

Leadership Between Generations

By Allison Jordan

1. Introduction

Leadership, it is a broad concept and includes many different elements, no two people have the exact same definition. However, many elements in peoples own definitions do overlap, as leadership is constructed by society. In looking at the Hobart and William Smith Colleges, I wanted to figure out what similarities were shared among people, but also where their differences in leadership lied. I wanted to understand the ideas of leadership that students on campus held, compared to that of the faculty on campus

At a very young age, we are taught about good leaders, and how to be a good leader ourselves. It through socialization, that of being raised, and through our own culture and surroundings, that our idea of what a good leader is begins to form. This idea of socialization is emphasized in Mark J. Ahn, and Larry W. Ettner's article, "Are leadership values different across generations?: A comparative leadership analysis of CEOs v. MBAs." Ahn and Ettner highlight in their work that though many studies have shown that there are different thoughts about leadership between different generations, there are some core fundamental factors shared among each generation. According to their study, "there may be fundamental human values that are foundational, become institutionalized, and stand the test of time" (Ahn and Ettner 2014 987). This continuity over time is due to how we are socialized at a very young age. We live in a society where there are fundamental ideas about how one should be and what one should do, which are passed down through generations. Think of the Golden Rule, treat others how you

want to be treated, many people know it and follow it, because it has been passed down through so many generations. It is seen as a fundamental rule, and it is accepted by many. Society has taught us to follow it and live by it. Though leadership is different, Ahn and Etnner have a point, that there are fundamental leadership characteristics across age groups. However, ideas of leadership still vary amongst people and generations, as people go through different experiences and have lived through different events and time periods, from that of the Vietnam war and that of the housing crisis of 2008. These can cause differences in ideologies and thoughts amongst people in different age groups.

When I think of my time so far as an undergrad, and being a part of my school's leadership program, I have not only seen my idea of what a leader is change, but I have also changed what I consider to be the qualities of a good leader as well. This is why, in finishing my school's leadership program, I wanted to study leadership on a wider scale, using my campus as a model. I wanted to figure out what the differences and similarities were between students and the faculty in what they understood good leadership to be.

I thought that because a lot of the faculty, though not all, were significantly older, they would have different perspectives about leadership compared to the students. I believed this because the older generation have lived more and so they had encountered more events like that of wars, and governmental issues that could have shaped their views. Much of the younger generation would not really remember events that had happened in the past, as it would not have affected them as much, as I know of the 2008 housing crash, it did not really impact my life as much as it would say someone in their 40's or 50's. Although, I understand that there could be

similarities between the generations, I was curious to know if there were any key differences in their leadership ideology, and that is why I went about creating this project. Also, I was curious about trying to understand other views of leadership too. I knew what I thought was a good leader, but how do other people view it? Leadership is a vast topic that encapsulates so many ideas, for it to have one strict definition is not realistic. There are so many types of leaders, from the famous figureheads, to the people working behind the scenes. If there are so many different types of leaders and leadership styles, then there must be different ideas and definitions for what a leader is, and what a good leader is. Due to this, everyone must have their own ideas as well, and that is why I went about trying to discover how the faculty and students at the Hobart and William Smith Colleges viewed and saw leadership.

2. Methods:

To uncover the different viewpoints of leadership across campus I decided to take two very small samples sizes of the campus. In the faculty group, there were 6 people, 4 women, and 2 men. The faculty were between the ages of 25 and 60 years old. In picking faculty for the project, I wanted a variety of different ages, as one can tell they had a large age range, compared to that of the students. I also picked people with different backgrounds; I interviewed professors from different departments, but also staff members, who worked in a variety of areas on campus, such as dining services, and campus safety. In picking informants for this project I wanted a holistic view of leadership, that incorporated different aspects of the campus. In the group consisting of students, I also interviewed 6 individuals, which included 3 men and 3 women. Their age range was between 19 and 21 years old. In picking students, I chose students from different backgrounds including fields of study, lived experiences, and the people living in

different states, I ever had a student who lives in Pakistan. In getting people of different backgrounds it allowed me to compare the two generations a non-discriminatory way.

