Using Biographies to Teach Leadership Skills: A Classroom Example

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The purpose of this article is to describe a leadership biography assignment used in our master's of business administration (MBA) class and to detail how a biographical approach can be used to teach leadership concepts and skills to management students and to business practitioners. In the classroom assignment, MBA students analyzed biographies of leaders across time, industries, and professions by responding to select questions. From this analysis of business and nonbusiness leaders, students gain a more holistic perspective to the different styles, traits, characteristics, and situations that constitute the art of leadership. Although the leadership biography assignment was used in our MBA classes, this assignment could also be used in undergraduate business classes and undergraduate and graduate classes outside the business field, as well as part of a professional development activity for business practitioners.

Keywords: Leadership; Biographies; Leadership Skills; Leadership Characteristics; Mentors; Storytelling

INTRODUCTION

One of the core courses in most MBA and MS business programs is a graduate-level course on leadership. In addition, many undergraduate business programs, as well as professional programs in other disciplines, such as education and health, will have at least one course on the topic of leadership. Many businesses throughout the

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world also offer professional development seminars and executive training sessions on the topic of leadership to facilitate the growth of their employees.

Although it is difficult to estimate exactly how many universities and colleges in the United States offer courses on leadership, the number of these classes and programs has expanded exponentially since the 1990s [Dugan and Komives, 2007], when it was estimated that there were anywhere from 500–600 academic courses and/or extracurricular programs on leadership on U.S. campuses [Fagan, Bromley, and Welch, 1994].

Even though leadership is widely taught and studied in both the university and business world, with over 12,000 books being published alone on the subject in the last few years [Martin, 2002], the concept of leadership remains an evolving topic. Debates not only range from whether leaders are born or made [Bass, 1982] to whether you can truly teach the concepts of leadership to others [Mole, 2004].

In most leadership courses in business programs, students will learn about the science of leadership through an emphasis on both theory and skill development. However, successful leadership requires much more than understanding theories and learning specific skills. How a leader performs in any given scenario varies according to the situation and is often dependent on a multitude of contextual factors. Although case studies, which are frequently used in most graduate leadership business courses, provide a good tool for understanding how a leader behaved in a given situation, truly understanding the "art" of leadership requires a much more in-depth analysis of the socio-cognitive, psycho-cognitive, and ethical dimensions of the individual.

Therefore, for students to become better able to adopt and exemplify the behaviors of established leaders requires an education pedagogy that addresses not only cognitive knowledge, but also fundamental values and emotions.

Although there are multiple, innovative educational approaches used to learn a subject such as leadership, the challenge for the instructor is to find an approach that will not only teach the knowledge and skills of leadership but also can have an emotional and perceptional impact on the students' personal lives over a longer period of time. In past courses, using the tenets of social learning theory, the authors have used films with varying degrees to teach management education, and maximize student learning and retention [Mathews, Fornaciari, and Rubens, 2012]. Pedagogically similar to films, written biographies of leaderships can potentially have a dramatic impact on student's emotions and perceptions. With a growing distrust of government leaders and scandals of corporate chief executive officers (CEOs), students more than ever appear to not have great leaders that can serve as examples of people they can emulate and follow. According to the Center for Creative Leadership white paper on leadership, when asked whom they revere as a great leader, a vast majority of the business leaders focused on past political leaders, with very few mentioning leaders in their own field [Martin, 2002].

For more than ten years, the authors of this paper have used biographies in the leadership classroom as an approach to go beyond the normative approach to

leadership education and to address the need of students to not only learn from past leaders but also to provide learning that can impact students' personal lives over a longer period of time. In addition, the authors have delivered hundreds of executive education seminars to business leaders in over 50 countries, cutting across multiple industry sectors.

In this article, we begin by describing leadership education and the use of biographies and storytelling in teaching. From this, we describe a typical course and its content, the methods used to bring the material together for students to maximize learning, and in the case of business executives, the frameworks used to draw practical lessons that can be applied to live business decisions.

