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The Leadership Practices of Effective RAs

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The Leadership Practices of Effective RAs

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Investigated is the relationship between the leadership behaviors of RAs and effectiveness assessments provided by their constituents (N = 1,304), supervisors (N = 5), and themselves (N = 333). Significant and consistent patterns emerge, with the RAs most frequently engaged in leadership practices viewed as most effective.

One of the most important determinants of organizational or group effectiveness is leadership (Bass, 1991; Yukl, 1989). Despite the obvious importance of this subject, there is still little consensus about how to measure leadership or about the extent to which variations in leadership practices are actually related to differences in performance. This predicament, apparent within business and government organizations, is even more pronounced among college and university administrators concerned with leadership development issues (Hirschorn, 1988). Following her review of the leadership development literature in higher education, Brodsky (1988) asserted: "Valid instruments designed specifically for college students to measure their leadership development do not exist."

One recent attempt to remedy this gap has been the development of a student version of the Leadership Practices Inventory (Kouzes & Posner, 1988). Based upon case studies and interviews of the "personal best leadership experiences" of over 1,000 managers, Kouzes and Posner (1987) identified the key actions and strategies of leaders and proposed a five-factor framework for conceptualizing how leaders behave. Applying this framework, derived from qualitative studies, to a quantitative analysis resulted in the development of the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI). Subsequent studies have demonstrated strong psychometric support for the instrument (Posner & Kouzes, 1993).

Brodsky (1988) replicated the Kouzes and Posner research design, finding that both their methodology and leadership framework, with some contextual modifications, could be successfully applied to understanding the behaviors of college student leaders. The resultant college student version of the LPI has been shown to differentiate significantly between the leadership practices of effective and ineffective fraternity (Posner & Brodsky, 1992) and sorority chapter leaders (Posner & Brodsky, in press). Effective fraternity and sorority leaders were seen as engaging in the leadership behaviors assessed by the LPI more frequently than their less effective counterparts. This perspective was shared not only by the student leaders themselves, but by their "subordinates" (members of their respective chapter executive committees). In a study of female leaders from organizations across campus, Komives (in press) found that LPI-Student scores are strongly related to the collaborative relational style on the Achieving Style Inventory (Lipman-Blumen & Leavitt, 1979).

This study extends the potential application of the student version of the LPI in several ways: (a) by examining another distinct organizational set of college student leaders (resident assistants in student housing organizations versus fraternal organizations); (b) studying leaders within multigender organizational units (versus single-gender organizations); and, (c) investigating student leaders who hold appointed management positions (versus positions secured through peer election). Furthermore, rather than relying only on self and/or subordinate (membership) perceptions of performance, as in previous studies, appropriate campus student personnel administrators provided independent effectiveness assessments of the RAs on their campus from a supervisor's perspective.

It was hypothesized that leadership and effectiveness would be directly related; those most effective would be most frequently engaged in key leadership practices. In addition, this relationship is postulated to be consistent across all three (self, constituent, and supervisor) perspectives.

METHOD

Participants

The managerial sample for this study consisted of RAs in student housing complexes on college campuses. These are front-line management positions, held by students who are selected and hired by a university's residence (housing) director. In exchange for room and board (and sometimes a small stipend), they are responsible for, as one college catalogue states: ". . . providing a living-learning environment that encourages academic achievement while assisting each individual student and the resident community in their development." RAs are responsible for the safety and well being of the residents on their hall or floor and typically work with these residents, along with other RAs in their residential complex, to provide extracurricular activities of both a social and academic nature. Housing directors and student personal administrators generally agree that the quality of residential life is directly related to the character and quality of the residential life staff (RAs).

Six public (nonprivate) colleges and universities across the United States participated in the study. By size (number of students), one campus would be classified as small (under 10,000), two as moderate (between 10,000 - 20,000) and three as large (over 20,000). These schools were located in California, Colorado, Ohio, South Carolina, Maryland, and New York. Half of the campuses were situated within urban communities and the other half were located within suburban (or rural) environments. Taken as a group, by institutional size, regional location, and community setting, the study involves a cross-sectional representation of the population.

