General Peter Chiarelli - An Old School Leader Using a New Leadership Approach

Former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, General (retired) Peter Chiarelli is, by all accounts, a leader among leaders. Chiarelli graduated from the Reserve Officer Training Corps at Seattle University as the Outstanding Military Graduate in 1972 and embarked on a 40 year military career that would see him occupy the second highest uniformed office in the U.S. Army (Cloud & Jaffe, 2009, p. 15). Although Chiarelli was undoubtedly the product of the leadership approaches that permeated the military culture during the 1930s through the 1960s, Chiarelli's leadership traits developed during his career and likely encompassed components from all leadership approaches, most notably the traits approach and the authentic approach.

To understand the different theories of leadership is to understand the changes in society from the dawn of the 20th century until today. Northouse (2016) describes those early theories and approaches as "emphasizing control and centralization of power with a common theme of domination" (p. 2). The newest leadership theory was developed in 2003 and is called authentic leadership based on meeting society's demands for "bona fide leadership they can trust and for leaders who are honest and good" (Northouse, 2016, p. 195). The delta between those early approaches and today has caused researchers to shift from focusing on the leader to focusing on the process of leadership.

When we look at the trait leadership approach of the 1930s, also known as the "Great Man Theory", it becomes easy to place Chiarelli in that box because it is "property based", he has the properties that people look for in a leader; height, intelligence, extraversion, fluency, etc." (Northouse, 2016, p. 9). So the intuitive trait approach becomes easy to accept because he appears to be a "born leader". Does that mean he cannot develop leadership skills, traits, or properties? Absolutely not, that is what you need the new "authentic leader" approach for.

If we apply the characteristics of the authentic leader theory to Chiarelli, his leadership style has demonstrated that he possesses all of them; "passion, compassion, consistency, connectedness, and behavior" (Northouse, 2016, p. 198). So the question becomes is he a trait based leader or an authentic leader? The answer is quite simply, yes!

"Traits are those individual attributes that describe who leaders are as people, while the term process refers to what leaders do through the application of knowledge, skills, and abilities related to leading" (Bissonette, 2018, p. 7). Chiarelli does both by being a leader whose traits are recognized as having a positive relationship to leadership and by applying the lesson he has learned in some of the most demanding leadership challenges of the 21st century, including the attacks on September 11, 2001 and rebuilding Iraq in 2003. So trait and authenticity theories complement one another when viewed through a lens that sees leadership as a holistic event and not an event tied to a single explanation.

Although Peter Chiarelli graduated from all the right leadership courses throughout his career, he is a great example of what can happen when process does not lead the man, but man leads the process.

References

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