Five Elements for Encouraging Leadership Among Mexican Undergraduate Students

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Leadership is formed by a diverse array of elements, and leaders need to be prepared to portray different skills according to the context, situation, and the constituent's needs. So, how can we teach leadership and prepare the next generation of leaders? The article proposes five elements for encouraging leadership development among Mexican undergraduate students. Also, the article presents some leadership theories and leadership scholars' ideas. In addition, Mexican history and Mexico's current context is described, with the purpose of considering it as background information for teaching leadership to Mexican undergraduate students. The five specific elements the authors propose and seek to develop among undergraduate students are: self-awareness, life's mission and vision, social awareness, critical thinking, and teamwork skills. Using the background information and the five elements of leadership proposed, the authors describe a newly developed leadership course which is currently being taught as a main stream course to all the undergraduate students of the Universidad de Monterrey.

> *Keywords:* leadership, teaching leadership, undergraduate leadership course, Mexico, self-awareness, life's mission, social awareness, critical thinking, teamwork, leading by example

While doing a consulting project for a government agency here in Mexico, we were told by the agency's leader (the client) that they had a problem in the amount and quality of the results delivered by the agency's staff. The agency's leader is a young man who finished his

undergraduate studies about three years ago. The client, as well as the consultant, thought that maybe the problem was due to the leadership style used by the leader.

The agency's leader wanted to be advised regarding how he should change his leadership style. When some interviews were performed, and surveys were submitted to the agency's staff, it seemed that all the staff members believed that the leader's leadership style was appropriate, and that the problem was due to a motivation issue. The situation was that many of the agency's staff could not be fired from their position because of their affiliation to the union, and as a result, some of them did not feel motivated to give better results. So, in this specific scenario, the leader's strategy should be oriented not towards changing his leadership style, but towards thinking about creative ways for motivating and rewarding any additional efforts made by the staff, in order for them to deliver what was expected.

The situation described above provides an example of the diverse scenarios that young leaders face within their jobs. This case is only one example of how leadership is not static and how it requires a varied array of elements according to the organization and the constituent's needs (Blanchard, 2007). Also, it exemplifies the importance of encouraging the development of leadership skills among young people in order for them to portray the leadership skills they may need to become effective leaders within their professions. Thus, this article explains five elements for encouraging leadership among undergraduate students at Universidad de Monterrey who currently live in a complex context.

Leadership is a topic that most people hear and speak about, but can we really understand leadership and what it is about? Researchers and scholars have tried to decode and simplify this phenomenon for decades. Some of those researchers have framed leadership-taking as found in five different approaches. These five leadership approaches are: the trait theory, the behavior theory, the contingency theory, the transformational theory, and the servant-leadership theory (Crippen, 2005; Lussier & Achua, 2005; Yukl, 2006). The trait theory was the first approach to leadership studies; it emerged during the 1930s with the idea that leaders were born with some leadership traits such as high energy, good-looking appearance, interdependence, and personal confidence (Lussier & Achua, 2005). Then, during the 1950s, many researchers focused their attention to the specific leadership behaviors and styles that promoted high performance in organizational environments (Lussier & Achua, 2005; Yukl, 2006). Later, during the 1960s, the contingency theory emerged (Lussier & Achua, 2005; Yukl, 2006). This approach argues that the leader's style should be adapted according to the followers' characteristics and situation (Blanchard, 2007). Then, during the 1970s, the term "servant-leadership" was coined by Greenleaf in his first essay entitled *The Servant as Leader* (1970). For Greenleaf, servant-leadership begins with a natural feeling that one wants to serve and then to lead. From this

approach, servant leaders consciously choose to lead through service to others, and to their organizations (Spears, 1998). Finally, during the early 1980s, the transformational leadership approach made its appearance in the leadership field, and it argued that leadership is a process that changes and transforms people. According to Northouse, transformational leaders are "attentive to the needs and motives of followers and try to help them to reach their fullest potential" (2001, p. 132). Bass argues that transformational leaders "move followers to go beyond their own self interest for the benefit of their group, organization or community" (2000, p. 21).

Nevertheless, for some researchers, leadership is not only about having certain traits, portraying specific behaviors, or about being in the right context according to their skills, among other elements; leadership can also be about having emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998, 2000, 2001; Goleman, Boyzatis, & McKee, 2003), being authentic (George, 2007), and promoting change (Kotter, 1996).

