Leadership Education: Fantasy or Reality?

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The Essence of Leadership and Its Questions

Leadership is a word that spins through personal and professional conversations. Observations of leaders during the "September 11" national crisis revealed people wanted direction and sought comfort from their leaders. During the crisis, leaders quickly became heroes with noble causes. However, leaders remain, in day-to-day activities, common people striving to improve organizations and activities. Employers request "leadership" be included as a part of the perfect applicant's resume. Members of struggling student and volunteer organizations call for the emergence of leaders who can increase member involvement. And political candidates continually reference "leadership experience" in their campaign marketing strategies. Clearly, in 2002, leadership continues to be a concept of interest.

Although leadership is an important topic and successful leaders are emerging, questions continue to surround this dynamic concept. Leadership educators are on the cusp; they hold the educational keys to unlock the mysteries of leadership. Leadership educators are hired to provide programs, teach leadership concepts, and develop leaders. But, has this group reaped the rewards from known facts, research, and development efforts? Are leadership educators focusing on methods to steer the discipline forward? Are leadership educators driving fantasy programs or factual programs? To seek the answers to these questions, leadership educators are challenged to seek answers to contemporary questions such as:

1. What is the true purpose for leadership education and do leadership organizations deliver what they promise?
2. Is leadership different among diverse cultures?
3. What are the best teaching/learning environments for leadership education?

Recently leadership educators and researchers have revealed several findings to support and expand productive leadership education development. The implications of recent research results, when blended into program objectives, may ensure positive and productive results.

Today's Leadership Purpose

Recently, in a simple focus group atmosphere, high school students were asked to define leadership (Hamilton, 2002). Their comments ranged from broad to very specific articulation. Although young and not alumni of formal leadership training activities, the words of these young people contained some pivotal messages…..

> "Leadership is the ability to compromise your ideas to the point where people will listen to you." -- Chris, 17 years

> "Leadership is initiating things and having people follow you." – Hilary, 17 years

> "Leadership is effective manipulation." – Brian, 18 years

> "Leadership is acknowledged power over other people." – Markle, 17 years

> "My mother is a leader because she always tells me the right things I should do." – Sierra, 13 years

> "Leadership is being responsible for others." – Mike, 14 years

The message was robust: people (young and old) know how they expect leaders to act. The have a concept for what leaders do and how followers react. The question for leadership educators is how to create environments where people excel to their leadership potential.

Certain studies have looked to national leadership audiences to ascertain the effectiveness of leadership education. One research effort determined how one organization is fairing with its leadership development programs. Rutherford and her colleagues (Rutherford, Townsend, Briers, Cummins, & Conrad, 2002) studied a national youth leadership organization – the FFA (formerly known as the Future Farmers of America). In their study, it was discovered that, in fact, the more a member participates, the more positive their leadership self-perceptions. Interestingly, Rutherford and colleagues also reported that the size of a member's organization might relate to one's leadership abilities. The members from larger chapters had stronger perceptions about their abilities to work with groups and make decisions. And, finally, their study revealed that members who participate in more activities do have stronger leadership perceptions than those who participate less.

How organizations manifest their leadership development efforts is a critical issue for leadership educators. In the case of the reported study, a national youth leadership organization was accomplishing its purpose. Are other organizations

fairing as well? Do organizations evaluate their leadership efforts? Leadership educators may be in the perfect position to evaluate programs as well as create them. Seeking accountability in organizational leadership efforts is critical to sustaining the efforts of leadership education programs.

Leadership Education for Diverse Cultures

In 2002, Montgomery developed a research activity to examine the effectiveness of leadership education for an under-represented population. After studying the Hispanic culture, he developed 2 lessons to present to this specific group. The lessons were composed to assist the participants in developing change efforts and setting goals in their organization. In each case, the participants did not respond to the training with behavior changes. They did not increase their perceptions of their abilities in these two leadership competencies.

