

**LEADERSHIP PERCEPTIONS AND PREFERENCES OF THE 21STCENTURY
YOUTH**

Rosh Maharaj,

Richfield Graduate Institute of Technology, Durban, South Africa, 4001

Jay Ramnundlall

Richfield Graduate Institute of Technology, Durban, South Africa, 4001

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to shed light on the leadership perceptions of the young generation in the workplace. How do they perceive current leaders to be and how would they like leaders to be in terms of promoting performance, productivity and staff satisfaction. A qualitative study was undertaken with a varied sample in terms of age as well as years of work experience. In the main the findings reveal that staff prefer transformational leaders who are both firm and fair and work with them rather than against them.

Keywords:. Transformation, leadership, ethical leadership, work life balances

INTRODUCTION

It has long since been established that the Y generation are significantly different to the older generation in terms of their preferences for leadership styles (Anderson, Baur, Griffith, & Buckley 2017). This fact has been established by various recent studies (Kuron, 2014, Twenge&Kasser, 2013, Lu&Gursoy, 2013) that support the traditional leadership studies of Lewin, Lippitt& White (1939). One can argue that the most significant criteria that impacts on their leadership preferences emanate from their current attitudes and values that have changed in the 21st century(Kuron, 2014). This change in all likelihood could be attributed to the introduction of technology, a fast moving lifestyle, lack of parental care due to working parents and more important freedom in terms of dating the opposite sex that has exacerbated due to social media (Anderson et al., 2017).

This culture pervades the work environment and studies have proven that the younger generation or baby boomers require more support from their managers and leaders because of their ideals and desire to have the best of both worlds in terms of work life balances (Twenge, 2010.) A stark comparison between the work ethics of more seasoned employees and those of the younger generation reveal marked differences in work management. Whereas the older generation pay attention to deadlines, the younger generation are happy to drag their feet by watching YouTube, chatting on WhatsApp; and only when the boss arrives, a mock sense of urgency prevails (Ng,

Schweitzer, and Lyons, 2010, Lu &Gursoy, 2013). When such staff are chastised, it leads to dissatisfaction with everybody concerned(Anderson et al., 2017).

Regrettably, this culture has numerous disadvantages and lends itself to job satisfaction and high staff turnover (Lu &Gursoy, 2013). The days of being loyal to a firm has long since gone, because the younger generation are ready to hop around looking for the most highly paid job irrespective of other circumstances. Money is a very important precursor to job opportunities, and this generation expect to be well paid (Johnson &Ng,2015). With the older generation, loyalty and commitment take precedence over salaries despite the fact that such employees know they are worth more to the institution (Anderson et al., 2017;Twenge&Kasser, 2013).).

So it stands to reason that all the theories on leadership of yesterday can become obsolete when referring to the preferences of the Y generation (Anderson et al., 2017). This evolution of theories has given rise to more recent leadership theories like Transactional Leadership , Servant leadership, Transformational leadership as opposed to Lewin, Lippit and Whites (1939) autocratic, Democratic and Laissez fair leadership practices.

This change in leadership preferences has to be managed by both employers and employees and the generation gap and the leadership gap must be resolved in the interest of all stakeholders because it is these gaps that eventually determine the perceptions of the young generation towards leadership. Needless to say that attitudes, values and caliber of both leaders and the young generation have changed markedly in the 21st century; hence the need to revisit the traditional theories of leadership in the current context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since leadership style is precursor of several variables such as job satisfaction, staff turnover performance and productivity, it stands to reason the influence of leadership theories on current management practices will also evolve.

Before discussing three different leadership theories, it is important to define the term leadership because research has revealed that there are 221 different definitions and conceptions of leadership (Rost, 1993). Hence, Bass (2008) argued that to search for a single definition of leadership was pointless. Suffice it to say that the correct definition of leadership will depend largely on the specific aspect of leadership of interest to the younger generation of employees to decide on their preferences of how to work, when to work and with whom to work. In addition the specific leadership style can impact on their behaviours and sense of loyalty to the firm.

