Leadership Styles in The Shawshank Redemption

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Based on the Stephen King novel, “The Shawshank Redemption” (Marvin & Darabont, 1994) tells the story of Andy Dufresne, a successful banker wrongfully convicted of murdering his wife and her lover. Once in Shawshank prison, his world is turned upside down as he learns the new dynamics of life on the inside. Set in the 1940’s, the film shows the graphic and harsh world that exists inside prison walls and when viewed through a leadership theory lens, provides insight into the ways in which corruption, power, and struggle can change the way we behave both as leaders and followers. There are several characters in the movie who reflect various leadership styles: Andy Dufresne (emotional intelligence), Warden Norton (authority-compliance) and Ellis “Red” Redding (middle-of-the-road and situational).

Red described Andy Dufresne as a quiet man, who “strolled, like a man in a park without a care or worry in the world” (Marvin & Darabont, 1994). His quiet nature initially made him a target for the Sisters, a violent group of convicts who abused him physically and sexually. Later in the film, Andy was able to gain favor with the guards, which allowed Andy a degree of protection from the Sisters and resulted in their leader, Boggs, being removed from the prison. Aligning himself with prison guards did help Andy but also put him in their debt as they utilized his skills to file their taxes and provide financial guidance for their illegal activities. But Andy also aligned himself with Red, an inmate who was well-respected and had seniority among the other inmates and who became a confidant and friend. In the beginning of their friendship, Red didn’t understand Andy very well, but as time progressed, Red started to appreciate Andy’s unique approach to managing prison life.

Later in the film, Warden Norton brought Andy into a money laundering scheme. The tie to Warden Norton again provided Andy with a degree of protection, but also gave him some
insight into Warden Norton’s true colors as Andy became a temporary member of the Warden’s in-group. Andy used his in-group status to acquire things needed for his escape and to set up accounts he would need once he was on the outside. Unlike other inmates, Andy was truly innocent and the thought of spending his life behind bars was not acceptable. During nearly 20 years in prison, Andy chiseled through the walls with a rock hammer and planned his escape from Shawshank state prison. Once free, he used his knowledge of the money laundering scheme to ruin the warden and proceeded to establish a comfortable life in “a warm place with no memory” (Marvin & Darabont, 1994).

The main character in the film, Andy Dufresne, would eventually assume a leadership role among inmates; the characteristics of this role are best illustrated with the emotional intelligence framework (Goleman, 1996). Andy was a highly intelligent and skilled person, both of which are threshold capabilities needed to become a leader (Goleman, 1996). He also displayed (in varying degrees), each of the skills that comprise the emotional intelligence framework. Specifically, Andy routinely exhibited motivation, empathy and social skill, while he only demonstrated self-awareness and self-regulation occasionally (Goleman, 1996).

Andy’s motivation could be seen in two different ways: doing everything he could to get funding for a prison library and continuously planning his future escape from the “fictional” Shawshank state prison. As a successful, educated man, Andy felt that the growth of the Shawshank prison library was of great importance and undertook the task of procuring funding. Through weekly letters and continued effort, he secured adequate funding and resources to allow the library to thrive. Throughout the entire process, Andy was constantly reminded that he would never succeed at his endeavor. Despite the difficulty, Andy continued to maintain optimism in the face of failure (Goleman, 1996).
Another example of Andy’s motivation was through his relentless desire to get out of prison. Andy eventually made this a reality through a lengthy tunneling process and debris-removal plan. The risk of getting caught and the immense amount of work required to make his dream of freedom a reality both go towards showing the lengths that one man will go to in an effort to achieve his end goal. His high level of motivation can be summed up with the words Andy said to Red toward the end of the movie (Marvin & Darabont, 1994): “It comes down to a simple choice. Get busy living or get busy dying.”

