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College Student Leadership Development: Transformational Leadership as a Theoretical Foundation

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Abstract

The fast-paced growth of organizations in the world requires more leaders who are equipped with the requisite skills and competencies to bring about positive change in society. Essentially, contemporary society demands a set of leaders who are able to provide adaptive and creative solutions for the challenges that confront the modern world. The development of leadership competencies has therefore become critical at virtually every level of society. Accordingly, various organizations and institutions have employed various approaches to develop the requisite skills and competencies in their leaders. However, given the subtlety and range of skills demanded for leadership in contemporary society, leadership educators are challenged to select and synthesize appropriate concepts and methods consistent with the features of the new millennium that can buttress and give significance to student leadership experience. Otherwise, leadership development could be premised on theoretical approaches to leadership that may have been effective for past centuries "premised on physical production" (Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvy, 2007, Rost, 1993). The purpose of this paper, then, is to explore the impact of leadership education on college students and to propose transformational leadership as a theoretical foundation on which to build a formal student leadership development program that can adequately prepare college students for leadership for positive change.

Introduction

The fast-paced growth of organizations in the world requires more leaders who are equipped with the requisite skills and competencies to bring about positive change in society as well as those who can "display a high level of emotional and spiritual wisdom and maturity" (Astin & Astin, 2000, p. 1). Boyd (2011) stated that "there is a need for leadership education/ leadership development at every level of society from youth to business executives (para. 7). Gardner (1990) underscored the need for active leaders throughout all segments of society and estimated that need to be "1 percent of the population" (p. xix). Gardner further noted that leaders must help to bring leaders along and that conditions must be created for young people to unearth their buried gifts and release their untapped energies. Currently, the call

for leaders who are creative and innovative has been more compelling than ever before. Durham-Hynes (2009) noted that the leaders who are desired in this era "should be able to graft innovation into an organization or society and know how to generate successful outcomes based on the infusion of new ideas or new ways of doing things" (p. 3). Given these demands, institutions of Higher Education are increasingly been viewed as ideal spaces to respond to the clarion call for leaders who can create positive social change (Astin, 1996; Astin & Astin, 2000; Carry, 2003).

According to Berg (2003) the university has the opportunity to influence the student because of their current life stage. University students are individuals in transition, making decisions about careers and the direction for their lives (Berg, 2003). Gardiner (1994) stated that "our graduates will be central to solving every major social problem that faces us" (p. 3). Astin and Astin (2000) declared that Higher Education should acknowledge the demanding challenges of leadership and intentionally and coherently conceptualize ways in which they can "produce future generations of transformative leaders" (p. 6). As such, identifying the most effective ways to develop college students' leadership capacity is an emerging discussion among leadership educators (Shehane, Sturtevant, Moore, & Dooley, 2012).

However, due to the complex nature of leadership (Northouse, 2004), and the subtlety and range of skills demanded for leadership in contemporary society leadership educators are challenged to select and synthesize appropriate concepts and methods consistent with the features of the new millennium that can buttress and give significance to student leadership experience. Otherwise, leadership development could be premised on theoretical approaches to leadership that may have been effective for past centuries "premised on physical production" (Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvy, 2007, Rost, 1993). The purpose of this paper, then, is to explore the impact of leadership education on college students and to propose transformational leadership as a theoretical foundation on which to build a formal student leadership development program that can adequately prepare college students for leadership for positive change.

The Changing Nature of Leadership: Shifts in Theoretical Perspectives

The literature on leadership has undergone fundamental shifts over several decades. Theoretical explanations have moved from one model to the next, each highlighting the shortcomings of the other while building on their strengths in an effort to create a more comprehensive perspective (Brungardt, 1997; Komives & Dugan, 2011). Until the early 1950s leadership was framed through an industrial lens, emphasizing theories predicated on traits, individual achievement, positional authority, situations, behaviours and influence (Komives & Dugan, 2011; Bohle, Gebhardt, Wilk & Cooney, 2011; Brungardt, 1996). The industrial theories of leadership therefore limited leader emergence and leader effectiveness to select individuals.

