SUCCESSFUL INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP STYLES IN EDUCATION

Gina Smith, Grand Canyon University
Maria Minor, Kaplan University
Henry Brashen, Clear and Effective Communications
Kristie Remaly, Walden University

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research study was to explore the dominant leadership styles of online college instructors. Online instructors voluntarily participated in a survey to indicate which of four leadership styles they use in their classes: transformational, situational, democratic, or authoritarian. The surveys indicated that the transformational leadership style was the most common style used by the online instructors. The majority of instructors felt that their leadership style in the classroom was effective based on feedback and evaluations, although only half of the instructors indicated that the university or college they teach at offers leadership training.

Keyword: leadership style, transformational leadership, situational leadership, postsecondary education, online instruction

INTRODUCTION

There are many leadership styles represented in higher education. Specifically, there are a variety of leadership styles used by online college instructors. This study is an exploration of the dominant leadership styles observed in online college instructors.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this research study is to determine if there is a dominant leadership style that online college instructors tend to develop when teaching management and leadership courses at the bachelor, graduate, and doctorate levels. This research will contribute to the field of postsecondary educational studies by identifying if there is a dominant leadership style online instructors tend to develop in order to be effective instructors, or if there are various leadership styles that promote effective instruction. The data collected from this research study will contribute to better leadership training of instructors at the bachelor, graduate, and doctorate levels.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative survey was used in this study. Researchers utilized social media to gather data. The survey was sent to 100 respondents that teach at online institutions via LinkedIn, e-mail, Facebook, and Twitter. Twenty-two instructors completed the survey for a 22% rate of response. The survey design consisted of ten questions and contained three questions that sought demographic information such as gender, age, and length of online teaching. Seven multiple choice questions, with an option to comment in an "other" category, asked respondents for data on their leadership style in the online classroom within each degree category, if they felt their style was effective, and if the online institution offered classroom leadership training.

The study sought to address the following research questions:
- Is there a dominant leadership style that online teaching instructors tend to develop?
- Is there a dominant leadership style that

online teaching instructors tend to use if they teach multiple degree levels?

- Do institutions support instructors by offering leadership training?

PARTICIPANTS

The participants for this study included online college instructors. Both males and females with a range of online instructional experience were included in the survey. The ages of participants ranged from 30 years old to 60 years or older.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are hundreds of leadership styles to research. For the purpose of this study, four styles were chosen that were on opposite ends of the leadership spectrum: 1) transformational leadership, 2) democratic leadership, 3) situational leadership, and 4) authoritarian leadership. Since there are other leadership styles to consider, the survey also included an open-ended question if respondents preferred to write in another leadership style that was not listed on the survey

Online Instruction

Harasim (2000) discussed a paradigm shift that occurred in the 21st century due to the invention of the World Wide Web, which increased opportunities for online instruction. While the first fully online class was introduced in 1981, most advanced course offerings and programs were introduced in the early 1990s (Harasim, 2000).

Online instruction includes electronically supported platforms whereby instructors and students collaborate. Students learn through electronic media, discussion forums, and related applications.

There are two types of instruction in an online learning format:

1) Synchronous Instruction: Instructional activities where both instructor and students are engaging in activities at the same time.

2) Asynchronous Instruction: Instructional activities where the instructor and/or some or all students engage in activities that are not necessarily occurring simultaneously. (Cal Poly, 2016, para 4)

While there are defined formats of instruction in online learning, there is a significant gap in the literature to determine what type leadership styles are most effective in an online learning format.

Transformational Leadership

Burns (1978) defined transformational leadership as a process where leaders and followers engage in a mutual process of empowering one another through values, self-awareness, charismatic actions, and motivation. The goal in a transformational leadership style is to implement literal and lasting changes in individuals and organizations in the following categories: mind, heart, vision, insights, understanding, purpose, beliefs, principles, and values (Covey, 2004). Transformational leadership is designed to bring about changes that are synergizing and everlasting (Covey, 2004). Transformational leadership also includes a shared value system that is based on a purpose and is shared as an agreement amongst the individuals on the team (Cawelti, 1990). Additionally, in transformational leadership every individual is "…valued for his or her intrinsic worth" (Pai & Adler, 2001, p. 61).

Burns became known amongst scholars with transformational leadership (Covey, 2007). He branded three actions between leaders and followers in a transformational leadership style: 1) increase followers' awareness of values, 2) increase focus on the organization as a whole and the overall vision, and 3) improve the ability to recognize higher order needs as they relate to purpose (Covey, 2007). Bernard Bass, a supporter of Burns' work, added that transformational leaders offer characteristics that others trust and admire (Covey, 2007).

