

Describing Pathways to Leadership for Introverted Students

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Introduction/Need for Research/Conceptual Framework

Proponents of trait leadership theory espouse leaders have special qualities which facilitate leadership outcomes (Northouse, 2017). Extroversion is the number one personality trait associated with the traditional view of leadership (Goldberg, 1990; Judge, Bono, Illies, & Gerhardt, 2002). Extroverts are characterized by being charismatic, articulate, convincing, and energized by interaction with others (Atamanik, 2013; Stephens-Craig, Koufie, & Dool, 2015). In contrast, introversion is characterized by being detail-oriented, private, contained, and working deeply through ideas through quiet reflection (Myers, 2015). Introverts make up roughly 30-50% of the population (Atamanik, 2013). Although extraversion is most often associated with leadership, varying leadership perspectives allow for the possibility of introverted individuals to lead in alternative ways (Northouse, 2017). Employability skills, including leadership, rank among the top needs for new employees, thus introverted students represent a special population worth studying.

The purpose of the study was to describe the leadership beliefs and strategies of college students identifying as introverts. This study was guided by the central question: How do introverted college students enrolled in a leadership course conceptualize and enact leadership?

Methodology

Researchers employed qualitative research methods to collect data for this exploratory grounded theory study (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Researchers analyzed data using constant comparative method to compare emerging categories from the data (Creswell, 2013). The themes were used to create a model of the pathways to leadership for introverts. Researchers bracketed their experiences as extraverted leaders and leadership educators when coding and theming.

Study participants included five self-identified introverted students enrolled in an introduction to leadership course at a Midwest land grant university. Participants self-identified as introverts through a computer Personality Type Self-Assessment, based on the theories of C.G. Jung and Briggs & Briggs Myers (Myers, 2015). Participants received instruction on how to take the instrument and characteristics of introverts. Researchers conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with five self-identified introverted students, ranging in time from 45 to 75 minutes in the fall of 2018. Researchers also observed and recorded field notes of participants as they interacted with classmates in daily team tasks to facilitate triangulation (Creswell, 2013). Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and researchers individually coded each interview. Data from interviews and observations were analyzed to find common themes. Researchers coded interviews and observations separately, then cross-analyzed codes, then recoded and generated common themes. This is an exploratory study; results should not be inferred.

Results/Findings

Three themes emerged from the data: 1) introverted leadership starts with listening, 2) comfort with people and context is essential before vocal leading can occur, and 3) extraversion is an empowering and limiting characteristic for leadership.

Theme 1: Listening is a key influence concept mentioned by all participants in this study. Each student described situations in which they led by first listening to the opinion and comments from others before they made the decision if they would enter the conversation. Participant #1 (P1) described "I feel like introverts kinda benefit more from the reservation, from

the awareness, from the I can take a step back and read what's going on around me and deal with it in the best way instead of the quickest way." P2 reflects "[I'm] worried about whether you're better or worse off after speaking. Like will people think less of me now...that I'm not contained in a way or do they respect me more for have spoken?" P3 adds "I can talk if I need to talk, it's just that I prefer not to...because I also feel like you have to take time to listen to people too. I feel like some of the people that I know as extroverts don't listen very well." Participants focused on interactions and listening to others' comments for context before entering a situation.

Theme 2: Being comfortable with their peers and surroundings before leading was also a theme common among all participants. Participants described in great specificity how group size, relationships, and comfort with spaces and content facilitated leadership empowerment. P2 supported this theme by stating "I would say the average introvert has to feel comfortable um... understanding the crowd. I will remain fairly quiet until I understand the crowd I am with." P3 builds off of P2's statement by adding "If it's more than 10 people then I'm not saying anything...unless I feel like my input will matter." P4 adds "But, in like a group setting where I don't know the people then I try to be more reserved and like I... I am trying to figure out how people interact with each other. P4 reflected "it's kinda finding that balance of knowing someone and how to react to their needs or how they like to be led."

Theme 3: Introverted leaders viewed strong extraversion as antithetical to listening, yet most participants reported utilizing extroverted traits in order to appear as good leaders. This expectation of extraversion appears to some from learning about leadership from extroverted role models as children. P4 states that there are times where he can be an "introvert, you know, a non-leader." P1 reported "You gotta be that person, but being able to put on, like a façade...it's that switch (to extraversion to lead)". Some have an aversion to extraversion. P1 reflects on extraversion "you don't want all of your personality and all of your knowledge to be like a wild water or fire hydrant." P2 doesn't see "extreme extraversion as really or always a good thing; there's this stream of thoughts...there's not as much filtering going on. It's less efficient, you're nor removing all these...unessential things. Superficial and emotional, not always articulated well. I mean they are articulated well...but it's like you are just overwhelmed."

Conclusion/Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession

When researchers asked participants if they see themselves as leaders, each responded their leadership capacity depended on the context and their peers. Approximately 10% of the 194 students in the participant's course self-identified as introverted; all study participants enrolled in the leadership class to meet a graduation requirement, but some had alternative options.

Participants engaged in leadership activities by first listening and internally processing how their ideas could contribute to solving the problem at hand. For most introverts, speaking up was associated with extraversion. Two participants were FFA officers in high school; each had independently been asked to coach public speaking for younger members. Is training public speakers a strategy for leadership development specific to introverts or is this common practice for all FFA officers? All participants reported small group size and comfort with individuals as prerequisites for leadership, operationalized as comfort in speaking up and setting expectations.

Researchers recommend further exploring how introverted leaders use listening and comfort in initiating leadership, and to what extent introverted leaders struggle with the perception of extraversion as necessary for leadership. Researchers should identify how common leadership development practices like Parliamentary Procedure and public speaking are consumed and applied by introverts.

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