Leadership in Stoic Philosophy: Virtues and Communication

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In the context of Stoic philosophical ethics, this article examines the theory of leadership traits and behaviour, leadership virtues, communication, and life practices. The Stoic philosophical tradition, which originated in ancient antiquity, is gaining popularity and relevance in today's world of technological change, competition and insecurity. An analysis of the scientific literature reveals that leadership is widely addressed within various disciplines, reflecting its growing role in economics, business, politics, education, the media, and other areas of society. The article demonstrates that although the Stoics did not use the terms 'leadership' or 'communication,' their philosophy can be related to the theory of personal leadership by providing a broad and comprehensive presentation of the individual's moral system, practices of self-restraint and self-development in life, behavioural patterns and communication principles. The analysis reveals that the theories of self-regulation, self-direction, intrinsic motivation and other qualities of a leader, as defined by contemporary leadership researchers, have their origins in Stoic philosophy.

Keywords: personal leadership, communication, virtues, Stoic philosophy

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary world, many businesses and institutions organise personal leadership seminars inspired by Seneca and guided by Stoic principles and virtues. Numerous training programmes are based on the philosophical ideas of the Stoics. Although the Stoics did not use the term 'leader', their philosophy, which covers a broad discussion of life practices, virtues, and behavioural patterns, can be linked to modern leadership theory. The term 'Stoic' itself evokes the image of a person characterised by exceptional endurance, patience, self-control, and courage in the face of difficulties. Leadership has the potential to address complex challenges not only in personal lives and organisations but also in society at the national and international levels, promoting the collective good and generating positive social and cultural change (Pandya 2024; Kuipers et al. 2023; Moore et al. 2023).

Leadership issues are widely studied in various disciplines, reflecting the growing role of leadership in the economic and business sectors (Andriani et al. 2024; Hehenkamp et al. 2024; Sarwar et al. 2023; Šilingienė et al. 2023; Klösel 2022; Ciulla 2022; Masood et al. 2011), politics (Vergaray 2024; Morrell 2012), education (Singh 2024; Brandon et al. 2024; Tremblay 2022), media, and other public and social sectors (Knotts et al. 2022). Furthermore, research reveals that personal leadership and self-development can help prevent various mental health problems, including sleep disorders, anxiety and depression (Fitzgerald 2022: 57).

Seneca extensively discusses these insights, diagnosing that signs of a 'sick soul' include anxiety, fear of the future, and an inability to control emotions. He emphasises the need for the human soul to engage in philosophy, which he saw as having a therapeutic effect on intellect, self-control and virtue (for more details, refer to Seneca 2022). The Stoics view philosophy as a practical activity, that is, a way to transform one's life to find inner harmony and overcome personal challenges. However, moral commitment and responsibility are integral parts of this harmony (Groenendijk 2009).

Mitchell (2019) sees Stoicism as a powerful philosophy that is rapidly gaining popularity today. It offers a deep and comprehensive understanding of human nature, emotions, and the causes of spiritual states and also provides a highly effective life philosophy that can help individuals become better managers and acquire essential leadership skills. Raffnsøe et al. (2014), in their 'leadership lab' experiment, review the historical leadership traditions of kings and dukes, as well as the works of Scholastic philosophers and Stoics. They note that appropriate control of emotions in the face of difficult and adverse conditions has always been vital for effective leadership.

In his exploration of Stoic philosophical wisdom, Irvine (2009) identifies Stoicism as one of the most popular and successful schools of thought in ancient Rome. Stoic philosophy remains significant in today's ever-changing and uncertain world because it offers guidance for individuals seeking a more authentic, satisfying and stable way of living. Leadership is inherently a multi-level phenomenon. It develops and expresses itself in various specific ways. Therefore, it is preferable to begin not with the perspective of business and organisational leaders, but with the practical, individual level of a person's life. Stoicism is not merely a theoretical framework; it is, first and foremost, an art of living (Jiang-Xia 2022).

Within the context of Stoic philosophy, personal leadership development and leadership communication can be discussed (Mitchell 2019; Raffnsøe et al. 2014). Prominent Stoic philosophers such as Lucius Annaeus Seneca (2022; 2003; 2004), Epictetus (1925; 1807) and Marcus Aurelius (1910) present models of behaviour and moral principles in their writings, which include practical advice and attitudes on how to behave, interact with others, respond to difficulties, and achieve self-restraint and life goals. The article aims to define the Stoic leader and to reveal which Stoic ethical principles and life practices contribute to the development of a spirit of personal leadership in human beings today. The focus is on non-managerial but rather on personal qualities, virtues, principles of life and communication.

LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION

In today's context, leadership research remains an ongoing effort to understand and strengthen leadership by assessing the effectiveness of communication between those involved in different situations. In the 21st century, the philosophy of leadership embraces adaptability and agility, which is becoming an integral part of a leader's competency in a fast-changing environment.

Openness, diversity, continuous learning, and inspiring others are prioritised, with an emphasis on ethical leadership and inclusiveness in the face of complex challenges (Kiplimo 2023). However, research indicates an increasing attempt to look back and draw on the effective Stoic philosophy of life with the aim of strengthening, understanding, and focusing on personal qualities, using them purposefully in leadership communication (Dopierała 2022). Stoic philosophy argues that despite being not able to control the outside world, people can find peace, happiness and meaning by focusing on themselves, their beliefs and their actions (Evans 2019). Leadership communication is defined as inspiring and encouraging an individual or a group through dialogue and persuasive communication to share information in a systematic and meaningful way, to use excellent communication skills, the ability to manage human nature, and to guide a group of individuals to choose a specific course of action (Luthra, Dahiya 2015; Bass, Stogdill 1990; Kiplimo 2023). Leadership is strongly linked to the ability to influence, communicate values, ideas and skills to others. This communication must be simple and clear, so that recipients can perceive the senders as visionaries, entrepreneurs, and creators of their own destiny (Pereira et al. 2024). Leadership expressions are realised through social interaction and the communication process (Johansson et al. 2014). It is difficult to imagine leadership without communication; any goal or common purpose must be expressed in words, become known, understood and accepted in order to be implemented (Johansson 2018). Leadership communication is always related to the content communicated and the consequences of the relationship. Successful communication is about the quality and precision of information transfer (content consequences), as well as the fulfilment of personal needs, aspirations, and expectations of those involved (relational consequences) (Arendt et al. 2019).

The communication of a successful leader is linked to behavioural and trait theories of leadership, which focus on learnt behaviours and inherent traits. Behavioural theory claims that effective leadership comes from observing behaviour, and that leadership skills can be developed through active observation and practice, and also learning. The behavioural approach to leadership emphasises the importance of task and relational behaviours. Task behaviours aim to help followers to achieve their goals, while relational behaviours aim to create a comfortable and supportive environment for followers (Northouse 2016; Nanjundeswaraswamy et al. 2024). This theory emerged as a reaction to trait theory, which argues that leaders have internal character traits that make their communication and activities effective. Trait theory emphasises leaders' competencies and behaviours by focusing on what they do and how they communicate. It is noted that successful leaders tend to have intrinsic qualities or traits such as intelligence, charisma, confidence and determination (Nanjundeswaraswamy et al. 2024).

LEADERSHIP VALUES IN STOIC COMMUNICATION

The Stoic approach to emotion regulation includes more than just the pursuit of personal happiness and peace of mind; it is also closely related to leadership, as noted by contemporary researchers (Mitchell 2019). Leadership is viewed as a value system cultivated through consistent self-care and self-control. Stoicism provides a practical framework and a moral ontology for life (Maurer, Jaffro 2013). For them the mind serves as the tool responsible for the perception and management of emotions, as well as the development of virtues. The Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius (1910) asserts that we have power over our emotions through the mind, even though we cannot control everything that happens in life. Consequently, a leader is characterised by well-developed logic and strong principles. Through reason, a rational being becomes aware of the essential laws of life and strives to adhere to them consistently. The philosopher

Epictetus further develops this idea by emphasising that happiness and spiritual freedom begin with a clear understanding of a fundamental principle: some things can be controlled, while others cannot. This understanding, which is based solely on individual awareness, helps avoid unnecessary stress and frustration, forming a solid moral foundation for life.

Irvine (2009), in his book *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy*, analyses the practical techniques and tips that Stoics employed to achieve peace and reduce anxiety. He notes that the Stoics teach the fundamental principle of avoiding distractions and focusing our efforts on things we can control. We can always manage our reactions, emotions, feelings about events, opinions, and thoughts about others. Epictetus asserts that we cannot control certain aspects of our lives, such as our body, health, possessions and reputation. He provides two fundamental principles for a leader: first, 'Require not things to happen as you wish; but wish them to happen as they do happen' (Epictetus 1807: 301); second, 'The only way to leadership is a contempt of things not in our own power' (Epictetus 1807: 307). These insights encourage individuals to rise above changing circumstances, fostering strength and resilience in the face of fluctuating emotions. Thus, a leader's soul remains unclouded by passions, as the leader prioritises reason and virtue, ultimately possessing *scientia bonorum et malorum* [knowledge of good and evil] (Groenendijk et al. 2009: 86).

