

Semiotics and leadership: making meaning for the young generation

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Abstract. *Any research is actually performed with a view to the future and has a predictive nature. We study the past and the present in order to be prepared for the future. So we study for the generations to come; it is therefore important to know their expectations, worldview, interpretation of reality. Specialized literature has defined leadership and made the profile of the various types of leaders according to our experiences. What would be the profile of a good leader according to the criteria of the young? Do they correspond to our criteria? Semiotic investigation covers nowadays a wider cultural area and a wider range of domains and may help in getting an insight in the young construction of reality.*

Keywords: semiotics, leadership, worldview, cultural specificity, universal leadership traits, leadership styles, empowerment.

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1. Introduction

Numerous studies, both empirical and theoretical, have been dedicated to the study of leadership, the leader's profile, types of leaders and the influence of cultural specificity on the leadership style. Debates have been led for or against universal leadership traits. The globalization turmoil has caught us somewhat unprepared and while attempting to adapt to the new, unforeseen circumstances, we are concerned with the change brought about by this powerful process in our lives and worldview. Multiculturalism has raised issues never before experienced and the need of adapting processes to the specifics of a country (glocalization) is obvious. Sustainable development and looking into the future by decoding the symbols that are meaningful for the younger generation is a more recent concern which needs further and more in-depth study.

2. The 'Young and the Restless'

With so many challenges we are facing today and our preference for labeling, we sometimes take for granted the authority given by life experience. Any other views that we have not get to define may easily be labeled as 'valueless', just like we label the new generation – a generation 'growing without values'. 'Every generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it and wiser than the one that comes after it' rightfully asserted George Orwell. But everything is moving too fast for us to afford the luxury to think that the world is changing only under the technological impact while the humans preserve

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their ancestral features. Therefore, when studying phenomena and processes, the variable ‘age’ should be equally considered.

The young generation has been defined in various ways, mostly with condescendence. It is, obviously, the digital generation, with different thinking, interpreting and communicating patterns. Their motivation and expectations are different. In a previous article (Vasilescu, R, The Romanian Generation Y, 2010), we attempted a classification of the common characteristics, with a few culturally-specific and technology-conditioned features:

- **Familiar with and reliant on communication technologies (technosavvy)** – use and integrate technology in all forms into their lives
- **Short attention spans** – the instant click of a mouse is the info rate they are ready to accept, every topic should be short and to the point
- **Multitaskers** – while listening to a topic, they may send an e-mail or an SMS or look up something on the mobile net at the same time, which does not mean they are not interested in the topic under discussion; but time is too precious not to make the best of it
- **Filter and consume info quickly** – easily select information and are able to process it immediately and apparently, effortlessly.
- **Information must apply directly and be relevant for them** – Skype, ICQ, MySpace, Facebook are the channel of communication for them, where they select the information they need at a high-speed rate, any background or general information is irrelevant, therefore, useless and left aside.²

The younger generation seems more ‘equipped’ to cope faster with external stimuli of any nature. In order to find out the young expectations from a leader, we should first consider their attitude towards work, which is best described by Jordan Kaplan, an associate managerial science professor at Long Island University-Brooklyn in New York.: "[They are] much less likely to respond to the traditional command-and-control type of management still popular in much of today's workforce... They've grown up questioning their parents, and now they're questioning their employers. They don't know how to shut up, which is great, but that's aggravating to the 50-year-old manager who says, 'Do it and do it now.'

They are both high-performance and high-maintenance, say the employers. They want to work but they do not work to be their life. They are taking their place in an increasingly multigenerational workplace. Is that speak-your-mind philosophy uncomfortable for today's employers?"

Today's youngest workers put a high priority on career, but they want jobs with flexibility, telecommuting options and the ability to go part time or leave the workforce temporarily. They walk in with high expectations for themselves, their employer, their boss/leader, the employers say.

3. Semiotics and leadership

According to Umberto Eco: ‘Semiotics has to do with anything that may be considered a sign. Anything that may be considered a significant substitute to anything else is a sign.’