More recent perspectives of leadership are focused on a much more complex concept that goes beyond traits, situations, power or style. The idea of the leader as "lone ranger" is a concept that is opposed to contemporary definitions of leadership. In fact, today, the phenomenon of leadership encompasses the idea of multiple leaders in a given situation (Pearce & Conger, 2003); interactions or relationships among individuals (Kouzes & Posner, 2008; Rost, 1991), and a focus on the needs of all involved in the leadership process (Greenleaf, 1977). The new interpretations of leadership have positioned the wider populace as leaders, whose capacities can be developed through leadership education and leadership training. Leadership by its post-industrial definitional parameters is not limited to the work of

elected officials but encompass "the critically important civic work performed by those individual citizens who are actively engaged in making a positive difference in the society (Astin & Astin, 2000, p. 11). That is to say any human being who is committed to social change regardless of physical or intellectual state and stage in society is a potential leader. As a result, students, especially those in institutions of higher education are being developed as leaders.

Leadership Education in Higher Education: A Necessity

According to Astin and Astin (2000), "colleges and universities provide rich opportunities for recruiting and developing leaders through the curriculum and co-curriculum" (p. 3). Similarly, Roberts (2007) expressed that institutions of Higher Education are deemed "vital and fertile holding environment [s]for leadership learning among young adults" (p. 1). More students are enrolling in colleges and universities in the 21st century than any other time in history, and by virtue of their numbers, "students are ultimately higher education's most critical stakeholders" (p. 27). Research conducted at The National Centre for Education Statistics (2012) revealed that between the years 2000 and 2010 enrolment in degree granting institutions increased 37 percent, from 15.3 million to 21.0 million. The statistical findings indicated that between 2000 and 2010, the number of 18- to 24-year-olds entering college increased from 27.3 million to 30.7 million, an increase of 12 percent, and the percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in college rose from 35 percent in the 2000 to 41 percent in 2010. This increase in enrolment suggests that a significant number of young people are matriculating each year from colleges and universities to take on some form of leadership task in the wider society. As such, it is a requirement of higher education to empower students by helping them to develop the talents and skills that will allow them to become "effective social change agents" (Astin & Astin, 2000, p. 12). Additionally, the professional standards for Higher Education, as mandated in the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS), has outlined that "colleges need to develop not just better, but more leaders…and that students must be better prepared to serve as citizen leaders in a global community" (Miller, 2003, p. 196). Reluctance to educate our students in the area of leadership will therefore result in an incalculable loss to society.

Leadership development Programs: Importance and Impact

Researchers have focussed on both structured as well as informal processes that impact leadership development in an effort to understand the process of leadership development among college students. Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt (2001) assessed the developmental outcomes of college students' involvement in leadership activities. The results from their grounded theory research indicated that leadership participants showed growth in civic responsibility, leadership skills, multicultural; awareness, understanding of leadership theories, and personal and societal values. Other empirical research on leadership development in Higher Education suggests that students learn leadership through faculty mentoring (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), sociocultural discussions (Antonio, 2001, Kezar & Moriarity, 2000), and community service involvement (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin, Sax & Avalos, 1999; Dugan & Komives, 2010). However, early researchers into student leadership development such as Astin and Astin (2000) suggested that though important, rather than be limited to student organizations or community service activities, purposeful interventions or leadership education could empower students to advance the

larger educational mission (Astin & Astin, 2000). Formal leadership development programs have therefore become an effective method to equip students with the skills they need as leaders in contemporary society.

Formal leadership programs are conceptualized as programs that are purposefully designed to enhance and foster the knowledge, skills and values of college students (Haber, 2011; Dugan, 2011). Formal leadership programs represent "an overarching set of experiences spanning multiple platforms of delivery" (Dugan, Bohle, Gebhardt, Hofert, Wilk & Cooney, 2011, p. 67*).* Rosch and Caza (2012) suggested that leadership competencies are best developed overtime through a program that fosters personalized integration of theory and practice. They reported that well-structured short-term progress can impact student leadership practice long after attendance.