TEACHING LEADERSHIP

The teaching of leadership has a long and varied history. The Greek "Academy" was established around 386 BC by the philosopher Plato with the express purpose of developing the leadership capabilities of future statesmen [Korac-Kakabadse, Kouzmin, and Kakabadse, 2002]. After the birth of his son Alexander in 356 BC, Philip II of Macedonia had a clear leadership development plan for his son. Starting at the age of seven, his education under Leonidas focused on learning physical skills such as horseback riding and swordsmanship. Around the age of 13, his intellectual development took priority when he studied under the mentorship of the great philosopher Aristotle. Finally, as he entered his late teens, the focus of his development shifted toward appreciation for culture, music, and fine arts under the guidance of Lysimachus [Kets de Vries, 2003]. The goal was to develop a set of well-rounded capabilities necessary for the young Alexander to develop into the successful leader that history now refers to as "The Great."

In the intervening centuries since the time of Alexander, many leaders have risen and fallen across the spectrum of human activity, and the approach to developing those leaders has been equally diverse. For the purposes of teaching leadership in a business context, stories such as the one of Alexander play a central role in our approach (as will be described in the next section). The primary aim of the authors is to teach both students and business professionals about leadership in a way that will resonate with them and will have an impact on them as they practice leadership over the length of their careers.

According to "The Handbook for Teaching Leadership" [Snook, Khurana, and Nohria, 2014], it wasn't until 1985 that the first comprehensive textbook on teaching leadership—"Leadership in Organizations" [1985]—was developed by the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership at West Point.

A review of the literature reinforces the wide range of approaches to leadership development. In a national web-based survey, Jenkins explored the usage of 24 commonly used instructional methods for leadership. His findings indicate a wide adoption of discussion-based pedagogical approaches aimed at conceptual

understanding but a surprisingly low adoption level of action-learning approaches such as simulation, role play, and storytelling [Jenkins, 2013].

In an article that reaches back to the earliest forms of leadership development, Gehrke argues that mentoring is a critical form of relationship and should be preserved as a classical component of personal development [Gehrke, 1988]. Approaching from a different perspective, Antonakis et al. explore the question of whether a particular leadership characteristic—charisma—can be taught [Antonakis, Fenley, and Liechti, 2011]. Their findings suggest that leader training can have a significant impact on perceptions of leader charisma, which translates into higher ratings on perceived leader effectiveness.

In his *Harvard Business Review* article comparing managers and leaders, Abraham Zaleznik suggests that every society grapples with the challenge of finding an ideal way to develop leaders. He argues for two critical factors in developing leaders. He suggests avoiding peer-learning approaches such as task forces and instead suggests cultivating individual understanding and mentoring relationships [Zaleznik, 1992].

Not only in academic institutions has the study of leadership and the creation of centers for leadership grown, but the topic has also spawned a huge industry for academics and consultants in "leadership training" and "leadership development." As noted, there is a proliferation of ebooks, texts, and articles analyzing and speaking about various business leaders, and in some cases, business leaders have almost taken on a mythic image in our culture. However, while leadership has been widely and variously studied and will continue to be, it remains, as James MacGregor Burns has said: ". . . one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth." [Burns, 1978]. Warren Bennis expressed a similar sentiment: "Never have so many labored so long to say so little. Multiple interpretations of leadership exist, each providing a sliver of insight but each remaining . . . incomplete." [Bennis and Nanus, 1985].

STORYTELLING AND USING BIOGRAPHIES

Just as leadership is a long-studied subject, storytelling is one of the oldest forms of education. Since ancient times, people around the world have told stories as a way to pass on cultural beliefs and traditions to future generations. Currently, museums and other institutions are rushing to record narrative histories from survivors of varied events so that their stories will not be lost. Stories help us see through the eyes of others and gain understanding we may not have had before. Stories go right to the heart. Irish poet and philosopher James Stephens [1929] wrote: "The head does not hear anything until the heart has listened. The heart knows today what the head will understand tomorrow." Stories help us preserve the wonder and mystery of the world by enabling us to believe in that which we cannot see and reach us at an emotional level.

In business, storytelling has been used for many years as an effective tool not only to illustrate management techniques but also to teach lessons about the culture of the business and organization. As a form of storytelling, biographies relate history and can be used to teach factual information.

Guber suggests that there are two misconceptions about storytelling that need to be addressed. First, he asserts that storytelling is much more than entertainment and that it plays a central role in instructing and leading. Second, he suggests that storytelling is not about inventing myths or tall tales. Rather, great storytelling does not conflict with the truth but is most effective when it is deeply honest [Guber, 2007].

