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CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | CRITICAL ESSAY

Critical analysis of leadership theory in “American Sniper”

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Abstract: This analysis examined the film “American Sniper” and identified five leadership theories/approaches that were represented by the leading actor. These theories and approaches were classified as the following: trait approach, skills approach, style approach, situational approach, and path-goal theory. Being military themed, this film falls into the areas of dedication, sacrifice, and moral ethics, which are considered major capacities of the leadership paradigm.

Subjects: Education; Leadership; Leadership Strategy; Theory of Education

Keywords: education; leadership; leadership theory

1. Introduction

As considered the most lethal sniper in American history, Navy S.E.A.L. Chris Kyle recorded the most career sniper kills in United States military history from 1999 to 2009. Not only did Iraqi insurgents fear him so much to place a bounty on his head, Chris Kyle earned the trust and gratitude from his brothers in arms. Throughout his military career as a sniper, his success in protecting others with pinpoint accuracy was so remarkable his fellow military brothers deemed him “The Legend.”

Chris Kyle’s memory lives on through Clint Eastwood’s movie labeled “American Sniper” which came out shortly after Chris Kyle’s death at a shooting range while he was trying to help a fellow S.E.A.L. (Sea, Air and Land) with Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The movie is not just a military

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brad C Wedlock is currently a doctoral student of education in the Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and an Adjunct Instructor of Communication at South Louisiana Community College. Currently, his research centers on educational leadership, educational technology, and instructional leadership. The research presented in this paper centers on foundational leadership theory found in the biographical war film “American Sniper.” Director Clint Eastwood based this film on the memoir *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History*, by Chris Kyle with the help of Scott McEwen and Jim DeFelice. Leadership remains a topic of interest, but it is even more important in society today in the wake of a growing national debt and political tension. With dwindling budgets and degree inflation, organizations are becoming more critical on who they hire and whether those individuals can lead them in the proper direction.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This paper examines one of the leading topics today, leadership. Generally, leadership is an important quality that most organizations value heavily as it is one of the primary determinants of success. However, there may be different forms of leadership and how it is used in various situations. For instance, a person may develop leadership capabilities due to the rise of a situation, take the lead on a project because of their dominant nature or because the skills they hold in being able to complete a project. This paper examined Navy S.E.A.L. Chris Kyle in the film “American Sniper” to understand the various types of leadership theory/approaches he used throughout his military career in the Middle East to lead his fellow soldiers. Although this paper has a military aspect, the focus is strictly on leadership and the theories discussed can be used on a wide range of landscapes.

memoir, but also a timeless piece of a man who dedicated his life to protecting the people he served with and the nation he loved. The movie took a different angle than most military shows being it was a character study as well. The show revealed a man who was torn between two great responsibilities, that of his country and his family. In the trailer for the show, Bradley Cooper who plays Chris Kyle stated that Chris Kyle “had so many different qualities, but you could only really see how gentle he was if you were confronted with the massive physical presence” (American Sniper – Featurette [HD], 2014).

“American Sniper” was a 2014 biographical war drama film based on the book *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History* directed by Clint Eastwood. This film, based on the life of an American War Veteran, went to extensive lengths to portray the military and personal life of an extraordinary individual torn between family and duty. Filmed in California and various locations throughout Morocco, Clint Eastwood went above and beyond to portray the environments Kyle visited in the War on Terror, which included Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan (Kyle & McEwen, 2013). While this film mainly focused on Kyle’s military career (including time home and away), it provided insight to his leadership qualities along with the toll of war on a person and his family.

The purpose of this review and critical analysis is to examine the film “American Sniper” and identify five leadership theories/approaches represented by the leading actor. As a military-based show, this film naturally falls into the areas of dedication, sacrifice, and moral ethics, which can be considered major capacities of the leadership paradigm.