Situational leadership theory proposes that effective leadership requires a rational understanding of the situation and an appropriate response, rather than a charismatic leader with a large group of dedicated followers (Grint, 2011). Situational Leadership Theory (SLT) in particular evolved from a task-oriented versus people-oriented leadership continuum (Conger, 2010). The continuum represents the extent that the leader focuses on the required tasks or focuses on his relations with his followers. This theory focuses on the need to relate the leader's style to the maturity level of the followers, implying that each task will have specific roles for followers, definite instructions, and organizational patterns, (Hersey & Blanchard, 1981). Therefore, this leadership style will appeal to the younger generation as situations will be "created for them". A criticism of this definition is that the younger generation may take advantage of leaders who are gullible. This type of leadership style can be compared to the transactional leadership theory (Sharma & Jain, 2013). This theory can be used to advantage by the younger generation because it focuses an exchange between the leader and the employee. So in effect a transaction takes place: I will do the work if you promise to let me have tomorrow off (Stone et al., 2013).

In contrast, relation-oriented leaders practice concern for others, attempt to reduce emotional conflicts, seek harmonious relations, and regulate equal participation (Shin, Heath, & Lee, 2011). SLT focuses on leaders' behaviours as either task or people focused.

Transformational Leadership (TL) has been "the single most studied and debated idea within the field of leadership" (Diaz-Saenz, 2011: 299). Several studies, point to the significant role of the CEO in transformational leadership success (Jung, Wu, & Chow, 2008), middle manager effectiveness (Singh & Krishnan, 2008) and cross-cultural leadership (Diaz-Saenz, 2011). Undoubtedly, the role of the leader has serious implications for the survival, sustainability and success of the organisation. Accordingly, this theory emphasises the fact that when an individual interacts with others and is able to create a solid relationship that results in a high percentage of trust, and an increase in intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, in both leaders and followers develop. Consequently transformational leaders are defined as leaders who are able to motivate their followers into setting and attaining performance outcomes that exceed what was expected of them. They motivate their followers and employees by using ideals and values not by using negative and indifferent feedback giving impetus to Merton's (1948) the self-fulfilling prophecy. However, the transformational leadership style is not without its shortcomings. While all employees desire attention and recognition for exemplary work (Anderson et al., 2017), the individualistic nature of such employees makes it difficult for transformational leaders to interact with because they need to know how to educate employees to work in the interest of the organization rather than their own self-interest. Idealized influence and inspirational motivation

by the transformational leader will not help because such employees are less motivated to obtain a collective goal.

One notable difference between these three leadership theories involves the subject of charisma (Conger, 2011). Many scholars combine idealized influence and inspirational motivation under the heading charismatic-inspirational leadership or simply charismatic leadership (Sharma & Jain 2013). In contrast to transformational leadership, both situational and transactional leadership theories ignore the role of individual differences between leaders (Bass, 2008). Charisma is a key example of one such individual difference.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND QUESTIONS

The objective of this paper is to explore the perceptions of the 21st century youth regarding leadership preferences

To meet this objective, the paper attempts to answer the following research questions:

- What are your perceptions about the leadership practices of your Managers?
- Which leadership style allows you to work to your optimum?

METHOD

Since leadership is an aspect of human behaviour which is constantly changing, the researcher deemed it important to explore the process rather than the outcomes, which would provide valuable insights into the phenomenon under investigation, in keeping with an interpretive philosophy.

The suitability of the qualitative research method for the present study is determined by the identifying features of qualitative research, namely: exploring specific situations or people; its inductive approach; its emphasis on words rather than on numbers; and its building of knowledge through observation from information-rich data as supplied by participants (Sekaran and Bougie 2013).

