

What is it “To Lead?”: A Nuanced Exploration of Leadership by 3M National Student Fellows

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Abstract

In Canadian higher education, students from across the world interact within tight-knit communities, sharing ideas and developing a wealth of soft and disciplinary skills. With many universities playing host to dozens if not hundreds of student groups, the word “leadership” is uttered by students and faculty in hallways, gymnasiums, outdoors areas and of course, student group meeting rooms. On June 20, 2013, five members of the 2013 3M National Student Fellowship cohort explored the term “leadership,” sharing their personal experiences and observations with Canadian faculty members in a Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) workshop. This paper explores the conversations and ideas inspired by the group’s pre-STLHE online discussions and the current emphasis on leadership in Canadian higher education.

Introduction

From June 19 to June 22, 2013, the second annual cohort of 3M National Student Fellows assembled in Sydney, Nova Scotia, for the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) conference. On a chilly evening in Sydney, emerging leaders from McMaster, Mount Royal, University of Northern British Columbia and other schools, assembled and for what became an unforgettable weekend. The ten 3M National Student Fellows capitalized on the conference energy, developing an impressive team chemistry.

On June 20, 2013, five Student Fellows facilitated a workshop on campus leadership, seeking to discuss and redefine the term. Considering the National Student Fellowship’s emphasis on “honour[ing] undergraduate students in Canada who have demonstrated qualities of outstanding leadership and who embrace a vision where the quality of their educational experience can be enhanced in academia and beyond”, the topic was altogether appropriate. The vast majority of 3M students came with experience, drawing on previous representatives in university research and student government programs. Yet, the four days at CBU were transformative. This paper documents the transformation of

the 3M students' perspectives toward the word "leadership," through an analysis of the Canadian higher education environment and a selection of 3M student personal stories.

Leadership as a Dirty Word

Ameena, Emerson, Rosa, Brianna and Tristan entered the conference with surprisingly hostile feelings about the word leadership. This was evident from the group's initial online interactions, via Google documents. In preconference online discussions, a student admitted;

"I hate the word leadership. For me, it conjures images of cheering high schoolers, bad PowerPoints and 'action plans.' Maybe that's because it's a noun and seems to refer to something 'out there,' something that some people can possess and others cannot."

Another 3M student wrote;

"Many of the so called "leaders" I encounter often neglect that oh so important concept of leading: directing a group of people to fulfill some sort of initiative. Of course, that is a rather finite way of interpreting an amorphous idea, but to me, that is the gist of the leading. Frankly, I despise the solo-leader, the strong-headed person who drags the group in the direction they want to go."

These shared frustrations allowed for genuine dialogue. Throughout the conference, small groups of attendees, moderated by the students, discussed themes such as "age and leadership," "compassion and leadership," and "leaders as aggressive shepherds."

Leadership in Canadian Higher Education

Why is campus leadership a worthy topic for discussion? Dr. Ronald Barnett of the University of London argues the university is no longer the sole producer of knowledge within society. Facing unexpected competition from corporations and open-access learning resources, it must justify receiving shrinking public funds (Barnett, 2000).

This intense public scrutiny not surprisingly encourages universities to further emphasize campus leadership programmes and certificates, study abroad opportunities, internships and student group offerings. Many of these programs are attempts to measure and perhaps even commodify leadership. This leads educational leaders to quantify leadership, questioning its viability.

In the following sections, 3M Student Fellows attempt to weave together these leadership reflections.

An Analysis of STLHE Leadership Workshop Themes

Age and Leadership

By Emerson Csorba, University of Alberta

Prior to the June 21, 2013 workshop, I often considered the drawbacks and advantages of being a young person in higher education leadership roles. As a former Students' Union Vice-President Academic, I served on committees and boards comprised primarily of professors and administrators; there were only one or two student voices, at most. This was also true as a community league president, where I chaired a board comprised of executives two or three times my age. Despite the comparative lack of experience, the young representatives often presented themselves competently, contributing meaningfully to discussions.

Several years later, at the STLHE workshop, this discussion was reignited. I initially planned to gauge the conference attendees' views on age and leadership. The first discussion involved a significant amount of listening, as I served as the moderator and ensured the conversation remained on track. The second group was more dynamic, with the conversation flowing quite naturally. Despite the time limitations, the discussions were fruitful and illuminating.

One of the memorable moments from the opening discussion involved a professor describing an academic curriculum reform project championed by an undergraduate. This student successfully infused board-room tables with youth perspectives, guiding the university through a complex process. Similar sentiments were echoed when discussants articulated that many people discount young leaders based on their age. Thus, this Ontario student's success in coordinating university-wide discussions is an outlier example; it is not *what we expect* out of undergraduate-level students.

As a young person, I prepare vigorously for most meetings. Though this is a good habit for *any person*, I question whether this intensity fosters more anxiety than openness in group settings. It is because of this that intergenerational understanding is paramount; that is, engaging in dialogues based on respect regardless of age and individuals' unique life experiences.

