A Research Leadership Paper about LeBron James

by Jessica Franklin
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Introduction

LeBron James is considered one of the greatest basketball players of all time. He currently plays for the Miami Heat. He has won the NBA championship two consecutive times, 2011-12 and 2012-13 season. He has 4 NBA MVP awards and is on the verge of receiving his fifth. If all goes well, he will be the first NBA superstar to win 5 MVP titles in six consecutive years. Many ESPN correspondents all applaud him for his leadership skills. It takes a leader on and off the basketball court to demand the ability for grown men to work effectively as a team. James has been able to be the leader for the Miami because he is able to unite his teammates with a common goal; Winning. But James is not just a leader on the court; he is also a leader off. He gives credit to his teammates in interviews and he makes his teammates feel appreciated. James, a superstar, already knows that the attention is on him and instead of craving the
spotlight and making the Miami Heat be about him, he has been able to create a space that shows that the Miami Heat needs everybody to win, not just him. In an environment that has created him to be more than basketball, he creates a space that shows that he is not more than the game and he shows he needs his team more than his team needs him. He acts in a way that many leaders in high positions forget, and that is humble.

Background

LeBron James comes from humble beginnings. He was born December 30, 1984, in Akron, Ohio. He was raised by his mother Gloria in a single-parent household. His mother had a hard time finding steady work and she moved around a lot with her son. Gloria wanted her son to live in a stable household. At the age of nine, James moved in with the family of Frank Walker, a local youth football coach who introduced James to basketball. James began playing basketball at an early age, but it wasn’t until high school that showed that he was destined to be in the NBA. As a freshman, James helped his school, Vincent-St. Mary High School win Division III state title by scoring 25 points. As a high school sophomore he was chosen for the USA Today All-USA First Team. James was the first sophomore ever selected for this award. In his junior year he was named PARADE magazine’s High School Boys
Basketball Player of the Year and Gatorade Player of the Year, while at the same time being compared to the great and legendary Michael Jordan. James finished his high school basketball career with 2,657 points, 892 rebounds and 523 assists during his four years at Vincent-St. Mary High School. In 2003, James was drafted first overall pick by the Cleveland Cavaliers. He was the first rookie in the Cavaliers franchise history to win rookie of the year. James had an amazing career with the Cavaliers and then he went on to sign with the Miami Heat in 2010. James currently has two NBA championships, two Olympic Gold Medals, and 4 MVP awards.

Description of LeBron James; Leader-Follower-Situation

LeBron James admits that he has to credit his team and relationship with his Miami teammates. But it is important to note the leadership-follower-situation theory because James was the leader of the Cavaliers for seven years. But although doing well in the regular season, James failed to take the Cavaliers to the NBA finals, let alone win a championship. James is a great leader for the Miami Heat. Leadership is defined as “the process of influencing others toward the achievement of group goals” (Hughes, Richard L., Ginnet, Robert C., Curphy, Gordon J. (2009). Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience, 6th ed. McGraw-Hill). James is able to influence those around him to play better and be better teammates for each other. James not only unites his team with a common goal of winning, but he
gives meaning and rationale behind uniting his team to win. It is fact that all players in the NBA hope to
win at least one title in their career. But it is also fact that not every NBA player will win an NBA title in
their basketball career. Some people may point out that he was winning in Cleveland, so why couldn’t he
unite his teammates in Cleveland to win an NBA title? The answer is simple: Cleveland was a different
situation compared to Miami. According to *Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience*,
“Situational factors can play such a pervasive role that they can effectively minimize the effects of
personality traits, intelligence, values, and preferences on leaders’ and followers’ behaviors, attitudes, and
relationships,” (*Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience*, pg. 581). James’s leadership changed
based on the dynamics of the situation. James was put into a situation where he was around basketball
players that responded well to how well their leader was doing as a player. The Cavaliers depended on
James to do all the work, whereas Miami depends on James to make them better so he doesn’t have to do
all the work.

**Contextual and Operational Leadership**

LeBron James’ ability to be an effective leader in one situation compared to another demystifies
the myth that “leaders are born not made.” The concept for the above sentence is known as contextual
leadership. Contextual leadership is a new way of thinking about leadership because it challenges previous
myths about leadership and the concept encourages a new breed of leadership that people were made to
believe didn’t existed. According to the Harvard Business Review online blog, “Leaders need to have
certain personal characteristics to be successful, but it is often the application of those characteristics
within a specific context that define great success. It is not only who you are, but when and where you
are,” (Harvard Business Review). This is a perfect explanation for why James is successful in Miami but
not in Cleveland when it came time to win post season games, and thus the NBA championship. There is too much focus on the individual as a leader and not enough focus on the situational context. By placing too much prominence on the individual, many people fall prey to believing that any individual in one setting would naturally be successful in a new setting. This is why people have been so critical of James. People have even been harsh and questioned his legitimacy as a two-time NBA champion because of the situation he is in as a player for Miami versus as a player for Cleveland.

