

Jimmy Carter: Discovering the Soul of a Leader through an Investigation of Personality Traits

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i) Abstract

This research presents a case study of Jimmy Carter based on the Five Big personality dimensions considered to be important for effective leadership. Data sources include literary works, newspaper accounts and documentaries. An analysis of Carter's behavior during events such as the Camp David Accord, the Iran Contra crisis, and the work of the Carter Center provides leadership educators and students with a framework and method for studying and modeling effective leadership.

ii) Introduction

A key method for studying and developing leadership is to focus on personality traits. While there are hundreds of characteristics various authors list, research studies have shown that five general dimensions, the Big Five Personality dimensions, are shared by highly effective leaders. These five dimensions are extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience and emotional stability. In an attempt to better understand these dimensions and how they are exhibited by a leader through behavior, a study was conducted on Jimmy Carter, 39th President of the United States, with a key focus on the Big Five Personality dimensions. Based on this presentation, participants will develop an understanding of Jimmy Carter's leadership traits and discover a method for studying leaders through an investigation of personality traits.

iii) Literature Review

Leadership is a complex concept and the process of identifying what makes a successful leader has generated much discussion. One of the factors that studies show has an effect on leadership is personality traits. Personality is "the set of unseen characteristics and processes that underlie a relatively stable pattern of behavior in response to ideas, objects, or people in the environment," (Daft, 2002, p. 119). While there are hundreds, if not thousands, of characteristics that can be used to describe a person, there are certain traits that research studies show highly effective leaders share. These leader traits have been grouped into five general dimensions that describe personality and are often referred to as the Big Five personality dimensions (Daft 2002).

These five dimensions are: extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience and emotional stability. Each dimension is composed of numerous personality traits that establish whether or not a leader possesses the dimension. Research has found these dimensions to be factors in successful leadership (Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994).

The dimension of extroversion includes traits and characteristics that influence behavior in group settings (Daft, 2002) including being talkative, comfortable meeting new people,

dominance, assertiveness, and self confidence. Self-confidence is described by Dubrin (2004) as being self-assured without being bombastic and instilling confidence in team members.

Agreeableness, the second dimension in the big five, refers to the ability to get along with others, cooperative, compassionate, understanding, and trusting (Daft, 2002). Trust is a “person’s confidence in another individual’s intentions and motives, and in the sincerity of that individual’s word,” (Dubrin, 2004, p. 30). Trustworthiness can also be considered “walking the talk.” Consistency between deeds (walking) and words (talking) has a great deal to do with a leader’s effectiveness. A leader who is seen as saying one thing, but doing another will not gain much trust, respect or following from others.

Conscientiousness includes a person’s ability to be responsible, persistent, and achievement-oriented. Such a person remains focused on a few goals, which he or she pursues in a purposeful way, whereas a less conscientious person tends to be easily distracted and impulsive (Daft, 2002).

Emotional stability refers to the extent to which a leader is calm, secure, handles stress well, and is able to handle criticism (Daft, 2002). Leaders must control emotions in a way that is appropriate for the situation (Dubrin, 2004). Locke (1994) found that emotionally unstable leaders lack the ability to handle pressure and exhibit inconsistent behavior which damages relationships.

A person open to experience has a broad range of interests and is imaginative, creative, and willing to consider new ideas (Daft, 2002). Such people often seek out new experiences through travel and are intellectually curious.

While no individual can have all the personality traits, according to Hargrove (1988), talented leaders show a great range of skills and vary them to match changing situations. Each leader’s traits define him/her as a person and leader.

iv) Methods

In an attempt to better understand the Big Five personality dimensions and how personality traits are exhibited by leaders, an in-depth case study was conducted of an extraordinary leader: Jimmy Carter. As someone who has publicly faced harsh criticism at times and unconditional support and admiration at others, Carter has always led the public, the nation and the world towards a greater good. James Earl Carter, was 39th president of the United States, former Georgia governor, and founder of the Carter Center.

A case study is a detailed examination of an event, person or process that investigates the phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2003). The use of a case study to research a political leader is supported by Hargrove (1988) who stated that the achievements and failures of individual presidents are best understood through a contextual analysis.