At first glance, the researcher ascertained that the participants' outcomes were related to not succeeding in a one-shot teaching environment. However, additional investigation suggested a cultural possibility. According to the literature, Hispanic leaders tend to be role models for their constituents. In addition, the culture prefers to maintain tradition. Perhaps, the Hispanic students did not change their leadership behaviors because of a strong cultural impact in their environment.

Although this study was a preliminary piece of a larger research effort, it suggested some cultures might not respond to the traditional concepts of leadership. Leadership educators, therefore, may be in positions where investigation of cultural indicators may enhance leadership efforts.

Leadership Teaching/Learning Environments

"You're hired! Please conduct a 3-hour training program about leadership." This situation is a traditional venue facing many leadership educators. Often leadership educators are placed in positions to provide training as a short portion of a larger organizational agenda. Are these short programs effective? What is known about these types of program results?

It appears, from research studies, that one-shot programs add awareness but are ineffective in true learning and behavior changes. In three separate studies, researchers uncovered similar results that revealed the nature of these programs. In one study, a teen group experienced a 3 and ½ day leadership "camp" where they participated in leadership simulations, group discussions, and reflection. In another situation, an adult group met 8 times for 2 years. As a part of their total experience, they participated a 1 and ½ day leadership seminar. And in a third instance, a college student club was given a traditional leadership training program. In all three cases, the participants did not change their attitudes about

leadership nor their leadership behaviors (Cummins, 1995 and Montgomery, 2002).

However, when provided an extended and sustained class on leadership, participants reported that their attitudes and leadership behaviors were different after the class. This study was repeated 4 times (Cummins, 1995; Taylor, 1998, Thorp, Cummins, & Townsend, 1997, and Tabke, 1999). In each of these situations, college students met for their leadership class two or three times a week for 15 weeks. They experienced leadership lectures and related simulation activities for the time period. A follow-up study revealed that the students did change their perceptions of their abilities to be positional leaders, make decisions, and work in groups.

These related studies contained a clear message. By comparing the one-shot and long-term studies, it may be concluded that true leadership education – where behavior changes are expected – should be organized as a long term, sustained effort. Leadership educators are challenged to distinguish between leadership awareness and leadership learning. Awareness may be provided in short, one-shot programs and learning may be provided in sustained, long term programs.

To test another type of learning environment, in 2001, Hanselka examined a particular population of leaders to ascertain their tendency toward transactional and transformation leadership. In this study, the researcher examined collegiate student organization officers. The findings indicated that high school leadership courses were an important part of the development of transformational leadership skills. The more leadership courses a student took in college seemed to impact their development of transformational leadership skills, especially "attributed idealized influence." This study continued the support for sustained, long term leadership programs and classes.

However, in addition to ascertaining the effect of formal classroom training, the researcher also looked at the "activity" of leadership and how it related to a person's leadership trends. In this situation, the tendency to be transformational or transactional was a focus. It was revealed that student leaders who completed some leadership courses appeared to be less transactional. And, similarly, the more activities the students were involved in during high school, the more transformational characteristics they exhibited. The study also demonstrated that the more leadership positions available to students, the stronger their transformational leadership skills. Therefore, this study supported earlier writings that encouraged participation in activities to build leadership skills.

One contradictory finding confounded the question of encouraging activities to build transformational leadership tendencies. The students who reported participation in numerous college activities did not display transformational characteristics. Evidence revealed that the more activities a student was involved during college, the transactional leadership styles, especially contingent reward,

were enhanced. So, this study raised the question: was it possible that different environments encouraged different leadership tendencies?

This study suggests that people be encouraged to participate in many activities to enhance their leadership capacity. In addition, the study suggests that leadership educators should study the end-product environments and customize programs to match leadership tendencies with expected results.

Are the Questions Answered?

We are beginning to find the answers but the work is just beginning. Complex questions surround the reality of leadership education. Research and development in leadership education, therefore, has a critical purpose. In order to improve teaching and learning environments, expand program and workshop possibilities, and develop productive curricula, leadership research must continue to seek answers to the questions surrounding leadership and the changing world.

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