As a result, it can be clearly seen that leadership means many different things to different researchers. In addition, the context where leaders lead has become more complex, which has an impact on leadership and the skills leaders need to portray (Bennis & Nanus, 1997). Therefore, this article wants to share five elements which are important to develop among Mexico's future leaders within these complex times.

Understanding What Leaders Need to Do

The following information provided by five scholars on the topic of leadership was considered in order to develop a leadership course that encourages leadership among undergraduate students in the complex context of today. These five authors were selected because they present a leadership perspective similar to the one the Universidad de Monterrey portrays, which the university also seeks to develop among its students.

For Bennis (1989a, 1989b; Bennis & Townsend, 1995; Bennis & Nanus, 1997), leadership seems to be the marshaling of skills possessed by a majority, but used by a minority. Nevertheless, leadership is something that can be learned by anyone, and taught to everyone. Leaders also do not have any interest in proving themselves, but they have one continuous interest in expressing themselves completely. Thus, for Bennis, leaders are people who express and communicate themselves in a complete manner. These leaders know very well what their capabilities and weaknesses are. Moreover, people follow these leaders because they have a clear idea about what they want and why they want it. All of these allow gaining the constituents' attention and trust through the leader's vision. Also, the leader's vision awakens the passion and enthusiasm amongst the followers. Moreover, the leader's passion makes the constituents take risks, in order

to reach the vision for having a better community. Likewise, the leader's vision creates a culture where people often feel valued and important to the community.

For Goleman (1998, 2000, 2001, 2003), the most effective leaders have *emotional intelligence*. Goleman argues that emotionally intelligent leaders are highly self-aware; they know themselves. Also, they have control over their own emotions, even under any particular difficult situation. In addition, leaders in accordance to Goleman have empathy for others; also, they are highly-motivated people in doing something or achieving goals.

According to George (2007), leaders are authentic, so they do not try to imitate another leader. For him, every leader develops a unique leadership style consistent to his or her personality and character. Leaders are just applying their natural talents and abilities in doing something for the community where they live. George argues that leaders acknowledge their weaknesses as well, and try to diminish them by using the talents of others. Also, leaders know what goal they want to reach and how to accomplish it, because they understand their passion and purpose. The authentic leader always makes a difference in his/her community. In doing so, leaders build long-term relationships with their constituents. Moreover, leaders behave or act in accordance to solid values.

According to Conger (1989, 1992), leaders can be found in all sizes and forms, but all of them share almost the same characteristic, which is that leaders are connected with a personal passion or cause. Taking as a foundation their passion, leaders develop and communicate a vision of a better future. Leaders listen to people and act congruently; also, they create and develop meaningful moments with their followers. So, the constituents feel that their leaders are connected with their deepest aspirations. Besides, these kinds of leaders understand the culture where they are immersed, but have a sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo. So, they produce changes, empowering others to reach a dream. Moreover, leaders in accordance to Conger always manifest an entrepreneurial spirit.

Finally, De Pree (1987, 1992, 2000) conveys that leaders define the reality, serve, and enable others. In doing so, leaders are expressing their personal set of principles and beliefs. Those principles form the leader's vision. Besides, leaders according to De Pree create a net of relationships with their constituents, giving space to the diversity of gifts and talents. All of this gives as a result that these leaders gain the trust of their followers. Moreover, these leaders make a meaningful difference in their communities because they produce changes.

As it was explained above, according to these authors, leadership and being an effective leader requires knowing who the leader is, what he or she wants, having emotional intelligence,

knowing his or her constituents' needs, having critical thinking, as well as wanting to make a meaningful difference within their communities.

Aspects to Consider for Encouraging Leadership in Mexico

The first step in becoming a leader is to understand the context (Bennis, 1989a, 1989b). So, leaders need to be interested in knowing the context where they live; much of this knowledge may come from the history of the context. For encouraging leadership in Mexico, some aspects need to be considered: the first important aspect of the Mexican context to consider is its history. Mexico's history provides an example of the lack of leaders who have sought to have a positive impact within the nation. When the Spanish conquest of Mexico happened, the indigenous people were submitted to the Spanish rule, and during that time, they lived in poverty and hardship. Later, with the Independence of Mexico, leaders ruled, seeking their own benefit and did not really improve the situation for the people. As a result, many Mexican people experienced injustice on a daily basis and accepted it as part of their lives. This brings us to the second aspect regarding the Mexican context. For the Mexican people, it is difficult to speak up, challenge unjust systems, and fight for their rights due to their history of being conquered. The nation's history, which is full of unwise Spanish and Mexican leaders who have not served the people but sought their own benefit, has provoked the people's passive attitude towards unfair actions.

