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What Traits Do Peer Leaders Use To Help Their Students?

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Introduction

Peer leaders at New York City College of Technology, CUNY (Brooklyn, NY) are selected based on having a minimum GPA of 3.0, completion of MAT 1375 course (pre-calculus) with a grade A or B, and they are interviewed. The requirements are broad, so good peer leaders are not always only those students with the highest GPA or straight As.

The crucial aspect is the interview session where interviewers become more familiar with the Peer Leader candidates. By answering questions and responding to different scenarios that the future peer leaders might find themselves in, they are observed in how they think and behave. The interview process is in part a test of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence can be learned (Goleman, 2004). Peer leaders are trained through weekly classes and seminars to be able to identify different types of learners and how to adapt their leading to diverse audiences. Leaders learn best through “motivation, extended practice and feedback” (Goleman, 2004, p. 4).

Literature review

Traits that distinguish effective leaders (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991) include:

- Drive (achievement, motivation, ambition, energy, tenacity, and initiative)
- Leadership motivation (aspiration to lead but not purely look for power)
- Honesty and integrity
- Self-confidence
- Cognitive ability
- Knowledge of the business
- Charisma, creativity and flexibility

Humility is another characteristic. Modestly admitting our own mistakes, acknowledging our followers and praising their performance and efforts, as well as trying to improve our skills and learn something new, not only makes the leader more liked, but it can also increase the overall performance of an organization (Owens & Hekman, 2011).

Emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2004) characterizes outstanding leaders. Emotional intelligence can also be linked to strong performance. There are five critical traits of emotional intelligence:

- *Self-Awareness*

- the ability to recognize and understand one’s moods, emotions, and drives, as well as their effect on others

- *Self-Regulation*

- the ability to control and redirect disruptive impulses and moods
- the propensity to suspend judgment – to think before acting
- *Motivation*
 - passion to work for reasons that go beyond money or status
 - propensity to pursue goals with energy and persistence
- *Empathy*
 - ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people
 - skill in treating people according to their emotional reactions
- *Social Skill*
 - proficiency in managing relationships and building networks
 - ability to find common ground and build rapport

Meta-analytic tests of process mechanisms on emotional intelligence and leadership in organizations (Whitman, 2009) has shown that there is a moderate connection between the two. Emotional intelligence has significant relationships with effectiveness, transformational leadership, Leader-Member Exchange, follower job satisfaction, etc.

A study by Streitwieser & Light, 2006 on *peer facilitators'* thinking and approach to teaching showed that no peer facilitators moved from a learning-centered (“help students develop into independent learners”(p.9)) to a teaching-centered (review of basic concepts) focus. Peer Leaders' increased use of facilitative discourse, instead of instructional (Frey, Brown & Sawyer, 2009) leads to improved student-to-student interactions and participation, more intellectual conversations, engagement with the concepts etc.

Survey

A one-page survey was adapted from the Leadership Traits Questionnaire (Northouse, 2009), using 10 items, and 5 of questions on Emotional Intelligence based on Goleman's (2004) traits and definitions. The survey was distributed to Peer Leaders, both experienced and first-semester, on April 24, 2012. No demographic information was collected and the surveys were anonymous. There were 24 completed surveys (N=24).

Leadership Traits Questionnaire

The overall results of the Leadership Traits Questionnaire averaged above 4 on a 5-point scale. Peer leaders scored highest on self confidence (4.33), friendliness (4.33) and outgoingness (4.33). The lowest average resulted for perceptiveness (3.48).

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Responses on Leadership Traits Questionnaire

5 = Strongly agree and 1 = Strongly disagree	Mean (SD)
1. I communicate effectively with others.	3.96 (0.80)
2. I'm discerning and insightful.	3.48 (0.99)
3. I believe in myself and in my abilities.	4.33 (0.82)
4. I'm secure with self, free of doubts.	4.08 (1.02)
5. I stay fixed on the goal(s), despite interference.	4.00 (1.06)
6. I take a firm stand, act with certainty.	4.00 (0.93)
7. I act believable, inspire confidence.	4.08 (1.02)
8. I'm consistent and reliable.	4.08 (0.65)
9. I show kindness and warmth.	4.33 (0.70)
10. I talk freely, get along well with others.	4.33 (0.70)

Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire

Motivation (passion to work for reasons beyond money or status) had the highest average, (4.58) followed by peer leaders' self-awareness (ability to recognize and understand their own moods, emotions, and drives, as well as their effect on others, value 4.46).

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Responses on Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire

5 = Strongly agree and 1 = Strongly disagree	Mean (SD)
1. I'm able to recognize and understand my own moods, emotions, and drives, as well as their effect on others.	4.46 (0.72)
2. I'm able to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods.	4.29 (0.69)
3. I have passion to work for reasons that go beyond money or status.	4.58 (0.50)
4. I have the ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people and the skill to treat people according to their emotional reactions.	3.88 (0.74)
5. I'm proficient in managing relationships and building networks as well as finding common ground and building rapport.	3.75 (0.89)

Discussion

What emerged from the data collected from the two questionnaires was that peer leaders who scored higher on the Leadership Traits Questionnaire generally had higher scores also on the Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire.

This can, in part, be related to Goleman's (2004) approach to leadership and the importance of emotional intelligence in effective and efficient leaders. Peer leaders have characteristics that not only represent traits of good leadership (Goleman, 2004), but are also beneficial to students, since they enable peer leaders to adapt their explanations to a variety of students from different backgrounds and skill levels.

Observing students and their peer leaders in embedded workshops, I was able to notice the complex mechanisms and communication processes that occur during their interaction. Every peer leader has a different "teaching" method, a singular approach to solving a problem or guiding the students into arriving to a conclusion. What Streitwieser and Light (2006) observed shows the peer leaders' collective effort in leading their students into becoming independent learners. "No one moved from a learner-centered focus to teaching-centered focus" (p.12). That is in part why Peer Leaders are called peer leaders, not simply mentors or tutors.

The use of a "facilitative" discourse style (Frey, Brown & Sawyer, 2009) and ability of Peer Leaders to successfully adapt to different situations and find common ground with their students, could be explained by the characteristic possession of the leadership trait of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2004). Self-Awareness, Social Skills, Empathy, Self-Regulation and Motivation are key traits peer leaders use in order to encourage group work, effective thinking, student interaction and active involvement.

Very often peer leaders praise the dedicated and hard working students who are willing to assist their peers. Peer leaders are willing to admit their own mistakes when a misunderstanding occurs and follow up with the students in order to correct it when necessary. These traits are elements of humility, as described by Owens and Hekman (2011).

Conclusions

- Practicing emotional intelligence is a characteristic of effective leaders. This can facilitate the process of identifying future peer leaders in workshops.
- Specific training focused on the development of peer leaders' emotional intelligence could improve their interpersonal skills and overall performance in workshops
- Further research is needed to confirm a positive relation between facilitative discourse and emotional intelligence.
- Observing the interactions between peer leaders and their students and trying to identify particular traits which characterize them has led me to think there are also possible differences in traits between male and female peer leaders.
- Whether a person was born a leader, or has the potential to become one, other than having to possess moral and ethical values, sense of justice and be able to distinguish between good and bad, with a good and efficient educational program and system that person can become an outstanding peer leader.

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