



THE POWER OF SIXTY

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Abstract

Many leaders have tried and failed to address the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Jerusalem Post reported that a group of sixty business owners from the Israel-Gaza border region took a relatively simple step and attended a business fair to promote their products and services. They rallied around a common cause, the economy, and resisted tackling larger political and religious divisions of the region. They applied situational leadership successfully when so many other leadership approaches have failed.

Keywords: Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Middle East, peace, Situational Leadership

Introduction

The August 31, 2018 headline in The Jerusalem Post “Gaza Border Business Owners Seek Economic Boost in Tel Aviv” was striking in its contrast to the other recent headlines of violence and terror along the Israel- Gaza border (Halon, 2018). The article states “seeking to counter the loss of income suffered during that time, more than 60 business owners from Gaza border communities gathered at Tel Aviv Port this week at the ‘Otef b’Kef’ fair organized by the Economy Ministry” (Halon). These business owners intended to “boost the local economy and encourage residents” to both return and invest in the community again (Halon). A simple act of leadership and commitment to take a stand can change an entire community and have an

impact on a population greater than itself. The following discusses the tragedy of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, previous leadership failures, and the successful deployment of situational leadership tactics by these business owners to create positive change in the Israel-Gaza border region.

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The “normal” for the border region of Israel has been filled with terror since the country was reestablished in 1948. At times, it seems that the entire Middle East (and the world) are against Israel. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a “national struggle” between “two peoples fighting over the same land” (Inbari, 2017, p. 66). Solve this problem and it is implied that one settles this conflict. It does not solve the additional broader conflicts between the “Israeli-Arab” or “Jewish-Islamic” peoples, but it is a start (Inbari, p. 66). These business leaders are singularly focused on using the power of capitalism to help bring people together.

The business leaders took a substantial risk and chose to ignore historical and religious divides. These business leaders did not consult with the international community when they scheduled their simple economic fair. Many believe it is the international community that advocate a particular “agenda” that drives both the Israeli’s and Palestinians apart (Patkar, 2014, p. 50). On one side, Sheikh Yusef al-Qaradawi, a Sunni Muslim and the religious leader of the Hamas movement, chooses to seek political advantage and religious claims (false as they may be) to justify the rights of the Palestinians over Israelis to the land (Rubinstein-Shemer, 2016, p. 83). He is an autocratic leader who will bend the truth to change views to meet his agenda. He only offers conversion and total followership of his principles or death. The autocratic leadership style is a “high directive style and is characterized by being highly controlling, seeing things in black and white, and wanting a high degree of structure and predictability” (Lundy, 2002, p. 12). On the other side, it is often claimed that “American Jews help fuel the Israeli-Palestinian conflict” by lobbying aggressively the U.S. government to favor Israel in all negotiations for peace (Waxman, 2017, p. 314).

Many leaders believe that the way to end hostilities in the region is to develop “a culture of responsibility at the regional level which means commitment to joint actions” (Bolborici, 2017, p. 58). Simple activities such as this business fair promote individuals taking responsibility and focusing them on improving the region and their own economic prosperity. This allows leaders to focus on solving day to day problems and business at the micro level to bring about change one step at a time.

Leadership Failures

Many leaders have tried to connect with followers by “using image-based language and creating a connection between personal aspirations and a shared vision” (Kouzes & Posner, 2017, p. 128). However, at the Israeli-Gaza border the differing groups share very little in common. They have different values, religions and aspirations. Seeking major change, many leaders in the region have tried to deliver broad far reaching solutions. Their motivations may have been sincere, but their results were lacking. “People in leadership must be committed to grappling with what it takes to change deeply ingrained habits relating to how to how they think, what they value, how they manage frustration, and how they act” (Banks & Ledbetter, 2004, p. 97). Therefore, they have often sought to deploy transformational leadership.

Northouse (2016) defines transformational leadership as being “concerned with the process of how certain leaders are able to inspire followers to accomplish great things” (p.190).

“Transformational leadership focuses on the followers and motivates them to achieve a higher performance level” (Kendrick, 2011, p. 14). However, when groups want to kill each other, it is hard to find common ground. With transformational leadership, “complete transformation of followers is the goal” (Northouse, p. 161). When followers have little or no motivation to change and just want to survive, then transformational leadership will not be successful. The Palestinians and the Israelis are just too far apart for transformational leadership to work.

Effective leaders are in sync with willing followers who agree with the amount of direction and support they are given by the leader (Salehzadeh, 2017, p. 865). Autocratic leadership has also failed. Former President Carter of the United States arrogantly called for Hamas, the Palestinian

leadership, to be removed from the Washington's list of terror groups and for Israel to be investigated for potential war crimes (Rudoren, 2015). Autocratic leadership often involves this type of arrogance and effectively renders an entire group resistant to any change. This may have not been his intent, but it was the outcome.

Taking a heavy hand and applying either autocratic or transformational leadership to these different groups as history shows will not solve the problems along the border region. Effective leadership takes into account the followers and seeks to meet them and their needs where they are. A different type of leadership is needed for this region.

