U.S. Students' Beliefs About Leadership

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Introduction

Imagine a newborn with muscles the size of a professional bodybuilder. Hard (and a little disturbing) to imagine, right? Just as babies are not born with well-developed physical capabilities, they also are not hardwired with all of the skills needed to be good leaders. Rather, people develop the skills, starting in childhood, that result in them becoming effective leaders. Educational institutions recognize how important leadership skills are for students' long-term success at work and in life and that like many skills such as math and writing, it is important for people to begin developing and practicing those skills as early as possible.

As a result, the number of leadership programs in educational settings – particularly college campuses – is increasing. Some forward-thinking institutions that CCL is working with are moving away from supplemental leadership *programs*, and instead are striving to build leadership development into the very fabric of the college experience. For instance, at Southern Methodist University's Lyle School of Engineering, in addition to formal, stand-alone "leadership programs," faculty in a first-year engineering course integrate leadership lessons and insights into team-based robot design engineering projects.

While there is broad-based recognition of the importance of helping students develop their leadership capabilities, there is limited empirical research regarding young peoples' beliefs about leadership. Do students believe leadership is something that can be learned? Do they believe they can be leaders, even at their young age? Finally, what do students think effective leaders do?

College students' beliefs and expectations about leaders have important implications for their development of leadership skills. People use their own ideas about leadership to decide how to develop leadership skills themselves and how they identify effective leadership in others.

World Leadership Survey for Students

About the Survey: The WLS-S is a survey of students' views on leadership and important workplace issues. The survey is administered online to college and graduate students over the age of 18. The sample of 116 native U.S. students represented in this report include:

- 73% Female
- 27% Male
- Mean age = 23 years old
- 11 % 1st Year Undergrad
- 16% 2nd Year Undergrad
- 17% 3rd Year Undergrad
- 47% 4th Year(+) Undergrad
- 9% Graduate

Students Believe They Can Learn to be Leaders

Students tend to believe that people *develop* into leaders more than they believe people are *born* leaders (with a mean score of 63 on a scale from 0 being "all born" to 100 representing "all made"). There were no differences in responses to this item between students who had been through a leadership development program and those who had not. When asked to weigh (by distributing 100 points across three options) what is most important in *developing* leaders, students prioritize *experiences* most highly (mean=45/100) followed by *training* (mean=27/100) and, lastly, *traits* (mean=23/100). Clearly, while students believe that people are born with a predisposition to be a leader (e.g. leaders have certain traits), they believe that whether or not someone is a leader is a result of individual learning of leadership skills and having experiences to develop their leadership "muscles."

Part of developing as a leader is practicing being a leader, and the vast majority of students (94%) believe that people of any age can act as leaders. In fact, beginning leadership development at an early age gives youth learn the skills they need and have time to practice and hone those skills, which are so desired in the workplace. In *Expanding the Leadership Equation*[1], 90% of employers surveyed indicated that they believe job skill and leadership development needed to begin before age 18.

Overall, these results indicate that students believe they can learn to be leaders, and they can begin practicing being leaders at any age. While some leaders may be "born" leaders or possess certain leader-like traits, U.S. students believe that leadership can be learned and developed through experiences in particular.

If students believe they can develop into leaders, what types of leaders do they think are effective, and what does that indicate for development?

What Leadership Looks Like to Students

Like everyone else, students have implicit ideas about what effective leadership looks like. To identify how they see leadership, we asked students to define leadership, to rate characteristics contributing to outstanding leadership, and to tell us about their images of leadership.

Defining Leadership: When students were asked to define effective leadership, the responses ranged from "telling someone to do something and they do it" to "someone who cares about their employees and helps them strive for the best." The most common types of responses referred to "achievement of goals," "empowering," and "inspiring" others.

> **"Effective leadership is getting everyone else excited to be a part of whatever it is they are working towards." -Student Quote**

Characteristics Contributing to Outstanding Leadership: These definitions are consistent with the way students assessed leadership characteristics in terms of how much they help or hinder "outstanding leadership." (See Figure A.)

Figure A

Characteristics Contributing to Outstanding Leadership

Characteristic	Rating
Effectively builds and manages teams that work together	4.82
Inspires and motivates followers	4.79
Is supportive and compassionate	4.65
Shares power and allows others to take part in decision-making	4.6
Motivates others through authority	3.29
Is individualistic and self-reliant	3.22

