Abstract

To enhance understanding of shared organizational military leadership, senior cadets at a Federal Service Academy, charged with becoming leaders of character during academic and military training, were asked to reflect on a shared leadership concept known as “The Corps Leading the Corps.” Responses (*n* = 179) were coded using content analysis, and three higher-order dimensions emerged from the data: (1) Autonomy and Empowerment, (2) Developing Self and Others, and (3) Role Modeling. The results and implications reflect emerging leaders’ insights and beliefs on incorporating shared leadership in a military environment.

“Corps” Leadership: A Cadet Perspective on Shared Leadership

In pace with ever-changing technologies, social forces, and political interests, the military environment has continuously asked service members to develop and broaden leadership skills to lead themselves and others. Leadership objectives for military leaders have been noted as leading others into harm’s way; protecting the physical and emotional welfare of service members and their families; and developing and maintaining technical and tactical expertise required of soldiers, marines, sailors, and airmen (Morath, Leonard, and Zaccaro, 2011). These challenges represent only a portion of the responsibilities faced by today’s military leaders, for they must possess the capability to lead across an ever-broadening spectrum of missions and operational environments in which the forces under their control are becoming more distributed across time, space, and individuals (Lindsay, Day, & Halpin, 2011).

Given the complexity of leadership and its responsibilities, it has been noted that there is significant task migrationacross military leaders (Reed, Bullis, Collins, & Paparone, 2004). Such task migration increases the likelihood that no single leader will offer all the necessary requisite skills to manage significant challenges encountered. Given this likelihood, the development and recognition of shared leadership roles and responsibilities has gained traction, for a collective group of leaders may provide a more informed picture of the leadership processes (Day & Harrison, 2007; Finkelstein, Hambrick, & Cannella, 2009; Mehra, Smith, Dixon, & Robertson, 2006; Wang, Waldman & Zhang, 2014).

**Shared Leadership**

The notion that individuals within a group can share leadership functions has acquired interest among scholars and practitioners (Contractor, DeChurch, Carson, Carter, & Keegan, 2012; Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012). Shared leadership represents a fundamental shift away from the concept of a single unity of control to a dynamic, interactive, and emergent process of collective leadership (Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012; Drescher, Kosgaard, Welpe, Picot, 2014). A shared leadership approach is based on the concept that leadership can be enacted by more than one member and is viewed as a group-level phenomenon generated from reciprocal reliance and combined influence among team members as to achieve team goals (Chiu, Owens, Tesluk, 2016; Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010; Pearce and Conger, 2003).

As an influential process, shared leadership involves interacting with others, and is manifested in behaviors such as communicating, influencing, making suggestions, and holding people accountable (Aime, Humphrey, DeRue, & Paul, 2013). These behaviors are an informal means of addressing the leadership functions typically addressed by more formal leadership approaches (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2012; Drescher et al., 2014).Accordingly, shared leadership is considered an internal and informal function of leadership, as opposed to an external and formal function of leadership, whereby multiple team members provide influence on the team and each other in ways that facilitate task completion (Chiu, Owens, Tesluk, 2016). Thus, the development of shared leadership is often created when members articulate their own leadership role and grant others leadership recognition to collectively share leadership identities with peers (DeRue, 2011). Shared leadership, accordingly, is a unique phenomenon that emerges from both the formal leader’s willingness to pass leadership authority to the team, and the team members’ willingness to accept the opportunity to lead and follow peers (Chiu, Owens, Tesluk, 2016; DeRue, 2011; Hoch, 2013). DeRue (2011) argues that such leadership configurations are the result of a series of leading-following interactions among members (Chiu, Owens, Tesluk, 2016).

**Purpose**

**Understanding Shared Leadership in A Higher Education Environment**

An emerging academic and experiential field in higher education is the development of leadership skills, with many colleges and universities attempting to create leadership curricula to develop future leaders within the student body (Keating, Rosch, Burgoon, 2014; Pearce & Conger, 2002; Posner, 2004; Roberts, 1997; Smart, Ethington, Riggs, & Thompson, 2002). Many academic programs encourage students to analyze and interpret their educational and life experiences regarding leadership, and to act in accordance to develop skills (Fischer, Wielkiewicz, Stelzner, Overland, Meuwissen, 2015; Mumford & Manley, 2003). Yet, the literature surrounding students’ conceptions of leadership has noted that students desire their schools to provide greater access to leadership opportunities and real-life experiences than what is often available (Dempster & Lizzio, 2007; Goertzen, 2009; Grunwell, 2015; Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005; Shertzer & Schuh, 2004). Students contend that leadership in schools is often concentrated on hierarchical leadership, and that leadership opportunities should exist with students across all levels (MacBeath, 1998). Similarly, Posner (2004) has called for leader educators and scholars to invest in student voice. Understanding emerging leaders’ ideology surrounding organizational leadership suggests possibilities for educational leadership initiatives (Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001). Given that a student’s perspective of leadership plays a significant role in whether he or she actively participates in leadership experiences (Astin & Astin, 2000; Marcketti & Kadolph, 2010; Shertzer & Schuh, 2004), the current study aims to understand a shared leadership perspective through the lens of cadet leaders at a federal service academy, by understanding the way in which the Corps of Cadets leads themselves as a command, through a shared leadership process called the Corps Leading The Corps.

