Chapter 11

i-Leadership: Leadership Learning in the Millennial Generation

Ivan Barron
University of Washington, USA

Daniel Alexander Novak
University of Washington, USA

ABSTRACT

The United States’ workforce is going through an enormous generational shift as Baby Boomers exit the workforce and Millennials launch their careers. The awareness of generational differences in learning styles and attitudes has been particularly acute in colleges and universities as Millennials make their way through higher education. In this regard, institutions of higher education are in a unique position to begin shaping the leadership values, identities, and experiences of the future leaders of our society. This chapter seeks to fill some of the gaps in the literature about the design of education programs to increase leadership expertise in Millennials through observation of a leadership program designed and taught by undergraduate students at a large university in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. Findings include insights into how Millennial students define and value leadership, self-organized to create systems of peer learning and mentorship, and how these digital natives did (and did not) use technology.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership in America stands at a crossroads. In the coming years, one of the greatest challenges for organizations will be the retirement of more than 75 million older workers, and their replacement by a comparable number of young people entering the workforce (Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010). Recognition of this challenge is not new. As early as 2001, the U.S. government’s General Accounting Office (GAO) placed this human capital issue on its high-risk priority list and considered it one of the government’s greatest management challenges (Ballard, 2001). Now, as the first wave of
the Baby Boom Generation begins to retire, the challenge of preparing a new generation of leaders has emerged in full.

Research focused on understanding generational characteristics in the United States (e.g. of the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, and Genartion X) has found many differences between these demographic groups in terms of typical or dominant personality traits, attitudes, and behaviors. These factors impact the way that these generations interact in the workplace (e.g. Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001; Twenge, Zhang, & Im, 2004; Wells & Twenge, 2005), and also manifest in the kinds of leadership preferences held by each group. In Arsenault’s (2004) research on intergenerational leadership differences, 790 respondents (covering 4 generations) identified their favorite leaders and ranked ten admired leadership traits. While members from all generations consistently ranked honesty as the most admired leadership trait, reported rankings for leadership characteristics and leadership figures (ranging from Winston Churchill to Tiger Woods) support the idea that each generation has its own key attitudes, values, and beliefs when it comes to leadership (Arsenault, 2004). If these generational differences are not understood and addressed, then leadership development programs may not adequately serve the various learning styles and perspectives of younger generations that are now preparing to enter the workforce (Katherine, 2011).

**Higher Education Can Shape a New Generation of Leaders**

The awareness of generational differences in learning styles and attitudes has been particularly acute in colleges and universities as Millennials makes their way through higher education in preparation to enter the workforce (Katherine, 2011). In this regard, institutions of higher education are in a unique position to begin shaping the leadership values, identities, and experiences of the future leaders in our society. Despite the extensive research on leadership in the social sciences over the years, higher education leaders have a difficult time applying this literature to develop leadership education programs to meet the needs of this new generation. While the literature offers some techniques for effectively developing leaders, from classroom instruction (Fiedler, 1996) to real-world experience (McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Morrow, 1994), relatively little is known about how to design organizational systems for leadership development (Conger, 1998). Indeed, in the areas of professional and leadership development in organizations there remains a significant gap in the understanding of expertise development in the areas of leading and managing people. Chipman (2009) writes:

*Most studies of expertise focus on some form of technical expertise in an individual. It is rare to study expertise that involves a complex social context and interaction with many other people...The current research base on expertise in the management of people is minimal. (p.470)*

This chapter seeks to fill some of the gaps in the literature about the design of education programs that can increase leadership expertise in Millennial undergraduate students. In particular, this study provides insights into ways of developing leadership education programs for Millennials in institutions of higher education. The aim of this research is not only theoretical, but also to serve as the basis for a set of guiding principles that higher education educators and administrators can use to design leadership education programs.

As institutions of higher education explore ways to effectively develop this new generation of leaders, a key component will be to design educational programs around a common understanding of who this new generation is and how they best learn (Black, 2010). This study examines a novel context for exploring

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