Transformational leaders offer a clear vision and prioritize clearly-defined values for their individual followers and in the environment as a whole (Cawelti, 1990). Burns (1978) rationalized the need for values because "values can be the source of vital change" (p. 41). By applying shared values, a transformational leader can continually improve culture's vision and purpose (Burns, 1978). In addition, trust is a key factor in transformational leadership because the vision must be accepted by the followers (Evans, 2005).

As we consider possible connections between transformational leadership and instructors, we may consider how transformational leadership characteristics can be applied to collaborative educational cultures. Sergiovanni (2004) noted that cultural connections include promises between one another so that mutual actions and commitments are seen as covenants between the individuals

within the culture (p. 20). Therefore, instructors, specifically online instructors, may be able to create an empowering culture that includes components of intrinsic needs, shared vision, values, and covenants, which is considered a transformational leadership style.

There is minimal literature on the connection between transformational leadership style and effective instruction; however, one study included a finding related to student satisfaction and instructor style. Caspi and Roccas (2013) found that students in a university setting were more satisfied with their courses when the instructor was a transformational leader. Similarly, Harvey, Royal, and Stout (2003) noted that there was a direct correlation between transformational leadership and higher instructor performance ratings.

Situational Leadership

The life-cycle behavioral model, developed by Hersey and Blanchard in 1969, later became more widely known as situational leadership (1996). Hersey and Blanchard's (1996) theory began with the idea of parenting styles and how they changed based on the developmental level of children. They applied this idea to leadership styles and how they changed based on the developmental levels of employees. Hersey, Blanchard, and Natemeyer (1979) discussed the importance of a leader's ability to determine the maturity level of a follower and to adjust leadership styles accordingly.

A leader's style is dependent upon the developmental level (competence and commitment) of an individual and the difficulty of the task being carried out. Based on the developmental level of the individual and the difficulty of the task, a leader would use one of the following leadership approaches: 1) coaching, 2) directing, 3) delegating, and 4) supporting (Blanchard, 2008). "Adapt your style to their developmental level" (Blanchard, 2008, p. 19).

Blanchard, Zigarmi, and Zigarmi (2013) stated that there are three skills necessary to become a situational leader. A situational leader develops clear goals using the SMART (specific, motivating, attainable, relevant, and trackable) format. A situational leader diagnoses the developmental levels of employees and matches his/her leadership style to the needs of the individual. Blanchard (2008) provided the following descriptors of the leadership styles and developmental levels of employees: 1) Coaching: high-directive/high supportive leader behavior, 2) Directing: high-directive/low-supportive leader behavior, 3) Delegating: low-supportive/low-directive leader behavior, and 4) Supporting: high-supportive/low-directive behavior (p. 19).

Some connections can be made between situational leaders in an instructional setting. In a K–12 setting, Hawkinson (2016) found that situational leadership is applicable to team teaching because the teachers can use a combination of the four leadership styles of a situational leader. Typically; however, one would not experience team teaching in an online setting. A study by Butaney (2015) found that student learning is enhanced when marketing instructors used situational leadership based on Hersey and Blanchard's theory.

Democratic Leadership

A democratic style of leadership includes the participation of all individuals in decision-making processes (Lewin, Lippit, & White, 1939). Although the leader typically has the final decision in this style of leadership, the followers are a part of the process (Lewin et al., 1939). Democratic leadership is perceived as the opposite of autocratic, or authoritarian, leadership (Smith, 2016).

In a study conducted by Okoroji, Anyanwu, and Ukpere (2014), a democratic leadership style was found to be the most effective style because student performance is improved by the "encouragement of class participation in decision making" (p. 191). The authors also noted that a democratic leadership style strengthens relationships between students and teachers. In our research efforts, no specific literature was located in the application of a democratic leadership style in online college instruction.

Authoritarian Leadership

Authoritarian leadership is defined by Lewin et al. (1939) as a style whereby the leader maintains maximum control over the environment. An authoritative leader, or a leader with an autocratic style, maintains control through strict rules, guidelines, and negative consequences (Smith, 2016). An authoritarian leader does not consult others in the decision-making process (Smith, 2016).

Authoritarian instructors maintain a tight classroom setting and are characterized by high expectations and strict rules (Baumrind, 1971). Only certain behaviors are acceptable. An authoritarian instructor is also recognized by punitive actions, a cold character, and restrictive behaviors. Students do not have any voice in the learning environment (Baumrind, 1971).

In our research efforts, no specific literature was located about the application of an authoritarian leadership style to online college instruction.

RESULTS

The first question addressed gender. The respondents were 64% female and 36% male. The second question collected data on the age of the respondents. Age categories were used and 5% were 30–39, 29% were 40–49, 43% were 50–59, and 24% were 60 or older. The third question addressed total years teaching online. Grouped in five-year spans, 14% had 0–5 years teaching experience, 32% 6–10 years, 36% 11–15 years, 14% 16–20 years, and 5% had 21 plus years' experience.