A third important aspect regarding the Mexican context is that currently, Mexico is facing a complex array of needs among its citizens. Some of the nation's problems have been evident through the news and are presented by the UNICEF (n.d.) as well, which are: cultural, economic and social disparities; extreme poverty; lack of quality in its education; and violence due to the drug dealers, among others. Each of these problems has a negative impact on its citizenry and urgently calls for a solution, or at least an improvement. Mexico's current needs make critical the development of leaders who may lead in a positive way and, by this, help transform the country by bringing solutions to its current problems. Finally, the fourth aspect regarding the Mexican context is that Mexico and Latin America are witnessing the emergence of the biggest young generation of modern history. The UNICEF, with the aid of the Latin American Studies Center of Population, predicts that, in the next few years, most of the population of Latin America and Mexico will be younger than 25 years old. Hence, in the near future, young people will determine the directions and decisions that will set the course of Mexico. They will likely impact the future of Mexico possibly more than any other previous generation. For these reasons, it is vital for Mexico to develop a generation of leaders among the youth who are able to provide solutions to society's needs. Therefore, we consider that the future of Mexico resides in

seeking to develop leadership among the youth by developing five elements of leadership amongst them.

Five Elements for Encouraging Leadership to Undergraduate Mexican Students

Considering the suggestions provided by the five leadership scholars that were previously mentioned, as well as our current context needs, the Universidad de Monterrey developed a new leadership course that every undergraduate student in our university will need to take as part of their undergraduate mainstream courses. The idea is to help encourage among every undergraduate student in our university the acquisition of the leadership background and the skills they need to become leaders of positive influence in our society. Thus, for teaching any leadership course, an important element to consider is leadership by example. For such reason, having the right teacher and facilitator within a course is of utmost importance.

According to Burns (1978), leadership is focused in the leader's engagement with others, which creates a special connection that raises the motivation and level of morality of the leader and the follower. Leaders should be attentive to the constituents' needs and try to help them reach their full potential. Leaders need to lead by example. Also, according to Kouzes and Posner (1995), leaders need to model the way, and need to give a personal example by showing a dedicated execution.

Nevertheless, there are five elements that we consider of outmost importance for encouraging leadership among our Mexican undergraduate students. As it was mentioned before, according to Bennis (1989a, 1989b, 1995, 1997), leadership is something that can be learned and taught. So, we can encourage leadership that seeks to have a positive impact in our nation amongst our youth by the development of the following five characteristics: **(1) Self-awareness**—positive leaders are people who express themselves in a complete manner because they know their capabilities and weaknesses (Bennis, 1985; George, 2007; Goleman, 1998). Self-awareness is the first step for developing effective leadership (George, 2007). **(2) Life's mission and vision**—effective leaders have a clear perspective about what they want, why they want it, and how they will achieve it. Also, they are effective change agents (Conger, 1989, 1992). These kinds of leaders have a cause, and also they develop a vision for a better future (Kouzes & Posner, 1995). **(3) Social Awareness**—leaders who seek to have a positive impact need to acknowledge the needs and problems their community has, and want to make a difference by helping to solve them (Greenleaf, 1970; Spears, 1998). If leadership is not oriented towards bringing a positive impact, by seeking to contribute to society, it will only bring personal gain. Thus, a crucial part for developing social awareness among leaders is encouraging positive character traits, such as empathy and compassion (Goleman, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2003; Bencivenga, 2003). **(4) Critical**

thinking—the next generation of leaders will need to be able to view our reality with a critical eye, in order to analyze it and raise difficult questions which challenge the status quo (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001). Here, we refer to leaders who can diagnose our current status quo, and find solutions to the nation's problems by using critical thinking skills. **(5) Teamwork skills**—they need to understand the power that exists among teamwork (Kouzes & Posner, 2005) and how they can increase their abilities by working as a team, and having, by this, advantages for making a difference within their context**.**

Putting it All Together

The Universidad de Monterrey is currently including the five elements mentioned above within its new leadership course. At the beginning of the course, the students are given a general overview about what leadership is and its theories. Then, we seek to encourage students to develop a sense of self awareness, guiding them by working on topics such as discovering their strengths and weaknesses, and focusing on developing their strengths. Then, they learn about emotional intelligence and its elements, the temperaments, passion and the importance of finding what they are passionate about, and the different leadership styles that they could portray. The idea is for them to not only learn the concepts, but to be able to apply them to their personal lives. We seek to help students become self-aware regarding each of the topics covered on the course. Through the topics mentioned above, the first of the five elements—self-awareness—is covered within the course.

