

Toward a Conceptual Model of Contextual Intelligence: A Transferable Leadership Construct

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Abstract:

Organizations and their leaders have a growing pool of stakeholders with a growing chasm among stakeholder values. This, accompanied by growing global diversity and constant pressure to innovate, gives rise to continually changing contexts. In turn, these phenomena require executives and leaders to respond and adapt to quickly changing contexts. The purpose of this article is to assimilate the concepts of context, intelligence, intuition, and experience, and present a conceptual model for "contextual intelligence." Contextual Intelligence is a construct that involves the ability to recognize and diagnose the plethora of contextual factors inherent in an event or circumstance, then intentionally and intuitively adjust behavior in order to exert influence in that context. The conceptual basis of contextual intelligence involves convergence of three abilities. Contextual intelligence necessarily requires that 1) an intuitive grasp of relevant past events, 2) acute awareness of present contextual variables, and 3) awareness of the preferred future, interact so that the practitioner can exert influence and make appropriate decisions. In addition to these three "soft" skills, Exploratory Factor Analysis extracted twelve leadership competencies (from a larger pool of 49) that serve as the basis for this construct. While a potent concept, there remains much work in dialogue and future research toward validating contextual intelligence. However, the concept of contextual intelligence may help to delineate the implicit leadership skill(s) referenced in the literature as the intangible element that keeps so many managers from reaching their leadership potential.

Amid globalization, advancing technology, the rising awareness of global citizenship, and the increasing number of stakeholders it is not surprising to find a large number of contextual variables inherent in every situation. These contextual variables are multifaceted and fluid. Adapting as new conditions emerge is an important ability for contemporary leaders (Huston, 2006). Leadership needs to be able to remain effective amid changing contexts and be able to transition successfully into different contexts. The contextual ecosystem surrounding an individual is dynamic and fragile and crosses a diversity of industries and settings (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Moore, 1993). In light of these turbulent surroundings, today's leaders need to seize all their opportunities to be creative and original (Gabriel, 2002). Leadership fosters change and innovation. However, Frederick Taylor's foundational premise of scientific management, which intended to minimize future change, is "remarkably resilient" even in contemporary culture (Glegg, Kornberg, & Pitsis, 2005, p 376). Established structures and systems often create incredible obstacles to adapting to changing contexts (Huston, 2006). If it is as Grint (2002) suggests and the current organizational culture is not the place for "analytic models and rational plans" (p. 237) then scientific management is counterproductive in contemporary organizational contexts where innovation, creativity, and change are essential.

Traditionally, strategic planning helped organizations to survive and even thrive in dynamic contexts. While strategic planning continues to be an important element of an executive's responsibilities and organizational operations, we are reminded that in the not too distant past, strategic planning methods have not necessarily resulted in higher returns (Lisiński & Saruckij, 2006). In fact, researchers have noted that formalized procedures hinder quick and effective intuitive-based decisions needed by organizations in times of rapid change (Dane & Pratt, 2007; Khatri & Ng, 2000). In spite of efforts to demystify the strategic planning process it seems as if two-year plans, five-year plans, long-range planning, and other predictive strategies are decreasing in relevancy and predictive power. Currently, a majority of organizations forgo strategic planning altogether (Lisiński & Saruckij, 2006). Successfully implementing a strategic planning process is dependent on a litany of internal and external contextual factors (Chakravarthy & Lorange, 1991). Perhaps it is the inability to recognize these "contextual factors" that contributes to ineffective or absent strategic planning. Furthermore, many contextual factors appear to be interpersonal (between people or groups) and therefore are much less likely to have stable enough variables for concrete planning.

Strategic *intent* (versus strategic *planning*) is a "never-ending circular process" that does not follow the "normal study, plan, execute, evaluate, and adjust" strategic planning model (Service, 2006, p. 64). Strategic intent is based on the purposeful interpretation and reinterpretation of on-going events and is the ability to interpret circumstances as they unfold by using "instinct, political savvy, curiosity, flexibility..., and imagination" (Service, 2006, p. 61). Therefore, in spite of shortcomings in the strategic planning process in volatile environments, strategic intent is very much an essential element to diagnosing context.