² Vasilescu R., The Romanian Generation Y: preparing today's students for tomorrow's job market, in *Analele Universității " Spiru Haret" (Seria Economie)*, Vol. 2(11) nr. 1, 2011

The ‘general theory of signs’ or ‘doctrina signorum’ (St. Augustin) is an effective instrument in our endeavour of understanding and interpreting the world. The human being is a ‘signified’ being, a ‘homo significans’ (Henri Wald) able to ‘produce and understand signs’ (Thomas A. Sebeok, *Signs. An Introduction to Semiotics*). Producing and understanding signs and symbols is at the basis of human communication and semiotics (semiology) is the study of signs and symbols and of how meaning is constructed and understood. In linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure talked about the ‘signifier’ as the physical representation (written word or picture- e.g. the word *leader*) of the sign and ‘signified’ (the concept, the idea – e.g. what comes to mind when we read or hear the word *leader*). But this interpretation of the word differs from a cultural area to another, as the GLOBE research program about national culture and leadership profiles in 61 countries showed (2002), where culture is defined as a system of symbols in which ‘the individuals, assign significance to their own reality starting from a referential meaning’ (Onea A-N, Tatarusanu M, 2012). It also differs from one generation to another, according to their specific characteristics. So far, the cross-cultural literature has emphasized on the connection between culture and leadership styles. Studies have also considered other variables such as: religion, language, ethnic background, history, political systems (Dorfman, 1996). This article is pleading for the need of introducing *age* as another variable which may complete the range. As ‘there is a need for leadership and organizational theories that transcend cultures to understand what works and what does not work in different cultural settings ‘ (Triandis, 1993), there is also a need to consider the above-mentioned common characteristics of the young generation and their system of values and expectations in the attempt to draw the profile of the leader for the 21st century.

The GLOBE study defined *leadership* as: ‘the ability of an individual to influence, motivate and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members’ (House et al., 2004, p. 15). While *semiotics* provides ‘the theoretical, methodological and practical elements related to culture.... General theories that refer to the style of leadership must be reviewed and adapted to the context. The meaning considered by the group, on the acts developed by the leader-aspirant may differ from the one assigned by the leader-aspirant, as social codes are the ones which govern’ (Onea A-N, Tatarusanu M, 2012).

4. Universal leadership traits, leadership styles and young values

Is there such a thing as ‘universal leadership traits’ when cultural specificity has such a strong influence on worldview, values and expectations? The GLOBE project while showing the culturally-dependent view of leadership, found that we also have universal views on it. Several attributes are seen as universal for ‘good leadership’:

- Demonstrating trustworthiness, a sense of justice and honesty
- Having foresight and planning ahead
- Encouraging, motivating and building confidence
- Being positive and dynamic
- Being communicative, informed, a coordinator, a team integrator and builder

while the following are universally deemed as against good leadership practice:

- Being a loner and asocial

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- Being irritable and uncooperative
 - Imposing your views upon other

(Source: Dorfman, duLuque & House, In the eye of the beholder: Cross cultural lessons in leadership from project GLOBE. Academy of Management Perspectives.)

The above traits are common sense and applicable worldwide, which is important due to current labour mobility of the young, in particular. Understanding universal and culturally-determined traits is helpful for local or global effective leadership.

Leadership styles as we know them so far were detailed by Carol Zervas and David Lassiter in *Leadership Styles: Is There 'One Best' or is Flexibility Worth Developing* (2007), according to attitudes and behaviours which have a specific meaning and interpretation depending on culture, with the specification that some of them may be obsolete styles and that this classification of stereotypical profiles is not made in terms of 'good' or 'bad'. Every style is 'decoded' just like in a semiotic analysis and labelled for us to enable recognition and understanding. The classification below follows two main worldviews in point of leadership: the *traditional* and the *contemporary* views:

