

The Role of Solitude for Inclusive Leadership: A Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we propose a conceptual framework in which we describe the role that solitude can play for inclusive leadership development. As of yet, the role of solitude for inclusive leadership development has been largely neglected in the existing literature. Inclusive leadership is a concept based on an open-minded, pluralistic context that focuses on mutual respect of values. To be efficient, organizations and team leaders have to embrace to the differences people represent and demonstrate that they are inclusive because it allows for more effective skill management. In this context, old fashioned organizations with no focus on inclusiveness usually perform at mediocre levels. It is through inclusiveness that a team leader can drive performance, through rich and culturally diverse teams, to high levels of performance. An important part of this procedure is that team leaders should be highly flexible in such multicultural environments. Thus, they have to recognize their own behaviours and how they impact their team members' behaviours. In this context, self-awareness facilitates other-awareness. And to become self- and other-aware starts with an open attitude, which leads to knowledge and skills to apply this knowledge. Our proposed approach emphasizes the importance of finding opportunities for solitude. In turn, the increased opportunities for inclusive leader's access to solitude can enhance their levels of self-awareness and self-regulation that can facilitate the process of inclusive leadership development. In brief, a first contribution of this paper is the development of a theoretical framework as a basis for guiding future research on the underlying mechanisms and the outcomes of solitude. A second and most important contribution of our proposed approach is the recognition, for the first time in the literature as of yet, of the role that solitude may play in the inclusive leadership context. Undoubtedly, the proposed approach should be confronted with data, not only to assess the model's ability to replicate the behaviour of inclusive leaders with regard to the concept of solitude, but also in order to allow formal statistical estimation of parameters and functions of interest. It is clear that more extended research on the subject is of central importance.

Keywords: Inclusive Leadership, Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation, Solitude.

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1. Introduction

In contrast to the traditional “mainstream” norms, inclusive leadership is a concept based on an open-minded, pluralistic context that focuses on mutual respect of values. Given central importance of the concept of solitude in applied psychology, it is surprising that so little attention has been paid to it in the existing inclusive leadership literature. In fact, despite being a very useful state of mind, so far the role of solitude has been inadequately acknowledged or even largely unexplored in the literature on inclusive leadership.

For instance, it is largely believed that solitude is related to the inner world of self-reliance and ingenuity, representing an experience of discovering the personal truth and the reason of being.

In this work, we propose a conceptual framework in which we describe the role that solitude can play for inclusive leadership development. In other words the research question is: *Can solitude enhance inclusive leadership?*

In this paper, we will argue that access to solitude offers to inclusive leaders critical conditions for self-awareness and self-regulation (see Figure 1, below). Analytically, we propose the following scheme:

Research Question: *Is Solitude Beneficial for Inclusive Leadership?*

The way that we are going to tackle our research question is the following:

Proposition 1: *Solitude can enhance leader's self-awareness.*

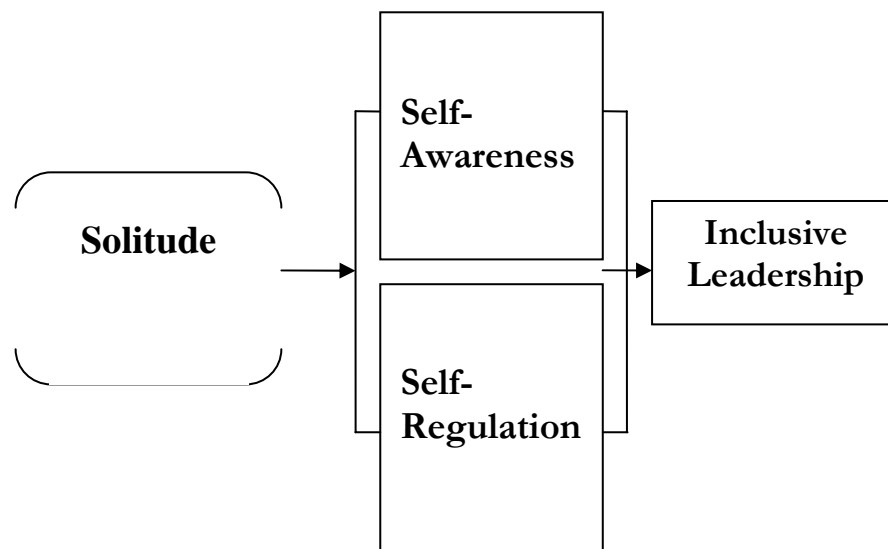
Proposition 2: *Self-awareness can contribute to inclusive leadership development.*

Now, Proposition 3 stems effortlessly from Propositions 1 and 2:

Proposition 3: *Solitude can contribute to inclusive leadership development.*

In brief, we suggest that leaders' focus on solitude offers them various benefits, such as self-awareness and self-regulation, which are critical for inclusive leadership. Furthermore, we develop a theoretical approach as a basis for guiding future research on the underlying mechanisms and the outcomes of solitude for inclusive leadership.

