The effects of peer leadership

Theory

Leadership, by definition, is the process of guiding and directing the behavior of people in the work environment (Nelson/Quick, 2011). The leader influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal, usually set by the organization. Leadership and management are not interchangeable; they deal with very separate things in the work place. In general, management involves tasks that are necessary for the business, such as staffing, budgeting, and problem solving, whereas leaders focus on the people within the organization and their needs, such as motivation, goal setting, and camaraderie.

Currently in the workforce, there are three different generations of leaders: the Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (1961-1981), and Generation Y (1974- 1994) (Robbins, 2008). Stereotypically speaking, there are differences in leadership styles and work ethics between these generations. Baby Boomers resist change and are unwilling to understand the new age. Those in Generation X are seen as unmotivated and selfish, though they generally have strong communication skills and are technologically savvy. Individuals born in the Generation Y do not have the same, strong work ethic as previous generations and do not understand the meaning of hard work, but are viewed as energetic, able to multitask, and very technologically savvy. Because of the differences between the generations, this could make leading groups or teams difficult. However, according to Robbins, all leaders ¿½must learn to dismiss stereotypes and gain an understanding of all generations¿½¿½ (Robbins, 2008).

Today¿½s leaders face many challenges. From diversity and generational differences to globalization and technological progression, it is how leaders face these challenges that set apart effective leaders from unsuccessful ones. The most important implications for leaders are that they need to be good diagnosticians. Leaders must be flexible enough to vary their own behavior in relation to the needs of individuals in particular situations in an appropriate way.

Peer leadership is great for situational leadership. Successful peer leading in university settings is the result of relationships among students, mentors and instructors (Ashman, 2010, pg. 121). Teaching also occurs between and among students as they work together and at times mentor each other in and outside the classroom. Though instructors may wish otherwise, this sort of peer teaching may have an even greater impact on students than teaching in the classroom (Goodlad, 1998). They suggest that academic involvement and interaction with faculty and fellow students increases the time and physical and psychological energy that students devote to the academic experience. Two of the most common situations that involve students helping other students are peer mentoring and peer leading, such as residential life settings (Ashman, 2010, pg. 122) . Peer leading focuses on more experienced students helping less experienced students improve overall academic performance, encourages mentors¿½ personal growth (Falchikov, 2001; Kram, 1985), and provides advice, support and knowledge to the mentee (University of South Australia, 2003). Using peer tutors requires a whole system of training and support concerning the socialization of students, teachers and instructors.

Peer leaders are a great help to the student body. It is because of the similarity in age that students can better relate with the peer group they are leading. They are the connecting link. In other words, they help other students inside and outside of class get involved with their campus and education (Sanft Jensen & McMurray, 2008). Also, because peer leaders are less authoritative, students feel more comfortable at times approaching them making them more effective leaders. It¿½s really important for students to have leaders¿½ knowledge of resources and events on campus. Students are the ¿½go-to¿½ people when it comes to learning information about things relevant to their age group.

Peer leadership guides and motivates other students (Ashman, 2010, pg. 125). Peer leaders encourage their students to get involved on campus, study more efficiently and improve academically. ¿½They¿½re not just leaders to the students [in their class], they¿½re leaders to all students¿½ they¿½re an example to all students.¿½ (Interview 40) In the role of learning coach, peer leaders teach students important academic and life skills (9 of 29). Almost every proponent of peer approaches indicates some sort of benefit to both sides of a peer mentor relationship (Ashman, 2010, pg. 127).

In the past two decades, much new research on inspirational leadership theories has emerged. Transformational leadership, charismatic leadership, and authentic leadership are all important developments in inspirational leadership. As the Residential Life program assists in the development of life skills, such as respect, accountability, mindfulness, responsibility, and patience, transformational leadership is demonstrated through staff forming emotional bonds with residents and ¿½arousing enthusiasm for a common

vision¿½ (Kearney 1). Instead of using their official position to manage residents, Residential Life staff members rely on their personal attributes to inspire and excite.

As role models, Residential Life staff members are charismatic, provide inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation, and show individualized consideration, all sub-dimensions of transformational leadership (Kearney 1). According to Nelson and Quick (2011), individualized consideration refers to how much attention leaders place on individual needs, and inspirational motivation is how well a leader is able to ¿½articulate a vision that is appealing to its followers¿½ (Nelson/Quick 197).