Andy also had a significant amount of empathy for people. He considered others’ feelings and wanted to help anyone around him. When he first arrived at Shawshank, he kept to himself and the only person he talked to was Red. Eventually, Andy was chosen for a coveted, outside prison job where inmates would tar the prison roof. While doing this work, Andy overheard the main guard, Captain Hadley, talking about an inheritance he would receive. Although a dangerous idea, Andy approached the guard and told him that he could save money using a legal tax loophole. Captain Hadley, after a rather tense conversation, allowed Andy to help him in exchange for a few cold beers for his fellow co-workers. Another way that Andy displayed his empathy towards others was when he spent time in the library mentoring other inmates. A new inmate, Tommy Williams, was a young, married father who had been in and out of the legal system most of his life. After Andy remarked to Tommy that he was not a very good criminal, Tommy decided that he wanted to turn his life around and asked Andy to help him study for his high school equivalency test. Andy agreed to help him and ended up spending time tutoring him, a perfect example of his “ability to develop others” (p. 5), which is a key component of the empathy skill from Goleman’s emotional intelligence framework (1996).
The last component of the emotional intelligence framework that Andy displayed was social skill. As discussed earlier with regards to the prison library fund procurement, Andy went on to demonstrate expertise in building and leading teams when he set up the library and supervised inmates to run the library. Another example of his social skill can be seen when Andy inspired Red to try to get paroled, instead of sabotaging his chances by repeating the same answers at each board meeting. Seeing the similarity of Red to Brooks, who could not handle life on the outside, Andy felt that Red would be the perfect companion for his life in Mexico. Their mutual understanding of the difficulties of life both in and out of prison would provide both men with a support system to cope with any changes. The way Andy managed his relationship with Red is an example of Andy’s ability to move people in the desired direction (Goleman, 1996).

Andy displayed the self-awareness skill of the emotional intelligence framework by understanding his skills and knowing what he would be able to contribute in order to gain an advantage while he was in prison (e.g., offering to help Captain Hadley, assisting Warden Norton in laundering money). Andy’s brief display of self-regulation was seen when he explained that he originally parked outside the home of his wife’s lover the night they were murdered and had been drinking. Despite having strong feelings (and strong booze), Andy regulated his emotions and instead of entering a potentially volatile situation, went home to sober up. Although this display of self-regulation did not occur in a leadership-type situation, it revealed Andy could control himself and was later displayed again during his methodical wall-excavation and debris removal project.

Although Andy’s leadership style did include elements of multiple different leadership styles, Goleman’s emotional intelligence framework (1996) is probably the best theory that can be used to describe his overall approach to leadership. One of the leadership capabilities Andy
displayed, in addition to the emotional intelligence framework, included an ability to “focus on opportunities, not problems” (p. 27), which is one of Drucker’s requirements for an effective leader (2004), and he demonstrated this capability by always focusing on the positive things that were going on. Another important aspect of being a successful leader is to know what your strengths are and what you are able to contribute (Drucker, 1999), which Andy displayed when he offered to provide financial advice to Captain Hadley in order to hopefully gain preferential treatment from the prison staff. Overall, his leadership capabilities were definitely well-rounded and there weren’t any major issues related to his leadership style.

Andy’s leadership style would work if applied in the real world. His leadership style is similar to the Strategist action logic type because he challenges existing assumptions (e.g., library funds) and generates transformations both for the physical structure of Shawshank prison (i.e. construction of the actual library) but also those transformations seen within the inmates (seeking a high school education) (Rooke & Torbert, 2005). By keeping his fellow inmates’ needs in mind, Andy was able to accomplish his own goals while still fulfilling some of theirs – even those that they did not know that they had. The strategic action logic is defined as having no weaknesses (Rooke & Torbert, 2005), also in line with the idea that Andy’s leadership style was highly successful.

The Alchemist action logic type (Rooke & Torbert, 2005) would be a viable alternative lens through which Andy could be viewed. The alchemist is known to be able to adapt their leadership style when necessary for certain situations: as a teacher and mentor to young Tommy, a confidant and trusted source of guidance for Red, or a skilled financial specialist for Warden Norton, Andy showed a remarkable capability to adjust his personality as needed for certain situations. His final actions at Shawshank prison that exposed Warden Norton, showed a desire
to shed daylight on the illegal activities that had been on-going within prison walls and allowed Andy to act as a reformer for the system as a whole.