Figure 1: Solitude - Inclusive Leadership relation



The paper is structured as follows: section 2 describes the links between inclusive leadership and self awareness and self regulation; section 3 discusses the benefits of solitude for self awareness and self regulation and establishes its distinction from loneliness; section 4 offers a discussion of the limitations of our approach and some useful implications; section 5 concludes.

2. Inclusive Leadership and Self-Awareness / Self-Regulation

Inclusive leadership is relevant in just about every sector of economic activity as the organizations continue to globalize. Nowadays, these globalized organizations have in mind that diverse workforces could act as the source of sustainable advantages. In this context, they tend to create inclusive environments, which involve a deeper understanding of culture and diversity (Hollander, 2009). In this framework, inclusive leadership makes sure that the environment can lead to optimization of the diverse backgrounds of the workforce. To be efficient, organizations and team leaders have to embrace to the differences people represent and demonstrate they are inclusive because this would allow for more effective skill management.

Hence, old fashioned organizations with no focus on inclusiveness perform at mediocre levels. It is through inclusiveness that a team leader can drive performance through rich and culturally diverse teams to exceptional performance. In another formulation, leaders are inclusive when they promote inclusion of others. In this spirit, Kandola defined several key issues to inclusion, the most prominent probably being that inclusion involves all people and requires effort to be achieved.

In this journey, leaders should have open attitudes, which are the prerequisites for the continuous development of cross-cultural inclusiveness (Doyle, 2002). An important part of this procedure is that team leaders should be highly flexible in such multicultural environments. These skills are necessary in order to maximize opportunities to achieve exceptional performance.

The next step is to analyze their own behaviours and examine how they impact their team members' behaviours. In this context, self-awareness facilitates other-awareness. And to become self- and other-awareness starts with an open attitude, which leads to knowledge and skills to apply this knowledge.

According to Lash (2002) top leaders must embark on an inner journey of self-growth to achieve outstanding results for themselves and their organization. This means that a key factor that is of great importance to the development of an inclusive leader, is the self-awareness or personal insight of the leader. Goleman *et al.* (2002, p. 40) maintain that “perhaps the most strong (though least visible) sign of self-awareness is a propensity for self-reflection and thoughtfulness. Self-aware people typically find time to reflect quietly often by themselves. Many outstanding leaders in fact bring to their work life the thoughtful mode of self-reflection that they cultivate in their spiritual life. For some this means prayer or meditation for others it's a more philosophical quest for self-understanding”. Self-focus, whether public or private, can be dispositional or situational, and dispositional self-focus is often referred to as “self-consciousness”, whereas situational self-focus is labeled “self-awareness” (Govern & Marsch, 2001).

Apparently, the construct of self-awareness is fundamental to inclusive leadership. In simple words, self-awareness means that individuals are cognizant of their own existence (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Silvia & Duval, 2001). Of course, self-awareness is an evolutionary process where the individual comes to understand his/her strengths,

weaknesses, values and beliefs. Usually, it also implies having an awareness of his/her own knowledge, experience, and capabilities (Avolio & Gardner, 2005 George, 2003; London, 2002).

Self-regulation involves the processes where people exert self-control by setting internal standards, assessing discrepancies between these standards and actual outcomes, and identifying actions for reconciling these discrepancies (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). It is in this context that de Vries (2001) argued that mentally and physically healthy people tend to engage in self regulation and self reflection, which are regarded as providing a deep understanding of one's personal values. In other words, self-regulation is the process through which inclusive leaders align their values with their intentions and actions. It involves a self-regulatory process where leaders achieve the aforementioned alignment, by making their inclusive values and motives transparent to their followers.

In our approach, we argue that self awareness and self regulation are crucial to inclusive leadership, and both require a state of solitude to flourish.

3. Solitude and Self Awareness / Self - Regulation

Hollenhorst and Jones (2001) argue convincingly that the act of solitude constitutes a detachment from society in psychological terms, an act of self-discovery. They further argue that solitude as such is involved in the search of meaning, happiness, self-awareness and maturity. In a similar spirit, Emerson (1983) argued that solitude is closely related to self-reliance.

According to existential philosophers, solitude represents a state of discovering our own personal truth and the reason of being. See for instance, Heidegger (1968) and Kierkegaard (1994). In the meantime, solitude has been related to mental and emotional health leading to self-evaluation, self-identity and emotional release (Hammit 1982).