Studies have shown that transformational leadership increases firm performance (Nelson/Quick 197). According to Judge and Piccolo (2004), it is positively related to a number or important outcomes, including the satisfaction, motivation, and performance of followers. Transformational leadership is effective because leaders encourage followers to set goals that are equal to their own personal interests and values (Nelson/Quick 197). This results in followers valuing their work more because their ultimate goals match up with who they are.

The Residential Life program consists of staff members ranging in age. With student RAs in every residential hall, there is little age difference between leaders and followers. This small age gap could conceivably influence the relationship between transformational leadership and team performance. Eric Kearney sought to examine the question of whether transformational

leadership is more effective when it is provided by team leaders who are older than the other team members.

According to Bass and Riggio (2006), personal identification and respect for a leader, as well as the internalization of the leader¿½s values, are all key mediating processes through which transformational leadership exerts its effects. Kearney proposes that as well as being perceived as ¿½competent and extraordinary (i. e. transformational),¿½ leaders must also be considered deserving of a special status. He then refers to Festinger¿½s (1954) social comparison theory that states that people have a natural tendency to evaluate themselves and their abilities (Kearney 2). In teams consisting of members of similar levels of education and qualifications, members will search for legitimate reasons why one among them has been selected to lead.

As RAs enforce rules and regulations in residential halls, residents of the same age may question the RAs authority. If students do not fully accept the legitimacy of the status and power of the RAs, it greatly reduces the potential positive impact of the RA.

Through studying 49 Research and Development teams in a multinational pharmaceutical company, Kearney hypothesized that ¿½the age difference between a team leader and his or her followers moderates the relationship between transformational leadership and team performance such that this relationship is stronger with increasing leader age relative to the team.¿½ He examined teams consisting of researchers and technicians who interacted often and worked interdependently toward common team goals. The

average mean age of the 49 teams was 38. 78 and the mean age of the team leaders was 42. 98. After 6 months, the direct supervisor of each team rated team performance.

Kearney¿½s results indicate that it makes a difference whether transformational leadership is provided by a leader who is older than or close to the same age as the followers. When the leader was older than the other team members, there was a positive relationship between transformational leadership and team performance. He interprets his findings based on the social comparison theory. Kearney states that leaders who are about the same age as the other team members are more likely to be viewed by similarly qualified team members of lacking the ¿½legitimacy to occupy a privileged position¿½ (Kearney 7). This in turn may make the team identify less with the leader and resist the internalization of the leader¿½s visions and values.

Kearney does note however, that the non-significant correlations between leader age and both transformational leadership and team performance show that older leaders themselves are neither perceived as more transformational nor are they more effective as leaders than younger leaders. Thus, leaders who are of a similar age as the other team members can be successful as leaders who are older than their followers. Kearney¿½s findings do suggest that leaders of a similar age as the followers are less likely to positively affect team performance through transformational behaviors.

Application

At Skidmore College, students are used to help lead the student body in the residential halls. Students are hired to work as ¿½Resident Assistants¿½ to help foster a healthy and happy living environment for the students. Resident Assistants generally employ one of three potential leadership styles. These styles are laissez-faire, autocratic and democratic.

1) Laissez-faire:

The laissez-faire leadership style has an unusual approach. Rather than actively directing a team to perform a task, the laissez-faire style gives little to no direction. Known as ¿½hands off,¿½ the laissez-faire system provides freedom an individual team. Although the laissez-faire leadership style in many situations can prove to be controversial and negatively affect the outcome of a group¿½s performance, it is not completely useless. Often if people are intrinsically motivated in a particular area the role of an active leader is not prevalent to encourage. The laissez-faire style can also be important and works very well for a team of experienced and trustworthy individuals. For example, consider a construction site with an architect and a five of his workers. The five workers have been building homes for ten years and understand construction very well. In this scenario the architect designed the home laying out the details and materials needed to get the job done safe and efficiently. Although the architect is the leader, his expertise consists of imagining the home but not necessarily the process of how it is to be built. Based on the architects original plan, the works build the house without any additional guidance from the architect, unless necessary. To clarify further, the architect knows where to put the window, but is not quite as sure how to put it there subsequently trusting his workers to build it. The

¿½hands off¿½ approach allows the workers to utilize their personalized techniques and work with each other in order to complete the task.