In setting up the project I arranged small one-on-one interviews that consisted of just 5 to 10 minutes. They were short, but the idea was to get snapshots about their leadership viewpoints. I came up with four questions that were given to each person who decided to be interviewed.

Question one was, “what is a good leader?” I wanted to hear what people saw as a good leader, the word “good” was supposed to be interpreted by the informant in whatever way they wanted it to be. I just really wanted to understand the qualities and descriptions of what makes a person a good leader in general.

It was then followed by the question, “can a follower be a leader?” There has been much discussion on what a first follower is, and I was interested if people would bring it up, saying that they are leaders. A first follower, is the first person to follow someone's movements, and it normally brings more people to follow.

The third question was, “did anything or anyone influence your beliefs that you hold about leadership?” People, places, and events influence us in our daily lives, also influencing our thoughts as well. I was curious in discovering what the differences in experience may have been among faculty and students. Are employers and jobs more influential to faculty, are students more influenced by the school and their parents?

The fourth question was, “what are good examples of leaders?” I wanted to know what people identified as good leaders, does it have to do with morality, or just that they have a

commanding presence? Understanding who people saw as good leaders, also gives insight to what a person sees a leader to be.

Shortly after question four was answered, I asked a follow up question, which was whether Hitler was or was not a good leader? That idea does bring morality into it, and I wanted to see how people would respond and answer it because it is a hard question. Morally he is a bad person and unethical, he led so many innocent people to their death, but he was able to lead many people and get them to follow him. How people will look and view him is also very telling of how they view leadership, especially if morality is a big player in how they see good leadership.

3. Findings

Based on the information collected, both groups had commonalities within their generational groups. Within the group of the students the commonalities about what makes a good leader included: being able to help out; they are inclusive and are willing to hear everyone one out (embodying the beliefs of a majority of their followers). They are also able to take charge when needed, displaying the ability to step up and lead the pack (the ability to persuade and have confidence). The influential factors that helped create these ideas, were mainly due to family, school, and school-related activities. Also, they included that the various experiences, my informants had themselves, did also influence their beliefs as well.

In terms of the adults the commonalities that I found included: bravery to make strong decisions and to go out on a limb; truth and integrity; there is no hierarchy, but that leadership is happening on all levels; being able to be a good follower; understanding that there is not always

going to be agreement or that they may not always be liked; being respectful and not putting people down; being influential and reaching out to people and motivating their followers; and lastly that they will be on the same page with people and have some sort of shared vision. In terms of influence, the main influential factors were that of having good and bad work relationships be that that of bosses or supervisors. They also included coaches, mother and influential women.

In terms of followership, almost everyone I interviewed in both groups, had the same idea, which was, yes followers can be leaders. However, many were saying that followers can be, and can learn to be leaders, or one can be a leader and follower separately, and in different scenarios. There was only one person, a student, who mentioned the idea of a first follower, that a follower can be a leader while being in the role of the said follower, at the same time. Normally, the first follower makes it acceptable to follow, as other followers see another person following the trend. Being the first followers can be scary, and takes some bravery, that is why they can be seen as a leader too, as they start the movement of following.

In the topic of examples of good leaders, there were some interesting findings. The faculty gave more answers of people of whom they knew personally, and normally it was that of people they worked for or with. There were answers such as teachers or coaches, but many related to work and personal relationships. However, the group of students was different, they did mention coaches, teachers, and parents, but there were a lot of symbolized leaders or that of figureheads, like that of Jesus, Winston Churchill, and the Obamas. In terms of who people thought were good leaders, student we more likely to pick more famous ones, while faculty were more likely

to pick the people who were close to them. This shows the differences in experience and what relates more to peoples lives. Students see figureheads more through their academic process that they are in right now, and that of current events. If you take the Obamas for instance they were the leaders for much of what the younger generation know of in this country. Though the older generation has gone through schooling and learned about this, it is through this and other events that they recognize the people they are close as valuable.