Storr (1988) in a seminal work on the field has famously argued that the capacity to be alone is an aspect of an inner security and, thus, solitude should be seen as a means of getting to know one's deep needs and feelings. He, further, emphatically argued that learning, thinking, and being in contact with one's own inner world are all strongly facilitated by solitude (Storr 1988, p. 28). Also, Koch (1994) has identified several benefits of solitude, among which is the freedom from social norms and constraints that is crucial also for inclusive leadership directly.

Maslow (1970) argued that solitude constitutes a prerequisite for creativity because it is related to timeless and selfless history. Also, solitude is said to provide a chance for engagement in self selected activities (Suedfeld et al., 1982, Leary et al., 2003, Burger 1995, Koch 1994). The principal benefits of solitude are excellently summarized as: "freedom of choice with respect to actions and thoughts" (Long and Averil 2003).

Also, on a more empirical level, studies have shown that people often gain from solitude a new understanding of themselves and their priorities (Long, 2000; Pedersen, 1997, 1999). At this point, it should be noted that while solitude is portrayed as opportunity for instrumental behaviour aimed at some important target such as improvement or correction, or change, it could also simply represent quiet for the manager or even a break in the action and time to rest. However, we focus on the first aspect of solitude which has a more substantive and "inner" character.

So far, numerous well defined benefits of solitude have been discussed. In simple words, short-term solitude is often valued as a time when one may work, think or even rest without being disturbed and it is desired for the sake of privacy, self-awareness and self-regulation, which are closely related to inclusive leadership. However, as we have seen solitude is not necessarily an end in and of itself.

In this context, in the long term, the benefits of solitude can result in disadvantages, signifying a 'dark side' of solitude. For example, a leader could be too much aware of his inner world that his/her behaviour becomes unnatural or even unhealthy. According to Cooper (2003) leaders could have strong feelings of loneliness and being disconnected from the rest of the organization. It is also common to engage in self-defeating behaviours and such behaviours can have negative effects of subordinates, the health of the organization and the career of the top executive. The change may come from the subordinates who now see the leader as different and apart from them (Cooper, 2003).

In reality, solitude is not responsible for this outcome. More precisely, at this point, there is an important distinction to be established, between solitude and loneliness (see e.g. Galanaki, 2001; Barbour, 2004). However, from the outside, they both look a lot alike. Both are characterized by solitariness. But all resemblance ends at the surface. Loneliness is a negative state, marked by a sense of physical isolation (i.e. loss, dislocation, and temporary absence). One feels that something is missing to him/her and it is even possible to be with people and still feel very lonely. On the other hand, solitude can be characterised as the state of being alone without being lonely. It is a positive and constructive state of engagement with oneself. In contrast to loneliness, solitude is not a negative state which most people seek to avoid (Long & Averill, 2003).

Solitude can be viewed as a state of being alone where you provide yourself sufficient company which suggests peacefulness stemming from a state of inner richness. Solitude is an opportunity to renew ourselves. In other words, it replenishes us (Cramer & Lake, 1998). Loneliness is a state of discontent marked by a sense of estrangement, an awareness of excess aloneness (Long *et al.*, 2003).

Solitude renews us for the challenges of life (Cooper & Quick, 2003). Some solitude is essential; Solitude restores body and mind whereas loneliness depletes them (Galanaki, 2004). We all need periods of solitude, although temperamentally we probably differ in the amount of solitude we need. It gives us time to explore and know ourselves. (Anderson, 1998; Moustakas, 1961).

To sum up, despite the fact that in overall research on solitude is limited, there exists literature from various fields (e.g. Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology, Management) highlighting its positive effects. More precisely, solitude is typically related to the inner world of self-reliance and ingenuity. As such, it constitutes a necessity for overall development of existence. Apparently, some of the most important benefits of solitude include mental and emotional health, emotional maturity, introspection, happiness and, of course, self-awareness and freedom from social norms and constraints.

Lastly, there is an important distinction to be established, between solitude and loneliness. Loneliness is a negative state, marked by a sense of isolation when one feels that something is missing. On the other hand, solitude is the state of being alone without being lonely. It is a positive and constructive state of engagement with oneself.

4. Discussion

At this point it should be noted that we have proposed a framework that is only a preliminary attempt at explaining the underlying mechanisms by which solitude influences inclusive leaders. Of course, we recognize that undoubtedly many other contextual factors also influence this process such as organizational structure and culture.

In this framework, the influence of context cannot be overlooked in the study of inclusive leadership and for that matter leadership development in general (Avolio et al., 2005; Day et al., 2004). A more thorough understanding is needed of whether different contextual factors, including those that can be shaped by the leader and those that are not within a leader's control, moderate the leader's effects (Avolio et al., 2005; Kark & Shamir, 2002).

By integrating context into our understanding of inclusive leadership and in the respective approach, there will be a greater opportunity to enhance the predictability of any leadership model. Of course, the context is by no means a fixed entity. It is indeed quite dynamic, depending on the experience and nature of the leader and follower at any one point in time, as well as across space.