The laissez-faire leadership style also applies to residential life at Skidmore College. The jobs of residential assistant aren¿½t solely to boss students around and keep order, but also to make student feel comfortable. As new students arrive at school they are filled with an array of emotions including anxiety, excitement, and fear that can make any individual uncomfortable. It is the job of a residential assistant to make the transition easier by creating a welcoming feel and sense of community within the dorm. That does not mean that an RA is responsible for a particular student¿½s friend making process, or work balancing skills. In order to expose a new student to the rest of their dormitory without ¿½holding ones hand,¿½ a laissez-faire approach is an intelligent direction to go in. Fun icebreakers that involve the young adults and allow students to meet each other work significantly well. The RA is initiates the interaction and explains the rules for the ice-breaker, then steps aside as students take control of the outcome of the game. If the RA gets too involved it can take away from the experience. For returning students, the laissez-faire style is also necessary as these students are experienced and have already gone through the process. Therefore, the returning students do not need much guidance and are fine on their own.

In the concept of the laissez- faire behavioral theory, leaders believe that their followers will perform to their greatest ability if they let them ¿½respond to their responsibilities and obligations in their own ways¿½ (Web Finance. 2010). This principle allows their followers to excel at their own expense and allows them to be accountable for their decision making. This

concept gives followers more freedom to work at their own pace and allows them to feel as if they are in charge of themselves. Although this shows that the leader is respecting that there may be different work needs among their workers, this type of leadership method does not always work. Within this laissez-faire concept, the leader may be seen as trying to relinquish his or her tasks that they were originally apportioned (Skogstad et al. 2007, pg. 81). This style of leadership can cause uncertainties within one¿½s position and it can ¿½cause interpersonal conflict at work¿½ because there is a poor communication between what the leader wants and what the followers do (Nelson & Quick, 2011, pg. 189). Take the role of a resident assistant in a resident at a university. When a resident assistant has his or her first floor meeting with their floor there is usually a discussion about what the rules and expectations of the resident hall. If this resident assistant decides not to set any ground rules or give any direction many conflicts would arise. There would not be a clear and concise framework for this situation which would leave the question, ¿½Who exactly is the leader and what does their position really entail?¿½ Many of residents would not have any guidance to know how to act when sharing a living space with different people and this could create tension among one another which would later cause disagreements and confusion.

To further discuss this point, there was a study that wanted to prove that laissez-faire leadership behavior was considered to be a damaging management behavior within the workplace (Skogstad et al. 2007, pg. 80). According to the experimenters, some problems this concept caused in the work setting were conflicts and misperceptions about role positions,

disagreements among employees, harassment, and ¿½ psychological distress¿½ (Skogstad et al. 2007, pg. 80). With these variables, the researchers came up with these five hypotheses to correlate these problems with laissez-faire leadership:

¿½Hypothesis 1: Experiencing laissez-faire leadership by one¿½s immediate superior is associated with high levels of role conflict and role ambiguity¿½. (Skogstad et al. 2007, pg. 81)

¿½Hypothesis 2: Experiencing laissez-faire leadership by one¿½s immediate superior is associated with high conflict levels with coworkers¿½ (Skogstad et al. 2007, pg. 82)

¿½Hypothesis 3: Role stressors and conflicts with coworkers mediated the relationship between superiors¿½ laissez-faire leadership and subordinates experienced exposure to bullying at work¿½ (Skogstad et al. 2007, pg. 82)

¿½Hypothesis 4: Superiors¿½ laissez-faire leadership is directly associated with subordinates¿½ exposure to bullying at work.¿½ (Skogstad et al. 2007, pg. 84)

¿½Hypothesis 5: Role stressors, conflicts with coworkers, and bullying mediate the relationship between superiors¿½ laissez-faire leadership and psychological distress among the subordinates¿½ (Skogstad et al. 2007, pg. 84).

With these hypotheses in mind, the experimenters mailed surveys to 2, 273 Norwegian workers to assess whether or not they were exposed to this type of leadership behavior (Skogstad et al. 2007, pg. 84). The mean age of this

sample was 43. 4 years and half of the test subjects were women (Skogstad et al. 2007, pg. 84). Skogstad et al. (2007) used a number of testing measures to evaluate the responses of the workers such as one from ¿½the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire¿½ to gain insight on the subjects contact with this leadership style (p. 84). In a portion of the survey, the researchers also used ¿½the Bergen Conflict Inventory¿½ to find out what types of conflicts the subjects experienced whether it was job-oriented or personal differences among coworkers (Skogstad et al. 2007, pg. 84). Within the results, the experimenters discovered that more than half of the workers ¿½experienced a low level of laissez-faire leadership, but that out of all the other effects of this concept, there was a sound relationship linked to harassment as well as the other office stressors mentioned before. (Skogstad et al. 2007, pg. 84-85). The reasoning behind this conclusion was when a leader does not meet up to their followers¿½ anticipations or show that they are apparent within the workplace, mannerisms such as role conflicts are initiated (Skogstad et al. 2007, pg. 86). This study shows how, at times, laissez-faire leadership can be a hindrance in certain organizations and business.

