Thesis Proposal and Preliminary Reference List

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THESIS PROPOSAL

We are at a unique time in history, in which the American workforce consists of up to four distinct generations of workers, each with its own attitudes, values and behaviors. The term “generation gap” came into vogue during the 1960’s to describe the disparities between the youth at that time and their parents. While many people experienced the clash of generations in a familial setting, the differences between the generations occur on a much broader social context. Indeed, each generational cohort can be considered a co-culture within the broader society (Zemke, Raines and Filipczak, 2000; Arsenault, 2004). As a co-culture, each cohort has its unique values, customs, lifestyle, and attitudes (Caputo, et al., 2002). In an organizational setting these unique characteristics can manifest themselves in such things as preferences in work hours, attitudes toward authority, methods and styles of communication, and individual versus group-centered tasks (Zemke, Raines and Filipczak, 2000; Arsenault, 2004; Kabacoff and Stoffey, 2001; Jurkiewicz, 2000; O’Bannon, 2001; Rodrigues, Green and Ree, 2003; Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal and Brown, 2007; Smola and Sutton, 2002).

Over the last twenty years, members of these different generations have been queried, studied and analyzed to determine what is unique about each generation, where there are similarities, and how the generations might peacefully and successfully work together. There has been speculation that the generational cohorts would have different preferences with respect to leadership characteristics and behaviors, and some evidence has been found to confirm this (Powell, 2005). What has not been well documented is how those preferences for leader behaviors are manifested in the leaders’ communication style. This thesis seeks to further examine the differences in preferences for leader characteristics and behaviors between the four
generations in an organizational setting, and also explore what leader communication styles each generation prefers.

Not recognizing that each generational cohort is a unique co-culture can lead to the same types of poor intercultural communication as would be the case between members of different ethnic or national cultures. As a leader, understanding the most effective styles of communication to employ can lead to greater organizational efficiency, satisfaction and commitment (Hackman and Johnson, 2009). It is easy to understand how increasing efficiency can have a net positive effect on the organization’s bottom line. Ultimately, the investment an organization has in its human capital is crucial to remaining competitive in today’s business environment. Increasing employee satisfaction and commitment are two key elements in retaining human capital.

Research Question

This research study will attempt to answer the following questions:

RQ 1: What leadership characteristics are ranked most highly by each of the generational cohorts?

RQ 2: Are specific leadership behaviors typified more by one generational cohort compared to others?

RQ 3: For members of each generational cohort, what communication styles are most preferred in their leaders?

Methodology

Kouzes and Posner have conducted research on leaders and their followers for more than twenty years (2002 and 2003). Their Leadership Practices Inventory has been given to tens of thousands of leaders and their followers over the years of research. As an aggregate, they report only minor variations in the rankings of leader traits from respondents. However, their data has
not been analyzed by age, and thus has not been correlated to generational cohort. This thesis will analyze their raw data using age (cohort) as the dependent variable to discern any differences in preferred leader traits or behaviors. Traits will be analyzed with respect to how they are communicated, or how they might align with styles of communication.

Contingency Data Collection

The native data from Kouzes and Posner’s studies are not immediately available from any published sources that I have found to date. Their website, however, indicates that numerous dissertations and publications have been based on secondary analyses of their data. I plan to contact the authors directly to request their native data for the sole purposes of analyzing it for this thesis.

In the event the raw data is not available in a suitable time frame, I will also pursue the possibility of conducting a survey within my own organization. My organization has been greatly concerned with the pending retirement of large numbers of Baby Boomers, who currently comprise the majority of leadership positions within the organization. Developing new leaders to replace such retirees has led to an organizational recognition that members of the next generations not only need to be prepared for their leadership role, they also need to be recruited and retained. The issue of retention has raised awareness that current organizational practices, including leadership styles, may not be conducive to the necessary retention. With this awareness as a backdrop, I plan to develop a simple questionnaire modeled after the Leadership Practices Inventory to be distributed to the workforce within my organization. Powell (2005) developed a 21-item, 7-point Likert scale modeled after Kouzes and Posner, which may provide a template for the leadership traits portion of the survey. An additional element will be added to the survey asking respondents to rate their preferences for specific communication methods.
This will be modeled after the Leadership Communication Style Preference Inventory in Hackman and Johnson (2009, p.40).

The most efficacious means of distribution is as an online survey, which would be linked to from a message contained in an email. The survey will be voluntary and anonymous; no individually identifying information needs to be collected to meet the needs of the research questions posed.
Preliminary Reference List


