EXPLORING FACTORS RELATED TO FEEDBACK-SEEKING BY STUDENT LEADERS

Abstract

Research in corporate settings has demonstrated the importance of leaders seeking feedback on such dimensions as credibility, effectiveness, engagement, and productivity. This study looked at feedback seeking behavior by student leaders. Explored were the extent to which feedback-seeking impacted how people felt when working with leaders, and how feedback-seeking might be influenced by age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, leadership experiences, and skill levels. Using an archival database, the sample included responses from 91,561 student leaders and observations from 365,747 of their peers. Few substantive differences were found on the basis of demographics, while those with more leadership experiences and skills reported the highest frequency of feedback-seeking behavior. Engagement levels were positively related to the frequency to which leaders sought feedback from others. Implications for future research and suggestions for the development of student leaders are provided.

Seeking Feedback

An essential component in the learning process is feedback, being able to both know the consequences of one’s efforts and actions and, presumably, to make changes or improvements accordingly. While there is a long-standing tradition, and abundant research, on the importance of feedback-seeking behavior in the management literature (Anseel, Beatty, Shen, Lievens, & Sackett, 2015; Ashford, De Stobbeleir, & Nujella, 2016), little of this knowledge has been extended to student leaders. One notable exception is early research that showed the behavior of student leaders improved after receiving feedback from their followers, and this was especially pronounced for those leaders who had initially received positive feedback (Atwater, Rousch, & Fischthal, 1995).

The current study explored feedback-seeking on the part of student leaders and how this behavior might be affected by demographic characteristics. Although it may be intuitively obvious that obtaining feedback would improve one’s performance, common sense doesn’t necessarily always translate into actions. Research with managers, for example, indicates that seeking feedback is generally at the bottom of the list of leadership behaviors that they engage in (Kouzes & Posner, 2014; 2017), and there is no reason to suspect that this would be any different for student leaders. In addition, because the benefits of soliciting feedback may not be readily apparent to student leaders, we investigate whether the extent to which student leaders seek feedback influences how effective they are assessed by their peers and also whether feedback-seeking by leaders elicits more favorable sentiments from their constituents. In addition, by examining the effects on constituents of “downward” feedback-seeking (leaders seeking...
feedback from their constituents rather than the other way around) the study contributes to this often-neglected characteristic in the feedback-seeking literature (Ashford et al., 2016).

Feedback-seeking represents an effortful devotion towards ascertaining the adequacy of one’s actions (Ashford, 1986). Various forms of feedback-seeking include passive monitoring of one’s environment and active requests for others to provide an assessment of one’s performance (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003). The focus in this study was on the latter, and, in particular, examined student leaders’ requests for feedback from their peers.

Seeking feedback is core to people's efforts in regulating their behavior toward effective performance (Ashford, 1989; Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Tsui & Ashford, 1994). Feedback can provide information about areas where greater attention is required, particularly with regard to aspects of performance not previously salient. It allows access to information not otherwise available, mainly diagnostic and error-corrective data on where one’s behavior or performance is falling short of expectations and how it might be improved. Thus, with clear goals and detailed feedback, people can become self-correcting (Eichinger, Lombardo, & Ulrich, 2004; Fishbach & Finkelstein, 2012). From a credibility perspective, people may not be aware or lack information regarding whether they are doing what they say they will do (that is, keeping promises and commitments) if they rarely get any feedback about their behavior and actions, and how it is impacting others.

In particular, feedback-seeking can increase self-awareness. Many managers have echoed the sentiment that “you might not always like the feedback but being aware of your shortcomings is essential for improving” (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). That is, feedback provides individuals with a perspective about themselves and how they are doing that only others can provide. It’s their avenue for understanding whether they are making progress toward their goal and executing properly. With feedback, leaders can decide whether they are on the right track going forward, and determine what help they need to be most productive.

Indeed, scholars have shown that when managers seek feedback they become more aware of their own behavior vis-à-vis constituents’ perspectives and can adapt their behavior according to those expectations and needs (Ashford & Tsui, 1991).

Self-awareness is considered one of the key components of emotional intelligence, along with self-management, social awareness, and social skills (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002). Being aware of one’s strengths, weaknesses, style, personality, preferences, etc., has a significant impact on how leaders behave and interact with others. Through being self-aware, leaders can consciously influence their situations and the potential climate of the group; and, not being self-aware can result in unwanted or undesirable consequences. Authenticity as a leader is born from self-awareness (Kouzes & Posner, 2016). Self-awareness has been shown to correlate with overall company financial performance. Results from Korn/Ferry’s International ProSpective Assessment shows that public companies with a higher rate of return employ professionals who exhibit higher levels of self-awareness (Zes, 2013).

