

Legitimizing Leader Admiration: A Social Constructionist Perspective on a Classroom Experiment

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ABSTRACT

MBA student teams at a Middle-Eastern, American-style, university self-organized to complete a 'Follower Analysis Project' based on interviewing prominent acquaintances about leaders who inspired them. The relationship of respect they constructed with interviewees shaped subsequent learning. They sought to manage the anxiety surrounding raising dissonant facts and interpretations from their own research. Interviewees defused this anxiety by convincing the students that their leader admiration was based on appreciative learning. The outcome of the interview was that students formed a consensual admiration of the leaders and revisited the leadership literature to find a vocabulary and rationale for the lessons they derived from the interview. The projects provided rich qualitative data for reflection on practice. The persistence of the pattern we observed and its sensitivity to instructor interventions designed to address the biases associated with the social construction of respect could be a subject of further research.

Keywords: Follower Analysis; Leader Legitimation; Social Constructionism; Appreciative Learning; Leadership Development

1. Introduction

We are writing this paper in the aftermath of the funeral of Nelson Mandela. One world leader after another flew to South Africa on 10th December 2013 to take the opportunity to express their admiration for the former South African president. Not only that, but the news and social media is buzzing with stories of the impact Nelson made on the lives of ordinary people often through the extraordinary empathy and sense of common humanity he communicated in the fleeting, sometimes chance, encounters he had with them.

A common feature of all these tributes is not just the admiration they express for the deceased leader but how they legitimate this emotion. They are often prefaced with statements along the lines of: 'Of course he was not a saint. He was a man with flaws like any ordinary man'. They then go on to focus on just what it is that they admired – what qualities, traits, behaviors or key episodes in his life-story that they found exceptional and worthy of admiration. Implicit in this assessment is the conviction that he was not above emulation, that we can appreciatively learn from him.

Leader admiration and its legitimation through a process of appreciative learning is actually the subject of this paper. It discusses a classroom exercise that we have found generates useful data for reflection on this form of socially constructed leadership learning. A diverse group of MBA students at a co-educational, American-style university in the Middle East were asked to complete a 'Follower Analysis Project' (FAP) as part of the assessment requirements for a module on 'Leadership and Change Management'.

In teams of three to four, they were required to identify someone who had achieved prominence in the workplace. They would then ask this person to name a political or business leader who has inspired them and who they seek to model their own leadership on. The team would then write a report that comprised three parts. The first part would set out the students' account of the life, achievements, and legacy of the leader. The second would be a transcript of the interview with the 'follower'. Thirdly, the students were expected to interpret and comment on this transcript, identifying the insights it provides into the leader, the follower and the nature of leadership. The team reports generated rich qualitative data that can form the basis for reflection on the nature of the relationships aspirant leaders construct with admirers of particular leaders and how this generates emotions that both facilitate and inhibit leadership learning.

This can be compared to the reflection on how management learning occurs in the context of social relations that are profoundly influenced by emotions and the choices made to manage them that has been advanced in a number of scholarly contributions by Russ Vince (see for example Vince 2001; 2002; 2008). While Vince developed his understanding of this complex process within the context of established power relations in organizations, we sought to explore it in the context of emerging relationships of respect that were temporarily constructed in order to learn about particular leaders. Like Vince, though, we are concerned with emotionally-laden moments in the learning process that confront individuals or groups with the choice of whether to move 'towards learning or away from it' (Vince 2002, p.79). Vince (2002) gives an example of this in the case of the dissonance created by anxiety. A move toward learning can occur when the uncertainty created by anxiety is held sufficiently long for risks to be taken and conflicts worked through so as to open possible paths towards new knowledge or insight. On the other hand, a move away from learning can occur where anxiety is ignored and avoided, creating a 'willing ignorance'.

In the student interviews, the crucial move toward learning occurred at the time the followers agreed to be interviewed. The student request for an interview constituted a move toward learning about how and what a particular follower learnt from the life of an admired leader. By requesting an interview with particular followers, the students were initiating a learning relationship based on the respect they had for these followers. By agreeing to this interview, the followers were putting this respect on the line in the sense that it would be undermined by their leader admiration if they could not satisfactorily legitimate it to their inquirers.