In looking at the responses to Hitler I separated the answers into 3 groupings, in which one group was that of yes he was a good leader, another group that they said he was not a good leader, and third group who could not really decide if he was a bad or a good leader. In looking at the data between faculty and student it was interesting because students seemed to be more accepting of Hitler being a good leader than that of adults. 3 students said that Hitler was a good leader, as opposed to one faculty who said yes. One student said no, as compared to two faculty members saying no; and 2 students were uncertain and in the 50/50 range, as opposed to 3 faculty members who were in the 50/50 range. It does make one wonder if morality is part of being a good leader.

3. Limitations

In creating this project and conducting my findings there were factors that could have influenced my findings. The sample sizes for faculty and students were small compared to the relative campus size. Also, compared to that of the students, in which I had an even distribution between men and women, the faculty did not, as there were slightly more women than men. Though, that may have not made a huge difference, it does show some discrepancies during the

my collection of data. Another influential factor was that of words or word choice, especially when thinking about the use of the word good. I did have some of my informants questioned this, on what exactly to think of the word and what quantifies good, so that may have altered ideas, yet it was up to them on how they were to define that word. The other issue was time, if I had more time I could have probably conducted more interviews, and gotten people who lived in many areas across the country and in the world that lived on campus. In a small amount of time, it is hard to get a much larger sample size.

4. Discussion

From my findings there were some differences in what my informants understood leadership to be. This was to be expected, as people in different age groups have had different experiences. The older generation, who in general have had more work experience compared to that of students, who have not worked that much, and are still in school does have impacts. This is illustrated, in how much of the older generation's discussions, their work relationships were emphasized when it came to understanding leadership. The older generation were all people employed by the campus, many who have worked several jobs, and had many years of work experience under their belt. That may have created these differences in beliefs, as many of the opportunities and experiences the older generation has had, many students have not even had a chance to acquire. Also, not all of the students in the younger generation had worked before, as that is not a main aspect of their life at this point, as they are in college with the goal of being employed one day. To that end, they cannot gain the same experience of one who is older than them. This trend was also followed in how my informants gave responses to who influenced their beliefs. The faculty I interviewed used work relationships, bosses, and supervisors, and when

they give examples of good leaders, it also did tend to be people they worked with or for. The students however, used family, school, and coaches as influential factors, and many named figure heads, such as Winston Churchill, and Barack Obama as examples of good leaders. They are still in school, and have just come from high school, in which certain figures are highlighted as important leaders. In this it seems that the older generation would look to work experience in helping them establish their idea of a leader, while students look to that of what they are learning. It seems such ideas do affect where one is in their life.

There were some similarities, such as leaders trying to be on the same page and trying to listen between the two groups. However, when it came to the older generation, it did seem that many listed values as important to leadership, such as, trust, bravery, and integrity, which was not said a lot amongst the younger generation. The younger generation really focused on taking the initiative and focusing on the group as a whole. This slightly goes with the study conducted by Johnny Robinson, whose article is, “Next Generation Leadership: The Changing Culture of Leadership In The Senior Student Affairs Officer (SSAO) Position”. The study which focused on leadership behavior, had two main groups, which were the Baby Boomer generation and that of students in college and that of students on a college campus. The study did show differences in the older and younger generations, which he wrote, “the findings showed that whereas generation x SSAOs exhibited more transactional leadership behavior, baby boomers were more transformational” (Robinson 2017 70). Defined by lumenlearning.com, transactional leadership is the focus on order, supervision, and the group performance, which can be in the students' understanding of leadership. However, transformational leadership focuses on change within an organization, which can be slightly seen with the older generation (“Types of Leaders”). Though

not completely emphasized in my study, the theories of leadership can be seen in the results. However, it does go along with the trend found in my research of different generations have different ideas and thoughts when it comes to leadership.