Then the course's objective is to guide them to develop group leadership skills. In this segment, the idea is to guide them to acknowledge some important elements a leader needs to consider for being a leader within a group. Seeking to develop this, we first teach them about the importance of teamwork. Also, some group dynamics are applied to help foster this. In addition, there are team projects, and team presentations within the course that also support the practice of teamwork and leadership skills. Then we use as a foundation Kouzes and Posner's *The Leaderhsip Challenge* book, and encourage in our students to learn how to develop a group mission or vision statement. Also, we teach them about the importance of promoting trust, collaboration and providing support to their group. In addition, they are taught about the importance of leading by example, establishing group goals, and motivating their team by celebrating group success. Within the team leadership segment, another two of the five elements are covered. These two elements are teamwork, as well as developing a personal and group mission or vision statement.

Then, the element of social awareness is applied on the social leadership and sustainability segment. Here, students are encouraged to research about what sustainable leadership is and

provide examples of current leaders that act in accordance to it. Also, they are encouraged to provide examples on how they can practice a sustainable leadership themselves. In addition, they are asked to research the needs their context has and propose a group project where they can use their personal and leadership skills, current knowledge, and area of study to improve their context. Also, they can choose to develop a project where they teach children or teens a skill or knowledge that will enable them to grow in a personal way; by this, they will have an impact on the future generation of leaders.

Finally, the critical thinking element is fostered during the whole coursework by group discussions, case study activities, group and personal assignments; also, course group participation is sought in every class by personal and group reflections, group discussion on the topics, group dynamics, fun team activities, and group participation.

The leadership course has already been applied and will continue to be applied within the university. The feedback given by some students and the observations made by the leadership professors are evidence that the course has had positive results and that the objectives have been met. For receiving the students' feedback, an anonymous open question survey was answered in some leadership course classrooms. All of the students surveyed affirmed to have learned about leadership and that the course's objectives and their expectations were fully met. Additionally, some conveyed that they had learned much more than what they expected to learn and that the course had helped them to become more self-aware and develop group leadership skills. In addition, all of the surveyed students mentioned that the final project helped them to develop social awareness and to apply the leadership skills they had previously learned within the course. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that every student that takes the course will become a positive leader; but it can be conveyed that every student has been taught the elements he or she needs to become a leader and have a positive influence within their community. Also, the group projects were chosen by each team and have been a means to give something back to the community or to the children or teens who received the benefit of the project implementation made by the students.

Conclusion

Leadership is a complex phenomenon because it is composed of many different elements, which provides somewhat of a challenge to teach it to others. Nevertheless, leadership can be taught (Bennis, 1989a, 1989b, 1995, 1997). So, to be able to teach leadership, it is important to have a clear grasp of what leadership is according to the different theories and scholars, know our context's situation and needs, consider the student's age and background, and finally,

acknowledge the main elements that are sought to be taught, in order to include those within the course's framework and goals.

The current article examined how the Universidad de Monterrey seeks to encourage among all its undergraduate students five leadership elements, which are: self-awareness, life's mission or vision, social awareness, critical thinking, and teamwork skills. These five elements are sought to be developed within the university's students, according to Mexico's context and needs. Also, the article conveys that having a varied array of teaching methods, group activities and dynamics, fostering group discussion, and critical thinking skills are important for being able to encourage leadership development. In addition, team group research, presentations, and project implementation are recommended to be included as well when seeking to teach leadership among undergraduate students.

The current article urges us, as well, to consider the importance the facilitator or leadership professor has for developing and teaching leadership. Much of the positive results and goal achievement a course can have are related to being a personal example of how a leader should be. Also, the professor is the one who makes the final decisions regarding the course activities, dynamics, group projects, and how the learning and teaching environment will take place. We can have a very well-crafted program or course syllabus, but none of this will matter unless the professors who teach the subject are passionate about leadership, model what leadership is, are creative in seeking and applying different strategies to teach leadership, and foster an environment of trust and collaboration, applying the same concepts they seek to teach among their students. For such reasons, leading by example is a very important aspect to consider as well.

Even if leadership is composed by many different elements, it can be taught. As a result, we ought to seek to develop leadership among Mexico's youth and other nation's youth, because positive leadership development can be the foundation for a better tomorrow.

About the Author

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