

Abstract

Scholarly literature has revealed that leadership is not reserved for a select few—it is for everyone. Individuals can develop their leadership abilities and skills through life experiences and under the guidance of others. Each person undergoes a personal process of leadership. This traditional-style research paper uncovers the most influential factors in a person's leadership journey through one-one-one interviews with public servants conducted via Zoom. Findings showed that support, passion and relationships play an important part in one's own leadership process. These findings reflect ideas noted in previous works about leadership development.

Introduction

Leadership matters in all fields of work; it is especially important for careers in public administration. Whether it is creating new policies, managing a nonprofit organization, or developing land-use plans, public administrators must be effective leaders to create positive change in their communities. Poor leadership in a nonprofit, for example, can cause the organization to struggle in fulfilling their mission. Leadership is crucial for the success of every organization.

Being a leader means something different to everybody. Some say that a leader is a person in a position of authority who makes all the decisions, while others define leadership as the art of influencing a group towards a common goal. Early literature equates leaders to the former definition of leadership mentioned. For instance, leadership in organizations is discussed in terms of managerial positions. More recent literature, however, has demonstrated leadership as a process rather than a role to be filled. This paper will further explore this definition of leadership as a process by identifying the factors that influence the leadership process. The study will attempt to answer the following questions: How do family background and upbringing impact leadership development? How much do role models or mentors influence an individual's leadership development? What factors are the most important in a person's own leadership process? By answering these questions, the study will hopefully demonstrate that leadership goes beyond formal leadership development courses offered at universities and work organizations. Rethinking the way society understands leadership development can help to empower today's emerging leaders. This change in perspective could build more effective public service leaders.

The paper will begin with an examination of literature related to leadership development and continue with the discussion of the methods used in this research project. The paper will also

explain the analysis of the data retrieved and reveal the findings. Lastly, the paper will offer recommendations for best practices and future research.

Literature Review

Defining Leadership

When you think of the word ‘leader,’ you most likely envision a person like the President of the United States or the dean of your university. You probably do not think of yourself. This is because we are usually taught that leaders are those with certain positions and special titles. In general, we perceive individuals like CEOs, governors, military officers, etc., to be the leaders of society since they have significant power over others. Leadership, however, is not about positional power, which is “the power that comes from holding a particular office, position, or rank in an organization,” (Yukl 2012, 3). Leadership is about your own personal power to inspire those around you (Yukl 2012, 3.)

Leadership as a Process

As mentioned above, leadership is typically portrayed as a position that somebody holds in an organization. When we think of leadership in this way, it is easy to assume that we can learn to be a leader with a few trainings. After all, many organizations offer leadership programs for their employees. They provide them with short lectures, online courses and group discussions so that they may become a “pool of trained employees ready for management challenges in the future,” (Cremo and Bux 2017, 3). Although formal leadership trainings and programs can contribute to a person’s leadership development, most scholars see leadership as a life-long process rather than a position that can be taught in a short amount of time.

Nature vs. Nurture

Not everyone chooses to be a leader because not everyone wants to be a leader. This could be due to a variety of reasons, such as feeling that leadership is not for them. A person may have the mentality that leaders are just naturally born. Early leadership literature suggests that particular people are “natural born leaders” with an inherited set of special abilities and gifts given to them at birth (Blank 2001, 6). These are the persons we often find ourselves competing against because they “effortlessly, spontaneously, consistently, and frequently demonstrate the skill set,” needed to be a leader (Blank 2001, 9). The “natural born leader” phenomenon centers around the idea that people’s genetic makeup is what makes them capable of performing certain skills. Their genes allow them to automatically “excel naturally” in their field, whether that is engineering, music, or sports (Blank 2001, 9).

This idea of the “natural born leader” is prominent in leadership, but scholars like Warrern Blank argue the contrary. In his book, *The 108 Skill of Natural Born Leaders*, Blank insists that genes do not determine how great someone can be. Blank admits that our genes give us innate characteristics that cannot be changed, but he claims that we all have the “natural ability to respond to opportunities that nurture [our] potential,” (Blank 2001, 10). In other words, we are all capable of learning to become leaders.