Data sources for this case study include literary works, newspaper accounts and documentaries. An analysis of Carter’s behavior during events such as the Camp David Accord, the Iran Hostage crisis, and the work of the Carter Center provides leadership educators and

students with a framework and method for studying and modeling effective leadership. Data was collected and analyzed based on a search for evidence of personality traits as outlined previously.

v) Findings

Even though Carter may not make the top ten list of all-time great presidents (Hertzberg, 1996), he has exhibited the big five personality dimensions and/or the individual traits that make up each dimension. Through an analysis of several critical events in Carter's life, these traits will be discussed.

The Camp David Accords

The Camp David Accords, a historical event that led to a peace treaty between the warring nations of Egypt and Israel occurred in 1978 when Carter met with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian Prime Minister Anwar Sadat at the presidential retreat, Camp David in Maryland. In a documentary, "Jimmy Carter: American Experience" by PBS (2002), Jehan Sadat, wife of Anwar Sadat said, "Carter strove for an informal atmosphere at Camp David. All three of the leader's wives were invited to the retreat to defuse the tension and make them more reasonable."

According to PBS (2002), Carter also decided not to adhere to a rigid schedule of meetings, preferring to let the negotiations proceed on their own. His casualness about the set up of the retreat laid good groundwork for making the negotiations seem less threatening and took away the stresses of an already tense situation. The negotiations however informal they were, required much persistence, patience and listening from Carter. The comfortable and inviting atmosphere along with Carter's willingness to listen illustrates approachability, a trait that falls under the dimension of agreeableness.

The dimension of agreeableness is seen also through Carter's trait of understanding. Carter described his mind-set going into negotiations as "an intensely personal effort would be required of us. I had to understand these men," (PBS, 2002). In an attempt to satisfy both parties and bring peace between the two countries Carter knew he had to listen to each side and gain a clear understanding of what was needed. On the thirteenth day of being in seclusion at Camp David, Carter's National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski described the president as, "driving himself mercilessly, spending most of his time either debating with the Egyptian or the Israelis or drafting and revising texts that are being submitted to him. He has single-handedly written the proposed document for the Sinai formula," (PBS, 2002).

Carter's dimensions of extroversion and conscientiousness also contributed to the achievement of the negotiations. Through his traits of self-confidence and of assertiveness, Carter kept the warring leaders on track towards peace. Carter was caring but firm in dealing with the negotiations. In dealing with Begin, Carter had to be especially assertive in making progress with the treaty. Zbigniew explains the situation as,

"The president described Begin as rigid, unimaginative, preoccupied with the meaning of words, and unwilling to look at the subject in a broader perspective. He sounded really discouraged. He kept shaking his head and expressing his disappointment and frustrations."

Carter constantly had to demand Begin to be more willing to compromise and see a bigger picture in the negotiations. On one occasion it took Carter exploding at Begin, “After he outlined all of the controls, veto rights and privileges he would retain for Israel while giving the Arabs a form of self-rule, Carter exploded, ‘What you want to do is make the West Bank part of Israel...no self-respecting Arab would accept this,’” recalled Brzezinski, (PBS, 2002).

This episode with Begin along with the entire negotiations at Camp David illustrates Carter’s persistence, focus, and desire for achievement, all which are traits under the dimension of conscientiousness. It took many traits: approachability, understanding, listening, self-confidence, assertiveness, persistence, focus, and achievement-orientation, for Carter to be successful with the negotiations and negotiate a peace treaty.

Iran Hostage Crisis

While Carter has demonstrated many key traits, he has not always been perceived as a pillar of strength and influence. In fact, during the end of his presidential term, he was not viewed as a leader, but a coward and a failure. Of all of his great moments, Carter is forever plagued with being remembered by many for the Iran Hostage crisis that lasted 444 days and ultimately lost him the presidential re-election.

On November 4, 1979, a mob of students in Iran seized the U.S. Embassy and held 90 people hostage in retaliation against the U.S. involvement with Iran. All women, non-Americans, and blacks were released, but the remaining 52 people were held hostage for over 14 months. Throughout the duration of this crisis, Carter negotiated for the release of the hostages. There was even a failed attempt to release the hostages through Operation Eagle Claw that ended in the death of eight Americans.