The Stoic philosophical concept of leadership can assist today's modern individuals, who live in a world of constant haste and competition, in finding emotional peace by developing their personal leadership skills. Irvine (2009) refers to the wisdom of Stoic philosophy, noting that Stoic methods and ethical advice are highly applicable to contemporary life. Stoic philosophy remains relevant today in the landscape of competition and uncertainty. The Stoics teach that in life's struggles and challenging situations, whether at work or in daily life, we must not give up; we must remain steadfast and maintain the presence of mind to recognise that we do not control all the events that unfold. Although we may often be unable to change difficult circumstances, challenges create opportunities to practice virtues and cultivate personal leadership traits. Grimal (1998) points out that Seneca's treatise *On the Firmness of the Wise Man* asserts that without trials, virtue weakens and ceases to shine forth in its full majesty, requiring obstacles to overcome. Seneca compares a man struggling against fate to a gladiator fighting in the arena. The Stoics acknowledge that life is a struggle, and in this struggle, courage helps us remain brave warriors. Even when wounded, we should not flee the battlefield. This perspective fosters the image of the leader as a hero, warrior, or fighter in the context of Stoic ethics.

Leadership is not just an intellectual skill; it is also a moral one. Understanding how to do the right thing together requires constant practice and learning. Whiting et al. (2022) emphasise this connection of theory and practice in the Stoic ethics: 'One way in which to conceptualise virtue is to understand it as an active characteristic and tendency to be (i.e. to think and act) in a certain way. In which case, virtue is something that is progressively developed through selective and deliberate responses to a given circumstance or situation' (Whiting et al. 2022: 457). In other words, it is the ability to act wisely. Acquiring wisdom is not easy. According to Stempsey (2004), we cannot truly determine if a person is wise without witnessing his response to trials that reveal his true character. Epictetus (1925) writes, 'It is difficulties that show what men are' (Epictetus 1925: 151). Stempsey (2004) interprets these words of Epictetus in such a way: When difficulties come your way, remember that God, like a physical trainer, has matched you with a rough young man. What for? Someone might say, 'So that you may become an Olympic victor; but that cannot be done without sweat' (Stempsey 2004: 469).

These reflections illustrate that the development of a leader involves not just theoretical knowledge and understanding but also practical experience and continuous self-improvement, which gradually fosters a Stoic spirit within a person. Seneca connects the apathy inherent in leadership to the principles of self-control, self-direction and self-restraint, urging all aspiring leaders to first turn their focus inward. As Seneca (2022) puts it, 'he is the most powerful who has power over himself' (Seneca (2022: 291). According to Christopher (2006), self-leadership comprises specific behavioural and cognitive strategies designed to positively influence personal effectiveness. This concept closely aligns with contemporary ideas of personal leadership, which emphasise development and self-management. Personal leadership is presented as a normative concept that includes behaviourally oriented self-regulation theory, social cognitive theory, intrinsic motivation theory, and various self-control and self-management strategies (Diskienė, Narmontaitė 2011; Knotts et al. 2022; Christopher 2006).

The Stoics place particular emphasis on wisdom, which can be used as a synonym for leadership, combining all of the above. Wisdom means the ability to distinguish between good and bad, to have the knowledge of right and wrong. It is the practical ability to act justly and fairly without losing one's temper or self-control. According to Stoic ethics, a sage is just because he not only knows the principles of justice and applies them without exception to all his daily actions and decisions. Stoicism is a teaching to live, not for one's own selfish interests, but for the common good. A just leader will remain humble, work hard for the good of all people (Inamori 1997), and positively influence his followers or the environment. This is what Seneca (2022) taught: 'you must live for your neighbour, if you would live for yourself' (Inamori 1997: 117). The works of this thinker are distinguished by the following principles: education as self-knowledge, the need for logic and critical thinking to make informed decisions, the study of philosophy as a preparation for life, and the need for the integration of practical knowledge into private and public affairs (Groenendijk et al. 2009).