In the area of military service, a couple of leadership concepts such as power, obedience, and respect come to the forefront. With the concept of power, in the military it comes down through the rank from commander, sergeant, corporal, to private and with that position comes power, respect, and authority. Realistically, the military nature of this show brings about the essence of leadership and the qualities that come with it whether it be trait, service, skill, style situational, etc. With the constraints of the military in mind, this area is one of the few where leadership and power is not only earned, but also equally demanded throughout its ranks.

2. Methodological approach

The present film review and analysis connects to leadership theory and approach, leadership strategy, and connection between theory and practice. The film “American Sniper” was selected based on its mass appeal and popularity to the general audience along with the film being a character study in addition to a war movie. In theatrical performance, the film made a worldwide gross total of \$547,426,372 along with its home market performance of \$61,302,467 in domestic video sales making it the highest-grossing American war movie of all time (American Sniper (2014) - Financial Information, n.d.). To aid its popularity, “American Sniper” received six Academy Award nominations along with massive political controversy between liberal and conservative parties (Arrington, 2015).

2.1. Procedure

The film was examined a total of 10 times to thoroughly screen the leadership theory focused on throughout this paper (i.e. trait approach, skills approach, style approach, situational approach, and path-goal theory). Through each viewing, the researcher identified various sequences that pertained to each leadership theory/approach, synthesizing these instances accordingly. Throughout the analysis, the researcher was the only one to screen the movie as Berg and Lune (2012) state, “certain elements of symbolism, meaning, or understanding usually require consideration of the individuals’ own perceptions and subjective apprehension” (p. 15).

3. Analysis of leadership theories

3.1. Trait approach

Although the trait approach is one of the oldest attempts to study leadership by scholars, it still remains relevant in some situations (Northouse, 2012). Over the years, scholars investigated traits deemed appropriate for leadership and noted that the majority of leaders in the corporate world possessed these characteristics and demonstrated them in various leadership styles. Throughout the twentieth century, scholars examined the specific traits that leaders possessed which differentiated them from their following (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Lord, de Vader, & Alliger, 1986; Mann, 1959; Stogdill, 1948, 1979; Zaccaro, Kemp, & Bader, 2004), but the central traits of leadership: intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability remained the same.

In reference to the film, the lead character, Chris Kyle, portrayed all of these traits in some shape or form. Kyle, in all of his time in the field demonstrated great intelligence or intellectual ability, when it came to being a S.E.A.L. sniper. In one particular scene, Kyle noticed that the marines were not clearing houses sufficiently and noticed people could get killed this way. To correct this, Kyle took the time to go out with the marines and showed them the proper way to approach and clear houses. Additional intelligence was shown in calculating his sniper shots (i.e. calculating temperature, wind speed, distance, and earth rotation). When it comes to self-confidence, this trait was hard to separate from the rest of the characters as the majority is trained to be confident in everything they do. Self-confidence is defined as the “ability to be certain about one’s competencies and skills” (Northouse, 2012, p. 24). There were a few instances where Chris Kyle was arguing with a superior officer and stated, “I don’t know what a Koran looks like, but I can tell you he had what looked like a M16, so you tell me what he was carrying.” Later when Chris Kyle visits a psychologist he is asked if he may have done anything he regrets while being in Iraq. Chris Kyle responds “No sir that’s not me” and only regrets the lives he could not save. These statements demonstrate that Chris Kyle never second-guessed any decisions made in taking a shot to protect others and in his mind always made the correct call.