LeBron James’ contextual leadership also correlates with his operational leadership skills. The NBA is an organization that pays athletes millions of dollars based on their performances. There is even a system of awards. James also exemplifies operational leadership. Operational leaders “are the ones who must lead teams in analyzing and understanding the strategic and tactical realities of the organization. They must craft the supporting infrastructure and framework to allow everyone to move tactically toward the achievement of the organization's strategy through the operational framework of processes, systems, structures, and incentives,” (The Three Levels of Leadership, 2011.) James demonstrates operational leadership by leading his teammates towards the common goal for not only himself, but also the Miami Heat organization too. Winning games are not only important for players, but winning games and championships are also important for coaches, managers, the stadium, owners, and the organization as a whole. There are multiple shareholders when it comes to basketball. For one, the purpose of winning for the shareholders may seem simply dismissive, but in reality the logic behind winning is because it correlates with the relationship between the shareholders. When the Miami Heat wins games, this increases the popularity of team which then increases tickets sales. The more tickets sold, the more seats are filled. More seats filled more money for the owners, coaches, and players. More money for the organization means better stadiums built for the fans. Thus, winning is the necessary correlation between all shareholders because of the ultimate goal is to win championships and sale tickets to fund the stadium and the entire organization.
**LeBron James as a Motivator**

LeBron James is able to inspire his team and the entire Miami Heat organization. He makes all the shareholders believe that the Heat are unstoppable when it comes to winning NBA championships. When the Heat does well, James makes sure that he publicly recognizes all of his teammates. James also has built a relationship off the court that has helped his leadership on the court with his team. James is notorious for taking his guys out to eat and celebrating with his teammates after championship games as if they are all family. In a sense, James challenges this notion of the star player because he gets everyone involved and he makes everyone feel like they are star players on the team. This type of leadership is hard, but an effective leader doesn’t back away from the challenge because leadership is about challenging the status quo and changing it in order to develop others. And most importantly, the leader
job is to create conditions for the team to be effective and that is what James does for the Miami Heat organization.

It is important that followers are inspired by their leader and in order to inspire the followers, the leader have to be able to motivate his team to believe in the common goal of the organization. In this case, James’ main goal as a leader is to motivate his team in order to inspire them to believe in the common goal of the Miami Heat organization. James takes the motivational approach when it comes to inspiring his teammates. According to Robert House and his House’s Path-Goal Theory, “the most important activities of leaders are those that clarify the path to various goals of interest to subordinates, thus effective leaders form a connection between subordinate goals and organizational goals,” (Leadership and Motivation, unit 11, pg.9). James is able to form a connection with his team that unites the goals of the organization, coaches, and his teammates. Leadership is about inspiring others and increasing group performance through motivation. And since leadership is only affective when the leader “show not tell” and create and environment that shows he lead by example, it is important to highlight James’ ability to motivate himself from his failures. Carol Dweck theory is that all goals a person might pursue fall under two distinctive categories: performance goals and learning goals. A performance goal is based on an individual acquiring praise from his peers, supervisor, and other shareholders. A learning goal is when an individual uses feedback to increase his performance. James represents both categories of the theory. Dweck’s theory also explains how failure has helped James become a better leader for his team and the entire Miami Heat organization. In his article, Leadership and Motivation, Ralph Nader states that “this theory provides better understanding about failure and its impact on the individual. Since we all fail sometimes, our ability to respond is an important factor in motivation. A person with a learning goal will respond to failure by trying even harder to succeed the next time,” (Leadership and Motivation, unit 11, pg.7). For example, when James loss the NBA championship in 2011 against the Dallas Mavericks after all the media hype around him winning with the other all-stars including Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh, he knew he had failed himself, his fans, and his team. But instead of dwelling on that failure he went in
the gym and practiced even harder during the off season. In a press conference after the loss James agreed the loss felt like a "personal failure" but also said "it hurts of course, but I'm not going to hang my head low,” (Huffington Post, 2011). Growing and becoming better from a failure is the essence of an effective leader.