In this context, the core virtues of Stoic ethics are highlighted: wisdom, justice, temperance, fortitude, moderation and courage. These virtues define the personal moral qualities of a Stoic leader and serve as a relevant foundation for leading oneself and others, keeping the mind free from clouded desires and emotions. It should be noted that Seneca writes extensively about how easily power and authority, when not governed by strong ethical principles and a commitment to goodness, can corrupt rulers. This illustrates that leadership is not only about wealth, power, authority, or dominating others; authentic leadership is virtue-based, rooted in a leader's willingness to continually assess their principles (Gronn 2001). The manner in which we manage ourselves significantly affects our quality of life and our interactions with others. To lead others effectively, one must first learn to manage oneself and acquire personal leadership skills. The Stoics also recognise that each situation is unique, so it is necessary to develop the intellect, to engage in philosophy which provides practical wisdom on how to deal with a particular situation. This includes the ability to adapt to changing environments, solve problems, and apply knowledge in practice. Thus, personal leadership is an ongoing process that involves the self-development of numerous interrelated moral and intellectual skills and competencies.

CONCLUSIONS

The Stoic philosophy of leadership is built on fundamental principles such as virtue, ethics, logic, emotional control, and self-mastery. The ideals developed by the Stoics in antiquity are not merely theoretical or detached from modern-day realities; their ethical insights shape

contemporary leadership ethics, promote reflection on life's moral challenges, and provide guidance for understanding and managing emotions and the roots of anxiety. These aspects are central for developing personal leadership skills, virtues, and communication skills.

The teachings of Stoic philosophy remain relevant today, offering pathways not only for personal growth, but also for professional development, helping individuals lead more sustainable and successful lives. In the Stoic view, leadership is not reserved for a select few; instead, personal leadership is encouraged for anyone seeking a fulfilling life. It involves continuous learning, growth, motivation to progress, and the ability to manage emotions while building healthy relationships with others, nature, and the world around us.

In today's world, characterised by constant activity, technological change, uncertainty and competition, achieving emotional peace and stability is increasingly challenging. Stoic practices of using reason, virtue, and constructive logical thinking as a means of finding emotional balance, even in the most challenging situations, are highly relevant. Achieving this requires avoiding pessimism and negative emotions, both internally and externally, being mindful of others' emotions, and peacefully accepting things beyond our control. These principles form the foundation of Stoic leadership virtues and communication skills. Emotional competence, self-regulation, self-control, self-management strategies, and theories of social cognition and intrinsic motivation, as defined by modern leadership researchers, are closely aligned with and rooted in Stoic philosophy.

Therefore, Stoic leadership philosophy can be viewed as a tool for personal development and as a normative approach to leadership, offering practical advice for building resilience in personal and professional contexts. The influence of Stoic leadership extends beyond the well-being of individuals, positively impacting followers, personal and professional settings, and contributing to the progress and development of the broader economic, social and cultural environment.

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Lyderystė stoikų filosofijoje: vertybės ir komunikacija

Santrauka

Straipsnyje stoikų filosofinės etikos kontekste nagrinėjama lyderystės komunikacija, vertybės, gyvenimo praktikos bei elgesio bruožai. Stoikų filosofinė tradicija, atsiradusi Antikos laikais, tampa vis populiaresnė ir aktualesnė šiuolaikiniame technologinių pokyčių, konkurencijos ir nesaugumo pasaulyje. Mokslinės literatūros analizė atskleidžia, kad lyderystės problematika plačiai nagrinėjama įvairių mokslo krypčių šaltiniuose, o tai rodo augantį jos vaidmenį ekonomikos, verslo, politikos, švietimo, žiniasklaidos ir kitose visuomenės srityse. Straipsnyje parodoma, kad nors stoikai nevartojo lyderystės ir komunikacijos sąvokų, jų filosofiją, kuri pabrėžia emocijų susivaldymo ir saviugdos gyvenimo praktikas bei išsamiai pristato individo dorovės sistemą, elgesio bei bendravimo modelius, galima susieti su asmeninės lyderystės bruožų teorija. Straipsnio analizė atskleidžia, kad savireguliacija, vidinė motyvacija bei kitos lyderystės savybės ir komunikacijos bruožai, kuriuos apibrėžia šiuolaikiniai lyderystės tyrėjai, yra kilusios iš stoikų filosofijos.

Raktažodžiai: lyderystė, komunikacija, vertybės, stoikų filosofija