Part of trait theory along with the previous facets is determination. Northouse (2012) reveals that the concept of determination rests in the ability to get goals accomplished and includes characteristics as initiative, persistence, dominance, and drive. Prior to Chris Kyle’s deployment into Iraq, he and his fellow S.E.A.L.S. were required to endure intense training known as basic underwater demolition/S.E.A.L. training (B.U.D.S.), which is some of the most mentally challenging and physically demanding training in the world. Not only did Chris Kyle excel at this training, but did so at the age of 30. The completion of this intense training along with the discipline to sit in one position for hours at a time providing over watch to ground troops and heading back to Iraq for multiple tours out of a sense of duty to his country and others displays determination at the highest level. Coming to the last two sections of the trait approach, the concept of integrity is examined. The basis of integrity involves two subcategories of honesty and trustworthiness along with following a particular set of principles and assuming responsibility for actions taken. Throughout this film, Chris Kyle stressed his undying care for others and the country that he chose to defend. In the few scenes with his wife, when he and his wife were getting married she noticed that his heart was beating out of his chest. Chris Kyle was so worried about others that he simply said, “I’m not the only one that’s going to war.” In addition Kyle was driving and explained that “people are fighting and dying overseas right now and I’m heading to the mall. I should be there!” It can be shown that Chris Kyle had a strong sense of responsibility for his country and was always forward about what he believed in and stressed that to everyone around him.

When looking only at the trait approach for leadership, Chris Kyle encompassed everything that society deemed a leader should have. However, leadership should not be narrowed to a set of traits and nothing else as leadership calls for much more to be effective. Leadership demands that leaders are able to help and direct others in particular situations and these instances may call for leaders to

be hands on and help others that may be in the field. Without the skills necessary to accomplish tasks, work with others and develop and vision, a leader realistically is just a placeholder.

3.2. Skills approach

Much like the trait approach, the skills approach is equally leader-centered, but shifts from personality characteristics to abilities that can be individually developed and acquired (Northouse, 2012). The skills approach tends to focus on what leaders can accomplish, therefore making skills learnable, where traits are part of the individual. Katz (1995) suggested there are three basic skills that all leaders need to develop: (1) technical, (2) human, and (3) conceptual. In looking at all the skills individually, technical skill is knowledge about specific activities (Northouse, 2012), human skill is knowledge about how to work with others or “people skills” (Katz, 1995), and conceptual skills are the ability to work with ideas (Northouse, 2012). Granted, some of these skills are more important than others in specific instances, but all leaders should encompass them in their entirety to be effective in high administrative positions.

For the concept of technical skill, this facet involves depth knowledge and expertise in a specific type of work or activity (Northouse, 2012). Throughout the film, others refer to Chris Kyle in the military as “Legend.” This nickname Chris Kyle received was not made to be ironic as he earned every piece of the name by his performance in the field and had the most confirmed kills in military history. In reference to technical skill, Chris Kyle would also leave his position as a sniper to go on the ground with marines to show them how to clear houses properly. Chris Kyle stated in one scene his knowledge of technical skill when he talked to a fellow marine on the ground before going in to clear a house, “In S.E.A.L. training I learned a few things, do you mind if I tag along?” Human skills were also a big part of Chris Kyle and his work with the team he directed. Throughout the movie, Chris Kyle and his team were constantly under gun fire and attacks, but yet he was always able to keep everyone calm and coordinated during the heat of battle. This allowed for people to trust Chris Kyle and his decisions in leading the team and making decisions to keep everyone safe. Lastly is conceptual skill and granted, this related more to military superiors as they coordinated operations to be carried out, however there were some instances where Chris Kyle was involved. There was a scene in a helicopter where a superior wanted Chris Kyle’s input on a mission that Chris Kyle wanted to put together because he believed it to be a priority. “I understand you want to put together a direct action squad to go after the butcher?” Scenes like the previous demonstrated Chris Kyle’s ability to have a vision of things that need to be addressed and accomplished that may be time sensitive.

The previous leadership approach focuses on the skills needed to be an effective leader for subordinates. In the following paragraphs, leadership theory shifts away from leaders’ capabilities and more toward leadership actions and what is done to the subordinates they supervise.

3.3. Style approach

Generally, the concept of leadership is interesting being that there are different variations of style and the nature of the institution in which a leader works may call for a specific style. The style approach can be divided into two categories: *task behaviors and relationship behaviors* (Northouse, 2012). Each behavior has its own strength and is specific to what they address for other employees. Task behaviors are goal oriented and help other achieve set goals while relationship behaviors are tailored to help subordinates feel comfortable with situations and themselves.