Call me anything but a "Leader"

By Brianna Smrke, McMaster University

I have a confession. I was the student who admitted she hated the word "leadership." I still do. As I said in the workshop, when it comes up in conversation, I think of a "flabby, bloated ball of taupe."

I think the word is used too hastily, too narrowly and too often. I will also confess that coming into the workshop I had grown cynical not only about the word "leadership"

but the practice of the idea that anchors the word. I was in a ‘post-leadership’ state of mind.

The workshop attendees questioned our mindsets with grace and care. Indeed, there richness, nuance and even beauty remain in the ability to tap into a group’s potential. It was conference participants’ examples – explicit, focused and clear stories – that led me to this realization.

We are all leaders, so there are no leaders. Thus, the “word” leadership is dead, though the practice is not. There are storytellers, accountants, writers, listeners, animators and human beings. Instead of crafting a definition bland enough to be palatable to everyone, we should recognize others’ authenticity and genuine contributions. Magic sometimes happens when we assemble and solve problems together. Breaking this magic into tangible actions and roles might be a more inclusive and sustainable practice than branding a chosen few as “leaders.”

I challenge you to be more precise with your language. If I see that someone can convince others that a better world is possible, I will not call them a leader. Instead, I will say they are an expert storyteller. If someone is able to manage and keep a meeting on course, I will think of them as a shepherd. I will not hide behind words I cannot fully define; words that will slip through my fingers were I to try to grasp them.

The Aggressive Shepherd

By Tristan Smyth, Mount Royal University

I like aggressiveness, which is not to say my default setting is aggression. By and large, aggression and its many permutations have been besmirched. We think of it as an attribute of Hitler or Stalin – forceful, offensive, dictatorial, and militant people – and never the trait of a good leader. I contend it is worthwhile; we focus on the first dictionary entry and fail to read further. Aggression is a drive to succeed, to be filled with energy, to be bold and assertive. Aggression, as a positive characteristic, needs to be reclaimed.

Therefore, I wish to propose an idea: the *aggressive shepherd*. While this is a startling juxtaposition, it marries my two favourite traits of a leader. The iconic shepherd frolics on a bucolic hillside while plucking a lyre and guarding a flock of white puffs of sheep. We could easily imagine Giorgione, Nicolas Poussin, or Thomas Cole painting this scene. However, none of that description is inherently relevant to leadership; it is as much divorced from good leadership as aggression is. Yet, together these words strike a different note. A shepherd is one who tends to the well-being of the sheep and makes decisions to benefit all, thus allowing sheep to prosper and produce wool (and occasionally meat, but that is a rather morbid train of thought). Our most immediate example of the aggressive shepherd is the sheepdog.

“Aggressive shepherding” is a service function. It is a person who guarantees the group is productive, even if it requires forceful guidance. These individuals ensure every group member reaches their destination through the dynamism of tempered aggression –

drive, energy and boldness. Thinking back to the example, sheepdogs are assertive to the flock and aggressive to foes. In short, this leadership requires being aggressive on behalf of the team and not to the team.

Why, not who, lead?

By Kyuwon Rosa Lee, McMaster University

The 2013 STHLE conference was unique by many accounts. Indeed, I met countless leaders, each enhancing the room's diversity. Whereas some attendees' natural presence grabbed a room's attention, others' shined through their elegance, intellect and insights. United by the common goal of enhancing postsecondary education, attendees stood together regardless of the challenges they each face in their own schools and fields.

At prima facie, leadership is too often defined by traditional images and qualities: the charismatic and aggressive shepherd with a strong voice. My conference experience, however, contradicts this. I realized the key commonality shared by the group is the *raison d'être* of leadership; that is, *why* we lead. This driving force is often neglected or forgotten in conversations about leadership.

Leaders are not innately different than everyone else. There is no genetic predisposition to becoming a leader. Leaders are simply those fortunate enough to discover their personal *raison d'être* of leadership, likely because of auspicious circumstances, tools and supports. With this in mind, I propose we bring more nuance to leadership, considering the "purpose of leadership" rather than the individual leader.

In addressing this shift, I conclude with several lingering questions. First, how can we encourage individuals to reflect on their motivations for leadership? More specifically, how can postsecondary education serve as a platform in developing leaders? In short, how does our society enrich the leadership discovery process?

Conclusion

Far from agreeing on leadership's definition, the ten STLHE National Student Fellows seek greater nuance in discussing the term. For some, leadership involves aggression, an energy channeled *toward* a group's benefit rather than at a particular individual or collective. In some cases, the 3M students believe leadership may flourish at young ages, based on experiences, reflection and the development of wisdom. Others, however, remain skeptical toward the term. Thus, they focus on the *process* of leading - where individuals accomplish together what they could never achieve alone.

References

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Biographies

The 3M National Student Fellowship Award was introduced in 2012 to honour undergraduate students in Canada who have demonstrated qualities of outstanding leadership and who embrace a vision where the quality of their educational experience can be enhanced in academia and beyond. Read the full bios of the second cohort at <http://www.stlhe.ca/awards/3m-national-student-fellowships/2013-2/2013-recipients/>.