Millennials among the Professional Workforce in Academic Libraries: Their Perspective on Leadership

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ABSTRACT

This study explores possible leadership perceptions of Millennials working in academic libraries, specifically their definition, the attributes they associate with leadership, whether they want to assume formal leadership roles, whether they perceive themselves as leaders, and whether they perceive leadership opportunities within their organizations and LIS professional associations. An online survey was utilized to gather the responses and the study participants comprised of Millennials (born 1982 or after) currently working full-time in libraries that were a member of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), a consortium of the Big Ten universities and the University of Chicago in 2011–12.

It is not uncommon today for the workforce in academic libraries, be it professional or non-professional, to consist of three generations: the Baby Boomers (born 1943–1960) (Howe & Strauss, 2000), approximately 80 million in general population size; Generation X (born 1961–1981) (Howe & Strauss, 2000), a population less than half of the Boomers; and the Millennial Generation (also referred to as Echo Boomers, Next Gen, and Generation Y, born 1982–2002) (Howe & Strauss, 2000), whose general population number of 88 million plus exceeds all other generations. In a few instances, the workforce might also include the Traditionalist or Silent (or GI) Generation (born 1925–1942) (Howe & Strauss, 2000). While the generation definitions described previously were delineated by Howe & Strauss, it is also not uncommon to see a disparity, or blurred lines, in the exact years used to identify generations as well as the generation span. For example, Twenge (2006, 2010), a psychologist who researches extensively generational differences and the Millennial generation, defines Millennials as those born after 1982 in some work and those born in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s in another; the Boomers as those born 1946–1964; and Generation X as those born 1965–1981. A Census Bureau (2011) study "The Older Population 2010" defines Boomers as also born from 1946 to 1964. Another research article for the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard by Masnick (2012) defines Generation X as 1965–1984. In comparison, Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak (2000) defines Boomers as 1943–1960, Gen Xers as 1960–1980, and Millennials as anyone born 1980 and after, while Beck (2001) defines Gen Xers as 1963–1977. Similar to one but still different from Twenge's definitions, Lancaster and Stillman (2002) state that Boomers are 1946–1964, Gen Xers are 1965–1980, and Millennials are

1981–1999. The length of a generational unit typically spans from 15 years to as many as 24 years depending on which definition is utilized and mirrors the disparity of defined generations discussed previously (Foot, 1998; Hicks & Hicks, 1999; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Martin & Tulgan, 2001; Meredith, Schewe, Hiam, & Karlovich, 2002; Strauss & Howe, 1991; Tapscott, 1998; Zemke et al., 2000). Some of Twenge's (2006) research is based on a thirty year span and on the other end of the spectrum there are research proponents for shortening the span to 10 years due to today's rapidly changing world.

As Baby Boomers and the remaining Traditionalists retire, they often vacate positions as managers and assigned leaders (Northouse, 2007). The first quarter of 2013 found 16 Association of Research Libraries (ARL) institutions either in the midst of conducting a library dean search, announcing a library dean recruitment, or announcing an impending retirement. If new hires are included, the number jumps to over 20, and if non-ARL colleges and universities are included, the number jumps significantly again. This does not include associate dean, director, or mid-management positions with open, active recruitments within academic libraries. Millennials possess the sheer numbers to eventually fill these vacated management slots (Howe & Strauss, 2000). While they have not yet assumed managerial or formal leadership positions to the extent that Generation X has, there will be increased opportunities as well as expectations that Millennials will become managerial leaders and fill the void created by the retirement of Traditionalists and Baby Boomers.

Despite all of the writings on leadership that now appear in the literature of library and information science (LIS), no studies have probed the perceptions of Millennials working in academic libraries about their definition of leadership, the attributes they associate with leadership, whether they want to assume formal leadership roles, whether

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they perceive themselves as leaders, and whether they perceive leadership opportunities within their organizations and LIS professional associations.

The findings from this study may provide insight, understanding, and possible direction for libraries facing increasing retirements and having a need to fill the subsequent leadership vacancies. The findings may also provide background information for those interested in attracting members of the next workforce, and those developing leadership programs geared to Millennials as well as the library managers seeking to motivate and engage these individuals. In addition, the insights will assist managers in cultivating and helping Millennials to develop their awareness, knowledge, and skill set related to managerial leadership.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social sciences researchers have examined the leadership preferences of Millennials, the differences between Millennials and other generations, and the management preferences and practices of Millennials in the general workforce. The leadership literature has compared Millennials to other generations in terms of perspectives or leadership theories, or identifying values or organizations commitment, or what Millennials want to see in their leaders. Many of the studies have used traditional methods for gathering the information such as face-to-face interviews, phone interviews, and written surveys.