Sample

According to Sekaran and Bougie (2013) interviewing a small group of respondents who are likely to be knowledgeable and informative about work experiences, and what their realities are regarding the phenomenon is feasible. Hence, 10 respondents, selected through judgemental, or purposive, sampling, were interviewed regarding the phenomenon under investigation. The interviewees were selected on the basis of their work experiences as administrators in several

sectors: marketing, finance, human resources and as personal assistants. The sample comprised of respondents with work experience ranging from 6 months to 8 years. In addition 4 managers with extensive work experience were interviewed. Judgemental sampling was chosen as it was necessary to obtain information urgently and get a feel of the phenomenon under investigation, and this method ensured that the sample units with knowledge about the research phenomenon were selected (Quinlan, 2011).

Procedure

The researcher conducted in-depth focus group interviews with the respondents during their scheduled lunch breaks lasting 60 minutes. The following questions were posed:

1. Explain your positive and negative work experiences in the current work environment
2. Which aspect of your work appeals to you the most? Why?
3. How would you describe your relationship with your immediate superior/staff?
4. Is there any likelihood of your being responsible for your managers' leadership style? Why?
5. Is there any likelihood that your leadership style encourages deviant behaviour and poor performance amongst your employees?
6. How do you think you can improve the situation?
7. What is your idea of the ideal leader/ideal employee?

Data collection and analysis

The researcher enjoys a trust relationship with the participants so they were confident and willing to share their experiences without fear, to produce useful knowledge (Quinlan, 2011).

During the course of the interviews, the researcher made detailed notes concerning the original comments, observations, and feelings regarding leadership preferences and reasons thereof. The data was deconstructed and then reconstructed and grouped together around the core concepts and themes of the study (Quinlan, 2011).

Ensuring trustworthiness

Credibility involves establishing that the results of the research are believable. In this paper the data speaks for itself as the research was heavily embedded in real life situations, settings and circumstances. While there were only 10 participants, the adequacy of the sample was confirmed

by the richness of the quality of data collected and not by the number of participants (Quinlan, 2011; Sekaran and Bougie 2013). This, together with the purposive sampling, ensured transferability (Babbie and Mouton, 2001).

Limitations

The non-probability sampling design, which does not facilitate generalization of findings, was a limiting factor. This was not significant, as the objective of the study was to gain understanding of the research problem, rather than to extrapolate the findings. Nevertheless, it is prudent to advise that the results and recommendations are based solely on the perceptions of the employees and managers experience of the phenomenon under investigation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion are presented under each question.

Question 1: Explain your positive and negative work experiences in the current work environment.

All the respondents were unanimous in stating that the most enjoyable work experiences centred on their colleagues, the support received from them, their levels of empathy, team work and understanding. With reference to the negative work experiences, respondents of the first focus group cited work pressure, no support and cooperation from line managers; taken for granted attitude. These findings support the views of Lu and Gursoy, (2013) in terms of factors contributing to job satisfaction and staff turnover.

The responses of the second focus group were positive in the main. They enjoyed working with their colleagues and immediate line manager. While pressure of work was a given, they enjoyed job satisfaction because of the support received from their line manager (Ng et al., 2010).

Question 2: Which aspect of your work appeals to you the most? Why?

The responses of both focus groups were heartening as nothing gave them more pleasure than when they achieved their objectives within specific timelines. Regrettably little to nil recognition is awarded. Despite that they enjoyed their own measure of success.

Question 3: How would you describe your relationship with your immediate superior/staff?

The responses of the first focus group left much to be desired. In the main their relationship resembled the actions of a yo-yo signifying the highs and lows. The respondents were quick to point out that there were more lows than high experiences largely because of confusion and conflicting emotions and the lack of support from their line managers. The findings lend support

to Lewin et al. (1939) study on autocratic and laissez faire leadership styles. Judging from the yo-yo nature of the relationship, it can be assumed that some semblance of transactional leadership is practised (Stone et al., 2013).

The second focus group enjoyed working with their immediate line managers and enjoyed an open transparent communication relationship, qualities practiced by transformational leaders (Ng et al., 2010; Glynn, &DeJordy, 2010).