Instruments and Procedure

The University's Resident Director (the individual with managerial responsibilities for the RAs, among other responsibilities) at each participating institution invited each RA on his or her campus to participate in the study. The RAs were asked to complete the LPI-Student RA survey and to distribute a copy of the LPI-Student Constituent survey to five (5) people who lived in their residential unit. The LPI-Student Constituent survey items parallel those on the LPI-Student RA survey but address perceptions of the RA's behavior (and not their own).

All participation was voluntary and confidential. Surveys (both self and constituent versions) were returned directly to a central office at the university and then forwarded to the authors. Overall the response rate from RAs was about 35%, yielding a sample size of 333 RAs. The average number of responses from constituents was 3.9 per RA (78% response rate), which yielded a sample size of 1,304 respondents.

The LPI-Student is a modified version of the Kouzes-Posner Leadership Practices Inventory (Kouzes & Posner, 1988). It was developed based upon the specific behaviors and actions that students report using when they are at "their personal best" as leaders (for more information on the development of the instrument see Brodsky, 1988; Posner & Brodsky, 1992). These behaviors are categorized into five leadership practices that are labelled Challenging the Process, Inspiring a Shared Vision, Enabling Others to Act, Modeling the Way, and Encouraging the Heart. Identified as practices common to successful leaders (both in collegiate and workplace settings), these leadership practices correspond well to the developmental issues of importance for college students as noted by Roberts (1981) and the specific qualities required by student leaders (Newton, 1981).

There are six behaviorally-based questions for each of the five scales on the LPI-Student. A five-point Likert scale assesses the frequency to which the person is reported to engage in the particular behavior, with (1) being "rarely or not at all", (2) as "once in a while", (3) as "sometimes", (4) being "fairly often", and (5) indicating "very frequently." Previous studies using the LPI-Student have reported internal consistency reliabilities at the .70 level and beyond. Means and standard deviations for RAs and constituents, on each leadership practice, are presented in Table 1. Internal consistency reliabilities, also shown in Table 1, range between .65 and .83 for RAs and between .81 and .89 for constituents.

The effectiveness of resident advisors was measured by items generated through discussions with relevant student personnel administrators (including housing directors, student activities and student affairs professionals), and from previous research efforts involving collegiate leadership (e.g., Posner & Brodsky, 1992; in press). Effectiveness was measured by the following nine questions, with editing appropriate to the sample (i.e., "I" or "me" for RAs and "He/She" for constituents): The residents view me as effective in meeting residence hall/floor objectives; Other RAs and administrators view me as effective in meeting residence hall/floor objectives; I am successful at representing our residence hall/floor with other students and RAs; I am successful at representing our residence hall/floor with campus administrators; I have developed a strong sense of cohesion and team spirit in this residence hall/floor; I am a positive role model as a RA; When this school year is over, people in the residence hall/floor will be able to talk about the differences that I made; I am effective at getting people to behave in a responsible manner; and, I am able to get people to volunteer for events and responsibilities. Respondents indicated the extent to which each of these statements was descriptive of themselves (as a RA) or about their RA (for constituents) using a seven-point Likert-scale with (1) being "not at all descriptive" to (7) being "all the time descriptive." Overall internal consistency reliability for this scale was .84 for RAs and .94 for constituents. The correlation between the RAs' effectiveness perceptions and those of their constituents was statistically significant ($r = .91$, $p < .001$).

TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations and Internal Reliability Coefficients for RAs and Constituents on the LPI-Student

	Resident Advisors M (Reliability)	SD	Constitutents M (Reliability)	SD
Challenging the Process	21.74 (.65)	3.29	22.42 (.84)	4.50
Inspiring a Shared Vision	20.66 (.81)	4.35	22.94 (.89)	5.02
Enabling Others to Act	25.20 (.69)	3.03	25.59 (.82)	3.84
Modeling the Way	23.25 (.69)	3.44	23.64 (.81)	4.18
Encouraging the Heart	22.23 (.83)	4.17	23.24 (.89)	5.02

Note. $N = 333$ for RAs and 1,304 for constituents.