New Type of Leadership Theories

According to an interesting article on LinkedIn titled “What Executives Can Learn From LeBron James” by Tod Sacerdoti, he states “When LeBron James looks in the mirror he knows he is committed to winning. Do you?” (What Executives Can Learn From LeBron James, LinkedIn, 2013). Leadership is about commitment to the core philosophy of an organization and uniting the followers to achieve the common goals of the organization. In “Leading Together: Complex Challenges Require a New Approach,” by Wilfred Drath, Drath says the new form of leadership is connected leadership where there is a shared sense-making that leads to a shared understanding. James has connected his teammates into understanding the common goal of the Miami Heat organization and the organization is united with the common goal of the team, and in essence the union between the team and organization unites the other
shareholders, including the fans. As stated above, the main goal is to win because when the team wins the organization is able to profit. When the organization profit the team profit because there is bonuses given based on performances. When the organization wins the fans win because more profits for the organization mean a better stadium for the fans. When the team wins, viewership and fans increase, and the more the fans the better the net profit for the Miami Heat organization, including seats filled, tickets sold, and merchandise bought. Thus, the leadership of one man has a great impact on the financial growth of an entire organization.

James also exemplifies the second type of new leader which is the social entrepreneur. In “Is the Social Entrepreneur a New Type of Leader?” by Lynn Barendsen & Howard Garner the new leader is a unique type of leader whose focus is social problems and whose approach is entrepreneurial. This type of leader is a caring professional who also has business acumen. As stated in the beginning of the paper, LeBron James is a leader on and off the court. Social responsibility is highly important in all business organizations, big or small. James has a foundation called The LeBron James Foundation and according to his website, the mission of this foundation “is to positively affect the lives of children and young adults through education and co-curricular educational initiatives. We believe that an education and living an active, healthy lifestyle is pivotal to the development of children and young adults, (The LeBron James Foundation). Lastly James represents the third type of new leader which has emotional intelligence. In “Successful Leaders Possess Emotional Intelligence” by Tim Field, he asserts that the leader must not only be business savvy, but he/she also has to be people savvy as well. Field adds that it is important that the leader be emotionally intelligent. There are three aspects of emotional intelligence that makes this new type of leadership successful, and thus James a successful leader. The three aspects of emotional intelligence that Field analyzes include self-awareness, self-regulation, and social skills. The new leader must be able to understand and manage his emotions in cohesion with understanding others’ emotions that enable a leader to help the organization make good decisions. James is one of the most passionate basketball players in the NBA. In Sacerdoti’s article, James states “I treat it like every day is my last day
with a basketball. Basketball is my passion, I love it. I just try to move forward and achieve my goals,” (What Executives Can Learn From LeBron James, LinkedIn, 2013). James is able to manage his emotions and use his feelings to compete aggressively and encourages other to feel the same passion he has for basketball, which includes his shareholders.

LeBron James’ Ethical Dilemma

Despite all the great leadership James has shown, many people may question his decision to broadcast his choice to sign with the Miami Heat versus returning to the Cleveland Cavaliers. This was an ethical dilemma that he faced and has become a better leader from this experience. Many people look at James’ decision to broadcast his decision as arrogant and said he was being over exposed. Multiple news channels showed that people were burning his former jersey in the streets. People ignored that the broadcast was benefitting The Boys and Girls Club of Cleveland. But instead of letting this be the end of him, as a leader, James saw the challenge for gaining back fans’ support. How did he do it? In “Realizing What You’re Made Of” by Glenn E. Mangurian, explains how an individual can either let adversity hinder him or heighten him as a leader. In a blink of the eye, James went from the one of the most popular
players in the NBA to being the most hated athlete in the United States. But James did not let the hate among sports fan stop him from the big prize: the NBA Championship. When the Heat were defeated by the Mavericks in 2011, many “LeBron haters” were happy. Mangurian states, “When you undergo a sudden loss, your routine is interrupted, and your mind becomes preoccupied with trying to make sense of what happened,” (Realizing What You’re Made Of, pg 3). Not only was James the most hated athlete in the United States, but his leadership was also doubted because this phenomenal team of what the media declared had the “Big 3” had failed to win the NBA Championship after all the hype. James had to recreate his identity and refocus his mind on becoming a better leader for his team. James chose to move forward despite all the adversity. James also acknowledges that “The Decision” was not something he would do again, which shows that he learned from his lessons. He states from an online blog, “Now I've seen everything on and off the floor this league has to offer,” he says. “I got an answer for everything…Winning, losing, being a free agent, staying, leaving, media, media down on you, media big up on you, agents, money, parking it, family, money…So whatever your question is, I can deliver” (Bloguin, 2014). He is a man who has learned from his experiences and he is able to change to be a better person than when he started in the organization, and thus, he has overcame what many people thought was impossible to comeback from. Like an eagle, he has risen from the bottom and stands high on that peak of sports fan. In the most recent ESPN poll, James is the most popular fan in the NBA, beating out five-time NBA Champion Kobe Bryan of the LA Lakers.
**Analysis**