Researchers have generally found that self-aware managers have the most satisfied and engaged employees, and, in turn, these employees view their managers as most effective (Van Velsor, Taylor, & Leslie, 1993; Sosik & Megerian, 1999; Tekleab, Sims, Yun, Tesluk, & Cox, 2007). In addition, when feedback is solicited, rather than imposed, it is likely to be more easily embraced and assimilated because it is viewed as legitimate and authentic (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford & Tsui, 1991). Actively asking for feedback reduces people’s
psychological resistance to negative information, providing them with an increased sense of control over their situation (VandeWalle, 2003).

In this study we examined several demographic factors that might influence the tendency of student leaders to seek feedback, as shown in Figure 1. The age, gender, ethnicity, and nationality of student leaders were all conceived as possible antecedents to the extent to which they sought feedback (Anseel et al., 2015). Two other factors, conceived as affecting feedback-seeking, were (a) the amount of experience and training student leaders had in leadership and (b) the perceived leadership skill level of student leaders. Furthermore, we investigated whether feedback-seeking on the part of student leaders had any impact on how their peers felt in working with them.

Methodology

Sample. In this study we relied on an archival proprietary database of student leaders. The company providing the data routinely helps educational institutions and students assess their leadership. Student leaders completed a survey about how frequently they engaged in various leadership behaviors and they invite three-to-five “observers” to provide their perspective on how frequently they engage in these leadership behaviors. The observers are typically their peers, involved in the same organization, activities, or classroom project, rather than their followers in any hierarchical sense. The sample for this study included 91,561 student leaders and perceptions of their leadership behaviors were provided by 365,747 observers.

For the student leaders in this study, 62% were female. All of the respondents were between 18-23 years of age, with 61% of them between 18-20 years of age and 39% between 21-23 years of age. Nearly half (49%) of the student leaders were Caucasian, with 32% being Asian, 7% African-American, 6% Hispanic, and 7% of Mixed Race ethnicity. The majority (62%) of the student leaders were from the United States. The demographic makeup of the observers were similar to the student leaders. Sixty-one percent were female, 55% between 18-20 years of age and 45% between 21-23 years of age. Fifty percent of the observers were Caucasian, 33% Asian, 6% African-American, 6% Hispanic, and 6% of Mixed Race ethnicity. The observers were mostly from the United States (62%).
Measures. The degree of feedback-seeking by student leaders was assessed by the question: “I ask for feedback on how my actions affect other people’s performance.” The frequency of this behavior was assessed on a five-point Likert scale, using the following anchors: 1 = “Rarely or seldom”; 2 = “Once in a while”; 3 = “Sometimes”; 4 = “Often”; and 5 = “Very frequently or almost always”. Observers completed a parallel statement, with the same response anchors: “This person asks for feedback on how his/her actions affect other people’s performance.” While the psychometric properties of measures are often more robust as a function of the number of statements asked, the measurement of certain constructs using single items can arguably be considered valid and reliable (Wanous, Reichers, & Hudy, 1997; Cheung & Lucas, 2014). As Sackett and Larson (1990) contend that this is especially likely in the case of unambiguous constructs, which we believed this feedback-seeking construct was.

Student leaders were asked about (a) the number of opportunities they had to be leaders, and (b) how many times they participated in formal leadership development opportunities, with response categories for the two queries being none (1), a few (2), some (3), several (4) and many (5). These two statements were strongly correlated (r = .61, p < .001) and were combined into a single variable, labelled “leadership experiences.” Student leaders provided a self-assessment of their leadership skills in comparison with their peers, using the following five-point Likert scale: 1 = “Not well developed”; 2 = “Somewhat underdeveloped”; 3 = “Similar with my peer group”; 4 = “Somewhat more developed”; and, 5 = “Very well developed.” Their observers responded to a similar question: “How developed are the leadership skills of the person you reported about compared with their peers?” using the same five-point Likert scale.

A measure of engagement, adapted from previous studies (Caza & Posner, 2017; Posner, 2014), asked observers about how they felt with regard to working with their student leader. Two statements inquired about intangible sentiments (“I’m proud to tell others that I am working with this leader” and “I feel that this leader values my work”). The third statement was a more tangible perception (“When working with this leader, I’m highly productive in what I do”). All three statements used the following five-point Likert scale: 1 = “Strongly disagree”; 2 = “Disagree”; 3 = “Neither agree nor disagree”; 4 = “Agree”; and, 5 = “Strongly agree.” The internal reliability coefficient (Cronbach alpha) for this measure was 0.85.

Results

Independent-samples t-tests were run to determine if there were differences in feedback-seeking based on various demographic factors. The data in Table 1 shows the relationship between the demographic variables of age, gender, nationality, and ethnicity and the frequency of feedback-seeking, as reported by student leaders and observers. Feedback-seeking behavior did not vary systematically based on the student leaders’ age nor did the age of observers significantly impact how frequently they reported student leaders seeking feedback. Similar results were found on the basis of nationality for both student leaders and observers. A statistically significant difference was found between the average feedback-seeking response from female and male student leaders, as well as reported by female and male observers. Female student leaders reported seeking feedback more often than their male counterparts, and female observers reported more frequent feedback-seeking behaviors by student leaders than did their male counterparts. However, in both instances, the absolute differences in frequency were relatively inconsequential.