Question 4: Is there any likelihood of your being responsible for your managers' leadership style? Why?

Both focus groups agreed that in some measure they are responsible for their line managers' leadership style. However, the first focus group that experienced more lows than highs explained that because of unclear messages, limited direction and support, they invariably ended up executing the wrong tasks and producing incorrect results! The respondents were afraid to question their line managers and attempted to do their best. These findings demonstrate the need for understanding employees, their level of competence and the necessary support structures that they require to improve their work situations. While respondents are unhappy, they value their jobs and are prepared to learn.

Some respondents in the second focus group indicated that some line managers prefer things to work out themselves without taking any action. This attitude leads to resentment and subsequent aggressive behaviour and with little respect for such leadership style. A very strong contributing factor in this case is the generation and leadership gap between line managers and the youth (Graenand Schiemann,2013).

Other respondents indicated that they enjoyed a cordial relationship with their line manager; however, they indicated when top management finds fault with the department, it affects the whole team.

Question 4: Is there any likelihood that your leadership style encourages deviant behaviour and poor performance amongst your employees?

The line managers for both focus groups had different responses. The line manager for the second group indicated that they enjoyed a reciprocal relationship whereby all departmental matters were brainstormed and discussed prior to decisions being made. But there were instances when poor leadership practices impacted on all respondents. A quite, passive leadership style is generally categorised as ineffective leadership practices; little recognition is accorded to the

hidden strength. Nevertheless staff perceive passive leadership style as associated with leaders who tend to allow events to unfold with minimum guidance or input until something goes wrong. Then they tend to become more involved in identifying who created the problem and correcting them (Deal, Altman & Rogelberg, 2010). This style of leadership is considered to be the least effective and most likely to generate negative feelings in subordinates

Question 5: How do you think you can improve the situation?

Both focus group respondents stressed the need for open lines of communication, caring environment and transparent decision making in the interest of all. The respondents highlighted the importance of high-quality leaders.

Question 6 .What is your idea of the ideal leader/ideal employee?

Both focus group respondents emphasised that their vision of an ideal leader is one who works with the team, supports their attempts, reprimands and motivates them when they are wrong, provides appropriate guidance and focuses on work life balance to get the optimum level of performance. This finding underscores the value of having able leaders in place in order to harness human capital resources. While all respondents viewed the transformational leader as an ideal leader, they were quick to point out that individual recognition, reward and praise were non-existent. This finding contradicts the views of Graen and Schliemann (2013) who stated that transformational leaders by virtue of their idealized influence are able to provide personalized attention to employees.

The line managers were in agreement that they desired employees who will focus more on their work rather than on their cell phones; be punctual, be able to multitask and more importantly focus on improving themselves as responsible employees. These findings reveal that the line managers will definitely experience disconnect with the younger employees who value more constructive work life balance structures.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The main conclusions from this study cantered on:

- Erratic leadership practices
- Importance of Work life Balance for youth
- Transparency in communication channels
- Need for reward and recognition not special dispensations
- Need for constructive support from line managers

While there is no one leadership style that will satisfy the youth in any organization, it stands to reason that work life balances emerge as the most critical success factor in having a contented workforce. Hence, it is imperative for organisations to focus on work life balances not only in terms of activities, but also in terms of flexibility in working hours, distributed between home and office.

Communication in the modern office revolves around technology and the fact the short messages are sent to specific targets, it does lead to formation of ‘cliques’ who think nothing of engaging in the office gossip. Unless and until leaders/line managers draw clear rules for the use of personal technology in the office, this problem will persist, thereby making transparent and authentic communication difficult.

All situations demand specific leadership traits; only in this way leaders/line managers can be said to be effective. However, the youth, in their enthusiasm to criticize, fail to see the benefits of situational leadership styles. But one needs to be mindful that not all leaders/line managers subscribe to effective situational leadership styles, hence, the term erratic leadership. To curb such “erratic leadership” styles, it is prudent to advise that employees must introspect their own behaviours that in all likelihood contribute to their leaders/line managers’ erratic behavior.