Development through Training vs. Experience

It was noted earlier in the literature review that leadership cannot be learned with a couple of trainings. Again, this does not mean that leaders cannot benefit from formal trainings provided by organizations. There is no harm in learning about different leadership theories and concepts. One leadership program evaluation found that their workshops helped members increase specific leadership behaviors like enabling others to act and modeling the way (Leigh, Shapiro and Penney 2010, 6). This study suggests that leadership programs can provide

emerging leaders a chance to grow. For this paper, however, the focus is leadership development through personal experiences like early family life.

Self-Leadership

The leadership process starts with self-leadership, which is defined as “having a developed sense of who you are, what you can do, and where you are going,” (Browning 2018, 15). Essentially, it is up to an individual to realize their potential and choose a path of leadership. Anyone can be an effective leader, but they must have the willingness and desire to get there (Swaroop and Prasad 2013, 36). This is not to say that being a leader is as simple as waking up one day and wanting to be a leader; leadership is a never-ending process of self-study, training, and experience (Swaroop and Prasad 2013, 36).

Experiences can either make us or break us; we can choose to learn and grow from them or let them get the best of us. In her book, *Leadership in Turbulent Times*, Doris Kearns Goodwin provides a detailed account of the lives of four U.S. presidents. She shows how each president’s leadership depended on what they chose to do in times of tragedy and hardship. Abraham Lincoln, for example, suffered with depression. So much so that his friends worried that he would take his own life (Kearns Goodwin 2019, 98). Lincoln had reached a point where he considered himself “the most miserable man living,” and he eventually withdrew himself from politics (Kearns Goodwin 2019, 100). This could have been the end of Lincoln’s career and possibly even his life, but he chose to pick himself up and become an accomplished man. As Blank states in his book, “Becoming a leader is a choice,” (11).

Upbringing and Family Background

Part of the leadership process is being shaped by your experiences and environment. Therefore, each journey to leadership is different and personal. Helen Keller once said, “There

is no royal road to the summit, each person must zig zag their own way,” (Blank 2001, 3).

Kearns Goodwin illustrates that some of the country’s greatest leaders grew up in circumstances that were unlike one another. Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt had two very distinct childhoods. Lincoln was raised in poverty and without a mother. Furthermore, his father discouraged him from attending school and Lincoln was left to educate himself by borrowing books (Kearns Goodwin 2019, 8). Roosevelt, on the other hand, lived in a wealthy household where he had access to his own library (Kearns Goodwin 2019, 25). Their upbringings are clearly opposite, but both shared a love for reading and learning that helped them develop into leaders. Kearns Goodwin reminds us that leaders are not produced in a set of universal circumstances.

The Role of Mentors and Relationships in Leadership

Although everyone undergoes a personal journey with their leadership, developing into a leader is not something that you do alone. The four presidents in Kearns’ book did not get to where they were without any help. Each one received guidance and support from either friends, family, or colleagues: Theodore Roosevelt was mentored by a young man named Bill Sewall during his time at Harvard University; Lincoln learned how to prepare legal cases by a lawyer named Stephen Logan; Franklin Roosevelt had his wife aid him with his political activities and events; and Lyndon B. Johnson became Franklin Roosevelt’s protégé (Kearns Goodwin 2019).

Other literature also emphasizes the importance of role models and mentors in a person’s leadership development. In their article, “Examining the Relationship Between Role Models and Leadership Growth During the Transition to Adulthood,” the researchers conducted a study with a group of undergraduate students at a large university (Bowers, Rosch and Collier 2016, 6). These students were ‘emerging adults’ aged 18 to 25 years old and they were recruited through

academic courses or student organizations (Bowers, Rosch and Collier 2016, 6). The participants were asked to partake in interviews where they had to answer questions about their leadership development since high school. The researchers found that role models influenced the participants' "pursuit of growth opportunities" and their "awareness of their potential to become leaders," (Bowers, Rosch and Collier 2016, 10). Overall, their role models led by example by displaying leadership qualities and encouraging their leadership growth. This study showed that people who surround us in our everyday lives can help us to pursue opportunities that can develop us into leaders.