A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to determine if feedback-seeking behavior varied based on ethnicity (and for this analysis only respondents from the United States were used). Statistically significant results were found for both student leaders (F = 50.41, p < .001) and for observers (F = 1021.8, p < .001). Post hoc analysis
using LSD (least square differences), revealed that comparisons of means by frequency of feedback-seeking behavior were statistically significant (p < .001) for student leaders (with the exception of Caucasians and Mixed race) and observers. The differences for student leaders were mostly between both African-Americans and Hispanics more frequently seeking feedback than their Asian, Caucasian, and Mixed Race counterparts; with Caucasians and Mixed Race student leaders also engaged less frequently than Asian student leaders.

On the part of Observers, LSD analysis showed that Asian and Mixed Race respondents reported that student leaders engaged less often in seeking feedback than that indicated by African-American, Hispanic, and Caucasian student leaders.

### Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>STUDENT LEADERS</th>
<th>OBSERVERS</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>18-20 years</td>
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<td>21-23 years</td>
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<td>1.08</td>
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<tr>
<td>GENDER⁴</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>1.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>1.08</td>
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<tr>
<td>NATIONALITY⁶⁷</td>
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<tr>
<td>United States</td>
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<td>1.08</td>
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<tr>
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<td>ETHNICITY⁸</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>1.07</td>
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³⁵ t-test was not statistically significant
⁴ t-test was statistically significant (p < .001)
⁶⁷ ANOVA was statistically significant (p < .001). Post hoc analysis, using LSD (least square differences), revealed that comparisons of means by frequency of feedback-seeking behavior were statistically significant (p < .001) for student leaders (with the exception of Caucasians and Mixed race) and for their observers.

Independent-samples t-tests were run to determine if feedback-seeking behavior was related to the extent that student leaders had experienced leadership opportunities (both to be a leader and to engage in leadership development activities). Those student leaders who reported above average leadership opportunities sought feedback significantly more often (t = 32.50, p < .001) than did those student leaders who had experienced fewer leadership opportunities, as shown in Table 2. A similar pattern was found on the basis of the self-reported leadership skill level of student leaders, also shown in Table 2. The student leaders who evaluated their leadership skills as more developed
(above average) than their peers reported seeking feedback significantly (t = 23.52, p < .001) more often than those student leaders who viewed their leadership skills as less well-developed (below average) than their peers. Observers who evaluated the leadership skills of student leaders as more developed (above average) than their peers reported that they more frequently (t = 58.00, p < .001) sought feedback than those student leaders evaluated by their observers as having less well-developed (below average) leadership skills. As also shown in Table 2, the observers who felt the most engaged (above average) reported that their student leaders asked for feedback significantly more often (t = 181.32, p < .001) than did the student leaders of the lessor-engaged (below average) observers.

Table 2.
Analysis of Feedback-Seeking Behavior by Leadership Experiences and Leadership Skills of Student Leaders andObservers’ Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>x  StdDev</td>
<td>x  StdDev</td>
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<tr>
<td>LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES</td>
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<tr>
<td>Below Average</td>
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<td>3.49 1.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Above Average</td>
<td>3.34 1.04</td>
<td>3.71 1.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>LEADERSHIP SKILLS</td>
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<td>Below Average</td>
<td>3.06 1.11</td>
<td>3.49 1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above Average</td>
<td>3.27 1.06</td>
<td>3.71 1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENGAGEMENT</td>
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<tr>
<td>Below Average</td>
<td>3.25 1.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Above Average</td>
<td>4.02 0.92</td>
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*a t-test was statistically significant (p < .001)*

Discussion

The findings from this exploratory study are consistent with the research literature about the importance of feedback-seeking as a key proactive behavior of leaders, and we extend that conclusion to a college student population. There are many benefits that accrue to student leaders who seek feedback about the impact of their actions on other’s performance. One benefit is that their leadership skills are more positively evaluated by their peers. Another is that feedback-seeking contributes favorably to the perceptions that student leaders have of their own leadership skills, and may correlate with their self-efficacy and confidence in using leadership behaviors (Caza & Rosch, 2013). In addition, those working with student leaders (that is, their peers as observers in this study), feel more engaged (proud, valued, and productive) when working with student leaders who take the initiative to ask for feedback; that is, being interested in, and open to, input from others about how their leadership behaviors make other people’s efforts more or less difficult. Under this circumstance, constituents are likely to feel more empowered and committed to their efforts because they feel more in control of their work environment (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). They are likely to remain longer with the leader and the organization, resulting in greater retention and less turnover, for example, in fraternities and sororities (Posner &
Brodsky, 1994). They may also recruit their colleagues and friends to join and participate in activities led by that student leader, for example, resident hall counselors and orientation advisors (Posner & Brodsky, 1993; Posner & Rosenberger, 1997).