Today's organizational context has an increasing diversity of stakeholders compounded by greater and greater divergence between stakeholder values. These and other factors are forcing the rapid evolution and enhancement of skills of workers. Today's leaders, managers, and employees must be able to foresee and diagnose any number of changing contexts quickly; then seamlessly adapt to that new context or risk becoming obsolete and irrelevant.

Diagnosing contexts successfully requires intentional leadership and a paradoxical devotion to having a global perspective in the midst of local circumstances. Commitment to discerning the variables inherent in each new context can be likened to the commitment Kofman and Senge (1993) called for of the learning organization. Much like a learning organization, an individual's commitment to accurately discerning contexts requires a dramatic shift in current ways of thinking, classifying, and assimilating data and information. Diagnosing contexts is, however, different from the learning organization in that the ability to diagnose context is an individual's skill and is not directly an organizational phenomenon.

In contemporary scholarship and popular literature much has emerged concerning different "intelligences." These intelligences contribute to the effective practice of business and individual success. Theories such as Multiple Intelligence and Emotional Intelligence have been forerunners to this phenomenon. For example, spiritual intelligence, moral intelligence, financial intelligence, social intelligence, risk intelligence, and other "intelligences" are filling journals, magazines, books, and business-based internet sites. Their acceptance has also served in popularizing the term "intelligence" as a business buzzword.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the broad concepts of context, intelligence, and experience, assimilate these concepts, and present a new concept of "contextual intelligence." In brief, context consists of all the external, internal, interpersonal, and intrapersonal factors that contribute to the uniqueness of each situation and circumstance. Intelligence is the ability to transform data into useful information, information into knowledge, then most importantly assimilate that knowledge into practice. Finally, experience as referred to in this paper is measured by the ability to extract wisdom from different experiences and is not necessarily the passage or accumulation of time. Contextual intelligence integrates these concepts and ultimately becomes a transferable leadership construct. Furthermore, Contextual Intelligence consists of a specific skill set (cluster of meta-competencies) whereby the individual effectively diagnoses their context. Similar to strategic intent, Contextual Intelligence is fundamentally about recognizing and interpreting contexts and the proverbial "baggage" people carry. That recognition is used to position self and others for a preferred future. The contextually savvy person also uses that new knowledge to exert influence in crafting the future.

The Empirical Origin of Contextual Intelligence

The concept of Contextual Intelligence was formulated by the author during the data analysis portion of an unrelated empirical investigation involving an exploratory factor

analysis (EFA) of 49 leadership competencies. The EFA extracted 12 related leadership competencies from this larger list (the methods and results are discussed in more detail later). During the creative process of examining and analyzing those 12 leadership competencies in light of their unique relationship to each other the notion of Contextual Intelligence was born. While Contextual Intelligence was validated as a leadership construct for that particular study, it is now expanded upon and introduced here as a larger leadership construct, which requires dialogue and additional research.

The Concept of Context

Context is the background in which an event takes place. Contexts come in various forms and involve any set of circumstances surrounding an event. The science of hermeneutics teaches us that knowing the specific context of an event is imperative to a correct interpretation.

Training takes place in a specific context and often the knowledge gained is retained for or relegated to that same or a similar context. Ideally, learning occurs as a social process and not an individual event (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Therefore, the context of an event or industry involves much more than work setting, a geographic or demographic, or the mastery of technical competencies required of a given work setting. Context is often real and perceived, psychological, social, physical, and metaphysical and includes such things as: geography, genders, industries, job roles or titles, attitudes, beliefs, values, politics, cultures, symbols, organizational climate, the past, the preferred future, and personal ethics. Compounding the difficulty of context is the growing need to recognize these contextual variables in self as well as in external and internal stakeholders. The presence of these contextual variables and any number of other external or internal, overt or covert variables makes each context unique. These contextual variables interact to form the *contextual ethos*. Identifying the factors and variables that constitute contextual ethos becomes an important leadership skill.