Additionally, Dugan, Bohle, Gebhardt, Hofert, Wilk, & Cooney (2011) related that macro level assessment of students' participation in formal leadership programs report positive results. Haber (2011) outlined that recent research demonstrated that those students who engaged in at least one program report higher leadership capacity than those who have no such experience. Bayer's (2012) research into the effectiveness of student leadership development programs suggest that exposure to student leadership development programs can contribute to positive changes in students' perceptions of their leadership development.

Evaluation was also done into the impact of short-term and long-term programs. For short-term programs, a longitudinal study was conducted on college student participants of the LeaderShape development programme. Zimmerman-Oster and Burkhardt (1999) reported that the participants demonstrated an increase in their ability to create both organizational visions and their general transformational leadership skills. Moreover, the participants reported that their leadership skills were improved because of their training. Evaluation into long-term programs revealed that students who were immersed in these programs relate significant changes on the measured leadership outcomes of "increased self-understanding, ability to set goals, sense of ethics, willingness to take risks, civic responsibility, multicultural awareness, community orientation, and a variety of leadership skills" (Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999, p. 62). It is therefore clear that formal leadership programs can accelerate students' leadership skills.

Theoretical Foundation for Leadership Development Programs: A *Sine Qua Non*

Though empirical research consistently supports the significance of leadership development programs on college students' capacity for leadership, empirical research also illustrates that theoretical grounding consistent with contemporary conceptualizations of leadership is necessary in program conceptualization and delivery (Dugan & Komives, 2010, Eich, 2008, Haber, 2011). Boyd (2011) noted that there is a tendency to attach the label leadership on programs not grounded in leadership theory. Rost (1993) noted that "scholars, trainers and developers, and practitioners must rethink their old assumptions about leader development (p. 101). According to Rost, the training and development programs that have been offered in the past are no longer sufficient to develop leaders and collaborators in the 21st century". The students who are attending leadership programs are in the 21st century and, as such, must be taught the 21st century concepts of leadership. Leadership development, Rost argued, must not only focus on the leader but on the group as leadership is a collaborative process. This focus on collaboration is particularly relevant because for today's young people "relationships matter more than institutions" (Dempster & Lizzio, 2007,

p. 278). Komives, Lucas & McMahon (1998) noted that "[l]eadership today shows that there is great wisdom and energy in the group and everyone in the group has a great deal to learn from each other" (p. 19). In congruence, Berg (2003), Bibby (2001), and Howe and Strauss (2000) related that today's college students express a preference for relational approaches to leadership and are more geared towards collaboration. As a result, the shift in patterns of how students learn leadership must be understood in terms of these generational factors.

Transformational Leadership as a Theoretical Foundation

One theoretical grounding consistent with contemporary conceptualizations of leadership is transformational leadership. The theory of transformational leadership was first purported by Burn's (1978). Transformational leadership is diametrically opposed to the old model of formal, one-person leadership. It is instead "relational, collective and purposeful" (Burns, 1978, p. 18). Transformational leaders "convert self-interest into collective concerns" (p. 19). They do not emphasize authority and control. Rather, they recognize the importance of the followers, as well as their goals. Succinctly, transformational leadership is a significant relationship between leaders and followers that is based on mutual influence between both parties (Burns, 1978; Rost, 1993). Essentially, the transformational view of leadership dictates that "the function of leadership is to engage followers, not merely to activate them, to commingle needs and aspirations and goals in a common enterprise and in the process make better citizens of both leaders and followers" (Burns, 1978, p. 461). Northouse (2004) offered a similar perspective. He outlined that "transformational leadership is a process that changes and transforms individuals. It is concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals, and includes assessing followers' motives, satisfying their needs, and treating them as full human beings" (p. 169).