2) Autocratic Leadership:

Autocratic leadership is considered to be an outdated, classical style of leadership. Fundamentally, autocratic control places all power into the hands of the leader. In autocratic leadership managers seek to make as many decisions as possible, have the most authority and control in decision making, retain responsibility rather than utilize complete delegation, consult with other colleagues in minimally and prefer to work on the task at hand

(Gastil, 1994, pg. 386). The reason autocratic leadership survives, is because it is intuitive, has many short-term benefits and comes naturally to many leaders (Gastil, 1994, pg. 387).

Despite having critics, autocratic leadership offers many rewards to managers who emply it. For instance, stress is reduced due to increased control (Gastil, 1994, pg. 387). Also, group productivity often increases under increased surveillance (Gastil, 1994, pg. 388). The oversight that an autocratic manager exerts over a team improves their efficiancy and makes them less likely to be negligent. This is good for under-motivated employees who have little concern or interest in the quality of work and the speed with which that task is accomplished. Also, logistics of operations are improved (Gastil, 1994, pg. 390). Having one leader with in charge of everything makes it more likely that problems are foreseen and deadlines are met. This makes autocratic leadership best for complex projects where efficient cooperation is imperative to success. Faster decision making is another benefit (Gastil, 1994, pg. 392). When only one person makes decisions, choices are made faster.

Unfortunately, in most instances, autocratic leadership only leads to short-term improvement and carries grave long-term effects (Gastil, 1994, pg. 393). Even though leading autocratically can cause faster decisions making, the manager is actually hindering his or her workforce from progressing. This is a result of depriving employees of the opportunity to gain experience and learn from their mistakes, which leads to poorer decisions and productivity in the long run (Gastil, 1994, pg. 394). Managers with poor leadership skills with often revert to this leadership style (Gastil, 1994, pg. 394). By assuming

all responsibility an autocratic leader naturally works at his or her full capacity. This hyper-focus on work comes at the expense of good leadership development (Gastil, 1994, pg. 396).

While autocratic leadership has virtues in certain instances, autocratic leadership is not appreciated by employees. People dislike being ordered around (Gastil, 1994, pg. 396). As a result, the autocratic leadership style can create in a non-motivated workforce. Although autocratic leadership is a good solution for non-motivated workers, it is the leadership style alone that often demotivates employees (Gastil, 1994, pg. 397). After becoming accustomed to receiving orders with little return on cooperation, workers lose the confidence to make their own decisions. Accordingly, workers become ineffective functioning on their own.

3) Democratic Leadership:

Democratic Leadership encourages the distribution of responsibility, the use of delegation and continual group input (Woods, 2004, pg. 4). Democratic leadership is characterized by managers seeking assistance on decisions, delegating tasks, welcoming feedback and encouraging others to become leaders (Woods, 2004, pg. 4).

The result of this very involved leadership style is a more positive work environment (Woods, 2004, pg. 7). An environment where employees are given responsibility are challenged results in an organization where employees are more inspired to work. Similarly, the process of receiving feedback corresponds with better decision making and effective operations (Woods, 2004, pg. 8). In other words, democratic leaders¿½ engagement

with employees results in their knowing when something is going wrong, while employees under autocratic rule are discouraged from informing the leader. Another benefit is that democracy breeds creative thinking (Woods, 2004, pg. 10). Unrestricted flow of ideas and positivity is the unsurpassed vehicle for creativity.

Reduction of friction and office politics is another reward of democratic leadership. By allowing employees to think freely, managers reduce the amount of tension employees are subject to (Woods, 2004, pg. 11). When autocratic leaders refuse to listen to their workers they are effectively asking to be undermined. Unfortunately, democratic leadership can be in danger of pseudo participation (Woods, 2004, pg. 19). If managers simply pretend to employ democratic leadership to seem friendlier, employees will realize this when their ideas are not actually valued. Accordingly, the manager-employee relationship will be subject to further misfortune.