Seeking feedback does not appear to be a leadership behavior associated with the student leaders’ gender, age, or nationality. Post hoc analysis revealed that neither the age nor gender of student leaders were substantively related to leadership opportunities nor leadership skills (effect sizes less than zero). These findings are consistent with Posner (2013, 2014), who reported that demographic factors, in both corporate and school settings, do not explain substantial amounts of variance in leadership effectiveness.

However, there were some differences in feedback-seeking by student leaders due to ethnic backgrounds. African-American and Hispanic student leaders were the most likely to seek feedback about their behavior. One possible explanation is that student leaders in these ethnic groups have experienced fewer opportunities to lead and learn about leadership, and hence are most likely to seek feedback about their leadership directly from their peers. Post hoc analysis was consistent with this speculation, finding that Caucasians reported the highest frequency of leadership opportunities, while Asians and Mixed Race student leaders reported the least frequent number of leadership opportunities.

It is worthwhile noting from a practical perspective that only seven percent of student leaders indicated that they rarely ask for feedback about how their behavior affects the performance of others, and only 11% indicate that they seek feedback almost all of the time. In between these two points it would appear are numerous opportunities for student leaders to learn, and appreciate, more about why engaging in this particular leadership behavior is important, and how to become more comfortable doing so. It may be somewhat reassuring that observers reported student leaders actually seeking feedback more often than perceived by student leaders. Some student leaders may actually be taking actions that seek feedback but just do not recognize that this is what they are doing.

The challenge in seeking feedback for students, and people generally, is that it strikes at a tension between two very basic human needs: The need to learn and grow versus the need to be accepted just the way one is (Heen & Stone, 2015). Consequently, even what seems like a mild or relatively harmless suggestion from a peer (or teacher) may make a student feel angry, anxious, or vulnerable. The fear of being exposed—that is, exposed as not being perfect, as not knowing something (let alone everything), or as not being sufficiently capable—is a major reason that most people, and especially those in leadership positions, are not proactive in asking for feedback (DiNisi & Sockbeson, 2018; Buckingham & Goodall, 2019). Still, how can individuals know how they are doing if they have no data about the consequences of their actions on other people? Asking for feedback provides a perspective that only others can see; armed with this insight, student leaders have the information, and opportunity, to make improvements. Researchers (Gino, 2016) have shown that people who seek out disconfirming feedback (contrary to their self-perceptions) perform better than those who only listen to people who see their positive qualities: “Being aware of your weaknesses and shortcomings -- whether you like it or not -- is critical to improvement.”

Overall, the results from this study can strengthen the efforts of student affairs administrators and leadership educators to develop current and future student leaders by ensuring that they recognize the value of receiving feedback and learn about strategies for soliciting feedback about how their actions affect others. Without obtaining feedback, students cannot develop themselves as effectively as they might otherwise, and they run the proverbial risk of “talking the talk, but not walking the talk.” Lacking alignment between words and actions reduces the credibility of student leaders, resulting
in cynicism and lower motivation from their followers (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). In the course of leadership programs, workshops, and classes structured feedback instruments can be used to not only help increase self-awareness but reinforce for student leaders the instrumental value of soliciting feedback in the first place. Practice sessions can be conducted, with students learning about the most effective ways to obtain feedback and strategies for reacting in non-defensive and productive manners.

Finally, while this study had the virtue of using a large sample size, it also had some limitations, which suggests several promising directions for future research. The generalizability of these findings can be extended to more specific student populations, both organizationally (e.g., athletics or student government, campus size), and individually (e.g., major, geography). In addition, a somewhat limited range of demographic categories was considered in this study; age being a good example, as some research has shown that student leaders engage more frequently in college than they do in high school (Posner, 2013). Moreover, little is known about the actual leadership roles or experiences of the students involved in this study, only how many opportunities they had to lead and be involved in leadership development activities. Knowing more about the specific nature of their leadership experience (e.g., classroom-based, Greek affairs, residential halls, student government, community service, etc.) might help differentiate between what type of leadership experiences, as well as what sort of formal developmental activities, are most informative and useful (Posner, Crawford, & Denniston-Stewart, 2015). Additionally, having objective rather than subjective outcome measures (or even more than one subjective measure) would be another contribution from future scholars to better document the impact of feedback-seeking by student leaders on the behavior and sentiments of their followers. From a statistical perspective, because the data were cross-sectional, causality cannot be inferred. The level of analysis was restricted to a between-level of analysis (i.e.,
References


References


References