Extent characteristic helps outstanding leadership
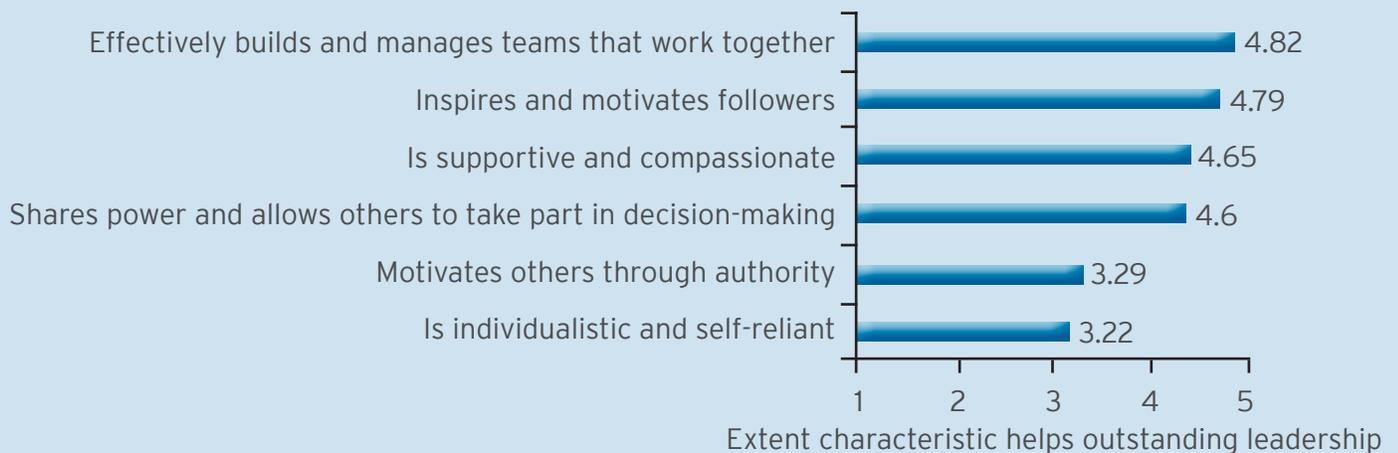
Our research shows that students believe leaders who are outstanding build teams that work together, and inspire and motivate followers. They also believe that being individualistic and self-reliant and motivating through authority contribute less to outstanding leadership. This means that students are likely to believe that leadership development in the areas of team-building and inspiring and motivating others will help them improve their leadership skills.

Images of Leadership: In addition to being able to define effective leadership and rate how much certain characteristics contribute to it, students also have images in their mind of what leadership looks like. To identify these images, we asked students to choose a picture (from a selection of 17 images[2]) that is closest to their image of leadership. Our findings show that there wasn't one strongly predominant image. In fact, all 17 images were selected in this sample. This indicates that there is substantial variation in terms of what images students associate with leadership. The most commonly chosen image for this U.S.-student sample was the picture of two people shaking hands (16.5%). When asked to describe the image (using a selection of words and phrases they could choose from), common responses included "leads by example," "serves others," and "takes initiative." The second most commonly chosen image was of a warrior, which students most commonly described as someone who "leads by example." Finally, the third most commonly chosen image was a picture of the ripples created by something dropping in a pool of water. For the students choosing this image, the most commonly chosen descriptor was "inspires." (For a report on the images chosen by a working executive sample, see Report[3].)

Leadership Images

Image #1
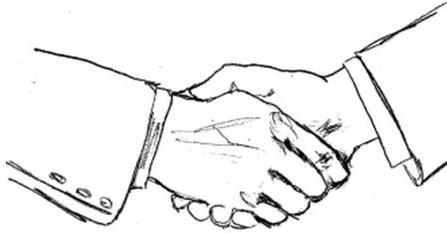
Common Descriptors for Shaking Hands:
"Leads By Example", "Serves Others,"
"Takes the Initiative"
(3-way tie)

Shaking Hands
16.5%

Image #2

Common Descriptor for Warrior:
"Leads By Example"

Warrior
12.2%
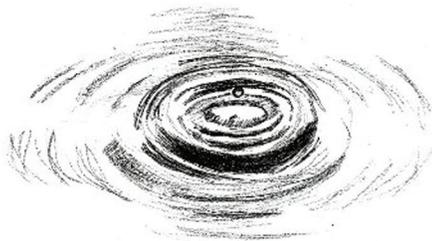
Image #3

Common Descriptor for Ripple Effect:
"Inspires"

Ripple Effect
9.6%

Conclusions and Implications

Students tend to have a wide range of beliefs about what it means to be a leader. There is no one single definition or image that is commonly held by most students. This supports the idea that in developing leaders, providing a set definition or characterization about leadership may not be particularly effective.

At the same time, students do generally agree that effective leaders have a "get the job done/task-orientation" coupled with a strong focus on serving and inspiring others. Therefore, students will likely be interested in learning about how to increase their effectiveness in both arenas and may also look to their current leaders for a similar mix of attributes and behaviors.

While there is no single image or definition of leader, there was a consistent theme: Students believe leaders should be compassionate, motivating, inspiring, and have the ability to take initiative and meet task-related goals. Knowing this is how many young people conceptualize leadership, those who work with youth should provide opportunities for young people to build these skills. Clearly students believe they can be leaders, and the more chances they have to gain the experiences needed to develop into leaders, the better.

