may therefore be fraught with problems.

The SRIM approach is a promising avenue for the further exploration of the links between leadership and strategy. Its

application allows for an additional level of complexity. This does not mean that it is an easy solution. Accurate assessment necessitates a considerable amount of skill and clinical insight, which are not developed overnight but take time and effort. We believe, however, that great rewards, in the form of richer and more accurate research output, await those scholars who are willing to make this effort.

APPENDIX

Instructions Given to the Interviewee

Understanding relationships is critical to our study of leadership and the strategy-making process. Please tell me about some incidents or events, each involving yourself in relation to another person. Each should be a specific incident. Some should be current and some old. For each one tell:

1) when it occurred;
2) the other person involved;
3) some of what the other person said or did and what you said or did; and
4) what happened at the end.

The other person might be any family member, friend, subordinate, or other person you have business dealings with. It just has to be a specific event that was personally important to you or that created a problem for you in some way. We will tape at least twelve of these incidents. Spend about three minutes (but no more than five) in telling each one. We will let you know when you come near to the end of five minutes. This is a way to tell us about your relationships. Make yourself comfortable as you would with someone who wants to get to know you. (Adapted from Luborsky & Crits-Cristoph, 1985, pp. 9-10).

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