Overview of Literature

The literature reviewed in this paper demonstrates that leadership is a continuous process in a person's life. The process begins when an individual realizes what they are capable of. When a person sees their potential, they are more likely to be motivated and driven to learn new skills and take on difficult situations. Leadership can be enhanced through formal trainings, but it is truly developed through life experiences and relationships. Experiences, whether positive or negative, can highlight a person's strengths and weaknesses. Knowing what our abilities are can help us to succeed as leaders. As for mentors, they act as some of our biggest supporters. They encourage us to engage in opportunities and can help us to make sense of our experiences.

One of the strengths of the reviewed literature is that most were published recently; however, there are still some gaps in the area this paper seeks to understand. There are very few articles available that discuss the impact of a person's upbringing on leadership development. For example, there are no articles that talk about the effects of family income, housing conditions, and neighborhood on leadership. There are also none about the importance of culture (i.e. Hispanic traditions and beliefs) on leadership development, and only some literature focuses

on the importance of role models and mentors. The literature all seems to be about formal leadership development in the workplace and its effectiveness in different organizations. Furthermore, if a piece of literature describes leadership as a process, they are referring to the process of interactions between leaders and followers. For example, how leaders communicate with their followers, gain their trust, and work together to achieve objectives. It would have been helpful if there was more literature that talks about the process within a leader's self. In other words, how individuals are shaped into effective leaders rather than how they guide and direct the people that they lead. This study is important because it can help shift the focus from the leader-follower process to the individual leadership process.

Data and Methodology

Although it is important to learn about all aspects of leadership, including the relationship between leaders and followers and the impact they have on one another, the center of this study is leadership at the individual level. As discussed earlier, becoming a leader is a different experience for everyone. Leaders may share the same qualities and characteristics, but each one will have gone through their own journey. To see which factors are the most important in leadership development, I spoke with various individuals and asked them to share their stories with leadership.

Participants

Participants were selected through a process known as quasi-snowball sampling. This method relies on referrals to create a sample. Because the focus of this study is leadership, the subjects were individuals who are known to have held leadership positions. It is important to note that this does not mean that leaders are only those in special positions. Narrowing it down to

well-known leaders in the community simply made the selection process easier. Furthermore, these subjects were selected based on the need for data for a separate multidisciplinary study for the St. Mary's University Westside San Antonio Humanities Project. This project was initiated by the History Department at St. Mary's University. The professors in this department wanted faculty and students to "uncover aspects of the Westside's history and culture... and share it with the public." Therefore, the participants were people who grew up on the San Antonio Westside or currently work on the Westside. To gather names of possible subjects, I reached out to professors in the Political Science Department at St. Mary's University and asked them for recommendations. Several of them responded with names and corresponding contact information. I used this information to communicate with potential participants. I sent them an email (or text message) informing them of the purpose of the project and asked if they would like to participate in the study. Using Calendly, an appointment scheduling software, I was able to schedule interview dates easily and efficiently with the individuals who chose to participate. Eighteen individuals were contacted but only seven participated in the study. All the participants were adults from the San Antonio area; four of them were male and three of them were female. The participants held the following positions: former city manager, corporate marketing manager, professor, CEO, city council member, and executive director. Participants were not compensated for their participation and no incentives were provided.

Materials and Procedure

Before beginning the study, I completed a Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) course for human subject research. Upon completion of the CITI program, I created the interview protocol. This protocol was designed to be used in a semi-structured interview with the participants. A semi-structured interview is one that is guided by pre-made questions but is open

to new questions as the conversation goes on. This type of interview allowed for the subjects to discuss and share their experiences. The protocol was created to address the research questions in this study as well as provide information for the Westside San Antonio Humanities Project.