In addition, at each campus the Resident Director provided a global assessment of the effectiveness of the RAs at their campus. Asked to consider all the RAs as a group, they assigned a (1) to those they felt were among the least effective performers (lowest quartile) and a (3) to those they felt were among the most effective performers (highest quartile). All others were considered "average" performers and later coded as a (2). This assessment was completed on five of the campuses, resulting in 53 RAs being rated "low" (22%), 117 RAs rated "average" (49%) and 70 RAs being rated "high" (29%). Subsequently, RAs and constituents were also divided into three performance categories on the basis of their overall (nine-item) effectiveness scores. The low performance group among the RAs included 99 respondents (31%), with 108 respondents in the average category (34%), and 115 in the high performance group (36%). The low performance group for the constituent sample had 376 respondents (31%), 427 respondents were in the average category (33%), and 418 in the high performance group (32%).

Respondent Characteristics

A few demographic questions were asked about the respondents: year in school, age, grade point average, and whether

this was their first year in their position (as a RA or for constituents whether this was their first year living in the residence hall). This information is summarized in Table 2 for both RAs and constituents. Typically RAs were in their junior year of college, about 20+ years of age, with a 2.93 (B) grade point average. For most (69%) this was their first year as a residence advisor. Fifty-six percent were female. There were no statistically significant differences by gender for RAs on year in school, age, or grade point average. There was a slight tendency for more females to be in their first year as a RA than was the case for their male counterparts. The constituent group, not surprisingly, were somewhat younger than the RAs both in age and year in school, with a slightly lower grade point average (2.77). For about two-thirds this was their first experience in the residence hall; nearly 62 percent were female.

RESULTS

Results of an analysis of variance of scores on the LPI-Student by performance from the viewpoint of constituents (residents), self (RAs), and supervisors (Resident Directors) are presented in Table 3. Self and constituent perspectives are remarkably similar across all five leadership practices: Those engaged in this set of leadership practices most frequently, as compared to those engaged in them less often, are consistently viewed as more effective by their constituents and by themselves. The perspective of their supervisors (Resident Director), although following a somewhat similar pattern overall, however, does not reveal as strong a relationship between leadership and effectiveness.

TABLE 2

Demographic Characteristics of RAs and Constituents

Demographic Characteristic	% RAs	% Constituents
School Year		
Freshman	3.4	51.0
Sophomore	30.5	24.0
Junior	36.9	16.4
Senior	27.7	8.0
Graduate Student	1.5	.6
Age (in years)		
18-19	17.3	65.1
20	36.1	18.3
21	22.4	10.6
22	14.4	3.7
23	3.8	.9
24+	3.5	1.4
Grade Point Average		
≤2.9	37.3	45.4
3.0 - 3.4	44.7	36.7
≥3.5	18.0	17.9
Gender		
Male	44.0	38.5
Female	56.0	61.5
RA (Dorm) Tenure		
First Year	68.6	67.1
2+ Years	31.4	32.9

From the perspective of constituents, the RAs who least frequently engaged in the leadership practices of challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to

TABLE 3

ANOVA of LPI Scores by Performance Categories From Constituent, Self and Supervisor (Resident Director) Perspectives

	Challenge	Inspire	Enable	Model	Encourage
Constituent					
Low	18.75	18.74	22.07	19.95	19.05
Average	22.64	23.34	26.11	24.01	23.63
High	25.97	26.88	28.53	26.92	27.22
$F_{(2,1218)}$	451.85***	477.23***	553.77***	508.19***	488.76***
Duncan's+	1< 2 < 3	1< 2 < 3	1< 2 < 3	1< 2 < 3	1< 2 < 3
Self (RA)					
Low	19.74	17.69	23.06	21.04	19.20
Average	21.50	20.49	25.15	23.00	22.19
High	23.62	23.39	27.05	25.49	24.76
$F_{(2,319)}$	48.96***	63.81***	64.25***	66.25***	65.66***
Duncan's+	1< 2 < 3	1< 2 < 3	1< 2 < 3	1< 2 < 3	1< 2 < 3
Supervisor (Resident Director)					
Low	21.02	19.70	24.17	21.94	21.04
Average	21.21	19.93	24.61	22.80	21.35
High	22.26	21.30	25.83	23.84	22.97
$F_{(2,237)}$	2.55	1.75	5.18**	5.05**	3.23*
Duncan's+			1,2 < 3	1,2 < 3	1,2 < 3

