Short Communication

Millennial Leadership Expectations, Shared Leadership, and the Future of Organizations

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Abstract

Generational diversity is the new normal in most organizations. Millennials now make up the majority of the US workforce. As Baby Boomers enter retirement and Millennials enter leadership positions, the paradigms and models of leadership must be reexamined, and possibly swept away. Shared Leadership may hold a prominent position in the organization of the near future based on observations about Millennials leadership preferences.

Keywords: Millennials, Leadership, Shared Leadership

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Generational diversity is the new normal in most organizations. Millennials now make up the majority of the US workforce (Brownstone, 2014). As baby boomers enter retirement and Millennials enter leadership positions, the paradigms and models of leadership must be reexamined, and possibly swept away.

A recent article by Anderson, Baur, Griffith, and Buckley (2017) addresses the need to reexamine leadership theories in light of the differences between Millennials and other generational cohorts (Boomers and Xers). These differences include an increased desire for work-life balance (Twenge 2010; Twenge & Kasser, 2015), a preference for higher levels of manager support and feedback (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010), and a stronger relationship between job satisfaction and turnover (Lu & Gursoy, 2013). Anderson et al. go on to examine specific conventional leadership theories given these differences and to present a series of propositions based on their analysis (2017). They delve into Transformational leadership, Authentic leadership, Ethical leadership, Leader-member exchange, and Information processing; however, they did not examine Shared Leadership.

In this new diverse organizational environment, Shared Leadership Theory appears ripe for a renaissance. Leadership is shared in teams where any member can step into a leadership role, provided that she sees a need and believes she is competent, and can call attention to that need and enact the role of team leader (Bass, 2008). Shared leadership is closely related to, and sometimes viewed as synonymous with Distributed Leadership although each enjoys a distinct history in the literature (Burke, Diaz Granados, & Salas, 2011). First, let us examine the theoretical discussion around Millennial Leadership and then we can return to the implications of Shared Leadership Theory.

Millennial Leadership Preferences

Using the framework presented by Anderson et al. (2017) and placing their observations against the backdrop of theoretical conception of shared leadership, a model of leadership emerges with potential to assist the organization of the near future. The model includes:

- less emphasis on transformational leadership behaviors,
- a keener awareness of extrinsic rewards and early advancement,
- an increased awareness of the needs of individualistic workers,
- a greater emphasis on alternative work settings,
- a decreased reliance on the centrality of work,
- an admission of the difficulty around motivating followers who share different leadership attributions,
- a focus on high tech collaboration and communication rather than high quality exchange relationships,
- a strong preference for work-life balance,
- an acceptance of value incongruence in important areas including work ethic, intrinsic outcomes, and moral intensity,
- a willingness to redefine the relationship between supervisor and employee and the nature of work,
- a preference for highly social and connected interactions in the workplace, and

- higher openness to Shared Leadership arrangements where appropriate.

Shared Leadership

Shared Leadership is related to and sometimes considered synonymous with a variety of leadership theories including distributed leadership, co-leadership, collaborative or collective leadership, emergent leadership and participative leadership (Fitzsimons, 2016; Fitzsimons, James, & Denver, 2011). Among these various terms and conceptions of plural leadership, the two most commonly used are distributed leadership and shared leadership (see Fitzsimons et al., 2011 for a more thorough review). To clarify the concept used here, we endorse the definition offered by Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone (2007). Shared leadership is "an emergent team property that results from the distribution of leadership influence across multiple team members" (p. 1218). This definition shares with all the previously mentioned similar ideas the concept that "leadership is not the monopoly or responsibility of just one person, with each suggesting a similar need for a more collective and systemic understanding of leadership as a social process" (Bolden, 2011, p. 252). Shared leadership results from a process of influence (Ensley, Hmieleski, & Pearce, 2006; Friedrich, Vessey, Schuelke, Ruark, & Mumford, 2009) and has been described as "dynamic, simultaneous, and on-going" (Bergman et al., 2012, p. 18). It is further characterized as the simultaneous emergence of two or more leaders in the same group or team (Pearce, 2004). When these two or more leaders enact leadership behaviors designed to influence their peers, shared leadership occurs (Bergman et al., 2012; Carson et al, 2007; Pearce, 2004). Recent literature highlights some of the characteristics of shared leadership (Bergman et al., 2012; Friedrich et al., 2009; Vanderwaerde, Voordeckers, Lambrechts, & Bammens, 2011).

