Saints and Sinners: Leadership Styles of Mother Teresa and Margaret Sanger

Anne Branan

NURS 4600, Leadership and Management in Nursing

Submitted April 10, 2018
Saints and Sinners: Leadership Styles of Mother Teresa and Margaret Sanger

There are countless individual leadership styles, some arguably more effective than others. This paper will describe the leadership styles of Mother Teresa and Margaret Sanger, and will detail the traits that made each of them a successful leader. It will also compare the similarities and differences between how these two women used their leadership skills to change the world.

Description of Leadership

Weiss and Tappen (2015) tell us that successful leaders are individuals who “engage others to work together effectively in pursuit of a shared goal.” They explain that there are many qualities a person must possess in order to be an effective leader, such as integrity, courage, positive attitude, initiative, energy, optimism, perseverance, generosity, balance, ability to handle stress, and self-awareness. Moreover, they claim that effective leaders should be able to set priorities, think critically, solve problems, respect individuals, communicate skillfully, create a vision for the future, and develop themselves and others.

This laundry list of traits and behaviors seems to set an almost impossibly high standard for simply “effective” leadership. It is difficult to believe that every great man or woman who successfully led others to reach a common goal embodied every one of these qualities. Instead, Weiss and Tappen seem to be describing a glorified idol which few mere mortals could hope to achieve.

Chandler and Chandler (2013) offer a more attainable definition of effective leadership: the ability to develop a compelling, well-conceived vision, the power to persuasively communicate that vision, the skill to build and manage an organization to implement the vision,
and, under it all, the basic characteristic of selflessness. If one strongly exhibits all of these traits, they have the makings to be an effective, if not exceptional, leader.

According to White and Lippitt’s (1960) behavioral theory of leadership, a leader’s style can be categorized into one of three styles. Autocratic leaders make all decisions and refuse any input from group members. Democratic leaders listen to group members and promote collaboration and creativity. Laisse-faire leaders are arguably not really leading at all, and give no direction or guidance to the group.

Analysis of Non-Nurse Leader

Mother Teresa left her home at the age of eighteen to become a Roman Catholic nun. She relocated to India, where she taught at a school near her convent for nineteen years before beginning her missionary work with the poor population of Calcutta in 1948 (The New Indian Express, 2016). She founded the Missionaries for Charity and, with no income during the first year, spent her days begging on the street with the population that she had dedicated herself to help. She was eventually able to set up a school, mobile medical care, orphanages, hospices, a leper colony, caring facility for individuals with HIV/AIDS, and a facility where locals could go to die with dignity (Adonis, 2016). She offered her services to anyone who needed them, regardless of religion or social status.

Her dedication and desire to help the “poorest of the poor” shows that Mother Teresa possessed the traits of an authentic leader. Adonis (2016) states that there are four components to being an authentic leader: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internalized moral perspective. One volunteer who worked with Mother Teresa described her leadership style as “the balanced application of a simple, clear vision, practical trade-offs, patience, inquiry, joyful discipline, true communication, equal regard, and silent reflection”
Mother Teresa also exemplifies the style of democratic leadership because she encouraged open communication and involvement from members of her organization. She treated everyone with respect and inspired others to work hard towards a common cause.

Mother Teresa founded Missionaries of Charity in 1948 with twelve members. Because of her exceptional leadership, the organization now has a full-time work force of 4,000 and over 1 Million volunteers serving tens of millions of clients in over 100 countries (Bose & Faust, 2011). Her clear vision, selflessness, and compassion moved others to dedicate themselves to helping the poor in Calcutta and around the world.

Analysis of Nurse Leader

Margaret Sanger was the sixth of eleven children growing up in an Irish Catholic family in New York. Her mother died of tuberculosis at the age of 48, which Margaret blamed on excessive childbearing (Chandler & Chandler, 2013). She also attributed her family’s low economic status on their large number of children. In a 1931 autobiography, Sanger herself said that from a very early age she “associated poverty, toil, unemployment, drunkenness, cruelty, quarreling, fighting, debts, and jails with large families.” Her resolve to promote family planning was strengthened in 1912 when a patient died after trying to abort an unwanted pregnancy. Sanger had been present months earlier when a doctor had told the young woman that another pregnancy could kill her, but the only advice that he gave to prevent another pregnancy was that her husband sleep on the roof (Kennedy, 1970).

Sanger began publishing articles for women to educate them on sexual health and feminine hygiene, until the material was banned as “obscene” under the Comstock Law. After a brief period in France, Sanger returned to the United States and began publishing a newspaper
called the *Woman Rebel*, which focused on contraception and introduced the term “birth control”. Sanger was indicted under the Comstock Law for distributing obscene materials and fled to Europe, where she met and learned from other radical reformers and studied contraception and women’s health under Dr. Johannes Rutgers (Chandler & Chandler, 2013). When she went back to the United States, she found that organizations had been founded to promote birth control, and was shocked to discover that other people had stepped up in her absence and were vying for position as leader of the movement.

Seeking to regain control of the movement she had started, Sanger devoted herself to establishing reproductive rights for women through repealing the Comstock Law and creating programs to educate women about birth control methods. She gained followers through “a captivating potion of charm, logic, statistics, often maudlin sentiment, and high idealism” (Kennedy, 1970). However, Sanger insisted on being in charge of all decision-making for the organizations she ran, including clinics that were established in twelve different states, which ultimately “exacerbated the separation between mainstream medicine and birth control” (Chandler & Chandler, 2013).

While she demonstrated a well-conceived vision and was able to persuasively communicate that vision, Sanger struggled with both maintaining organizations and putting the needs of the movement before her personal desires. According to Chandler’s and Chandler’s definition of effective leadership, Sanger falls short of perfect. Sanger’s style of leadership would be categorized as “narcissistic,” because she had difficulty listening to others and handling disagreement, but she still had a compelling vision (Weiss & Tappen, 2015).

Under White and Lippitt’s (1960) behavioral theory, Sanger displayed autocratic leadership. She wanted to control decision-making and was unable to delegate tasks to others or
accept input. Nevertheless, her efforts led to the introduction of the first contraceptive pill in 1960, the repeal of the Comstock Law, and the establishment of Planned Parenthood.

**Comparison of Leaders**

Both Mother Teresa and Margaret Sanger made lasting impacts in their respective movements, but they made their influence in very different ways. Mother Teresa was driven by a religious calling to help those in need, and she turned a twelve-person organization working in the slums into a worldwide charitable foundation. Her democratic style of leadership supported collaboration and inspired creativity and motivation. Margaret Sanger worked in the public eye promoting social and political change to give women access to birth control and information regarding women’s health, but her autocratic leadership style was ultimately incompatible with the movement.

**Self-Analysis of Leadership Potential**

I believe that I have the potential to be an effective, democratic leader. I know that I do possess some autocratic qualities like desire for control and efficiency, but I also value creativity and flexibility. In past situations requiring leadership, I have made efforts to hear the opinions of group members when making decisions, but I have not been reluctant to voice my own feelings and make the final choice if I feel that it’s necessary. With the knowledge of different leadership styles, I hope to be able to avoid the negative aspects of autocratic leadership and consciously strive to promote feedback from others and freedom of decision-making.

**Summary**

There are many ways to describe leadership. Different theories focus on different aspects of leadership, such as whether a leader behaves autocratically, democratically, or makes no decisions whatsoever. Leadership can also be described by qualities of the leader themselves,
like Mother Theresa’s authentic leadership or Margaret Sanger’s narcissistic leadership. Ultimately, what matters most is whether or not an individual’s leadership is effective in achieving the goals of the group.
References