Burns' (1978) transformational leadership theory makes a stark distinction between transformational and transactional leadership. He described transformational leadership as a mutually beneficial process and defined transactional leadership as an exchange based process of leadership. More specifically, transactional leaders approach "followers with an eye to exchanging one thing for another" (p. 4) whilst transformational leaders seek "to satisfy higher needs, and engage the full person of the follower" (p. 4). According to Burns "leadership is nothing if not linked to collective purposes" (p.3). Leadership is transformational when individuals engage with each other in such a way that together they raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality (Burns, 1978).

Given, the complexity of the present era and the need for more than one mind to clarify issues training students as transformational leaders can have potentially positive repercussive effects on themselves and society. Moreover, the skill sets that are practiced by the transformational leader are essentially learnable. Tichy and DeVanna (1986) outlined seven characteristics of transformational leaders. They indicate that they (a) they identify themselves as change agents; (b) they are courageous; (c) they believe in people; (d) they are value-driven; (e) they are lifelong learners; (f) they can deal with complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty, and (g) they are visionaries. Other authors such as Bass and Riggio (2006) proffered that transformational leaders demonstrate an ability to stimulate interest among followers, create and inspire a shared vision, motivate followers to tap into their potential; and inspire followers to look beyond their own interests. Indeed, the concept of transformational leadership takes on elements of most of the leadership models of the post-industrial era. It incorporates the idea of morals and ethics in ethical leadership. It embraces

the concept of shared decision making evidenced in shared leadership and it is conceptually related to servant leadership due to its emphasis on the moral sense of concern for others. As a result of its multi-faceted nature it is a well-suited theory to undergird a college student leadership development program. Careful delineation of transformational leadership reveals six optimal facets of transformational leadership that if undergird a student leadership development program may equip college students with the requisite skills and competencies to bring about positive change in society as well as give them a greater sense of control over their lives.

Transformational leaders are *change agents*. Importantly, the twenty first century landscape is demanding a set of leaders who are not only responsive to change but also have the capacity to create change (Drucker, 2002). Designing a leadership training program that is grounded in transformational leadership could prove catalytic to achieving some of the demands articulated for twenty first century leadership. As change agents, student leaders will be able to guide their followers by focussing on a clear or directed vision. By consciously looking for potential motives in the follower and engaging their full person the transformational leader is attuned to the objectives of his/her followers and constantly endeavours to meet their needs but at the same time is conscious of and sensitive to their deep-rooted purpose and higher aspirations for their organizations (Burns, 1978).

Transformational leaders are *courageous*. Transformational leaders create a new narrative for large scale change. They demonstrate a willingness to charter the unfamiliar and to challenge entrenched assumptions. The courageous leader dares to create symbols and new patterns on which the organization can be built by carefully sifting through the best of what the organization possesses as well as deliberately discarding practices or activities that detract from central goals or impede progress. Transformational leaders instill "a sense of adventure in others, look for ways to radically alter the status quo, and ... scan the environment for new and fresh ideas" (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 77). Transformational leaders lead the change agenda. They create an atmosphere of inquiry and advocacy where individuals express facet of organizational management that they think should remain as well as question elements that thwart progress, all in an effort to bring about positive change.

Transformational leaders demonstrate *concern for the followers.* At the heart of transformational leadership is concern for the follower. Bolman and Deal (2008) postulated that "taking time to hear people's ideas, and concerns and to make sure that all involved have the talent, confidence, and expertise necessary to carry out their new responsibilities is a requisite for successful innovation" (p. 382). The transformational leader is not a lone ranger but practices shared decision making and demonstrates an appreciation for the skills, expertise and talents of others. They do so by empowering others to share in the decision making process.

The transformational student leader is able to recognize the creative energies of followers in the pursuit of shared purpose (Gardner, 1993). It is their duty to motivate individuals and engage team members equitably. Presumably, all members in a student organization are capable of playing a role that can facilitate the development of their organization. However, the transformational leader creates a climate of openness, identify key individuals and formulate high-performing teams to sustain the vision and mission of their student organization.