It is clear that James is an effective leader. He gives credit to his team. He unites his teammates with the goals of the Miami Heat’s organization, and he unites all the shareholders overall. He inspires his followers to be better players and he inspires other NBA competitors to be better players. He challenges this notion of the superstar by creating an atmosphere where his whole team can be superstars. But most importantly, James is not afraid of change when it comes to improving his game and he is not afraid to step back and allow others to lead. He is encouraging on and off the court and he shows appreciation to his teammates by acknowledging them on and off the court. For example, when he is on the court, he is not a selfish player and is always ready to give an assist. When he is off the court, he makes sure to acknowledge that when the Miami Heat wins, it is because of the efforts of the team, not just him. He also
does not mind hanging out with his teammates after his job is down on the basketball court. However, so far it has shown that James’ leadership skills are tested within the context of the situation. He is in a much better situation when it comes to the dynamics of the Miami Heat versus Cleveland Cavaliers. James must find a way to prove the he is the best player in the NBA by being placed in another situation like Cleveland where his leadership skills are tested. If James can show that, he has improved and that he can adapt, change, and be an effective leader in any organization, then he will retire as the greatest player in the NBA.

The approach I would take would be just like James. I think it is important to inspire others so that they can believe in the core philosophy of the organization. When everyone is in sync with each other, the organization will benefit the most and be the most productive. Followers appreciate when they are given credit and feel valued. As we discussed in class, productivity is better when subordinates and coworkers are loyal. In order to build loyalty a leader must show that he appreciates his followers by acknowledging them and giving them credit when credit is due. Many executives and upper management often forget to acknowledge that it takes a team to get the work done and run an origination effectively. Everyone deserves gratitude and James shows that he is the type of leader that appreciates his team. As far as the new leadership approach when addressing followers, I would take a mixture of all three. I think it is important to exemplify; connection to the subordinates and meeting the new challenges, socially responsible and a businessperson, and have emotional intelligence and in-tuned with others. As LeBron James demonstrates, an effective leader will have a mixture of all three of the new type of leadership approach.
According to the Myers/Briggs Test and our class discussion, LeBron James would be an ENTJ. He exemplifies “the executive” role. ENTJs are very career-focused and are able to execute critical decisions. Like an ENTJ, James is constantly scanning his environment for potential problems which he can turn into solutions. Like an ENTJ, James generally sees things from a long-range perspective, and he is constantly trying to find ways to execute effectively as a leader. A great example is how James was able to come back from losing to the Mavericks in his first season with the Miami Heat and pulling his team together to win two consecutive years. James is tireless in his efforts to constantly build the Miami Heat organization and continue to improve his team and win championships. He is able to visualize where his organization is headed. For these reasons, he is an effective leader. He is also very energized and love
to interact with people, especially his teammate. LeBron James often post Facebook post, twitter updates, and other social media interactions with fans. ENTJ enjoys interaction with others according to Myers/Briggs. ENTJ is a very forceful and dynamic presence who has a tremendous amount of self-confidence and excellent verbal communication skills and James exemplifies this through his presence on the basketball court. Players recognizes that James is a dominate player and he showcase his dominance, rather he wins or lose. ENTJ people tend to be dominating among others.

**Conclusion**

I learned that LeBron James is an effective leader. He represents an ENTJ. Although James is not an executive, he acts as an executive on the basketball court. I learned that James has come from humble beginnings and I think that because of James background, he is able to be humble for his experience and the people around him. James is able to execute effectively and show appreciation to others. He is able to take on the new roles of leadership and operate in way to unite his team and the core philosophy of the Miami Heat. James is able to keep the fans engaged enough to buy tickets and interact with his fans via social media. James is able to give back to his community and still find time to have dinner with his teammates, challenge them in practices, and push their skills in the games. James is able to step up to new challenges and inspire his teammates to do the same. His leadership is based on the situation he is in.
Although he was unable to do what he has done at the Miami Heat in Cleveland, I believe that James has learned from his experiences to be an effective leader. I firmly believe that LeBron James can go to another organization and build that team if he brings that same mentality and the knowledge he learned at the Miami Heat.

Bibliography