Task behaviors primarily focus on goal accomplishment and in the movie *American Sniper* it is apparent that Chris Kyle was always concerned with accomplishing his goal or what he perceived to be the military’s goal. According to the movie, Chris Kyle went back to Iraq for four tours because he was convinced his task was not complete as he stated, “we have to organize and go after him, I leave in three weeks!” With relationship behaviors, Chris Kyle took it upon himself to lead and take care of others that he served with. Chris Kyle throughout the show would tell his partner and friend that they “are protecting more than just this dirt” which would remind everyone there that what they were doing in Iraq had a purpose and were fight for things they love. Through motivation acts

and talks, Chris Kyle would build the relationship among his peers and brought them closer together. At the same time however, Chris Kyle recognized that not everyone might not have been as battle ready as him as he asked one of his brothers in arms, “hey man you need to sit this one out?” In addition to the military, when Chris Kyle was also a family man. He may have had a hard time showing compassion and love, but none less loved his family always staying in contact with them whenever he could. Chris Kyle was always ready to do his job, but portrayed behaviors that recognized relationships above all else.

3.4. Situational approach

Being one of the more popular approaches to leadership, the situational approach was developed from Reddin’s (1967) 3-D management theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1967). As suggested by the name, the situational approach applies leadership to specific situations in which leadership does not determine the situation, but rather the situation is the determinant of the leadership. The situational approach has both directional and supportive dimensions and both have to be applied to situations for leadership to work effectively (Northouse, 2012). Once a leader has evaluated his/her employees, it is up to them to determine the degree of each dimension to use to meet the needs of the employee.

Throughout this film, there for four situational approaches shown which cover the supportive and directive dimensions. The first style (S1) is a high directive and low supportive style that can be noticed by the superiors in the military film. Chris Kyle did not have too much decision-making when it came to forming missions, but nonetheless the forming of military action missions is one of high directive and low supportive style. The next style (S2), which is a coaching approach, is high directive and high supportive in nature. This style can particularly be found when Chris Kyle leaves his sniping position and heads to the ground with the marines to clear houses and ensure that procedures are being done correctly for their safety. The third situational approach (S3) is supporting approach and this, from a military standpoint, can be found in Chris Kyle’s sniping support throughout the movie. This approach is high in supportive style, but low on directive style and uses behaviors that bring out employee skills around the tasks to be completed. From the rooftops in his sniping position, Chris Kyle provided cover for ground troops to transport materials from one location to another without having to worry about coming obstacles. The last style (S4) is a low supportive and low directive approach, otherwise known as a delegating approach. This approach again does not directly relate to Chris Kyle, but more toward the superiors of the military that were primarily conceptualizing missions for action squads to execute.

Moving into the last theory of this paper, the situational approach is a great transition to path-goal theory, as it demands different styles of leadership. Although each setting and situation varies to some extent, each situation and how it is handled is determined by a stated goal by people in leadership positions.

3.5. Path-goal theory

In comparison to situational theory, path-goal theory focuses on the relation between leadership styles, work setting, and subordinate characteristics being the goal is to improve employee performance and fulfillment (Northouse, 2012). The premise of this theory is to motivate employees through a number of different leadership such as directive, supportive, participative, and achievement leadership. In short, these styles provide a working goal for the subordinates: directive provides guidance, supportive provides nurturance, participative provides involvement, and achievement provides challenges.