While the respondents are willing to work, they believe that very little recognition is accorded to the quality of work they produce. It is recommended that due recognition needs to be accorded to retaining talent through meaningful rewards like: Certificate for star performer of the month, certificate for punctuality, a dinner for two; a simple meaningful ‘thank you’ etc. Such gestures will only emanate if constructive support, and mentoring is ongoing amidst collegial relationships. It should not be like a bolt from the blue to earn the disrespect of employees.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, H., Baur, J.E., Griffith, J.A., Buckley, R. 2017. What works for you may not work for (Gen)Me: Limitations of present leadership theories for the new generation. *The Leadership Quarterly* 28, 245–260
- Babbie, E. & Mouton, J. 2001. *The practice of social research*. Cape Town
- Conger, J. A. (2011). Charismatic leadership. In A. Bryman, D. Collinson, K. Grint, B. Jackson & M. Uhl-Bien (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of leadership* (pp. 86-102). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Deal, J. J., Altman, D. G., & Rogelberg, S. G. (2010). Millennials at work: What we know and what we need to do (if anything). *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 25, 191–199.

Diaz-Saenz, H. R. 2011. Transformational leadership. In A. Bryman, D. Collinson, K. Grint, B. Jackson & M. Uhl-Bien (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of leadership* (pp. 299-310). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Glynn, M. A., & DeJordy, R. 2010. Leadership through an organizational behavior lens: A look at the last half-century of research. In N. Nohria, & R. Khurana (Eds.), *Handbook of leadership and practice* (pp. 119-158). Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press. 128

Graen, G. B., & Schiemann, W. A. 2013. Leadership-motivated excellence theory: An extension of LMX. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 28, 452–469.

Johnson, J. M., & Ng, E. S. 2015. Money talks or millennials walk: The effect of compensation on nonprofit millennial workers sector-switching intentions. *Review of Public Personnel Administration*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0734371X15587980> Advance online publication.

Kuron, L. K., Lyons, S. T., Schweitzer, L., & Ng, E. S. 2015. Millennials' work values: Differences across the school to work transition. *Personnel Review*, 44, 991–1009.

Lewin, K., Lippitt, R. and White, R.K. 1939. Patterns of aggressive behavior in experimentally created social climates. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 10, 271-301

Lu, A. C. C., & Gursoy, D. 2013. Impact of job burnout on satisfaction and turnover intention: Do generational differences matter? *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1096348013495696> Advance Online Publication

Merton, Robert K. 1948, "The Self Fulfilling Prophecy", *Antioch Review*, 8 (2 (Summer)): 195, doi:10.2307/4609267, ISSN 0003-5769, retrieved May 4, 2017

Ng, E. S., Schweitzer, L., & Lyons, S. T. 2010. New generation, great expectations: A field study of the millennial generation. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 25, 281–292.

Quinlan, C. 2011. *Business Research Methods*. ISBN 1408007797 Cengage Learning

Rost, J. C. 1993. Leadership development in the new millennium. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 1(1), 91-110. doi:10.1177/107179199300100109

Sekaran U, Bougie R 2013. *Research methods for business*. Hampshire: Wiley.

Shin, J., Heath, R. L., & Lee, J. 2011. A contingency explanation of public relations practitioner leadership styles: Situation and culture. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 23(2), 167-190. doi:10.1080/1062726X.2010.505121

Singh, N., & Krishnan, V. R. 2008. Self-sacrifice and transformational leadership: Mediating role of altruism. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 29(3), 261-274. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org.library.capella.edu/10.1108/01437730810861317>

Twenge, J. M., & Kasser, T. 2013. Generational changes in materialism and work centrality, 1976–2007 associations with temporal changes in societal insecurity and materialistic role modeling. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 39, 883–897.