According to Leckie [2006], "biographies are superb teachers' aids because as members of humankind we do not simply live out the life of our species. Instead, we display a variety of native abilities, and our personalities are shaped by our consciousness of our gender and race, environmental influences, and the choices we make." Nielsen [2009], in teaching disability history says: "teachers can take advantage of biography's special appeal to teach students about the interplay between individuals and structural forces in history." Fairweather and Fairweather [2010] used biographies of famous scientists to teach middle school students the scientific methods, and Mori and Lawson [2006] used biographies to teach science in their course: "Life of a Psychologist: Experiences of Women in Science" to teach students the many challenges and facets of being a woman in the science field.

Several years ago, Fagan, Bromley, and Welch [1994] wrote about their experiences in using biographies to teach leadership. In their papers, the authors draw on their four-year experience with teaching "Profiles in Leadership," a freshman course where students read and discuss the biographies of leaders. Although they found that young students were not used to reading longer prose with multiple characters, the biographies proved to be a useful assignment. This finding is very important when we consider that more than ever there is greater trend away from longer prose in our "social media" world. Despite this societal trend, the use of written biographies remains a powerful approach.

Hayes and Robinson [2012] for several years used biographies to teach entrepreneurship. They found biographies helpful in not only assisting students with understanding the entrepreneur's journey but also very useful in reinforcing entrepreneurial concepts and putting them in a context in which students could understand and relate. These authors go on to say that: "many students commented on how influenced they were by each entrepreneur and how they (the entrepreneur) challenge some of the preconceived notions" [Hayes and Robinson, 2012].

THE ASSIGNMENT OVERVIEW

The course we teach is a core MBA course entitled: The Challenge of Leadership. Our course is given both in classes in a traditional classroom format and via a distance-based on-line mode of delivery. The class is given over the

typical 16-week semester period and is taken by most MBA students at the beginning of their MBA program of study. The course is also taken by students from multiple other graduate majors at the university after they have completed foundation and core courses in their respective programs; e.g., Master's in Public Administration, Master's in Computer Information Systems, Doctorate in Educational Leadership, etc.

The focus of our MBA class is to teach our students the fundamental theories, practices, and skills of leadership, as well as providing cases and material that give students the opportunity to learn from other leaders' experiences. To teach the fundamentals, we have used a variety of skill-based leadership texts over the years such as Gary Yukl's "Leadership in Organizations," Peter Northhouse's "Leadership: Theory and Practice," or Robert Lussier's book: "Leadership: Theory, Application, & Skill Development." We also generally assign a supportive leadership text on business practices to accompany the foundational leadership text such as: Jim Collins, "Good to Great," Warren Bennis, "Leading for a Lifetime," etc., in order to introduce additional leadership thoughts and perspectives.

Although we provide a variety of written assignments in the class, ranging from case study write ups to having students develop a self-reflective professional development report, one of the key assignments that we have consistently used over the years is having students do a comprehensive analysis of a leader of their own choosing (based on a biography or autobiography of that leader). Understanding the qualities of leadership and how a leader thinks and acts in specific contexts is a main objective of both this assignment and the overall course.

The specific objectives of the biography assignment that we give our MBA students are not only to teach and reinforce their understanding of leadership concepts and ideas but also for the students to be able to look at how these concepts could be applied across a variety of contexts throughout the world. In addition, learning about the background and actions of leaders, regardless of the nation they are from, the industry that they work, or the time period which they live or lived, can serve as a guide/mentor for the person in their future careers and lives. This objective is further reinforced throughout the MBA class with a series of exercises that is culminated with the leadership book assignment and its related white board exercise.

Prior to selecting the leader that they will study, students complete a number of classroom exercises. In one of the first classes, the students will do an exercise where they identify a person that they admire and write up the "characteristics" of this person. In a follow-up exercise, students are asked to name a situation when they felt they were a leader, describe this situation, and identify the leadership characteristics that they displayed. In another class exercise, the students identify their "best boss" and their "worst boss" listing the characteristics and skills, or lack thereof, from these people, as well as the behavior that they displayed. These types of exercises help the students to learn to reflect and analyze what is involved

with the art of being a leader, and to reflect on how leaders, even themselves, might lead. In addition, these types of exercises also set the stage for students to recognize and realize how their behavior in and outside work is learned from others.

Assignment

At the first class of the semester, the students are told that they will conduct an analysis from a biography of a leader. The students are told that the leader's biography should be someone that the student is interested in and/or someone that the student wants to learn more about. Although the students have a great deal of discretion in picking their leader, we encourage the students to go through a process of reflection before making their final selection of their leader.