The implication of this is that the ability to *diagnose context* is a skill that transcends job roles and even industries. Much has been said about the transferability of leadership and whether or not leadership competencies are restricted to a specific role, work setting, or industry (Pralhad, 1999; Yntema, 1960; Levitt, 1974; Boal, 2000; Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002; Bolden & Gosling, 2006). Boal (2000) posits that it is unfortunate that many leadership theories are context free. Osborn, Hunt, and Jauch (2002) suggest that leadership research that is not context specific is incomplete. Furthermore, Bolden and Gosling (2006) point out the possibility that leadership development efforts fail because they inherently imply followers and contexts are irrelevant. The concept of Contextual Intelligence does not challenge these and other notions that leadership competencies might be unique to work setting, or even be job or industry specific. However, the transferability of leadership is an important implication of Contextual Intelligence. Correctly identifying contextual ethos and diagnosing context contribute to leadership success regardless of setting.

When context is approached with the intent to extract knowledge from it, the knowledge extracted is transferable to any different or future work setting. Contextual Intelligence as a transferable leadership construct is important because across industries, cultures, social-climates, and organizations there are often similar situations (Dye & Garman, 2006; House & Aditya, 1997; Smith et al., 1989). The implication is that a contextually intelligent person can influence others regardless of their role, expertise, or competence.

Intelligence and Experience

What is an “*intelligence*?” According to WordNet[®] intelligence is the ability to comprehend; to understand and profit from experience. The ontological and epistemological origins of intelligence are highly debated. It is traditionally believed to be either 1) something that grows in an individual as a result of experience and learning, or 2) that it is “something” different than what accumulates from experience and knowledge (Spearman, 1904; Sternberg, 1996). Obviously, this second notion is very vague. However, this second notion alleges that intelligence is set in everyone and can be differentiated from what one would gradually amass over time and through experience.

It is implied that similar (and perhaps identical) experiences result in different behaviors from different people. Basically, the schools of thought can be summed up as either, intelligence is a result of the accumulation and recall of external stimuli (and therefore people in similar circumstances should come to similar conclusions) or it is a form of internal awareness and coding which, all other things being equal, are often interpreted differently by each individual involved. This second notion of intelligence is intriguing, and serves as the impetus behind its popularity as a business buzzword. It is this second idea of intelligence that is applied when describing Contextual Intelligence.

What you know and how you came about learning it is much less important than the ability to learn (Grint, 2006). Knowledge [intelligence] is not purely the result of theoretical propositions, analytic strategies, or in identifying the elements of the decision (Benner, 2001). In short, knowledge (or discovering the correct answer) is not always linear; in a contextually rich world $a+b$ does not always $=c$. Supporting Benner’s (2001) notion, Van Der Maas et al (2006) conclude that while there is ample evidence that cognitive factors do play a role in intelligence, none of these [cognitive] factors is generally accepted as the unitary cause of general intelligence. Intuition (i.e., arriving at knowledge without rational thinking) often forms the basis for later intellectual exercises (Isaack, 1978). Therefore, it is implied that intelligence can be gained from interpreting different events, using intuition, and does not purely result from formal education, experience, or intellect. Experience results when preconceived notions and expectations are challenged, refined, or disconfirmed by the actual situation (Benner, 2001). Therefore, demonstrating appropriate behavior is the best indicator of experienced-based intelligence and not longevity.

Aristotle (1998) wrote in *Nicomachean Ethics* that wisdom is an issue of maturity or as he states the “defect” of not having wisdom is from “living at the beck and call of

passion.” Therefore, presumably wisdom itself is not necessarily a direct result of the passage of time or living per se, but is a result of maturity (p. 3). Furthermore, because experience is so unique and individualized it is difficult to use it as a learning model with any kind of predictive strength (Grint, 2007). Therefore, within the framework of Contextual Intelligence, experience can be measured by the amount of knowledge extracted from a single event. The most intelligent people can extract the most knowledge from a single event, regardless if the event is positive or negative. Presumably, the newly acquired knowledge when applied is transformed into wisdom that can be “reused” in new contexts. Intelligence is certainly rooted in experience, but more importantly in the ability to extract valuable information about people, events, attitudes, behaviors, etc., from those experiences. The value and relevance of experience is measured by the magnitude of an individual’s contribution to values and goals. Experience is validated in the ability to contribute early and often in a new environment.