An effective transformational leader is willing to expose vulnerability by expressing the need for collaboration and interdependence to other team members. Through cross functional teams, collaborators become multifunctional and are more able to value the strengths and weaknesses of others. The student organization therefore becomes a learning space of creativity, synergy and symbiosis.

Transformational leaders demonstrate *unquestionable character*. The character of the transformational leader is an important ingredient for bringing about positive change. According to Petrick and Quinn (1997) character is the "pattern of intentions, inclinations, and virtues that provide the ethical or moral foundation for behaviour" (p. 51). The character of a leader reflects his/her principles, values and beliefs. The student leader's capacity to affirm values, clarify, articulate and share the ethical and moral premise on which his/her leadership is based is crucial to the success of his/her leadership. However, in order to do this, student leaders must be clear about the principles that guide their lives so that their behaviour can be congruent with these values and standards.

Student leaders who are grounded in ethics and morality are crucial to the future landscape of leaders. With respect to student leadership, ethics is about the kind of persons student leaders are - their character and what they do, their actions and behaviours, how they make decisions, the things that they value, advocate for, privilege and sacrifice. A student leader who is ethically aware is one who possesses the capacity to perceive and be sensitive to relevant moral issues. Of equal significance is the student leader who is "ethically diligent" who reflectively, carefully and critically assesses ethical conflicts and delineates the good from the bad, the just from the unjust, the right from the efficient, the legal from the moral.

Transformational leaders are *communal*. Another important dimension of transformational leadership is its emphasis on inclusivity and community building. Teaching students to build collaborative and caring relationships and to engage in positive and respectful communication are core factors for leadership in multicultural contexts. Transformational leaders understand that individuals exist in a symbiotic relationship with community. They are dependent on each other and desire mutual trust and collaboration. Individuals need to be goaded and supported in order to develop a framework of shared values and meaningful communications (Gardner, 1993).

However, an individual's relationship with community will not always be one of shared values. We will inevitably grapple with differences, confrontations and matters of competing interests. However, the premise of transformational leadership is that "whatever the separate interests persons might hold, they are presently and potentially united in pursuits of "higher" goals" (Burns, 1978, p. 425). Transformational leaders therefore seek to facilitate growth by representing the "collective or pooled" interest of followers.

Transformational leaders are *creators or co-creators of vision*. Imagining a positive future of an organization is a key ingredient to being a "catalytic" leader. Kouzes and Posner (2008) related that exemplary student leaders are capable of imagining greater opportunities to come; "they envision the future, the exciting and ennobling possibilities ahead" (p. 13). Transformational student leaders create a vision for their organizations that is congruent with the overarching vision and mission of their institutions. They craft their vision and make it a focal point in their day to day operations. More importantly, they articulate that vision in powerful ways and garner support for the future direction of their organization. The vision

inspires the followers to enthusiastically engage themselves in the leadership process and the achievement of the organization's goals. It creates a shared sense of identity (Kouzes & Posner, 2008). However, in order for a vision to be realised there has to "buy in". "Buy-in" can be achieved when the student leader invites other stakeholders to share in the creation of that vision. In this way, other members of the student organization will be more adaptable to change and the organization has a greater possibility to succeed.

In essence a transformational student leader demonstrates the ability to influence the behaviour, attitude and values of others by articulating a clear vision, demonstrating high ethical standards, respectfully challenging the status quo, embracing the view of others with the end goal of achieving the institution's vision and purpose.

Conclusion

In an attempt to develop or enhance leadership skills and competencies, educators and scholars of student leadership have afforded emphasis on purposeful interventions such as leadership training programs. Though research suggest that students who participate in leadership programs develop leadership capacities, leadership programs that are grounded in theories and consistent with the contemporary societal context are crucial. This paper proposed that a leadership development program that is rooted in the theoretical concept of transformational leadership may not only develop the leadership capacities of students but also furnish students with the skills to bring about positive change in local, national, and international contexts. Educating students in transformational leadership will allow student leaders to raise the consciousness of themselves, their followers and ultimately the organization, embrace trust and emphasize mutually influential relationships.

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