During the 14 months the hostages were held captive, many traits appeared in Carter that were effective, but there were others that for the first time caused him to look incompetent as a leader in the public eye. The trait that helped him negotiate peace at Camp David seemed to fail him in his final hour, the trait of self-confidence.

Many Americans at the time felt that Carter had failed them and they lost the confidence they once had in him. The situation worsened when the Shah was allowed entry into the U.S. after Carter had denied him on a previous attempt. Vice President to Carter, Walter Mondale, remembers that crucial discussion with the council, “[Carter] went around the room, and most of us said, ‘let him in.’ And he said, ‘And if [the Iranians] take our employees in our embassy hostage, then what would be your advice?’ And the room just fell dead. No one had an answer to that. Turns out, we never did,” (PBS, 2002). Less than a month after admitting the Shah, the hostage crisis began.

If Carter had had confidence in his decision and trust in himself, history may have been different. Along with his self-confidence, Carter seemed to have lost his assertiveness to deal with the Iranians and his trustworthiness from the American public. For the first few months of the crisis, the American public rallied around Carter, but as winter turned to spring and negotiations failed to produce a deal, a frustrated America demanded stronger action, (PBS).

Rosalynn Carter recalls her husband's reaction to the crisis, "No one can know how much pressure there was on Jimmy to do something. I would go out and campaigning and come back and say, 'Why don't you do something?' And he said, 'What would you want me to do?' I said, 'Mine the harbors.' He said, 'Okay, suppose I mine the harbors, and they decide to take one hostage out every day and kill him. What am I going to do then?'" (PBS, 2002). As the conversation between Carter and Rosalynn demonstrates, the one thing Carter never lost was his compassion and his high degree of agreeableness.

The Iran Hostage Crisis was by all definitions a stressful situation, one that Carter was at the center of. The fate of 52 people teetered on Carter's decisions on how to handle the crisis. The nation, however, did not feel that Carter was making good decisions and turned on him with harsh criticism.

Many Americans felt that negotiating was not enough. The Denver Post published a letter to the editor from Daniel A. Darlington who voiced his opinion of the situation, "these Iranians have committed an act of war against the United States and all Carter wants to do at the moment is talk. It is time to speak with the power and the might of a first rate country instead of the wishy-washy language of diplomatic compromise," (Darlington, 1979, p. C4).

Carter's compassion is shown in his hesitance to use military action. This is based on his commitment to basic human rights, the alleviation of suffering, the promotion of peace in the Middle East ... (CNN, 1999)." When Carter did attempt a military mission to rescue the hostages however, it failed "due to mechanical problems and a severe sandstorm," (PBS, 2002). This mishap seemed to fuel the public's criticism of Carter even more. Sheldon J. Potter wrote a letter to the editor of the Denver Post, "So that's what our almighty government has had up its sleeve since Day One to help our 50 plus brave American hostages in Iran – a military slapstick comedy routine, played out in the deserts of Iran!" (Potter C6).

These sentiments from the letters to editors represent about ninety percent of letters to editors throughout the country during the time. However, some citizens rallied behind Carter and recognized his efforts toward success. The Minneapolis Tribune printed an article, "Minnesota Relatives of Hostages Differ Sharply on Rescue Mission" where Arvid Laingen, brother of a hostage said, "People have been severely criticizing Carter for doing nothing. But now that he does something and it doesn't work he is going to be severely criticized again?" (Laingen, 1980, p. A2).

Most people under high amounts of scrutiny, as Carter was, would crumble and fail, but not Carter. Throughout the entire Iran hostage crisis, Carter remained poised, calm and focused. He remained emotionally stable. Many leaders can maintain a strong footing of their goals and purposes, but few can do this when stress levels are high and lack of progress brings personal attacks. Jimmy Carter however took the public's disappointment in him and used it as a motivator for him to work even harder at negotiations with Iran.

Carter demonstrated his ability to handle stressful situations with a level head and was secure in his firm stance against going to war, which many encouraged. The media and the nation turned on Carter and criticized him and how he handled the crisis, but he remained calm. All these abilities support Carter's leadership trait of emotional stability.