**Method**

**Participants**

The United States Coast Guard Academy (USCGA) is the smallest of the five federal service academies (Merchant Marine Academy (MMA), United States Military Academy (USMA), United States Air Force Academy (USAFA), United States Naval Academy (USNA)) with approximately 1,000 cadets, and 250 faculty and staff members. Much like the other federal service academies, the USCGA’s primary mission is to develop service ready leaders of character. The Academy provides each cadet a 200-week learning experience filled with leadership practicum experiences within military operations, academics, athletics, and values domains. Leadership experiences are based on their role: freshman (follower), sophomore (role-modeler), junior (mentor), and senior (leader). Additionally, leadership roles are centered within two broad areas, Leading Self and Leading Others, which are applied and assessed across leadership experiences during their tenure at the Academy. During their senior year, cadets are provided the opportunity to share leadership opportunities within the Corps of Cadets (student body) through one of several roles such as Division Officer, Company Executive Officer, Company Commander, or Regimental Staff, charged with the overall leadership of the student body. While taking part in leadership education, cadets’ theoretical knowledge and experiential learning moves them towards earning a baccalaureate degree and a commission in the United States Coast Guard.

**Procedure**

The USCGA senior class (*N* = 214) was given a leadership survey during the fall semester, with an 84 percent (*n =* 179) completion rate. With Institutional Review Board Approval, senior cadets were asked to respond to the open-ended prompt during a leadership workshop to the entire senior class, asking “*What does the corps leading the corps mean to you?”* In a non-military setting,this question would equate to: *“what does the student body leading the student body mean to you?”* Respondents answered the prompt anonymously via a paper and pencil medium. Participation took 5-10 minutes to complete.

**Data Analysis**

Once data was collected, the first, second, and third authors used content analysis to review responses. Responses varied in length from one sentence to multiple paragraphs in length, and the research team analyzed raw data using open coding until emergent themes were agreed upon. Responses were reviewed for redundancy until the most accurate, yet succinct codes emerged from text segments. Agreement was reached only once all responses were independently reviewed, compared, and discussed. Final themes captured overarching aspects of the data in relation to the research question, and represent patterned responses within the data set. This method of analysis yielded the research team an inter-rater agreement of 86 percent. Responses emerged into three higher order themes and eight sub themes, and were given brief titles to convey the collective participants’ meaning.

**Results**

Three dimensions emerged and were categorized as: (1) Autonomy and Empowerment, (2) Developing Self and Others, and (3) Role Modeling. Within these three dimensions, eight sub-themes emerged. Dimensions and subthemes are presented in Table 1. To retain anonymity, cadets’ quotes were identified numerically (i.e., C1, C2, C10).

*Insert Table 1 Here.*

**Dimension 1: Autonomy and Empowerment**

In this theme, cadet responses (*n* = 106) discussed the importance of acting autonomously and being empowered to do so by school leaders and officials. The ability to exhibit independent actions, as well as follow through on procedures and processes, defines autonomy and empowerment. This dimension consists of two subthemes: (1) accountability/authority and (2) decision-making. Accountability/authority was the largest subtheme (*n* = 76) and encompassed phrases such as “having a say”, “moving ideas forward”, “taking ownership”, and “self-correcting.” Cadet (111) responded, “People are willing to embrace being a leader and accepting the responsibilities that go with that but only if they are given that responsibility with autonomy and trust,” while cadet (8) responded with, “it means taking responsibility and ownership of our actions and behaviors.” The second subtheme was coded as decision-making (*n* = 30) and revolved around the ability to apply knowledge, make decisions, and learn from subsequent outcomes. Cadet (29) wanted the ability to “make decisions for the benefit of everybody without too much overhead,” implying that he/she may make a decision without superiors impacting the decision. Cadet (28) took a broader approach, suggesting “cadets are taking what they see wrong and changing it to make the corps more efficient and successful in the future.” These responses highlighted cadets’ beliefs that they had the knowledge and experience to make good decisions for themselves and others around them.