For example, a leader may have 1 year of experience, but that year could be significantly bolstered by myriad meaningful experiences that have significantly influenced his practice of leadership. Based on the ability to extract wisdom from a single experience one-year may be equivalent to four or five years. That phenomenon is what I like to refer to as “experience in dog-years.” Therefore, the description of *novice* and *expert* must not be solely set by age or even number of past experiences per se, but “experience” should be evaluated in light of significant contributions. In this respect, experience is best defined by the leader’s ability to effectively use history in making decisions, even if the individual has a very limited history (i.e., experience). A meaningful history can be gained from personal experience, but also from the observation and study of other’s experiences, past and present. The contextually intelligent practitioner is able to extract “lessons” from a single experience, versus the less contextually intelligent person who requires multiple experiences before learning the same or similar “lessons.”

The Concept of Contextual Intelligence

Considering the above descriptions of context, intelligence, and experience the following definition of *Contextual Intelligence* is submitted.

Contextual Intelligence is the ability to quickly and intuitively recognize and diagnose the dynamic contextual variables inherent in an event or circumstance and results in intentional adjustment of behavior in order to exert appropriate influence in that context.

The aspect of *intuitive recognition* is important to Contextual Intelligence and distances it from situational and contingency-based leadership theories. “Intuition is an innate ability to synthesize information quickly and effectively” (Dane & Pratt, 2007, p. 33). Intuition as used to describe Contextual Intelligence involves being adept at instantly assimilating past events into the current context, irrespective of the context in which the original event occurred. Intuition appears to be especially acute in turbulent environments (Khatri & Ng, 2000). Since Contextual Intelligence involves diagnosing a dynamic context, intuition is an asset. Interestingly enough the accuracy of decisions decreases as more

time is used in deciding; therefore, scholars suggest that using intuition is a way to leverage this inverse relationship (Dane & Pratt, 2007). It is the expert-level practitioner who is most adept at using intuition (Benner, 2001) and achieving expert status requires being able to extract practical wisdom from different and perhaps unrelated contexts.

The contextually intelligent practitioner is knowledgeable about *how to do* something (i.e., has technical knowledge from formal education and observation), but more importantly is wise enough (based on intuition and experience) to know *what to do*. Knowing *how to do* can put someone in a position to influence, knowing *what to do* keeps one in the place of influence. Knowing *what to do*, as opposed to knowing *how to do* something enables an individual to act appropriately in a context of uncertainty and ambiguity where cause and effect is not predictable (Grint, 2007). Figure 1 illustrates the contextual intelligence triad and delineates a conceptual framework of how contextual intelligence is exercised in a given contextual ethos. The contextually intelligent practitioner must always view their current context through the dual lenses of past experience and the preferred future. Meaning, present experiences, as they occur, regardless of the context they occur in, can all be intentionally integrated into the psyche of the individual for use and application in future context(s).