Note. + Duncan's Multiple Range Test of differences between means of low (1), average (2) and high (3) groups. Significant differences indicated by "<".
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart were reported as *least effective in the performance of their job responsibilities* in comparison with RAs assessed as either average or high performers (as indicated by results from Duncan's Multiple Range Tests). Similarly, those RAs in the average performance category (according to constituents) engaged in these same five leadership practices significantly *less* frequently than those RAs who were viewed by their constituents as high performers.

The identical pattern found from constituent perspectives was reported by the RAs themselves. That is, those who perceived of themselves as most effective reported engaging in these leadership practices more frequently than did their counterparts who viewed their own performance as average. In turn, the average performers saw their use of these leadership practices to be more frequent than that reported by the RAs who saw themselves as least effective.

The performance data provided by the Resident Directors, as supervisors, suggests a pattern similar to that indicated by the RAs and their constituents. The RAs who reported engaging in the leadership practices of enabling, modeling, and encouraging were reported as being more effective by their supervisors than were those RAs who reported engaging in these same practices to a lesser (average to low) extent. The differences between average and low frequency on these three leadership practices were not statistically different. No statistically significant difference in their supervisor's assessment of their effectiveness were found on the leadership dimensions of challenging and inspiring.

Given that comparisons of the leadership practices of male and female RAs (results not shown) had revealed statistically significant differences on several of the leadership practices, two-way ANOVAs on the performance data were conducted to examine possible interaction effects from both self and supervisory perspectives. The results in Table 4 reconfirm the main effect of performance on the various leadership practices. Gender has a main effect on the leadership practice of encouraging for both RAs and their supervisors (with females engaged in this practice to a greater extent than males) but has no statistically significant impact on challenging, inspiring, enabling, and modeling. The possible interaction effects of gender and performance failed to materialize for either the RAs or their supervisors on any of the five leadership practices.

TABLE 4

Two Way ANOVA of LPI Scores by Gender and Performance Perspectives of RAs and Resident Directors (F values)

	Challenge	Inspire	Enable	Model	Encourage
Resident Advisors (Self)					
Main Effects					
Gender (1,305)	.98	.02	1.04	.37	5.00*
Perf (2,305)	45.15***	60.95***	58.31***	58.44***	59.55***
Interaction Effects					
Gender x Perf (2,305)	.24	.63	.02	.40	.64
Resident Director					
Main Effects					
Gender (1,227)	.36	1.94	2.20	2.88	4.54*
Perf (2,227)	1.75	1.45	4.74**	4.66**	2.39*
Interaction Effects					
Gender x Perf (2,227)	.38	.57	.07	1.26	.49

*$p<.05$ **$p<.01$ ***$p<.001$

DISCUSSION

The leadership practices of RAs are related to assessments of their effectiveness, and this relationship is apparent not only to others (e.g., constituents and supervisors) but also to one's self. Those RAs who viewed themselves as most effective also saw themselves acting like leaders significantly more than did their counterparts who perceived themselves behaving as leaders less often and reported their own effectiveness less favorably. Likewise, constituents reported a statistically clear and consistent relationship between assessments of their RAs' effectiveness and the extent to which their RAs engaged in these five leadership practices.

The independent evaluations provided by Resident Directors revealed a similar pattern, although neither so consistently or strongly as that found for RAs and their constituents. The RAs that were reported by their supervisors as being most effective were the ones who saw themselves engaging most frequently in the leadership practices of enabling, modeling, and encouraging. Indeed, what may set apart the most effective RAs from their counterparts is their above-average use of these leadership practices.