**Dimension 2: Developing Self and Others**

Developing self and others emerged as the second largest dimension (*n* = 81). This dimension revolves around people, with subthemes emerging for (1) consideration, (2) social skills, and (3) influence. Consideration was the largest subtheme (*n* = 36) and was characterized by phrases such as “guiding”, “sharing with others”, “teaching”, and “providing others the opportunity to learn.” Per cadet (43), “the corps leading the corps means to use your previous experiences to become a stronger leader and help your subordinates through their experiences.” Cadet (35) shared a similar message, suggesting that cadets should “learn from their mistakes and provide the opportunity for others to learn from their mistakes as well.” Both responses suggested that as individuals learn from their experiences, they are better able to help others in similar situations. Various cadets (e.g. C149) even felt that “it is the responsibility of the upper-class to provide guidance.” The second subtheme, social skills (*n* = 30), emerged from responses which included “open and clear communication”, “listening”, “understanding concerns” as well as “knowing people” and “working up and down the hierarchical chain.” Cadet (7) responded with “encompassing a real and [sic] professional relationship with those who govern the corps”, while cadet (31) said “pooling together everyone’s talents, values, experience, culture, knowledge, and passion to help one another make it through. We need each other to lean on and rely on that friendship and mentorship.” The third subtheme, influence (*n* = 15), was identified as “inspiring”, “motivating”, and “encouraging.” Cadet (50) commented, “using your position and influence to inspire subordinates to want to perform at the best of their abilities.” Cadet (7) conveyed a similar message, responding with “we should be influencing each other to do the right thing, always.”

**Dimension 3: Role Modeling**

Role modeling (*n* = 67) was defined as observable behaviors, which encompassed subthemes of (1) setting the example, (2) supporting standards, and (3) values. Setting the example (*n* = 43) was characterized by terms such as “embodiment”, “demonstration”, “attitude”, and “professional presence.” Cadet (19) described this element as, “knowing the right thing to do, doing it, and showing it to others through actions.” Cadet (70) articulated, “not everyone sets a good example, but a good leader will.” The second subtheme, support standards (*n* = 13), encompassed phrases of “upholding”, “displaying”, “enforcing”, and “instilling” leadership. Cadet (79) responded with, “the quality of a leader is best seen in the standards they set for themselves.” Similarly, cadet (52) wrote, “it means that 1/c (seniors) are the leaders, they uphold the values and standards we have here at the Academy and expect the same of the 2/c (juniors), 3/c (sophomores), and 4/c (freshman).” The final sub-theme, values (*n* = 11), prioritized the integration of “respect” and “honor” into daily life. Cadet (96) explained, “for me, respect is one of the most critical elements to create and [sic] maintain leadership. I want to create an atmosphere where respect is always practiced.” Cadet (13) interpreted values as “the successful integration and internalization of the corps values of honor, respect, and devotion to duty.”

**Discussion**

The current study extends our understanding of leadership in a few ways. In this study, cadet’s entrenched in a shared leadership process known as the Corps Leading the Corps responded that having autonomy and empowerment was critical to their ability to take ownership, made decisions, and lead others in an impactful way. Importantly, cadet leaders mentioned that if they did not have an autonomous environment, they would be less willing to take on roles of responsibility. It has been previously suggested that the extent to which leaders can enhance one’s own autonomy, control, and self-management, can provide confidence in their abilities to lead and manage others in teams (Chen, Sharma, Edinger, Shapiro, & Farh, 2011; Drescher, Kosgaard, Welpe, Picot, 2014).Further, this sample of cadets discussed the importance of learning to be considerate of others, communicate openly, and influence those around them. This follows the tenets of a shared sense of leadership, noting the importance of team members having influence over each other and accepting this influence freely (Aime, Humphrey, DeRue, & Paul, 2013; Drescher et al., 2014). Lastly, emerging cadet leaders noted their ability to role model appropriate behaviors to those around them. They articulated their understanding that their actions would set the example that could either support or detract from standards and values of the organization from others. Insights from previous literature suggest that increases in shared leadership have motivational implications for the group that may lead to performance improvements. One of the proposed benefits of shared leadership is group trust (Bligh et al., 2006; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2012), which is an important predictor of group success (De Jong & Dirks, 2012). At the group level, trust is an attitude that is shared by the group and directed toward the collective (Drescher, Kosgaard, Welpe, Picot, 2014; Simons & Peterson, 2000). Collectively, these results feature cadet leaders as practicing a form of shared leadership, which allows for them to act autonomously, work together, and role model actions for others.