- *Coercive* – a control-oriented leader, who demands obedience and reporting back to the leader.
- *Task-oriented* – a leader concerned with work effectiveness and job outcome.
- *Authoritarian/authoritative* - a compelling vision, clear directions, progress monitoring, concentration of power and decision-making authority.
- *Bureaucratic* – a rule-oriented leader, having similar traits as the authoritarian style.
- *Affiliative* - an interest in the subordinates' job satisfaction, own popularity, recognition of work outcome, good communicator, but a possible danger of 'laisser-faire' due to lower level of priority for task outcome.
- *Laisser-faire* - avoids influencing subordinates, who have a greater autonomy and authority. No systematic approach to problem-solving; it may be successful with a highly qualified and educated workforce and clear goals.
- *Empowering* – a new, possibly effective style characterised by delegation of responsibility to subordinates.
- *Democratic/Participative* - a teamwork supporter, subordinates take part in the decision-making process, decisions result from a group consensus. Leader-subordinates relationship is based on trust.
- *Charismatic/Pacesetter* – an example-setter, establishing high standards and imparting enthusiasm. It is about what he/she can do rather than due to his/her leadership skills. This is a leadership style that may be perceived in a completely different way depending on the country. The charismatic leader may become coercive when disappointed by a subordinate performance.
- *Coaching* – in his/her views, success depends on developing the subordinates' and his/her own capabilities. They help the subordinates identify their strengths and weaknesses.
- *Transactional* - allocates work to subordinates, who become fully responsible for it; works according to the principle 'management by exception', paying attention more to what is not meeting performance standards, and therefore associated more to management than to leadership.

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- *Transformational* – an inspirational figure, making people to follow him/her, a person with vision and passion. Highly visible, in constant communication with their teams, full of energy and enthusiasm. He/she delegates responsibilities and relies on the expertise of the team to achieve results. High levels of communication, high commitment to self-observation and development.

Transactional and Transformational styles have been defined 20 years ago and are paid more attention: the transactional style is associated more to management and transformation style has been considered as a result of intensive research, as the ‘leadership’ style and its definition has undergone many revisions and adding.

Robert Greenleaf (1977) introduced the concept of ‘servant leadership’ and defined the servant-leader as making a deliberate choice of serving others, putting the needs and interests of others above his/her own, a strong self-image, moral conviction and emotional stability, empowerment. The servant leader combines traits from several leadership styles listed above, e.g. vision, trust, appreciation of others, empowerment, pioneering, communicator, competent, good listener, reliable, supportive, sympathetic and seems to be the ideal figure of a leader. One important characteristic of this type of leader is *empowerment*, defined by Gibson, Ivancevich, Donnelly and Konopaske (2006, p. 500) as: granting individuals the permission to utilize their talents, skills and resources and experience to make decisions to compete their workloads in a timely manner. This concept is gaining more and more ground nowadays and with good reason too. Comparing the young generation characteristics listed above with the leadership styles, the servant leader is the closest to their worldview.

Romania has long experienced the traditional authoritarian leadership style, and it is now searching for a style that might meet the people’s new expectations. According to the GLOBE study, current Romanian values are similar to other countries from Eastern Europe, where the profile of a good leader is: charismatic, value-based, team-oriented (also in Kreitner, 2009, p. 104). While the elder generation would rather have a leader who takes responsibility for them, with a protective attitude, the younger generation appreciates an inspiring personality, with a vision, a team worker, a good communicator and listener, getting them to acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses, motivating and stimulating them, delegating them responsibilities according to their talents and skills and leading them to successful, rewarding careers. Obedience, modesty, self-sacrifice are not an option for the young. They are more mobile, more participative, more competitive, more demanding. One leadership style may not cover all these expectations, but a combination of traits or an integrative style.

5. Conclusion

The concept of leadership and the leadership styles have been the subject of extensive research (e.g. the GLOBE intercultural study). Leadership was studied with the help of such variables as religion, language, ethnic background, history, political systems and cultural specificity. Semiotics as the science of signs and symbols is an important instrument in approaching this concept because it deals mainly with interpretation and making meaning. A leader is supposed to be able to interpret and understand a person’s worldview and what he/she values the most in order to motivate and influence that person (subordinate) effectively. Values and worldviews, on the other hand, differ not only according to the variables stated above, but also in point of the age of the person. Understanding and decoding the expectations and views of the young generation is essential for a sustainable development.

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