Warden Norton can also be seen as a leader in the movie whose character can be analyzed by looking at various leadership approaches. Referring to the Northouse trait approach (2010), Warden Norton demonstrates most of the traits found in many leaders: he is intelligent, self-confident and exhibits a strong determination to ensure that inmates in his facility are "rehabilitated" as he defines rehabilitation. There are two traits that he does not possess: integrity and sociability. Fortunately for his sake, his omnipotent position within the penitentiary and ability to maintain power through his close circle of officers, such as Captain Hadley, allow him to exert his influence and function without those traits. By maintaining a close circle of officers, Warden Norton demonstrates the effectiveness of using an in-group as described in the Leader-Member Exchange theory (LMX), also known as the vertical dyad linkage theory (Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997).

From the skills approach Katz introduced in 1955 and that Northouse covered in 2010, Warden Norton can be described as very low on the technical level, probably around ten to fifteen percent. His officers do most of the work around the prison leaving little reason for him to have technical skills. Most of his focus was on the human factor, as Warden Norton exerted his control via strict discipline, intimidation and fear. Warden Norton was closer to sixty percent in this area. Finally, his involvement in the conceptual area is revealed when he discussed the prison budget, how state senators view spending money on prisons, and when he announced his idea to use inmates to perform community service. Warden Norton's conceptual skills were probably around twenty-five to thirty percent.
Using the style approach to analyze Warden Norton as a leader, there can only be one type to describe his leadership throughout the movie - the authority-compliance style. He often directed his officers or inmates to perform different tasks and is very strict in requiring compliance with his directives. Negative consequences are always an option when Warden Norton wields his power. However, it is true that Warden Norton displays the situational approach as well. While he rarely shows any compassion or support, Warden Norton changed his style on occasion. For Andy, he made "exceptions" that allowed Andy to hang posters of scantily clad women on his wall and send letters to senators asking for money for the library. Finally, Warden Norton dramatically changed his style with Tommy during a meeting to determine if Tommy was being truthful with Andy and even offered Tommy a cigarette to make him feel comfortable.

Warden Norton’s leadership styles were successful in many instances. His authority-compliance approach set the tone with new inmates when he introduced them to Shawshank prison. The fear he instilled in the inmates is apparent when inmates sent out warning calls before Warden Norton arrived to do a surprise cell inspection. His approach was effective with his guards, as they (with the exception of his in-group member Captain Hadley) stood at attention in his presence and did not look him in the eye when being spoken to or when responding to him. This was evident when Warden Norton entered Andy's cell after Andy disappeared and demanded the guards find Andy immediately. His authority-compliance style was successful with Andy too. He made Andy shine his shoes, clean his clothes and do his money laundering. But it was most obvious when Warden Norton visited Andy in solitary confinement and told Andy he will continue to process his scams. Then we see Andy continuing to do what Warden Norton told him to do (because Andy knew the Warden killed Tommy),
despite Andy’s earlier refusal. On the rare occasion when the Warden changed style to a supportive one, it was also effective. Because Warden Norton approved some changes Andy wanted to make, he kept Andy happy and compliant.

Yet, the Warden’s approach also failed on a few occasions, although these occasions were more the exception than the rule. His unceasing authority-compliance approach eventually caused Andy to rebel. The first time Andy rebelled was when he played opera music over the loudspeakers and wouldn't open the door after the Warden demanded that he do so. The second time was when Andy finally had enough of the punishment, decided to get busy living, escaped from Shawshank state prison and promptly sent Warden Norton’s accounting records and details of the murders and corrupt business practices to the newspaper.