The leadership classes have a diverse array of students. Some are Millennials who have just completed their undergraduate degree, while others are pursuing their graduate degree after completing their own undergraduate studies decades ago. We also have in each class international students who are taking graduate classes arranged through university and College of Business partnership agreements with universities and business schools throughout Europe, Asia, and South America. By capitalizing on the composite student diversity in each class, greater breadth and depth to the exploration of leadership is provided. While students often pick a leader from the realm of business, they can select a leader from any field or industry (politics, sports, history, entertainment, etc.) and from any time period.

In the field of business, almost every semester, students will select leaders who are well known as successful business leaders such as Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, or Warren Buffett or others who have made their fortunes in the last decade such as Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, or Mark Cuban. While, in politics we frequently see students selecting leaders that are admired and respected such as Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, or Winston Churchill. However, equally each semester some students will select more infamous leaders such as Adolf Hitler, Benita Mussolini, or Mao Ze Dong. Military leaders as well as sports figures are regularly selected, and many students each semester will select female leaders, both contemporary and historical, from business and nonbusiness fields to do their report on. The only requirement for the students is that the leader's book should cover how this person leads others. In addition, students are told that the book can be either an autobiography written by the person on his or her life or a biography written by someone else. Students are given the first three weeks of the semester to select and get approval for their chosen leader, and each student must select a different leader. When students pick the same leader, the student that selected the leader first is allowed to write his or her report on the leader. Table 1 below shows a sampling of some of the leaders and their field of study that have been selected in the MBA class over the years.

Table 1. Example Leaders Chosen by Students

Business Leaders	Political Leaders	Social/Cultural Leaders
Richard Branson	Bill Clinton	Mahatma Ghandhi
Henry Ford	Winston Churchill	Martin Luther King Jr.
Bill Gates	Charles de Gaulle	Dalai Lama
Carlos Slim Helu	Mikhail Gorbachev	**Sport Leaders**
William Hearst	John F. Kennedy	Muhammad Ali
Steve Jobs	Abraham Lincoln	Alex Furguson
Jack Ma	Nelson Mandela	Michael Jordan
Lakshmi Mittal	Sheikh Mohammed	Michael Shumacher
Blake Mycoskie	Barack Obama	Arsene Wagner
Ratan Tata	Rajendra Prasad	Pele
Bill Bowerman	Franklin Roosevelt	Vince Lombardi
Larry Page	Margaret Thatcher	**Military Leaders**
Warren Buffet	Dengue Xiaoping	Marcus Aurelius
Walt Disney	Lee Kwan Yew	Napoleon Bonaparte
Herb Kelleher	John Kennedy	Ulysses S. Grant
Jack Welsh	**Female Leaders** (Business/politics)	Alexander the Great
Sam Walton	Oprah Winfrey	**Infamous Leaders**
Paul Allen	Golda Meir	Idi Amin Dada
John D. Rockefeller	Angela Merkel	Adolf Hitler
Donald Trump	Sheryl Sandberg	Genghis Kahn
Rupert Merdoch	Indra Nooyi	Osama Bin Laden
Business Leaders (Younger)	Eva Peron	Benita Mussolini
Larry Paige/Sergey Bin	Elizabeth I	Joseph Stalin
Mark Cuban	Barbara Walters	Ho Chi Minh
Jeff Bezos	Hillary Clinton	Che Chevera
Mark Zuckerberg	Mary Kay Ash	Mao Ze Dong
Tony Hseih	Martha Stewart	Jimmy Hoffa
Elon Musk	Carly Fiorina	Genghis Khan

Example Leaders Chosen by Students

For the assignment, students are instructed that they will write a 12–15 page typewritten (double-spaced) paper outlining their chosen leader. A key component of this assignment is that students are told that this is not a *book report* of this leader but an *assessment* of the key factors and characteristics that defined this person as a leader; e.g., what path did this person follow, what is his/her vision;