Helping Students Develop
One of CCL's core models for the development of executives is the Assessment-Challenge-Support Model or ACS. This model has also been applied in dozens of contexts for our youth programming. The following is an example of the process we use:

Assessment: Students do self assessments of their own strengths, challenges, values, and identities as leaders and ask for feedback from peers, teachers or professors, parents, and others.

Challenge: Students are asked to set goals for their own development, create their desired leadership styles and identities and to stretch beyond what is comfortable for them.

Support: We incorporate either formal coaching or mentoring components, or peer and faculty support groups to help students overcome challenges and develop as leaders.

CCL's President and CEO John Ryan, has been quoted as saying, "leadership is like a muscle, the earlier and more consistently you flex it, the stronger it becomes." After all, being inspirational isn't something that can be learned overnight, and learning how to motivate a team, and to be compassionate while still meeting goals is a skill that most people need practice to master.

To develop these leadership skills, students need both opportunities to work with others and the time to reflect on the experience and learn how to do it better the next time. Students see experiences as the best way to develop as leaders and appear to be open to the idea of getting a lot of practice. This is consistent with CCL's *Lessons of Experience*[4] research that found leaders develop through experience, relationships, and training – in that order. Leadership programs for college students are important, but organizations that sponsor them should prioritize helping students find ways to gain real *experience* as a leader. This doesn't always mean taking on a formal leadership role – like the engineering students at SMU demonstrate as they build their robots; there are opportunities to practice leadership in just about every corner of a college campus.

Would you like to learn more about your students' attitudes and beliefs about work and leadership? We offer custom summary reports free of charge for organizations that can provide responses to our survey. To learn how, please contact Jennifer Deal (dealj@ccl.org) or Sarah Stawiski (stawiskis@ccl.org) at the Center for Creative Leadership.

References

[1] Van Velsor, E. & Wright, J. (2012). "Expanding the Leadership Equation: Developing Next-Generation Leaders" [White Paper]. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.

[2] Maxwell, C. I., & Greenhalgh, A. M. (2011). Images of leadership: A new exercise to teach leadership from a social constructionist perspective. *Organization Management Journal*, 8, 106-110.

[3] Gentry, W. A., Deal, J., Ruderman, M.N., Cullen, K.L., Greenhalgh, A.M. & Maxwell, C. (2014) "Leadership is in the Eye of the Beholder: How Images of Leadership that People Have Differ Across the Organization" [QuickView Leadership Series Report]. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.

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Acknowledgments

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Sarah Stawiski, Ph.D., is a Senior Research Scientist at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) in San Diego, CA. Sarah's work focuses on evaluating the impact of leadership development programs and understanding individual and organizational factors that influence workplace attitudes and behaviors. Other interests include small group processes, ethical decision-making, and corporate social responsibility. Before coming to CCL, Sarah worked for Press Ganey Associates, a healthcare quality-improvement firm. She holds a B.A. in psychology from the University of California, San Diego, and an M.A. and Ph.D. in applied social psychology from Loyola University Chicago.

Jennifer J. Deal, Ph.D., is a Senior Research Scientist at CCL in San Diego, California, and an Affiliated Research Scientist at the Center for Effective Organizations at the University of Southern California. Jennifer's work focuses on global leadership and generational differences around the world. She is the manager of CCL's World Leadership Survey (currently in 15 languages) and the Emerging Leaders research initiative. In 2002 Jennifer Deal co-authored *Success for the New Global Manager* (Jossey-Bass/Wiley Publishers), and has published articles on generational issues, executive selection, cultural adaptability, global management, and women in management. Her second book *Retiring the Generation Gap* (Jossey-Bass/Wiley Publishers) was published in 2007. An internationally recognized expert on generational differences, she has worked with clients around and the world and has spoken on the topic on six continents (North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia). She holds a B.A. from Haverford College and an M.A. and Ph.D. in industrial/organizational psychology from The Ohio State University.

William A. Gentry, Ph.D., is a Senior Research Scientist and coordinator of internships and postdocs at CCL in Greensboro, NC. He also trains CCL's Assessment Certification Workshop and Maximizing your Leadership Potential program and has been an adjunct professor at several colleges and universities. In applying his research into practice, Bill's current focus is on helping leaders who are managing for the first time. Bill has more than 70 academic presentations and has been featured in more than 50 internet and newspaper outlets. He has published more than 40 articles on leadership and organizational psychology including in the areas of first-time management, leader character and integrity, mentoring, managerial derailment, multilevel measurement, organizational politics and political skill in the workplace. He also studies nonverbal behavior and its application to effective leadership and communication, particularly in political debates. Bill holds a B.A. degree in psychology and political science from Emory University and an M.S. and Ph.D. in industrial-organizational psychology from the University of Georgia. Follow Bill on twitter, @Lead_Better.

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