Seven questions sought data to address the research questions. When asked which degree level was taught, 50% taught bachelor's, 60% graduate, and 41% doctorate. All but one respondent taught multiple levels. The dominant leadership style used by 72% of respondents was transformational. Situational leadership was selected by 22%, 17% selected democratic, and 17% selected authoritarian. Some of the comments about style included:

- I checked Authoritarian because, in the context of online classes, I as the instructor have to set a clear direction for the students—probably even more than in a live classroom.
- I checked transformational, because my main style is to prod them to think beyond the obvious and their first responses.
- Style changes based on assignment and needs.
- I would describe my style as a Servant leader.

When instructors were asked if they felt their style was effective in the online classroom, an overwhelming 91% said yes, 5% said no, and 4% said not sure. When questioned about how they knew they were effective, eight comments were made that the student evaluations noted positive feedback about the instructor style. Other comments included feedback from chairs and peers and observing student growth and learning. The respondent that answered that he/she did not feel they were effective said they needed to try to counteract their authoritarian style with more servant behavior.

On being asked if their style differed when teaching various degree levels, 43% said yes and 52% said no. Only one respondent said they do not teach different degree levels. Transformational leadership style was selected by 57% of the respondents as being the style needed in order to be effective in the online classroom. This was followed by 43% selecting Situational leadership, 19% Democratic, and 10% Authoritarian. While 10% did not select a style they commented: I believe leaders must embrace several different styles to be effective and then be flexible to use what works in any given situation, and I believe we need to be able to adapt to our learning environment with multiple styles according to student needs.

A final question asked was if the college or university the respondents taught for offered leadership training; 50% said yes, 23% said no, and 19% didn't know. One commented that some schools offer a lot of training, while others offer very little training.

DISCUSSION

This study was limited by a small sample size (22), but trends were identified that suggest further study is warranted. Most survey participants (90%) felt their leadership style in the online classroom was successful. A majority (72.22%) identified their leadership style as Transformational. Additionally, 57.44% felt that Transformational leadership style was the most needed style in the online classroom. While it is difficult to make conclusions based on the small sample size, it is important to recognize that faculty leadership plays a major role in student success in the online classroom. While New Faculty Orientation programs (all new faculty in on-ground, hybrid, and online courses take this training) include topics such as learning styles, Bloom's taxonomy, technology instruction, and the cultural of the university, leadership training does not appear to be a major component of these sessions. Fifty percent of the respondents in this study did acknowledge that their college provided leadership training, but there was no information on whether that was included in the New Faculty Orientation

for new instructors or just offered through other venues at their college. Further, 22.73% said their college provided no leadership training and 18.18% did not know if leadership training was provided. Online students often are taking online classes for the first time, are unfamiliar with the technology, may have been out of the classroom for years, may be working full time, and may have families. These challenges can create stress and require strong faculty leadership.

Students learn through interaction and there may be differing and conflicting viewpoints in the classroom (Pachler & Daly, 2011). Effective collaboration is an integral part of leadership and necessary for student success. It takes faculty leadership skills to promote collaboration in the classroom activities and projects that relate directly to the course content. Collaboration, as a primary method of instruction, helps to encourage interaction among learners and is a necessary trend in the online classroom. (Hillen & Landis, 2014; Lister, 2014). Focusing on building faculty leadership skills with an emphasis on increasing student collaboration may lead to increased student performance. Therefore, if leadership training were included in New Faculty Orientation, it is reasonable to suggest that faculty would be better prepared to promote engagement and collaboration and the results may affect the overall retention rate.

LIMITATIONS

There were several limitations to this study:

The small sample size makes it difficult to generalize to a larger population.

In addition to the small sample size in this study, participants represented both graduate and undergraduate leadership and management classes thus making it more difficult to generalize findings for undergraduate and graduate levels.

- The assumption that survey participants understood the leadership styles in which they were evaluating their effectiveness may not hold true.
- This was a self-report and participants may not have accurately identified their leadership style in the classroom.
- Participants may actually use more than one leadership style.
- Only a small number of leadership styles were included in this study even though the

participants could identify "other" as an additional option.

CONCLUSION

Online instruction in higher education has grown significantly in the last decade. If we can identify the leadership styles that work best in the classroom, faculty can be trained to utilize them. One size does not necessarily fit all and if a leadership style is not working, it would be advantageous for faculty to have more leadership styles in their toolkit. Based on this study, we recommend:

- Utilize a case-study approach by identifying and interviewing ten successful faculty in online higher education based on self-assessment, student reviews, supervisor feedback, retention rate, and graduation rate to identify which leadership style/styles works most effectively in the online classroom. Ten participants should be primarily undergraduate faculty and ten participants primarily graduate (Master's) faculty. There may be some significant differences between graduate and undergraduate faculty suggesting that there may be different styles that are most effective at a certain level. Doctoral faculty should be studied separately as their students' needs may be different from the needs of undergraduate and graduate (Master's) students. There should be clear definitions and examples of the leadership styles addressed.
- Survey a random sample of higher education online universities identifying what content is covered in their New Faculty Orientation and whether leadership is covered in any significant depth.
- Based on the first two recommendations, a leadership-training program for online instructors could be developed and implemented for a higher education institute to pilot.
- Utilize successful online instructors as mentors for new instructors or instructors that may need additional training and leadership development.

