

**TITLE** How High School Students Experience, Define, Acquire, and Apply Leadership Attributes: A Phenomenological Study

**RESEARCHER** Richard Gibson  
School of Advanced Studies  
University of Phoenix  
Unpublished doctoral dissertation: July 2017

**OBJECTIVE** The purpose of this qualitative descriptive phenomenological study is to explore leadership as understood, lived, and experienced by 20 high school graduates exploring how, in the absence of a set curriculum or class, the students understand they have come to learn and apply leadership attributes in their life.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A series of digitally recorded interviews, using open-ended questions to engage participants in a reflective conversation, were conducted with 10 male and 10 female participants 18 years of age, within weeks of graduating from four high schools in southwest Alberta, Canada. Data collected from the interviews was coded and analyzed in the context of the high school lived experience of participants.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

The author reported:

Participants indicated leadership begins at a very individual level, small steps in their own choices, actions and conversations with parents, peers, and teachers (p. 138).

Over the 20 interviews it became apparent that all participants had developed an understanding of leadership based upon their interactions with peers, parents, other family and adults in a wide range of settings and activities. Teachers, both classroom and school based administration, played a key role in supporting and developing student understanding of leadership even if it was not deliberate (p. 141). In addition to the adults, teachers, and support staff, participants repeatedly expressed that their interactions with peers, individually and in groups in and out of class contributed to their understanding and development of leadership skills and attributes in their life. Participants particularly expressed awareness that they developed as leaders over time (p. 142).

Other conversations centered around making choices as a grade 10 to follow or lead. Participants explained how that evolved over their high school career informed their understanding of leadership over time. Participants shared the difficult experience of choosing to leave friends who they felt were making poor decisions that did not align with their personal values and saw that as a process by which they developed as a leader; first of self and then of others (p. 142).

Another secondary research question sought to understand how participants' individual definition of leadership and experiences impacted their own sense of efficacy and

development as leaders. Several participants discussed the confidence that came over time as they successfully completed hard tasks, made choices to lead, and even picked themselves up and carried on following a personal or group/team setback.

Whether it was developing a sense of humor and comedy, a determination to work hard, speaking in public, or just being the man of the house in a single parent setting with little sisters; the participants expressed the sense of self-worth they experienced in helping, making good choices, and setting what they perceived was a good example for others around them (p. 144).

Over time the development of leadership attributes brought a sense of confidence. As participants acted as leaders, the belief of others in them supported their belief in themselves. Participants understood it is not always easy to lead, one does not always make the right choices and it helps to be humble when things are good and when they don't quite work out (p. 145).

Participants were very clear, from their own experiences and in the identification of leadership attributes they valued, that leadership is a learned skill or attribute. They viewed leadership as comprised of many different elements not all of which can or are learned in a traditional classroom. This perception impacted their thoughts as to how leadership should be "taught" in school. Generally, participants held little interest in a traditional textbooks and assignments approach to learning leadership; even if they expressed that more could be taught about leadership in school (p. 149).

Participants emphasized the need to act, to participate, in leadership opportunities and reflected upon the times they had succeeded and struggled. They indicated that lessons could be learned from successes and struggles, if not failures, even if they had not necessarily discussed those events from a leadership development point of view. In responding to Q9, no participant offered a full delivery model with curriculum and project details for teachers to apply moving forward. In fact, several commented that traditional sit and get lecture, textbook models would fail to develop leaders (pp. 149-150).

Participants particularly agreed with the characteristics identified by Kouzes and Posner (2012) in their fifth edition of *The Leadership Challenge*. Of note the authors indicated that over the course of the five editions they had surveyed thousands of individuals and only four characteristics had been selected as critical leadership characteristics by over 60% of the respondents each time; honest, forward-looking, competent and inspiring. Honest, competent and inspiring were also frequently mentioned by the 20 participants in the study with competence/confidence at the top of the participant list (p. 151).

Educators should give consideration to the development of a more formal approach to leadership development though the participants were clearly mixed as to how that should look generally suggesting that it be an element of work perhaps best addressed across curriculum than in a specific course. Character education, conversations around values, decision making processes, can be discussed from a leadership point of view in most subjects. Perhaps most significantly educators should look to how they direct their classes during the formation and operation of group work, participants in the study having indicated that without direction leadership opportunities follow to a select few when

others would, if directed and supported step up and develop those skills and attributes if given the chance (pp. 154-155).