One of the few quotes that really carry path-goal leadership is when Chris Kyle questions his superior’s leadership about being stationed in a sniping position. Chris Kyle’s argument was that he cannot shoot what he cannot see and he wanted to be on the ground going into houses with the marines so he could protect them. “All these guys, they know your name and they think they are invincible with you up there.” This statement suggests that Chris Kyle being stationed in a sniping position

gave other soldiers motivation to do their job knowing Chris Kyle would be providing a watchful eye. This inference also gives note to expectancy theory, which is the underlying theory to path-goal theory. The premise of expectancy theory suggest that “subordinates will be motivated if they believe they are capable of performing their work, if they believe their efforts will result in a certain outcome, and if they believe that the payoffs for doing their work are worthwhile” (Northouse, 2012, p. 137).

In general, Chris Kyle encompasses all of path-goal theory, which include directive, supportive, participative, and achievement leadership. Chris Kyle was involved in the creation of missions (directive), performed in the field by sniping and going on missions (supportive and participative), and challenged his military brothers through his behaviors to go above and beyond the call of duty (achievement).

3. Discussion

Although various theories and approaches to leadership can be found through the film *American Sniper*, this paper focused on the five most noticeable theories and approaches (trait approach, skills approach, style approach, situational approach, and path-goal theory). The main character, Chris Kyle, transitioned through various styles of leadership, although once he was fully engulfed in the military, he would vary his leadership style interchangeably.

From an objective point of view, some approaches and theories were better portrayed than others, possibly due to the nature of the film and what military style calls for. For example, *American Sniper* was limited when it came to the style approach as it could show task behaviors well, but not so much with relationship behaviors. When it comes to Chris Kyle and the military, task behaviors are portrayed with ease as the military is good and executing mission and subordinates are told directly what to do. As far as relationship behaviors go, the military is authoritarian in nature. Hence, relationships that are obedience-oriented are highly regarded and preferred. Regardless of the circumstances, the signs of great leadership can primarily be found among the followers. DePree (1990) suggests that you should look at the followers of a leader and ask the following: Are the followers reaching their potential? Are they learning? Serving? Do they achieve the required results? Do they change with grace? Manage conflict? Proper leaders strive for their subordinates to achieve and grow to the best of their ability. Throughout the analysis, Chris Kyle has shown himself to be one of the elite when it comes to leadership.

In terms of leadership, no one person can limit themselves to the use of one theory and approach. It is the basis of human nature to be diverse and different, thus individuals have various levels of depth to them and have different values and tendencies. For a leader to be truly effective, he/she must encompass a multitude of approaches to deal with the people they lead, influence, and cultivate. Leadership is a dynamic concept and simply not an easy subject to explain and educate to others. There are some situations in which good leaders will be heavily criticized for making difficult decisions; nonetheless, these choices must be made regardless of the scrutiny behind them. The leadership theories and approaches discussed in this paper all differ to an extent, but carry the similarity in that all successful individuals in leadership positions use them in some form.

4. Impact and conclusion

Leadership is one of the few concepts that are not strictly dedicated to one field of study and can be found across many disciplines and virtually in almost any setting. The film ‘*American Sniper*’ is one such film that promotes leadership and provides countless examples in settings that can arguably be some of the most horrendous. Objectively, one could assume that this film is an advocate for leadership, as it highlights Chris Kyle’s dedication to the war on terror and his home life. Overall, ‘*American Sniper*’ promotes three types of leadership, which are explained by Chris Kyle’s father with the use of metaphors (sheep, wolf, and sheep dog). The use of these metaphors conceptualizes the leadership frame and set the tone for how Chris Kyle develops his particular style of leadership.

Sheep are the leaders that try to make life easier for others, whereas wolves lead by fear and the sheep dog leads by example and protects those in need if protection is needed.

Granted, leadership takes various forms and depending on what lens this film is examined through may yield different results and perspectives on leadership. This study examined the film *American Sniper* through various leadership theories and approaches and found that all theories called upon were sufficiently shown and used by the main character. For leadership, the film reiterates that some older approaches, such as the trait approach, are still relevant in certain situations and are used in conjunction with others. The various approaches in leadership are not just respectable in theory, but these frameworks set forth individuals who make well-informed decisions for themselves, others, and the organization they represent.

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