Situational Leadership Success

In the spring of 1991, James Carville, then advisor to presidential candidate Bill Clinton, famously stated its "it's the economy, stupid." He was referring to achieving amazing results by focusing a populous' attention on a single topic – the economy. He knew that if he could drive the narrative away from divisive topics and focus on a commonly felt problem that could be attacked then he could start winning over a population to his way of thinking and eventually elect his candidate to president. This concept is not lost on countries in the Middle East as they witnessed the "Arab Spring," a recent time of major uprising and unrest, as a large result of the failing economies throughout the region. (Martin, 2012, p. 10). A leader can sway followers to them if they can address and show relation to their most pressing problem.

In the case of the Israeli-Gaza border region, as supported in Halon' article, the major problem is a failing economy. Thus, the sixty business owners did a relatively easy, but extremely brave thing – they actively supported an economic fair to promote their businesses despite their many differences. They did not try to change the world. They simply took the lead on one issue - making their local economy better. This is situational leadership at its best.

Situational leadership allows leaders to change their style, adapt, and be flexible to achieve success (Constantinescu & Cîrstea, 2012, p. 57). "Adaptability of leaders is critical to effectively handle the variety of situations that may arise, studies have shown that superiors, peers, and

subordinates can identify adaptable leaders and view that as a positive leadership trait” (Wright, 2017, p. 28). Situational leaders look for incremental ways to achieve success and measure those results and then modify their methods to continue to achieve success.

Hersey and Blanchard first defined situational leadership theory and today it is one of the most “widely known leadership theories popular in management training programs and school-teacher training settings” (Thompson & Glasø, 2018, p. 574). Northouse (2016) states that situational leadership is “composed of both a directive and supportive dimension, and that each has to be applied appropriately in a given situation” (p. 93). This requires that leaders evaluate both the situation and the environment to determine how “competent and committed” their followers are to execute “a given goal” (Northouse, p. 93). An effective situational leader “recognizes what followers need and then adapt their own style to meet those needs” (Northouse, p. 94). Directive behaviors can be autocratic in their delivery as they give clear direction often through “one-way communication” (Northouse, p 94). Supportive behaviors help followers “feel comfortable about themselves, their coworkers, and the situation” and often involve “two-way communication” (Northouse, p. 94). Discussion occurs with supportive behaviors to get everybody comfortable with a direction or path to follow. Directive behaviors are often followed by gradually introducing supportive behaviors as followers continue to show commitment and alignment with the leader (Thompson & Glasø, p. 574).

Situational leadership theory “identifies four different leadership styles including directing, coaching, supporting and delegating” (Salehzadeh, 2017, p. 866). The last three are grouped to form the supportive dimension. Northouse (2016) states that followers “move forward and backward” along the developmental continuum” and that leaders need to recognize where followers are in their “competence and commitment” (p. 97). The Economic Ministry met the border region inhabitants where they were and sought an initial step in meeting their needs.

Hosting a business fair resulted in empowering the sixty business owners to not shed their responsibility but gave them a helping hand in promoting their businesses. The business owners still had to work and be committed to achieve success. Situational leadership empowers followers to be better than they could be on their own. Long lasting positive change then has a

chance. The outside “experts” and politicians were not brought in take charge and run it. This was too simple of an idea for them. Situational leadership often finds itself practiced by everyday leaders in all parts of an organization because it usually requires very little resources as each step is very manageable. Northouse (2016) states that “situational leadership is easy to understand, intuitively sensible, and easily applied in a variety of settings” (p. 99).

Keeping the corrupt politicians and power grabbing leaders out of this small success story will be the challenge moving forward. A common criticism of situational leadership is that the pace of change is too slow. Applying situational leadership in a time of crisis may not be successful. This is where autocratic leadership thrives. Another criticism as detailed by Northouse (2016) is that “followers with more education and more work experience desired less structure” (p. 102). Therefore, what is next for these sixty business owners? Another business fair or something else? What about a job fair or workforce education summit? Or maybe collaborating in a more significant way such as in the launch of a new business? Finally, at what point do the sixty business owners lose interest if they are not seeing continued success from these types of investments? Situational leadership requires the commitment of both leaders and followers to keep progressing with additional steps to achieve lasting results.

Conclusion and the Challenge

Situational leadership when applied to a willing and committed group of followers can achieve successful results even when other leadership styles have failed in the past. These sixty business owners took a chance and made an important first step in transforming their region to work together. They did not try to address the toxic political or religious divisions in the community, but rather chose to rally around a common, shared issue – making their personal and regional economy better. Follow through and a commitment to take another step forward in working together will be critical in achieving lasting results. Since 1948, peace has been fleeting, maybe a booming economy will bring together the Israelis and Palestinians along the border region into a new era of prosperity. A time when the larger issues of the region can be meaningfully discussed, and lasting change can be implemented. Leaders applying situational

leadership approaches have a real chance for success. Hopefully, the world will stay out long enough to give it a shot.

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