Table 2. Questions About Your Leaders

1. Who did you choose to study?
2. Why you choose to study this person?
3. What path did this person follow in getting to their leadership position (background, jobs, education, key events, etc)?
4. What is this leader's vision? Where did that vision come from? How that vision been articulated? Has this articulation been successful? Why or why not?
5. What do you believe are the keys to this person's success as a leader?
6. To what, or to whom, does this person credit his/her success as a leader?
7. Is there a particular code of ethics or set of values that this person appears to follow? What is it? How does it contribute to or detract from his/her leadership abilities?
8. How do you characterize his/her leadership style? Give an example of his/her behavior that fits this style?
9. What role models (positive or negative) influenced this person as a leader? In what way?
10. How does this leader get people to follow? Is he/she effective at it? Why or why not?
11. How does he/she make decisions? Who is involved in key decisions within the organization?
12. What "price" (if any) has this person had to pay for being a leader?
13. How does this leader view his/her employees/followers? Give examples.
14. Does he/she have a theory of success or failure in general? What is it? Has he/she followed that theory consistently? Give examples (Refer to question six).
15. Has this leader groomed a successor(s)? Who is it? How did he/she select and prepare this person?
16. What is a "good" leader according to this person? Do they fit their own definition? Do you agree with this definition? Why or why not? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this definition?

what leadership style did they employ, who were their role models, how did they make decision, what was the situational context, etc. In pursuit of understanding the leader's path to becoming recognized as a successful leader the student is given a series of questions that should be addressed and answered in the paper (See Table 2):

Questions about Your Leader

   In developing the paper and responding to the leadership questions, it is recommended that the student conduct research beyond his or her chosen biography through articles and texts related to the leader, his or her industry, and leadership attributes that he or she represents and exemplifies. In addition, it is

Figure 1. White Board One Suggested Topic Areas

White Board One
Suggested Topic Areas

__Traits__	__Characteristics__	__Skills__	__MBTI__
Leaders Traits, physical, social, intellectual, etc.	Leaders Characteristics, attributes, etc.	Skills of leader; i.e., Technical, human, and Conceptual	Myers Briggs Personality Types, Extrovert, Introverted, and also, MBTI Combination; i.e., ENFP, etc.

Figure 2. White Board Two Leadership Style Suggested Topic Areas

White Board Two
Leadership Style
Suggested Topic Areas White Board Two

__Style__	__Transactional or Transformational?__	__Level 5__
Leadership Style of the leader, autocratic, democratic, servant, etc.	Is the leader transactional or transformational and why?	Jim Collins, Good to Great Leader Type (Optional Area)

recommended that the students in developing their final paper incorporate the readings, topics, and issues learned throughout the class related to leadership theory and the leadership process.

During the last two sessions of the class, the students orally present their leaders to the class. The oral presentation is approximately 10 minutes, and the students describe their leaders and their varied paths toward becoming a successful leader. Specifically in the students' presentations they discuss:

- *Path followed* to leadership
- *Leader's vision* and how and who helped develop this vision

- *Leadership style*
- *Role models* who influenced him/her
- *Decision making* style and *followership*
- *Price paid* and *successors*

Following the student's presentation of his/her leader, he/she opens the presentation to a question/answer period from the other students in the class. The students are graded on their written report and their oral presentation.

Debriefing

Upon the conclusion of the final presentation, a class white board debriefing occurs. In this debriefing, two separate boards are utilized.

White Board One Topics

White Board One

For *white board one,* the focus is on understanding the basic traits, characteristics, personality types, skills, etc. of the selected leaders of the students. For example, you can have the students brainstorm the "traits" of their leader, based on trait theory, referring to not only physical traits but also to traits such as intelligence, self-confidence, determination, sociability, etc. [Stogill, 1948; Stogill, 1974; Yukl, 1989; and Bass, 1990]. Alternatively or in addition, you can have the students brainstorm a list of the personal characteristics and/or attributes that their leader possessed; e.g., "my leader is an innovator, exercises power, egocentric, etc." Other areas for *white board one* have involved having the students describe the leadership skills of their leaders, e.g., specific technical skills, human skills/people skills, and conceptual skills or strategic skills based upon skill theory [Katz, 1955; Bass, 1990]. In addition, in the brainstorm discussion, you can encourage students to point out those areas that could be considered negative traits, characteristics, or skill weaknesses. We have found that by focusing on both bad/negative attributes of a chosen leader in addition to the more readily recognized good/positive attributes, you can enrich class discussion by bringing a level of greater realism and complexity to the examination of the successful leader. Many entrepreneurs, for example, have leadership traits that are suited to the driving effort needed to build a business, but those same traits can cause significant dysfunction in the subsequent stages of business development [Kets de Vries, 1985]. For example, the biography of Steve Jobs by Walter Isaacson [2011] has been selected by some students. Students speak of the genius of Steve Jobs but also note how difficult it would be to work for him.