In many instances the authority-compliance approach seems reasonable when dealing with people who are incarcerated. In real life, the authority-compliance approach is used with great effectiveness in the military, airline industry, police force, and other industries where strict compliance with requests is required to prevent physical harm to those participating in or around these jobs. When it comes to prisons, this approach is also effective because, based on the past actions of prisoners, they are not likely to strive for higher ideals. Thus, maintaining a sense of authority and demonstrating strong consequences for poor behavior is important. However, there are alternative approaches that Warden Norton could have used that may have yielded the same or even better results.

Instead of leading by the authority-compliance style and with intimidation and fear, using an approach to rehabilitation that incorporates more coaching and education may have worked just as well for Warden Norton. For example, the library program, while not Warden Norton's idea, was successful in providing a healthy way to rehabilitate inmates while keeping them
compliant (they didn't want to lose their library so they behaved). Warden Norton also placed a strong emphasis on the Bible and used Bible verses throughout the prison. As opposed to just telling the inmates to find salvation in the Bible, he could have coached, explained, and modeled the characteristics in the Bible he wanted inmates to follow to improve their character.

Warden Norton could have used a middle-of-the-road style to promote a more balanced approach to compliance. This may have created an environment where inmates were less likely to rebel. Yet it still would be clear who was in charge and that there were consequences for poor behavior. If Warden Norton spent more time developing his self-awareness, empathy and social skills, as described in Goleman’s Emotional Intelligence concept (1996), he may have been able to use a different leadership style and improve his effectiveness at rehabilitation.

Finally, in many cases, Norton could have used the Path-Goal approach (House, 1971). Instead of using threats, the Path-Goal approach could have been implemented via telling inmates what to do, removing restrictions (roadblocks) to allow them to perform a task, and rewarding inmates when they achieve different levels on the way toward reaching a goal. This approach could promote an inmate’s interest in achieving higher education, developing team skills through project work, participating in prison sponsored character building programs, etc. Using this approach instead of the authority-compliance style, it seems likely that the Shawshank prison would have produced inmates who were truly rehabilitated rather than sending the same person back into society again, albeit a more institutionalized one as we saw with Brooks and almost with Red when they were released.

Ellis “Red” Redding is the older, respected leader of a group of inmates and has a reputation of being able to get the inmates anything they need, from a rock hammer to posters of female movie stars. Throughout the film, Red primarily displayed a middle-of-the-road
leadership style and situational leadership. In middle-of-the-road leadership, leaders seek to avoid conflict while emphasizing moderate levels of production and interpersonal relationships (Kritsonis, 2003).

Red lived within the restraints that a penal system imposes but was able to show a moderate degree of concern for inmates in his group and the work they were assigned to do. Red calmly insisted that group members concentrate on their tasks (whether inside or outside of the prison) and made sure they satisfactorily completed their work. Being too concerned for a fellow inmate was likely frowned upon, so Red had to carefully choose the time and place to give advice. At the beginning of the film, he instructed newcomer Andy to watch his back at all times. Red also warned his group to keep their attitude in check around the guards but did not say more than that. Although the middle-of-the-road leadership style is primarily viewed within the context of business, the concept still applies as Red maintained a balance in his concern for people and concern for production within an organization (the prison, so to speak) meant to rehabilitate society’s worst offenders.

Furthermore, Red could adjust his behavior depending on whatever situation he found himself in at the prison. Situational leadership theory states that leadership styles are not rigid and can be changed based on circumstances (Management Study Guide, 2012). Red expressed a much higher level of support for Brooks during a discussion about why Brooks held Heyward at knifepoint. Red told his group that Brooks was dependent on prison life after 50 years and though granted parole, Brooks would have no identity in the outside world.

Leaders also exhibit different kinds of action logic – ways in which they interpret their surroundings and react when their safety is challenged (Rooke & Torbert, 2005). Red exhibited the diplomat action logic type. The diplomat avoids conflict and is the supportive glue on teams
(Rooke & Torbert, 2005). An example of this is when Red implored Andy to mind his business and focus on putting tar on the roof instead of approaching Guard Hadley to offer help preparing his taxes. Furthermore, Red is an example of the LMX theory in action. It was understood that if any inmate wanted Red to procure highly coveted items from the outside, Red’s name could never be mentioned as the source or that particular perk would disappear along with expulsion from Red’s in-group.