Why differences on challenging and inspiring were not found is open to speculation along several possibilities. Inspection of the specific behaviors that constitute these leadership practices suggests that performance of them may be less visible or tangible and thus not as apparent to one's supervisor, whose interpersonal interactions with the RA may be fairly infrequent (certainly not on the same daily basis as encounters with the residents in one's dorm). Alternatively, it may be that these two leadership behaviors

are not particularly well-suited or appropriate to the job performance and success of RAs. Posit that those RAs who challenge the process may be viewed unfavorably by their supervisors when it comes to enforcing and adhering to university rules and regulations. That differences on these two dimensions were noted by constituents and the RAs themselves, suggests another hypothesis; namely, that it was not politic to let one's supervisor know about the frequency to which one may take risks and experiment with new ways of doing things.

Inspiring a shared vision was the leadership practice reported to be engaged in least frequently overall, and this ranking for students is very consistent with findings from business executives. It is possible that this leadership practice, in the college setting especially, although engaged in with one's constituents, is not typically practiced upwards (in a hierarchical sense). Consequently, supervisors would be literally unaware of the RAs use of this practice.

Finally, it may be that the less robust relationships reported by Resident Directors stem from a restriction of range (one-item scale) in the way effectiveness was measured by them. It should be remembered that they provided relatively simple and global assessments of the "best" and "worse" RAs on their campus, and that an effectiveness scale composed of many dimensions might have proven more reliable. Future researchers should take this measurement issue into account, and they may also want to secure assessments from the Resident Directors of the extent to which they perceive their RAs engaging in the various leadership practices, and not just the extent to which they were performing well in their positions. Independent performance assessments from multiple sources might also clarify these relationships.

The LPI-Student, as a leadership development instrument for college students, continues to show promising reliability and validity. The relationships between leadership practices and effectiveness was quite consistent across students, in both leadership (RAs) and non-leadership (or constituent) positions. Moreover, the relationships were not affected much by demographic characteristics, such as gender and age. Finally, the relationships found between leadership and effectiveness with the instrument were generally confirmed by independent and third-party (non-self report) evaluations.

Several caveats are necessary. First, although this study involved multiple college campuses, across various situational characteristics (e.g., region and size), and included reasonably large respondent sample sizes, some caution should be exercised in making generalizations because this is not a completely random sample of colleges. Second, the LPI-Student is still a relatively new leadership development instrument and should be subjected to more studies with college students to continue to validate its usefulness and reliability with this population. For example, student body, class, and club officers, leaders of community service organizations, student media editors and directors, as well as intercollegiate and intramural sports' team captains might be the subject for future studies. Further instrument development efforts may be warranted to enhance the internal consistency reliability for several of the leadership practices in the self version (e.g., challenging, enabling, and modeling).

These concerns not withstanding, student personnel administrators realize that the effective development of "leaders-in-the-making" requires feedback on their leadership behaviors and a reliable method to assess leadership performance (Miller & Jones, 1981). The LPI-Student can help identify and specify areas for developing the personal skills necessary to be an effective student leader.

An expanded view of the role of resident advisors (RAs) also seems called for. When conceptualizing their job description and responsibilities, providing leadership should be specified as an important component of successful job performance. RAs should be seen as providing important role models to their constituents, especially first-year students, about the behaviors most effective in working with other college students, which is likely to have a carry-over effect on the way these students behave as leaders in their own subsequent organizational experiences.

Understanding the significance of leadership for effectiveness also has implications for RA selection and training. Part of the selection process should include attention to the candidate's leadership philosophy and understanding of the processes of challenging, inspiring, enabling, modeling and encouraging. Likewise, resident hall staff development programs should include leadership as a major component, providing opportunities for both self-assessment and skill-building. Feedback, from such instruments as the LPI-Student, can also be utilized throughout the academic year to identify areas where improvements have been made and areas where further development is needed.

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