Finally for *white board one,* you might want to look at personality types of their leaders. In the first few classes of our leadership course, we discuss self-awareness and have the students take the Myers Briggs Type Indicator

(MBTI) Inventory [CAPT, 2009]. Over the last few years the debriefing for *white board one* has included discussing what they think is the MBTI type of their selected leaders. For example, what individual personality type(s) do they think their leader best displays, e.g., "are they an extrovert, introvert, sensing, intuitive, etc." In addition, we have the students try to determine what they believe would be the MBTI combination of the 16 different personality types for their leader, e.g., ENFP, ISTJ, etc. Although we frequently use the certified MBTI®, for cost and convenience, there are a number of parallel personality assessments that could also be used, i.e., Keirsey-Temperament (www.keirsey.com/), Jung-Typology; (www.humanmetrics.com/cgi-win/JTypes2.asp), etc.

White Board Two

For *white board two,* we ask the students to first describe what they saw or found to be the "leadership style" of their leaders. For this part of the debriefing, the leadership styles are based on the varied leadership styles and models studied in class. For example, for the debriefing, we will talk about the different leadership models (contingency, situational, behavioral, etc.) but ask the students more specifically what type of leadership style their leader followed and why; e.g. leader-member exchange, participative, charismatic, autocratic, democratic, task oriented, servant, etc. [Yukl, 1989; Northhouse, 2004; Yukl, 2008]. Finally, with *white board two,* we discuss whether the leader would be considered a "transactional" or "transformational" leader. In other words, was their leader someone who was followed only because he/she had the "title" of leader or was their leader someone who was truly able to inspire his/her followers [Yukl, 1989, 2008].

Recently, we added a new category to *white board two*: "Would their leader be considered a "Level 5" leader" based upon Jim Collins work in his book "Good to Great" [Collins, 2001, 2005]. As noted earlier, "Good to Great" is frequently one of the assigned supplemental texts for the course. When students are not assigned this book as their supplemental reading, we have the students read an article on Level 5 leaders by Collins [Collins, 2005]. In his book and article, Collins describes the many qualities of what he has described as a Level 5 leader— selfless, humble, etc.—and how such leaders manage their people, e.g., "first who, then what" etc. For this debriefing, the students will discuss their leaders' styles and assess the ways in which their leaders would or would not be considered Level 5 leaders according to Collins' definition. When time permits, some of the other characteristics of the "Good to Great Leader" are also included in this debriefing.

White Board Two Topics

As a final note about the debriefing, we have recently moved to *Sympodium* in the classrooms in our College of Business. *Sympodium* is from "Smart Technologies" and allows an interactive pen display on your monitor. *Sympodium* is an

enhancement of "Smart Boards" that allows for a printed display of the content of your white boards (http://education.smarttech.com/ste/en-US/Classroom+solutions/). A major advantage of using this technology (*Sympodium or White Board*) is that it allows for each student to have a written review of the white board debriefing of the selected leaders.

DISCUSSION

The pedagogical use of biographies to teach students varied skills has been used by academics for many years. The biography assignment addresses the three identified reflective learning processes of a good course or assignment design [Hedberg, 2009], namely, subject, personal, and critical. The objectives of these assignments vary from wanting students to improve their reading and compre- hension skills to reinforcing skills and knowledge on a specific subject or topic to having students experience a sense of self-reflection on their lives based on the knowledge gained from the biography. In classroom discussions during and after the leadership biography assignment, students often say how much they learn from reading about the first-hand experience of their selected leader and hearing about leaders selected by other students. Some students voice how the experiences of these leaders have touched their lives and how much these individuals or situations have influenced them and their attitudes toward not only how they want to lead and manage but also how they want to be treated and how to treat others. Even the process of having students go through a period of reflection of the leader they are writing about has been helpful and insightful for the students.

David Sommers [1991] in writing about students' choice of leaders in a similar classroom exercise found that taking the time to reflect on choices of leaders teaches the students about their own sense of values and adds clarity to what they want in leaders. Taking this time to reflect, not only before but also after the assignment, is essential to the learning outcome gained. As Henry Mitzberg [2004] said, "reflection is hard work. . .it is not just a leisurely pursuit or an idle indulgence."