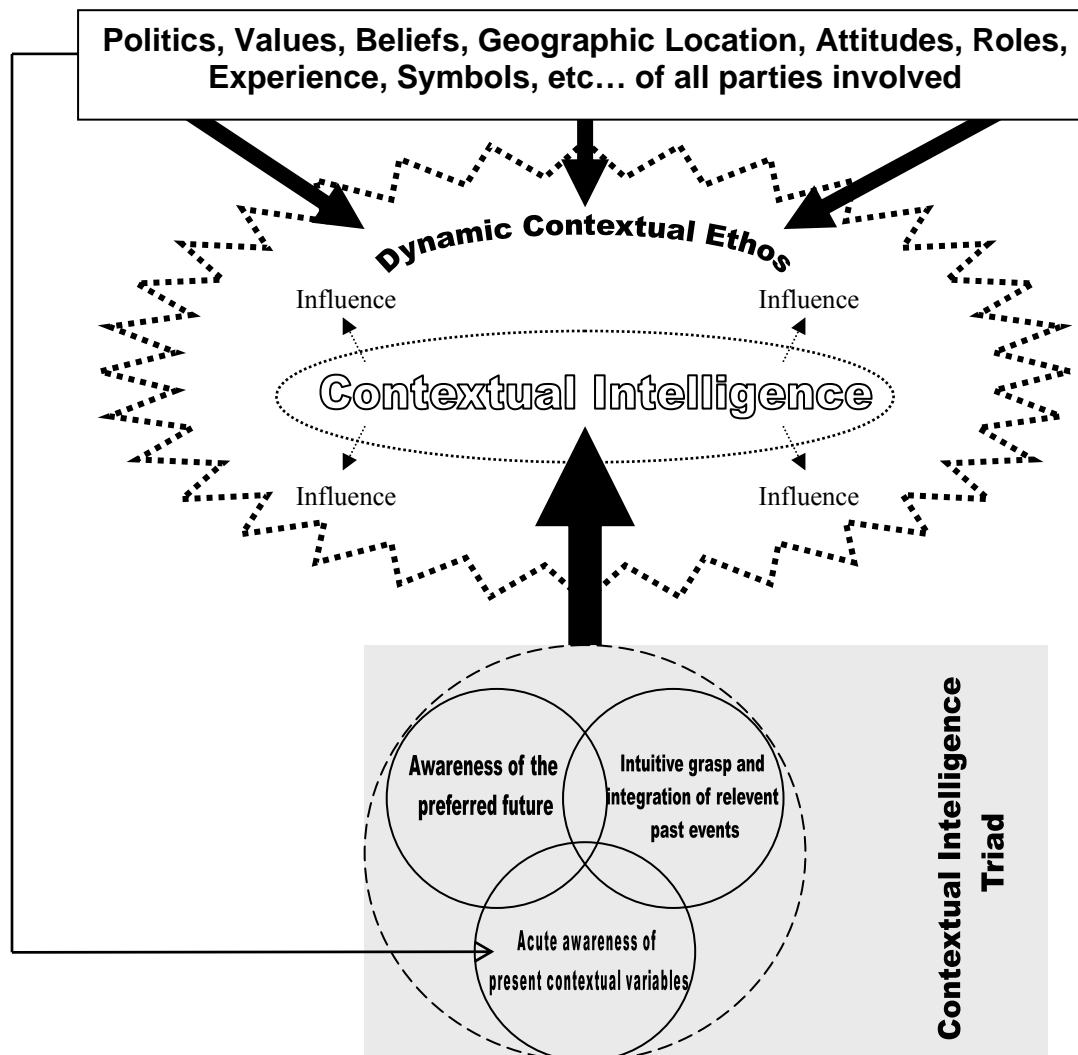


Figure 1. A conceptual schematic of contextual intelligence in action

Contextual Intelligence Skill Set

As an emerging leadership construct, it is reasonable to ask, “what skills, abilities, and knowledge contribute to contextual intelligence?” Are there predictors of an individual’s capacity for contextual intelligence? Furthermore, is there any empirical evidence to suggest or support Contextual Intelligence?

The contextual intelligence triad (Figure 1) serves as a conceptual framework for the skills and predictors needed. These skills include having an: 1) intuitive grasp of relevant past events, 2) acute awareness of present contextual variables, and 3) awareness of the preferred future. These three “*awarenesses*” converge to form the theoretical basis of Contextual Intelligence. The following is a synopsis of the methods and results of an empirical investigation of leadership competencies that led to the formation of the contextual intelligence concept.

Methodology

A two-phase research design investigating leadership behaviors of allied health care professionals was conducted. Phase One consisted of a mixed-methods Delphi Technique where 18 allied healthcare experts were asked to confirm or disconfirm as well as add to a list of leadership competencies identified in an extensive literature review. After two rounds of the first phase, the experts validated a list of 39 leadership competencies and added 10 additional leadership competencies resulting in 49 important leadership competencies for practice. This list of 49 leadership competencies was estimated to have acceptable internal consistency-reliability (Cronbach $\alpha = .96$) and inter-rater reliability (88%). Use of experts and a literature review established content validity.