As far as leadership practice is concerned, some very useful implications will arise. More precisely, we propose environments that provide access to solitude and, thus, enable leaders and their associates to accomplish their work more effectively. This suggests that for leaders and followers to be effective, leaders must promote an inclusive organizational climate that enables themselves and followers to continually introduce practices and policies that will show respect for the leader's need of solitude (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003).

Of course, the provision of solitude, by itself, does not guarantee continuous self-improvement. Just because solitude is available does not mean that an individual or a manager will practice it well. In fact, some people may need assistance in the use of reflection, self-discovery, and so on. Recent work in positive psychology, positive psychological capital and positive organizational behaviour argue that certain positive psychological capacities need psychometric support for being state-like, i.e. open to development and change, and thus play a crucial role in developing individuals to flourish and prosper (Luthans 2002, Luthans et *al.*, 2004). Clearly, solitude involves ongoing processes whereby leaders and followers gain self-awareness and establish trusting and genuine relationships, which - in part - may be shaped by planned interventions such as training (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio, 2005). We believe that solitude development involves complex processes, and that it is unlikely to be achieved simply through a mere practical training program. In this context, we do not view solitude development as a program, unless we were to very broadly label it as a “life’s program” (Avolio, 2005).

5. Conclusion

A first contribution of this paper is the development of a theoretical framework as a basis for guiding future research on the underlying mechanisms and the outcomes of solitude. A second and most important contribution of our proposed approach is the recognition, for the first time in the literature as of yet, of the role that solitude may play in the inclusive leadership context. In this spirit, the analysis of what solitude really is, its definitions and practical implications in a broader managerial context is a nice example for further and more extended research in the future.

To sum up, the role of solitude for leadership has been largely neglected in the existing literature. Our proposed approach suggests that leaders' access to solitude can enhance their levels of self-awareness and self-regulation; in turn, increased opportunities for leader's access to solitude can facilitate the process of inclusive leadership development. Of course, not all people have similar needs for solitude, implying that individual differences, such as preference for solitude and personality, are of great importance for understanding the relationship between solitude and leadership.

No doubt, the proposed approach should be confronted with data, not only to assess the model's ability to replicate the behaviour of inclusive leaders with regard to the concept of solitude, but also in order to allow formal statistical estimation of parameters and functions of interest. As a first step, one could operationalize the construct of solitude by identifying attributes underlying the two variables (self-awareness and self-regulation) using data and measures of solitude.

Next, the relationship between self-awareness and self-regulation and inclusive leadership described in the proposed approach should be further examined. To this end, one could start by correlating a measure of inclusive leadership with a measure of solitude, properly defined. Next, one could conduct multivariate analysis or structural equation (SEM) modelling in order to assess the capability of a potential set of explanatory variables (i.e. determinants) to explain the variance of inclusive leadership using hypothesis testing and other relevant model selection criteria. Lastly, if there is sufficient data available one could investigate whether solitude has predictive power for its described outcomes. In other words, one could test whether solitude causes self awareness and self-regulation and mindfulness, which in turn cause inclusive leadership. It is clear that more extended research on the subject could be of central importance.

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Appendix A: Brief Biographical Notes

Ourania Kardasi earned a BSc in Philosophy and Psychology from the University of Athens. Next, she earned a MSc in Human in Resource Management (HRM) and is currently working towards her PhD in HRM, both from the Athens University of Economics and Business (AUEB). She also serves as Research Associate at AUEB and has considerable work experience in management positions. So far, she has (co-)authored several articles published or forthcoming in scholarly journals including *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, *Journal of Philosophical Economics*, *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie* or appearing in refereed conferences. She speaks English, French, German and Greek.

Dimitris Bourantas is Professor of Organisational Behaviour at the Athens University of Economics and Business (AUEB). He received his BSc from AUEB, DESS, Aix-En-Provence, DEA, Ph.D., Universite de Montpellier, France. He has taught at the University of Athens, University of Montpellier (France) and has participated as trainer in several training programs for executives. He has served as consultant to national and multinational firms and public organizations such as Nestle, United Distillers Vit., Coca Cola, Bayer, Schneider, Citibank, Barclays Bank, Pepsico, Carrefour, Panafon, One Way, L'Oreal, Boehringer Ing. He has published several articles in scholarly journals including *European Management Journal*, *Long Range Planning*, *Organization Studies*, *Scandinavian Journal of Management Organization Science*, *Journal of Global Marketing*, *International Journal of Human Resources Management*, *Employers Relations*, *Revue Francaise de Gestion*, *Technology Analysis and Strategic Management*, *International Studies of Organization and Management*, and *Journal of Managerial Psychology*.