As noted in our literature review, online education is new and therefore minimal research has been conducted on leadership styles in the online format. Further research related to leadership styles

in the online environment is necessary to bridge the literature gap. Further research is warranted to determine the role of experience in online facilitation and whether there are significant differences between what undergraduate and graduate students need from their faculty to be successful in the classroom. This study has raised many questions and the answers generated may well serve to provide more effective facilitation in the classroom leading to higher student retention and graduation rates.

REFERENCES

Baumrind, D. (1971). Current patterns of parental authority. Developmental Psychology 4(2), 1–103. doi:10.1037/h0030372

Blanchard, K. (2008). Situational leadership. Leadership Excellence, 25(5), 19.

Blanchard, K., Zigarmi, P., & Zigarmi, D. (2013). Leadership and the one minute manager. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Burns, J. (1978). Leadership. New York, NY: Harper and Row.

Butaney, G. T. (2015). Examining the association between instructor leadership styles and student learning in marketing courses. In Wilson, E. J., & Hair Jr., J. F. (Eds.), Proceedings of the 1997 Academy of Marketing Science Annual Conference (pp. 47–53). Springer Link. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-13141-2_28

Cal Poly. (2016). Academic Programs and Planning: E-learning. San Luis Obispo, CA: California Polytechnic State University. Retrieved from http://www.academicprograms.calpoly.edu/content/elearning

Caspi, A., & Roccas, S. (2013). Passive leadership: An initial investigation of university instructors as leaders in a virtual learning environment. Management Administration and Leadership, 41(3), 372–392. doi:10.1177/1741143212474805

Cawelti, G. (1990). Value-added leadership: How to get extraordinary results in schools. Educational Leadership, 48(1), 89–91.

Covey, S. (2004). The 8th habit. New York, NY: Free Press.

Covey, S. (2007). Transformational Leadership Report. Retrieved from http://www.transformationalleadership.net/products/TransformationalLeadershipReport.pdf

Evans, R. (2005) The authentic leader. In Grogan, M. (Ed.) The Jossey-Bass Reader on Educational Leadership (pp. 287–308). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Harasim, L. (2000). Shift happens: Online education as a new paradigm in learning. Internet and Higher Education, 3(1), 41–61. doi:10.1016/S1096-7516(00)00032-4

Harvey, S., Royal, M., Stout, D. (2003). Instructors transformational leadership: University student attitudes and ratings. Psychological Reports, 92(2), 395–402. doi:10.2466/pr0.2003.92.2.395

Hawkinson, E. (2016). Team teaching and situational leadership theory: Adapting and combining frameworks for Japanese English Education. US-China Education Review, 6(3), 183–189. doi:10.17265/2161-623X/2016.03.004

Hersey, P., & Blanchard, K. H. (1996). Great ideas revisited: Revisiting the life-cycle theory of leadership. Training & Development Journal, 50(1), 42.

Hersey, P., Blanchard, K. H., & Natemeyer, W. E. (1979). Situational leadership, perception, and the impact of power. Group & Organization Management, 4(4), 418–428. doi:10.1177/105960117900400404

Hillen, S. A., & Landis, M. (2014). Two perspectives on e-learning design: A synopsis of a U.S. and a European analysis. International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 15(4), 199–225. doi:10.19173/irrodl.v15i4.1783

Lewin, K., Lippit, R., & White, R. K. (1939). Patterns of aggressive behavior in experimentally created social climates. Journal of Social Psychology, 10, 271–301. doi:10.1080/00224545.1939.9713366

Lister, M. (2014). Trends in the design of e-learning and online learning. MERLOT: Journal of Online Learning & Teaching, 10(4), 671–680.

Okoroji, L. I., Anyanwu, O. J., & Ukpere, W. I. (2014). Impact of leadership styles on teaching and learning process in Imo State. Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences 5(4), 180–193. doi:10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n4p180

Pachler, N., & Daly, C. (2011). Key issues in e-learning: Research and practice. London, UK: Continuum.

Pai, Y., & Adler, S. (2001). Cultural foundations of education (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.

Sergiovanni, T. (2004). Balance individual autonomy and collaboration to center on students. Education Digest, 70(3), 17–22.

Smith, A. (2016). Authoritarian leadership style explained. Small Business Chronicle. Retrieved from http://smallbusiness.chron.com/authoritarian-leadership-style-explained-58261.html