A number of scholars examined shared leadership in various settings. Bergman, et al. (2012) studied 45 ad hoc problem-solving teams and concluded that teams who shared leadership experienced higher levels of group consensus and trust, increased cohesion among team members, and less intra-team conflict. Friedrich et al. (2009) reviewed the relevant distributed leadership literature and proposed an "integrated framework for understanding the collective leadership process" (p. 933). These authors proposed a framework for understanding shared leadership based on the idea that not all team members are alike, that shared leadership situations are not static and information-based, and that the presence of shared leadership does not eliminate the need for or the benefits of formal leadership positions (Friedrich et al., 2009). Taking a novel theoretical approach, Vandewaerde et al. (2011) argued for a conceptual framework designed to address an ethical approach to top management team leadership using the shared leadership construct, noting that previous leadership demonstrated performance benefits resulting from shared leadership in various team settings. For example, utilizing a focused effort, taking advantage of member expertise, and engaging in collaboration, knowledge sharing, and joint decision-making, teams make more effective use of leader capabilities and problem-solving (Friedrich et al., 2009). Ultimately, shared leadership is recognized at the team level and based on the consensus of the team members.

The question to consider is whether Millennials could use the concepts of Shared Leadership to reshape the current organizational environment. As noted above, Millennials prefer less emphasis on transformational leadership behaviors. Since they are less willing to accept the single, charismatic, transformational figure, they may be more accepting of leadership by a committee of capable individuals. Millennials prefer greater opportunities for advancement and the sharing of leadership roles creates additional opportunities for advancement into leadership positions. Millennials display strong preferences for work life balance and low levels of work centrality and Shared Leadership roles allow for more time off and more flexible schedules for leaders since leadership roles and responsibilities are shared across multiple individuals. Millennials also express a preference for highly social and connected interactions in the workplace and Shared Leadership allows for greater social interaction and connectedness among the members of leadership as they lead through individual efforts at times but share the burdens and responsibilities of leadership as a small group. In effect, Millennials may be the first generational cohort with the capacity to fully embrace Shared Leadership Theory.

A Disclaimer

It is important to note that not all the current data about Millennial's leadership preferences suggest a large number of differences from other generational cohorts. Deal, Stawiski, Gentry and Cullen (2014) reported on an online survey of 5,940 U.S. respondents that indicated similar preferences across three Generational cohorts for leaders who were participative, team-oriented, people focused, and charismatic. In a surprising finding, Millennials were more likely than either Gen Xers or Boomers to defer to their manager, to prefer hierarchy, and to follow their manager's directives. This finding about deference to manager authority is surprising to many who anecdotally view Millennials as having a problem with authority in organizational settings (Deal et al., 2014). However, this finding is consistent with authors who found more preference for manager feedback and more transactional leadership styles among Millennials (Ng et al., 2010). The findings about charisma may be the most confounding at the moment as those results seem to contradict Anderson et al.'s proposition that, "Because today's employees are more individualistic, transformational leadership is less effective in motivating them to put the organization's needs before their own needs" (p. 248). The bottom line is that additional research is needed to further parse these findings and, accordingly, Anderson suggests sixteen propositions to drive a new leadership agenda aimed at understanding Millennial leadership preferences more fully. In a recent presentation, McCleskey (2018) further suggested that this research agenda expand to include an examination of Generation Z as they begin to enter the workforce in larger numbers. The Pew Research Center defines the as yet unnamed Generation Z as individuals born after 1996 (Dimock, 2018).

The organization of the near future will embrace these changes. The primary question of interest is when? Will organizations resist these changes as talented Millennials leave to pursue self-employment, start-ups, and alternative work arrangements or will organizations accelerate the process of work and job redesign required to usher in these changes now so that these talented and capable workers stay a part of the organizations of today? A new leadership model is required. Shared Leadership can play an important role in that new approach to organizational leadership. As leadership scholars, leaders, and architects of organizational structure, we must address the issues surrounding Millennials in the workplace in order to shepherd organizations forward to greater levels of success in the near future.

Acknowledgements

Funding

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