Red’s leadership style was successful as he kept his group together through hard days that mark life in prison and they supported each other. However, Red was not able to motivate his group, set a direction or align people with a vision – the key things that leaders do (Kotter, 1990). This is because Red did not have any compelling vision nor did he think about the future. Red did not believe in hope because he had been in Shawshank state prison for 30 years and was thoroughly institutionalized and did not know any other way of living. His worldview was limited, but he understood that and conducted himself in a manner that would ensure his survival and that of his group members.

The middle-of-the-road leadership style that Red displayed can succeed in the real world, but these types of leaders will not usually guide organizations to the next level of success or keep them competitive in the marketplace. For example, Detroit automakers were not innovative and their products were average, contributing to financial woes and struggles to keep up with foreign automakers. Regarding situational leadership, American presidents have successfully illustrated this as they must lead on shifting domestic and foreign issues and handle unexpected crises and events.

Other than middle-of-the-road leadership, Red could have worked on developing certain traits that would have enhanced his leadership style. Red already possessed intelligence, integrity
and sociability, but was somewhat deficient in self-confidence and determination (unlike Andy). Another alternative for Red would be authentic leadership. Authentic leaders have a high degree of self awareness, know who they are and make decisions grounded in this reality (George, Sims, McLean & Mayer, 2007). At the end of the film, there were glimpses of Red discovering his authenticity. He began to connect the meaning and context of his life to his personal beliefs and values. When Red finally voiced his true opinion about rehabilitation and whether he was ready to return to society, the board granted him parole.

The themes in this film are familiar, most notably the odd manner in which empathy goes more towards the prisoners than the warden and guards. Despite society’s belief that officers of the law should adhere to higher moral/ethical standards, this film exposes the fact that anyone could potentially take advantage of one’s position of power for personal gain. The question arises about how that power is used and the manner in which it harms those around us. In the context of this film, there are several instances where power and corruption puts lives in danger – for example, when Warden Norton has Tommy killed and almost every time that Captain Hadley interacts with the inmates.

Throughout the film, it can be said that certain leadership styles may be effective in the short term, despite their reputation for not generally being accepted as good leadership styles. Leadership styles can be effective depending on the situation in which they are applied. Red’s style as a middle-of-the-road leader is very effective in the context of his group dynamic, yet does not make him a threat to the guards. He is also respected in the prison community. Within a more typical environment, this middle-of-the-road style can be seen as ambivalent and can often frustrate people who prefer decisiveness. However, the delicate balance that must be maintained made this an appropriate style for Red. It is interesting to note how both Red and Warden Norton
illustrate the LMX concept in which they both act as the leader of an in-group. Their degree of influence gains their in-group power and comfort (whether it be monetary for the guards and Warden Norton or personal convenience and luxury items for the inmates).

All three leaders discussed above used some level of transactional leadership to advance their agendas. Andy, for example, performs financial services for the guards and educational services for the inmates. While he does gain something personally - protection, self-preservation, or respect - Andy is able to use this to his advantage. Warden Norton uses his position of power to gain respect and for monetary advantage, both inside and outside of the prison. Transactional leadership was shown, despite its obvious ethical pitfalls, as a positive way of gaining and showing favor.

It should be noted that many of the lessons learned in this film are not effective in a workplace environment. In situations where people are expected to maintain decorum and mutual respect, such practices as LMX and transactional leadership, as seen in this film, would be highly unethical and surely lead to office disputes. Yet, in extreme circumstances, like those shown in the film, certain leadership styles can still be effective in their implementation. Ultimately this movie demonstrates that no one leadership style is successful in every situation and the most effective leaders, based purely on their goals (ethical or not), are the ones who can analyze the situation and use a leadership style that will have the desired impact.
References