The second phase was a national survey consisting of a blinded random sample of 161 allied healthcare workers (~10% response rate). 95% of respondents confirmed all of the 49 leadership competencies as important for practice. Scale reliability was estimated with a Cronbach $\alpha = .96$. Phase Two also consisted of an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). Using a maximum likelihood extraction technique and promax rotation four leadership constructs were extracted. One of the factors extracted consisted of 12 interrelated meta-competencies ($\alpha = .90$) and was later named *Contextual Intelligence*. Construct validity was established by the EFA, convergent validity was established by Pearson r correlations ranging from $r = .43$ to $.94$ ($p = .001$) between the items within the factors, and concurrent validity was established through significant differences ($p = .05$) in independent t -tests and ANOVAs with post hoc adjustments between the four factors. Three other leadership constructs were identified during the EFA. One was “Initiative,” ($\alpha = .92$) which consisted of 14 metacompetencies and included demonstrating resilience, willingness to take risks, and responsibility. The third leadership construct identified was named “Communication and People Skills” ($\alpha = .88$) and consisted of 12 metacompetencies, and included demonstrating appropriate use of body-language,

excellent verbal and written communication skills, and organizational savvy. The fourth leadership construct was delineated as “Personality Characteristics” ($\alpha=.93$) and consisted of 11 metacompetencies, which include demonstrating assertiveness, ambition, and emotional stability. Furthermore, of the four constructs extracted, Contextual Intelligence had the highest mean rating ($M=2.23$, scale 0-3). This indicated that Contextual Intelligence was perceived to be the most important of the leadership constructs.

Reliability and validity of the meta-competencies (skill set) that formed the construct of *Contextual Intelligence* is well established. The descriptor “Contextual Intelligence” was selected by the researcher based on the relationship of the individual items extracted, a review of the literature, and the theoretical concept illustrated in the Contextual Intelligence triad (Figure 1). Table 1 is a list and description of the 12 meta-competencies making up the construct of Contextual Intelligence. The presence of many or all of these meta-competencies in an individual may also serve as a predictor of Contextual Intelligence.

A limitation is external validity and small sample size. While the skill set of Contextual Intelligence is an exciting and promising leadership construct the concept was built on an empirical investigation of leadership competencies validated and generalized to a specific healthcare discipline, which is a threat to external validity. However, most (79.6%) of the leadership competencies were derived from a literature review that consisted mostly of business and management literature. Therefore, validating these skill sets for a wider population is promising. Additional research and inquiry on Contextual Intelligence is certainly needed. Furthermore, there are presumably other skills (observed behaviors) associated with Contextual Intelligence that are more difficult to delineate given the sheer number of possible contexts and the sheer number of variables associated within any contextual ethos. Understanding Contextual Intelligence and the many contextual variables and behaviors will always be, to a certain extent, conceptual.

Table 1: List of behaviors, skills, and brief descriptors associated with contextual intelligence.

- 1. Future-minded**
Has a forward-looking mentality and sense of direction and concern for where the organization should be in the future.
- 2. Influencer**
Uses interpersonal skills to ethically and non-coercively affect the actions and decisions of others.
- 3. Ensures an awareness of mission**
Understands and communicates how the individual performance of others influences subordinate’s, peer’s, and supervisor’s perception of how the mission is being accomplished.
- 4. Socially responsible**
Expresses concern about social trends and issues (encourages legislation and policy when appropriate) and volunteers in social and community activities.

5. Cultural sensitivity

Promotes diversity in multiple contexts and aligns diverse individuals by creating and facilitating diversity and provides opportunities for diverse members to interact in non-discriminatory manner.

6. Multicultural Leadership

Can influence and affect the behaviors and attitudes of peers and subordinates in an ethnically diverse context.

7. Diagnoses Context

Knows how to appropriately interpret and react to changing and volatile surroundings.

8. Change agent

Has the courage to raise difficult and challenging questions that others may perceive as a threat to the status quo. Proactive rather than reactive in rising to challenges, leading, participating in, or making change (i.e., assessing, initiating, researching, planning, constructing, and advocating).

9. Effective and constructive use of influence

Uses interpersonal skills, personal power, and influence to constructively and effectively, affect the behavior and decisions of others. Demonstrates the effective use of different types of power in developing a powerful image.

10. Intentional leadership

Assesses and evaluates own leadership performance and is aware of strengths and weaknesses. Takes intentional action toward continuous improvement of leadership ability. Has an action guide and delineated goals for achieving personal best.

11. Critical thinker

Cognitive ability to make connections, integrate, and make practical application of different actions, opinions, and information.