Students have also voiced how the assignment has opened their thinking to other cultures, world leaders, and societal values. For example, many of our U.S. students have learned about leaders from other nations and other times that were frequently selected by many of the foreign exchange and/or non-U.S. students who were taking the class. In addition, students from different age groups have gained new perspectives, where younger students from the Generation X or Millennial age groups often learn about leaders from the past, while Baby Boomer students learn about some younger leaders and entrepreneurs. Students are also often surprised when they examine the characteristics of their leaders finding that both leaders who are regarded as positive role models and leaders who are regarded in a negative light often share the same or similar characteristics.

In preparing the student before the biography assignment, we try to take a personal approach to the student's analysis of leadership theorists and theories. This helps the students with their leader biography assignment in taking these theories—and their reflections of what it means to be a leader—to a new and often personal level.

As in academia, management professionals will read books as part of their own professional development or as a text recommended by the company's CEO or a member of the organization's executive team. More often than not, the recommended books are from business leaders about how a leader or company found success. Other times, employees may be asked to read a book whose purpose is to inspire and educate them: books such as "One Minute Manager" by Ken Blanchard [1981], "Who Moved My Cheese" by Spencer Johnson [1998] and Ken Blanchard, or as mentioned previously, Jim Collins' book, "Good to Great" [2005] to name a few. The primary purpose of having a company's employees read these books is not only to open up different way of thinking to the company's upper and middle managers but also to inspire and motivate them in their jobs and how they lead.

The authors, for example, have frequently used the Harvard Business School case by Nancy Koehn: "Leadership in Crisis: Shackleton and the Epic Voyage of the Endurance" [2003] in our leadership class. The story of Earnest Shackleton teaches students the concept of leadership and, in particular, leadership under crisis. Shackleton's life in biographies such as Peter King's [1991] "South," or Caroline Alexander's [1999] book, "The Endurance" have also been used by varied companies to teach these same concepts to employees in their organizations. Stories of crisis and survival such as these provide excellent examples of how individuals lead under stressful situations.

CONCLUSION

Increasingly, we are finding management students and employees in our businesses that were born after the 1980s and thus are members of Generation X and Millennials. While older generations may sometimes view Generation X and Millennials as narcissistic and lacking commitment, they have a different view of workplace expectations than older generations and often are willing to trade high pay for a flexible schedule and a better work/life balance. It is said that they value teamwork and seek and need affirmation, and although these individuals are highly tech savvy and appear to demonstrate a great deal of confidence in themselves, many in this generation have grown up in nontraditional families (single or divorced parents). They are often skeptical of government and businesses and sometimes feel that our nation's leaders, both in government and business, are primarily concerned about their own image and position and not the people they serve or that work for them. This generation values affiliation and

wants to belong and, almost more than any other generation, needs and wants mentors and people that they can look up to.

Marshall Ganz, a Harvard professor who helped structure the organizing platform for Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign and a former key member of Caesar Chavez's United Farm Workers movement, speaks of the importance of the narrative in an organization's culture. These narratives or stories are powerful messages that help employees identify with their organization and help inspire us in our work and life [Gatz, 2007]. Biographies of leaders serve this same purpose. We have found that in doing the leader's biography assignment students realize that the skills and characteristics of leadership transcend generations, industries, and situations. The students quickly realize that, regardless of when or in what area the person was a leader (e.g., ancient Greece, politics, or a current CEO), there are common characteristics and traits that are shared among leaders. In the class, students learn the theories and practices of the study of leadership and various leadership styles. The leadership biography serves as the vehicle for incorporating all of the leadership learning into an applied setting by focusing on how these leadership skills, practices, and decisions were practiced by real leaders that were selected for study. This same type of assignment could also work well with businesses and organizations as part of professional training seminars or "brown bag" types of sessions, where employees could read and share the experiences of leaders that they read about.

In any exercise or assignment there are limitations. Although it should be considered part of the learning process, some students, especially some younger students, would complain about the amount of reading in the class with the added biography. Many, it appeared, were not accustomed to this amount of reading. It has been said that Millennials in particular are used to reading smaller snippets of information and having some visual clues that accompany the information. However, the benefit of the assignment comes from engrossing yourself into the life of the leader. More often than not, even those students that complained about the amount of reading were thankful after they read their biography.

In closing, as Generation X and Millennials populate our businesses and academic institutions, having leaders and mentors that they can look up to is increasingly important. Biographies tell stories, and it is these stories (both from positive models and negative models) that can help shape not only the values and perspectives that we carry in the workplace but also the skills in which we lead and govern.

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