The Carter Center

Because of the success of the Camp David Accords, Carter decided to establish The Carter Center, rather than just a presidential library (PBS, 2002). Through the center, Carter is still collaborating and negotiating with others in an effort towards peace in countries all over the world. His advice and wisdom is more sought after today than when he was the president of the United States. In the article "Lesson from Jimmy Carter" in Georgia Trends Magazine, Bill Shipp (2003) quotes Carter as saying:

"When I was involuntarily retired from the White House by the election in 1980, it took a while to get over the defeat. But I soon realized that I was one of the youngest presidents who had survived the White House and that I had a life expectancy still of about 25 years. So we explored what to do with the future.... We had access to almost any leader on earth. We had a lot of influence if we wanted to exert it."

Carter is exerting that influence and accessing numerous leaders in efforts to achieve the center's goals. In the center's brochure, Carter explained its overall purpose, "Rosalynn and I founded The Carter Center as a place where people could gather to discuss issues and ideas, pursue a common dream, or resolve longstanding differences in a beautiful and peaceful setting."

This sentiment of Carter is echoed in the center's mission statement, "to resolve conflict, promote democracy, protect human rights, and prevent disease and other afflictions," (Carter Center website). Because The Carter Center and its principles were founded and implemented by Carter himself, the center and what it stands for serves as an example of Carter's leadership. The purpose and principles that Carter based the center's foundation on reflect the traits found under the fourth of the big five personality dimensions, openness to experience.

Carter's openness to experience is evident in the center's broad range of interests and goals that range from politics to environment and health care to education. Not only are the center's interests broad, but so are the places it travels in order to implement them. The Carter Center has been involved in helping almost every country in the world with at least one aspect of its mission.

Through Carter's trips to Cuba, Zambia, Nicaragua, China and Bangladesh, just to name a few, to assist in the implementation of political elections, and Rosalyn's many visits to third world countries in an effort to eradicate Guinea Worm Disease, the two have experienced numerous cultures and exposure to new ideas. Travels and experiences such as these, in relation to being open to experience, were found by one researcher to be critical elements in developing leadership skills and qualities (Daft, 2002).

Carter encourages everyone else to keep learning by offering continuing education classes for the center's employees. Through the center's objectives, Carter's broad range of interests is seen. His willingness to consider new ideas is evident in his encouragement for people to continue their education in order to increase their levels of creativity. He openly experiences new things through the travel he does in efforts to be successful in the center's mission. It is through all these traits that the dimension of openness to experience is viewed in Carter.

vi) Conclusions and Future Implications

No leader can be high in all dimensions of leadership. The greatest leaders are those who know their strengths and weaknesses and use them both advantageously as tools to better themselves as leaders. Hertzberg (1996) sums up the true meaning Carter's leadership:

“He hasn't just talked about housing the homeless, he has built houses for them with his own hands and has inspired and organized others to do likewise. He hasn't just talked about comforting the afflicted, he has mounted a little known program through the Carter Center that is well on its way to eradicating Guinea worm disease...He hasn't just talked about extending democracy, he has put his reputation and sometimes his very life on the line in country after country often with little or no publicity, to promote free elections and expose rigged ones. And of course, most controversially, he hasn't just talked about peace, he has made peace, made peace possible by using his moral prestige and his willingness to take risks and his persistence and his patience and his stubbornness to bring hostile parties that extra little distance that sometimes makes the difference between war and not war,” (Hertzberg, 1996).

Through his strong traits in the Big Five dimensions and his awareness of his downfalls in his swaying traits of self-confidence and assertiveness, Jimmy Carter has defined what leadership is about. Leaders must know themselves well enough to know what they are capable of doing for others and the best ways to do it.

Because of his great accomplishments, Jimmy Carter was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in December 2002. In his acceptance speech, Carter quoted a lesson from a school teacher who said “an individual is not swept along on a tide of inevitability but can influence even the greatest human events. (Carter, 2002).” Carter has done just that, he has influenced some of the greatest human events. He negotiated a peace treaty during the Camp David Accords, remained poised and persistent during a time of national crisis and continues to fight for human rights throughout the world through the Carter Center.

Through an analysis of a leader's personality traits and the events in which they are demonstrated, leadership educators and students of leadership can better understand the complex phenomenon called leadership. Whether applied to historical or current leaders, case study methods offer the opportunity for in-depth analysis of leaders' behavior.

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