Because this interview was meant for two different studies, the protocol not only included questions pertaining to leadership development but questions asking about the San Antonio's Westside area. The protocol was made up of the following questions:

- Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?
- Can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up and who you grew up with (i.e., parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts/uncles)?
- Did you feel as though your childhood was more difficult because you were raised in or around the Westside?
- How did your experiences growing up on or near the Westside encourage an interest in the work that you do?
- Who would you consider mentors and role models in your path to leadership? How did those individuals shape your interest in leadership and your approach to leadership?
- What is a core message you received from your mentors?
- Do you think your family played a role in your leadership development?
- Tell me about your education experience. What are some valuable lessons that you learned?
- Did your education affect who you are as a leader?
- What is unique about the leadership you provide(d) to the San Antonio community?

- What would you say are your strengths and weaknesses as a leader?
- Do you think there are distinct challenges to Latinx individuals as aspiring leaders? What are they?
- Would you say that leaders are born or made? Why?
- What makes a good leader?
- What do you believe are the most important leadership qualities and skills?
- What qualities do you think are lacking among today's public leaders?
- If you had to provide advice to current youth on the Westside interested in holding leadership positions, what would it be?

These questions were intended to get a better understanding of the personal leadership process and to learn more about the Westside community.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews (except for one that was done at St. Mary's University) were conducted via Zoom, a video communication platform. The participants were asked a series of questions from the interview protocol. Because they were semi-structured interviews, not all the questions were asked, and some follow up questions not included on the protocol were asked. Some participants had longer responses for certain questions, while others had much shorter answers. The length of the interviews averaged between 40 and 60 minutes, and all were audio-recorded using the voice recorder app on my phone. The interviews were also transcribed by the transcription setting on Zoom. The audio recordings were used to check the accuracy of the transcriptions developed by Zoom.

Analyzing the Data

To analyze my interview data, I first listened to each audio recording and got familiar with the interviews to make the transcription and coding process easier. Next, I copied and pasted the Zoom transcriptions into separate Microsoft Word documents and used the audio to correct any mistakes. After I finished transcribing each one, I read through all the transcripts a couple of times and began the coding process. The type of coding method I utilized is inductive coding, which is building a codebook based on the data rather than having a codebook at the beginning and looking for those codes in the data (Erika Yi 2018). As I read through the transcripts, I made notes on the side of the documents and assigned codes to certain parts of the text. For example, if the subject stated, “What that experience taught me is that you will do better at what you love doing,” I coded it as ‘having passion.’ If a participant said, “It really was always around me that we all have a purpose in this life, and that purpose should always be in service to others,” I coded it as ‘serving others.’ When I came across similar text, I assigned it the same code and repeated this with every interview. At the end of this coding process, I wrote down all the different codes on sheets of paper. Some of the codes noted were interacting with others, learning about issues, getting input and feedback, participation, having mentors, being confident, teaching others, being encouraged, learning from parents, building connections, and being supported. Using colored pens, I circled all the codes that were like one another to create categories. For instance, I combined the codes “working with others,” “interacting with others,” “networking,” “working together,” and “connecting with others” into a category called ‘building relationships.’ I wrote all these categories down on a separate sheet of paper and drew out the themes I noticed in my data. These themes were different than the categories. The themes that I ended up with are communication, passion, building relationships, serving others, confidence,

encouragement, hard work, being supported by family, taking advantage of opportunities, and understanding the needs of others.