One thing that did surprise me was that almost everyone had the same reaction to the idea of followership. Everyone said followers can be leaders and can learn to be leaders, yet they never said a follower could be a leader at the same time, except for one student. That is the concept of the first follower, they are a follower, in that they are the first to follow some movement or action, yet because they are the first person, it also establishes them as a leader, as they have taken the initiative to be the first follower and through this they establish that it is okay to follow. However, it is understandable that not many people thought about this concept because the idea of being a follower in our society is not well thought of, and so it is not emphasized as important. Many people seem to miss this concept of the first follower or not know it, so it was surprising to find someone who knew the actual concept. I did not know the concept until I came to college and took a leadership course, so it would make sense that not many people knew that idea.

The Hitler question did make a lot of people question whether the concept of morality was needed to be a good leader or not. People were all across the board saying that he was or was not a good leader, with several people unsure. It is a hard question because it really makes one think about what defines a good leaders and what does not. The faculty were less likely to say that he was a good leader, than students, were. Morality really did play a role in this, which was to be expected. Hitler was an immoral character with leading many innocent people to their death, through extermination, yet he was a powerful speaker and gained many followers who loved and

believed in him. In this respect one has to consider if morality is necessary to be a leader or is it the ability to lead people and gain a following. In general, the value of morality was a similarity held by many, even if not explicitly stated, which is brought up by Mark J Ahn, and Larry W. Ettner, in their article, “Are leadership values different across generations?: A comparative leadership analysis of CEOs v. MBAs.” They do not explicitly use the word morality as a value, but that of justice and fairness, which is pretty close. This was value was found important among faculty and students. It was even written in the article, “furthermore, despite labels such as Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y and Millennials, our study suggests that the views of MBA students regarding core values-based leadership ideals also closely align with those of modern-day organizational leaders” (Ahn and Ettner, 2014 988). Morality was value that was brought up throughout both groups that came in to the determination of Hitler not being a good leader or being a good leader, and many of those who fell in between. Morality was one value that did cross the boundary of both generations.

The findings highlight that there are differences between generations, along with similarities. We are socialized in society to think a certain way, which leads to similar beliefs. However, there are differences as well, as each person has their own life and live different experiences, and different generations growing up at different points in history.

5. Conclusion

In understanding leadership, and what makes a good leader there are some stark differences, but there are similarities as well. People are socialized and brought up in a similar way, but through different experiences they gain different views that create these differences in values.

Mark J Ahn, and Larry W, Ettner's article even highlights this in the beginning of the article, that similarities and differences have been seen in many studies about leadership and generations, though they believe that there are fundamental core values across generations, as they write, "A number of studies have been conducted to research generational values, finding both similarities and differences; however, research leans heavily towards generational differences, with most studies concluding that evidence points to a significant difference in the values held by people from different generations" (Ahn and Ettner 2014 978). There does seem to be differences in their views, mainly based on school and work, which makes sense to what their life relates to the moment.

Mark J Ahn, and Larry W, Ettner's did argue that the generations might not be as different as what people may believe, though they do agree that many results have proved otherwise, similar to what I discovered. Another argument against leadership differences among generations was Cort W. Rudolph et al. in their article, "Leadership and generations at work: A critical review." They believe that it is false to believe the leadership is thought about differently and is different in general among generations, and that there is insufficient evidence to prove such differences, and that many are experiments are flawed, but how he argues is not very convincing (Rudolph et al, 2018 44). Though, my data and others such as Johnny Robinson would beg to differ, finding differences among generation on the topic of leadership.

However there is one thing that is correct, in which they write, "The modern notion of "generations" as distinct units of study emerged within the field of sociology" (Roudolph et al 2018 45), though this does not make a difference in my findings, as society does enforce many

ideas and concepts by which we live by. A generation is socially constructed, it is a measure of age we live by and therefore it can be judged. Leadership is socially constructed and we are socialized into how we understand it. Society shapes a lot of what we think, but as an individual we put our own thoughts into our ideas, and that is why not all generations and people think the same. Also, different age groups have gone through different experiences and have witnessed different major events, which leads them to have different ideas as a whole. In conclusion, different generations view leadership differently with the older generation influenced more by jobs and work relationships, and the younger generation influenced more by family and school.

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