Gage (2005) compared the leadership perceptions of the Traditionalist and the Millennial generations in selected Midwestern towns. She explored leadership theories to examine how each generation answered her questions and determined that followership (part of many theories) and servant leadership stood out for both the Millennials and Traditionalists in her study. Influence, a component of leadership, plays a role for both leaders and followers. Gage determined that for Millennials and Traditionalists, neither group was necessarily seeking either a role as leader or follower in their quest to work with others. For example, Gage found that Traditionalists simply did what needed to be done. Millennials, on the other hand, value relationships and it is these relationships that motivate them to become involved. The involvement component, becoming active, from both generations is what creates influence and is based on their willingness to get involved despite differing reasons for the involvement. Hence, leadership is formed from the one relationship that incorporates both leaders and followers (Gage, 2005).

Kaiser (2005), who examined the organizational values and commitment of the four generations employed at one community college, found that Boomers and those in Generation X have a higher organizational commitment than do Traditionalists or Millennials. For Millennials, this translates into adaptability and a willingness to change jobs if the current organization does not meet their needs. Kaiser points out that the Millennials' commitment to the organization centers on three aspects: (1) their degree of belief and acceptance of organizational goals and values; (2) their willingness to exert effort on behalf of the organization; and (3) their desire to continue employment within the organization.

Stratman (2007) asked twenty Mexican American youths born between 1983 and 1987 about the attributes they associate with leadership, and the leadership attributes they prefer from leaders within the workplace. He found that they value the relationships with their leaders while expecting there to be a friendship component in the relationship. Teamwork evolved as an important aspect of how participants wanted tasks to be assigned. When making these selections, Millennials felt it was important to choose the individuals best equipped or suited to complete tasks based on skill set as opposed to tenure or seniority.

Dulin (2008), who studied leadership preferences of Millennials through a mixed methods methodology, discovered that, while they are extremely high-tech, they manage their relationships with others, thereby practicing a component of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is a leadership theory that describes an ability to perceive, assess, and manage the emotions of one's self, and of others. The initial focus groups facilitated by Dulin revealed five themes: competency, self-management, communication, interpersonal relations, and management of others (Table 1). The Leadership Preference Inventory that Dulin used was developed based on the five focus group themes that emerged in an attempt to validate the themes. Dulin's study found that while Millennials as a whole may be very high tech, they very much want relationships with high touch, preferring leaders who can act comfortably as mentors (Dulin, 2008).

Dulin's study demonstrated important findings unique to Millennials and mirrors other research. For example, work–life balance is critical to Millennials and, unlike previous generations, this cohort is unwilling to sacrifice personal pursuits for any type of professional success. The Millennials value their personal lives, families, and hobbies over the desire for control, recognition, or responsibility through managerial leadership positions (Mosley, 2005; Twenge, 2010; Wilcox & Harrell, 2009). The formal bureaucracies in which open communication, collaboration and teamwork are non-existent will not meet the needs of Millennials serving on teams where they expect open communication (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

To summarize the key attributes for Millennials identified in the research body: they place great importance on achieving work–life balance; are accustomed to working in groups or team; engage in multi-tasking, and use multiple technologies in their daily lives; (Espinoza, Ukleja, & Rusch, 2011; Foltz, 2010; Lippincott, 2010; Murray, 2011) have success in securing resources (e.g., funds and technology); have an ability to build partnerships and working relationships; are committed to professional development; and support for work/life balance (Young, Hernon, & Powell, 2006). Turning to the perspective of library directors, they expect their replacements to be committed to service, results oriented, effective communicators, and able to delegate authority (Hernon, Powell, & Young, 2003).

PROCEDURES

The Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), a consortium of the Big Ten universities and the University of Chicago, consisted of 13 academic institutions at the time the study was conducted, and it served as the study population. During the fall, 2011, the investigator contacted administrators at each university library to determine the number of Millennials currently on staff. The 11 responding libraries reported a total of 164 individuals; one library did not reply and the other declined to disclose the information.

The majority of responding officers stipulated that the library would distribute the survey to those eligible to participate and to let these individuals decide whether to participate. If there was no such stipulation, the investigator contacted the libraries for the names of participants so she could invite their participation in the study. The stipulation was agreeable to the investigator and data collection began April, 2012, after the Simmons Institutional Review Board granted approval.

Once participants were confirmed as willing to participate and signed consent forms received, the survey web link was distributed as an e-mail message either to the CIC officer or sent directly to individuals depending on library and participant preference. A modified version of Dulin's Leadership Preference Survey was administered through FluidSurvey. FluidSurvey is an affordable, easy-to-use online survey software tool for creating, managing, and analyzing research derived from online surveys. Dulin's set of attributes listed in the instrument was modified and the final two questions were rewritten for greater clarity. The revised set of attributes corresponds to the general ones listed in Northouse (2007). For example, questions not supporting Northouse's leadership attributes were deleted, and additional questions were added. The methodology selected recognizes that Millennials are continually online and operate with immediacy.