Empirical Findings

Because I had a very small sample size, I was not expecting to find many similarities between the participants' responses. To my surprise, there were several commonalities. Although I found myself with multiple themes at the end of analyzing my data, I think the most important themes were support, encouragement, passion, and building relationships. This is because every single participant talked about each of these themes. Not all the participants spoke about each theme mentioned in the previous section. Despite the participants' distinct backgrounds and upbringings, they all received support and advice from their family and loved ones throughout their life. Whether it was their parents, grandparents, or siblings, they all had someone to look up to and to learn from. One participant stated, "My grandma was always that kind of compass for us all, spiritually and ethically in terms of how we should be towards our community, how we should be toward our neighbors. And that really inspired me towards thinking "okay, even if you don't have much, share what you have, do what you can for whoever you can." Another participant shared that her parents raised her and her siblings to "believe in ourselves and raised us to be compassionate, loving people."

In addition to receiving support, the participants stressed the importance of encouragement from family, friends, and professional colleagues. The participants were encouraged to read, to attend college, and to become involved with the community. One participant said, "higher education was always on the radar. My parents were very big on it... always had the counseling... always had people talking to us about where you're going next, what are you going to do, what do you like to do, what are your interests, how to get there..."

Another participant shared that her mentor strongly encouraged her to be involved with the community. Her chief of staff taught her the “importance of community involvement and being an activist.”

All the participants also shared the belief that passion is needed to be a successful leader. One of the participants claimed, “The most important things are compassion, and passion. Compassion is what you saw there today. Somebody who is worried about those folks and wants to do something about it...And then passion, a drive to get that done.” Another shared his experience in college. He stated, “... I was not a good student as a business major. I just could not connect with it, there was no passion in it for me. That may not be true for everyone but for me there was no passion or emotional connection to business management.” Individuals will find it harder to excel as leaders if there is no passion.

Additionally, the participants heavily emphasized the importance of building relationships with those in your community. A participant stated, “One thing I have learned...is the value of relationships and your network. Meet as many people as you can and tell them what you want to do. It is amazing how many people are out there and want to see you succeed, even if they do not know you...at the end of the day, it all comes down to our human relationships and adding values to others. I have seen people succeed in ways I never would have imagined, and it is for no other reason than the relationships they built and the people they knew.” Another participant suggested having “a group of people that you totally respect, who can be watching over you to make sure you don't go veer off in the wrong direction because then because ego gets in the way.” Forming relationships with others can open doors of opportunity and keep you on the right path.

Through speaking with these individuals, I was able to answer (to an extent) the research questions for this project. From their stories, I was able to see that family background and upbringing is very important to a leader's development. This does not mean that a person must grow up in 'perfect' conditions in a great house in the best neighborhood. It means that people are more likely to become effective leaders if they have a supportive family that offers guidance and encouragement. Ultimately, they help leaders to realize their potential. As for mentors, whether professional or personal, they are also crucial to leadership development. Mentors can push someone to grow in their leadership by pushing them to take on different challenges and opportunities. Finally, the most important influences of an individual's personal leadership process are passion. Passion is what motivates you to be a leader; relationships are what help you get there.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this project was the sample size. The number of participants was extremely small, which meant that the amount of data I retrieved was small. Another limitation was the selection process. I only interviewed individuals in certain professions that were from a particular part of the city. The study would have benefitted from speaking to a more diverse group of individuals. The research was also limited by the needs of the outside project. Because I had to get information for the St. Mary's University Westside San Antonio Humanities Project, I could not focus my attention to the purpose of this study which is leadership development. The Westside San Antonio Humanities Project, on the other hand, was intended for the public to learn more about the history of the area. For future research, I would recommend a larger, more diverse sample and a study that uncovers more about a person's leadership journey.

Conclusion

This research project contributed to current literature by expanding on the idea that leadership is a process. Most people tend to think of leadership as a destination, but this study showed that leadership is an ongoing learning experience. The leadership process is supported by family and mentors, but it all begins with an individual's passion to be a leader. The St. Mary's University Master of Public Administration program aims to prepare and train students to be leaders in urban planning and public policy, and they should approach leadership from the process perspective. The program cannot magically transform its students into leaders with its coursework, but it can instill the courage and motivation its students need to start their own leadership development journey.

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