Are Charismatic Leaders Capable of Managing Sustainable Conservation Projects?

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Keywords: Conservation projects; Charismatic leaders; Vignette; Sociological; Management Sciences; Organizational Psychology

Introduction

The paper discusses the sustainability of conservation projects that are managed by charismatic leaders. In the first part I work with the vignette "Leadership for Conservation in Africa" to exemplify the topic and discuss the impact of charismatic leadership on effectiveness and efficiency of African conservation teams. Risks of that particular leadership style are discussed in terms of sustainable action and realisation of a long-term vision. In the second part the vignette is used to explore the shift of leadership driven conservation towards a different management approach in New Conservation. The new framing integrates environmental, sociological, psychological and management science concepts to analyse conservation complexity at the nexus of human-nature interaction and to define new pathways.

Vignette

Damian Mander [1] (44) is an Australian anti-poaching activist based in Zimbabwe and founder of the *International Anti-Poaching Foundation* (IAPF) as well as the initiator and director of the Conservation Guardians. He has military and business school training. In his military career his focus was on project management in armed conflicts and on training special forces in Iraq. Mander declares that since 2015 his anti-poaching and tactical training programs in Africa follow a community-based approach. In his projects African females with difficult backgrounds are systematically trained to become armed wildlife rangers and female empowerment is a side theme of his approach to anti-poaching.

The women are entitled to hold positions in Mander´s elitist Akashinga team that is dedicated to protect endangered rhinos in Zimbabwe. He is actively involved in training and in field works. His marketing activities involve many documentaries such as David Cameron´s Akashinga – The Brave Ones, interviews, and media coverage of his works. His relationships with activists such as Jane Goodall have added to his nimbus and fame [1,2]. In 2022 the population of rhinos in Zimbabwe has surpassed more than 1000 animals for the first time in more than 30 years, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature Species Survival Commission's African Rhino Specialist Group [3].

Discussion

Akashinga - Charismatic leadership and Sustainability

Although the documentary gives some insights, the management of the project team remains a black box. Apparently, the charismatic leader Mander has formed a high-performance team and his stakeholder management and networking activities [4] established a certain social pressure and team cohesion through global visibility and recognition - next to a constant stream of funding from beneficiaries. According to the interviews in the film it can be assumed that Mander´s leadership style is based on high referent power (attractive, rich male with a track record of successful operations) and reward power (monetary and social benefits like recognition and upward social mobility for team members). In the film, his situational leadership style varies from telling, to selling and even delegation in relation to the maturity level of team members [5]. The degree of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation of the young females from poor backgrounds is unclear although there are gender differences in attitude towards poaching in African societies [6]. Team members are mainly vegetarians like the team leader which can point to a genuine desire to protect animals or to social desirability [7]. However, the need for safety, food, and ubuntu or community spirit) might outweigh other needs and motivators like the genuine wish to protect endemic and endangered species. Power attributes such as expensive weapons and uniforms, and fame might play a role, too [8,9].

Sustainability – realizing a long-term vision

Wheatley, Frieze [10] critically discuss the "seductive image of heroes" for long term success in the complex field of conservation. Although Mander and his officers give direction and clarity in regard to goals, roles and processes they do not consider interpersonal relationships important in this top-down organisation [11,12]. It has to be seen whether Mander's vision has formed a team that has the perseverance [13] to secure ongoing operations despite drawbacks. Can the team sensibly self-reflect roles in the light of future strategies? Is the succession issue addressed? Will the team be able to cope with troubles without a strong foreign leader? Can they jointly face the critique from local communities and conservation experts if new facts ask for brainstorming and reforming of actions and shuffling of roles of team members? [14].

Generally, the success of anti-poaching and protection of species in Zimbabwe and other African countries is critically discussed for Zimbabwe as anti-poachers also started to protect elephants in the war-stricken country – a species that is not endangered and that destroys crops of local farmers [6]. Consequently, Mbaria [15] questions foreign-hero and military-style driven conservation in Africa and calls it new imperialism.

Theoretical Framing – A Shift from Leadership to Management in New Conservation

Risks and opportunities of charismatic leadership

The leadership concept of charismatic authority derives from Weberian classification in sociology and relates to "the likelihood that a group of defined persons observe orders given by the leadership" [16,17]. In the literature related to Weber charismatic leadership is connected to "extraordinary virtue and unusual quality of personality and exceptional powers" that can be found in military heroes, hunters, healers/magicians [17] - and in current business leaders like Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos. In psychology, the dangers of charismatic leadership are extensively discussed. McIntosh exemplifies how the belief that "the commands of a leader are legitimate" is a "group phenomenon". In this case, the team will be united by the belief that obedience to that idealized "father figure" is morally or legally obligatory [18].

Shared belief systems are the glue for team cohesion [19]. However, if cohesion relies on team loyalty to a single leader it is critically viewed in organizational theory as this charismatic leadership potentially questions institutionalized authority [20]. In a worst-case scenario charismatic leadership can lead to anti-compliant team behaviour that clashes with ethics, mission, and rules of the umbrella organisation [21]. At the same time the need for organisational transformation reindorses the concept of "change agents" in conservation and in transformation studies.

Legitimate change agents can be institutions [22] or engaged individuals who initiate and drive change to transform systems or rules or they can kick-off the design of new ones [23,24].

New conservation - new management challenges

New Conservation [25] addresses the complexity of coupled human and natural systems [6] and underlines the importance of participation and continued involvement of indigenous communities in strategy definition and implementation for long term success [26]. Equally, concepts of Political Ecology and Environmentalism stress the need for local empowerment and enabling. Therefore, effective transformational management needs to understand traditional belief systems of relevant stakeholders, to jointly reflect supporting attitudes, and to define the right incentives for sustainable behaviour (Mayne 2015).

In New Conservation Management challenges for successful reintroduction of species and ecosystem restoration derive from the cultural context [19]. In this new perspective conservation management can be understood as the challenge to "build a robust management system with the necessary elements to govern socio-environmental complexity and transformation. In Adaptive Governance new management challenges arise out of the changing needs for personal achievement of team members, onboarding of new team members and exit of trusted and accepted ones.

With moving targets, unintended consequences, and emerging synergies it is crucial to [4].

a) Mediate conflicts [19].

b) Build a robust team of change-managers [11].

c) Frequently build consensus.

d) Enable self-organisation.

e) Constantly manage the strategic fit of projects objectives and actions with organisational goals and rules.

f) To orchestrate the inputs of external stakeholders and different experts for the sustainability of actions.

Conclusion

The ability to build a viable management system that allows all system players to contribute to the success of the mission is of crucial importance in New Conservation. This management competence can be learned and trained to a certain extent [27,28]. Although the confusing term Leadership is still used in business schools and charismatic leadership remains a role model for self-declared leaders the Weberian type of charismatic leadership is not adequate for long-term conservation success. If the "leader" does not initiate adequate management systems, compliant long-term engagement of professional teams and volunteers must be considered as critical.

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