As an organization’s leadership capacity functions around social principles of sharedness and distribution of influence (Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2004; Wang, Waldman, Zhang, 2014), shared leadership allows individuals to act as both leaders and followers (Drescher, Kosgaard, Welpe, Picot, 2014). Given that hierarchical models require formal lines of communication, implementing a shared leadership model may remove communication barriers and allow team members to communicate more openly (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014; Pearce et al., 2004). Overarching, shared leadership models create an emergence of mutual influence and teamwork that puts the onus of responsibility on all team members to achieve a goal (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Wang, Waldman, Zhang, 2014).

**Shared Leadership Implications**

Although cadet responses develop awareness for the organization looking to build a shared leadership strategy from the inside out, with the characteristics of autonomy, social interactions, and role modeling behaviors, mitigating the challenge of developing other characteristics are likely just as important. When further analyzing cadet responses, two reactions suggest future implications for the challenging associated with constructing a shared leadership perspective in a historically hierarchical environment. One cadet (51) noted that when shared leadership is not happening, “the effect is felt all the way down [the chain]. The underclass knows when we are told to do something rather than make the decision on our own.” This response suggests a sense of dissatisfaction within the organizations behavior when it operates in a more hierarchical structure. A second cadet (137) suggested a challenge to the process of shared leadership with, “issues facing the Corps are not left to cadet leadership…. Solutions [get] handed down to cadet leadership for implementation.” In both case, a decrease or a gap in shared leadership highlights the notion that such an environment may limit opportunities, influence, control, and potentially trust among participants (Drescher et al., 2014; Ferrin, Bligh, & Kohles, 2008).

Leadership development across military, academic, and organizational settings may use the implications from this study to implement shared leadership models to foster growth and empower emerging leaders to take ownership of their own development. As large organizations, especially in the military setting have historically been hierarchical with respect to leadership, increasing a shared sense of action may allow individuals to take on more leadership responsibility and experience success and failure first hand. To avoid organizational cynicism, it is important for organizations touting a shared leadership culture to fulfill its promises, as formal leadership can potentially undermine trust, organizational alignment, and communication that shared leadership attempts to improve (Dempster & Lizzio, 2007; Haber, 2012).

**Conclusion**

The unescapable presence of self-managing and empowered teams, as well as flatter organizational structures emphasize the possible importance of shared leadership within teams. As a potentially important complement to traditional, singular forms of leadership, the key distinction between shared and traditional leadership, is that the former is an ongoing, mutual influential process (Pearce, 2004) that involves peer, lateral, upward or downward influences of team members (Conger & Pearce, 2003), while the latter involves only “a downward influence on subordinates by an appointed or elected leader (Conger & Pearce, 2003; Wang, Waldman, Zhang, 2014). In our cadet sample, the Corps of Cadets represents the ability and future possibility for a shared leadership perspective in the military context that involves peers, lateral, upward and downward influences. Such a perspective should be nurtured and strategically developed beyond the educational setting in this study for the positive aspects of such a framework of leadership have shown capability to expand leadership potential beyond the individual leader.

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Table 1

*Corps Leading The Corps Themes and Subthemes*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Dimension | Subtheme | Description | Representative Quote |
| Autonomy and Empowerment (106) | Accountability /Authority (76) | Determination, Ownership | “*Taking the initiative to lead by example where applicable, and taking responsibility for not only your actions, but those of your subordinates.*” (S106) |
| Decision making (30) | Awareness, Application | “*It means that students are taking what they see wrong and changing it to make it more efficient and successful in the future.*” (S28) |
| Developing Self and Others (81) | Consideration (36) | Guidance, Caring | “*The corps leading the corps means to use your previous experiences to become a stronger leader and help your subordinates through their experiences.”* (S43) |
| Social Skills (30) | Communication, Relationships | “*Pooling together everyone’s talents, values, experience, culture, knowledge, and passion to help one another make it through. We need each other to lean on and rely on that friendship and mentorship.*” (S31) |
| Influence (15) | Influence, Inspire | “*Using your position and influence in the Corps of cadets to inspire subordinates to want to perform at the best of their abilities.*” (S50) |
| Role Modeling (67) | Setting the Example (43) | Embody, Demonstrate | *“Knowing the right thing to do, doing it, and showing it to others through their actions.”* (S19) |
| Support Standards (13) | Uphold, Enforce | “*It means that 1/c are the leaders, they uphold the values and standards we have here at the Academy and expect the same of the 2/c, 3/c, 4/c.” (S52)* |
| Values (11) | Integrate, Internalize | “*For me, respect is one of the most critical elements to create + maintain leadership. I want to create an atmosphere where respect is always practiced.*” (S96) |

*Note*. Dimensions based on number of instances stat