12. Consensus builder

Exhibits interpersonal skill and convinces other people to see the common good or a different point of view for the sake of the organizational mission or values by using listening skills, managing conflict, and creating win-win situations.

Implications

The concept of Contextual Intelligence has far reaching implications, and may help to explain what happens (or what is missing) when, in one context a leader flourishes, but that same “successful” leader, when promoted, transferred, or transitioned into another role is not as successful. While there are other explanations for these types of failures, such as the significance of the role of the follower or the importance of the organizational culture, contextual intelligence can at the least help to mitigate the risk of failure after promotion or role transition.

Furthermore, understanding Contextual Intelligence may help to bring a name and face to that proverbial “intangible” skill set of “natural” leaders. The skill set that if lacking hinders some from excelling or reaching their potential, but if present automatically makes one a “natural born leader.” Therefore, understanding contextual intelligence may also help practicing managers, consultants, and scholars develop training and educational programs that teach and delineate leadership skill sets that transcend a specific context, and that has tangible value to any organization regardless of their uniqueness.

Investigating contextual intelligence, as a concept and by its specific behaviors, may in some small way help to describe that “mystical,” “nebulous,” and “intangible” leadership quality so many scholars and practitioners are seeking to delineate. Describing Contextual Intelligence as an intangible or nebulous skill couched in the language of influence points toward similarities to charismatic leadership. However, it is my contention that evoking charisma and practicing Contextual Intelligence are philosophically different.

While similarities do exist between charisma and contextual intelligence, charisma has been described as a matter of an individual’s personality (Takala & Kempainen, 2007; Weber, 1964). Recently, discussions of charisma and charismatic leaders has carried a note of danger and has become a “dubious” distinction that denotes a sort of unnatural attraction between followers and leaders (Takala & Kempainen, 2007). Historically, Weber (1964) described charisma as a divine gift of grace and therefore was something that is not necessarily based on experience or knowledge but rather on personal attributes. Furthermore, evoking charisma “rejects or transcends” normal life and is in “conflict with the existing or established order” (Takala & Kempainen, 2007, p. 117). Therefore, as an issue of personality it is plausible that one could possess contextual intelligence and have little charisma. Likewise, one could possess charisma and have little or no contextual intelligence. Contextual intelligence, while conceptually a “nebulous” or “mystical” skill set, does not reject normal life nor is it at conflict with the established order. In fact, contextual intelligence seeks to identify what the “norm” is for a given context and adapts to the “established order” in order to exert maximum influence.

Conclusion

Good leaders can identify a situation correctly and inherently know that all situations involve leaders, the followers, and varied contexts (Service, 2006). In spite of similar language the concept of Contextual Intelligence does not challenge the emerging idea that leadership theory and research should focus on context-specific skills and behaviors. However, the concept of Contextual Intelligence does warrant discussions on how the practice of leadership can and should transcend context. Furthermore, it provides a framework for discussing how leaders can successfully transfer into new roles. Most importantly, Contextual Intelligence is the ability to assimilate, cognitively and intuitively, past and current events in light of the preferred future. Contextually intelligent individuals rapidly identify the contextual ethos and think and act quickly when the context changes. They tend to intentionally lead by always seeking to be empathetic and scanning the horizon for value that can be used instantly and in the future.

Contextually Intelligent people are multi-tasking thinkers who routinely go outside of their existing context to acquire useful information about the world they live in and integrate that information into their decision-making.

Future Inquiry

Contextual Intelligence has merit as an intriguing and thought provoking conceptual framework. However, future scholarly investigations need to be conducted to add validity to the framework. Future inquiry should include 1) validating contextual intelligence as a transferable leadership construct that transcends organizational and contextual borders, and 2) answering the research questions of which factors or variables make up a contextual ethos and which of those factors are its most important determinates. Furthermore, validating the existing 12 meta-competencies as well as identifying additional meta-competencies that are associated with contextual intelligence is needed. Once those meta-competencies are delineated, creating a valid and reliable instrument that delineates predictors of contextual intelligence and an instrument that assesses an individual's level of or capacity for contextual intelligence is also needed. Much work remains to be done before contextual intelligence can be established as a legitimate leadership construct. However, the conceptual value that Contextual Intelligence offers the leadership landscape is intriguing and worth the dialogue.

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