The management of emotions would thus come to play a key part in this socially constructed relationship. Both sides would need to manage the anxiety that would surround the interview. This anxiety would surround what the students learnt about the leader outside the interview. Would it support or challenge the follower's admiring assessment of the leader? Would they call into question the respect the

students indicated they felt for the follower? And if dissonant facts and interpretations were introduced in the interview, would they cause the interviewer to clam up defensively?

Both sides would also have to manage their expression of admiration, to frame it as part of an appreciative learning process in which followers learnt appreciatively from salient aspects of the leader's life and students learnt how to draw lessons for their own leadership development in a similar appreciative manner.

The purpose of this paper was to explore the choices interviewers made in managing these emotions so as to facilitate the appreciative learning process. While acknowledging the tentative nature of whatever findings it generates, based as they must be on qualitative and small sample size research, we submit that they may be of interest to researchers and practitioners in the area of leadership learning since they point to the significance of the hows and whats of relationships that are socially constructed to facilitate appreciative learning.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section two explains the underlying pedagogy of the project and how it fitted into a course that required them to make weekly entries in a Leadership Development Journal (LDJ) in which they reflected, *inter alia*, on how they could draw on the life-stories of other leaders in constructing their own open-ended leadership narrative (see Shamir and Eilam 2005). Section three then describes the demographic profile of the different teams, the followers and leaders they selected and the sequence of tasks they were self-organized to carry out. Section four adopts a social constructionist methodology to interpret how emotions could be managed or mismanaged within the two relationships that emerged over the course of the study. Section five concludes the paper by considering the scope and limits of the self-organized learning students undertook through their participation in this project.

2. Underlying Pedagogy

We designed the project based largely on the pedagogy of reflective practice (Schön, 1983; Brookfield 1995; Reynolds, 1999; Reynolds, & Vince, 2004) and a social constructionist approach. Drawing from the reflective thinking concept of Dewey (1933), Schön (1983, 1987) developed the reflective practice theory based on three key concepts - knowing-in-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection-on-action.

We oversaw the project to enable all three types of reflective learning. Firstly, the team environment in which the students worked opened the possibility that knowing- and reflection-in action could occur during the course of their preparing for, conducting and interpreting the interview. Secondly, by debriefing each student after the reports had been handed in, we could facilitate their reflection-on action. Thirdly, we could also engage in reflection-on action as we reflected together on whether the projects advanced salient course objectives. In the course of this reflection, we were able to both consider how the project could have been sharpened as a pedagogical instrument.

Our reflection on these projects was also shaped by social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Burr 2003; and Gergen 1999). In particular reflection on how the social construction of a context both legitimates some forms of action, rather than others and constitutes a 'world' in the process requires the practitioner-inquirer to reflect back on how this process of legitimation and reification occurs. There has been an increasing turn to social constructionism in leadership studies (Meindl, 1995; Grint, 2005; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010) that focuses on how this phenomenon emerges from collaborative processes of meaning-making and role-attribution.

The social construction of emotions in this relational context has recently been highlighted by Quinn and Dutton (2005), Vince (2008) and Di Virgilio and Ludema (2009). This provided us with a useful perspective for reflection on the social construction of admiration within the relational context of respect that surrounded student-follower interviews.

Our proposition that admiration is legitimated through ‘appreciative learning’ is also reflected in the burgeoning field of ‘appreciative inquiry’ (AI) (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987; Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2003; Bushe 2007) that represents another fruitful application of social constructionism¹. As one practitioner of AI put it, ‘the best way to learn, develop and change is by studying ... people,...at their best (Whitney, 2010, p.6)’. Followers are likely to legitimate their admiration for particular leaders by highlighting those traits, behaviors and other qualities that characterize them at their best. In doing so they implicitly presume that leaders are not always at their best and these qualities may, at times, conflict with other desirable leadership qualities.

Based on the assumption that leadership learning involves a life-long ‘reflection on practice’ increasingly punctuated by participation in leadership development programs offered to ‘high potential’ employees as part of succession strategies in organizations, the primary purpose of our ‘Leadership and Change Management’ course was to enhance student awareness of the complexity of the leadership challenges they could face as they resume their careers after graduation. The core of the course sought to help them learn to apply key elements of the practice of adaptive leadership set out in Heifetz et.al. (2009). They had to auditioning their own interpretation of adaptive challenges they have either confronted or could imagine confronting for in the future. They also had to constructan identity with a hoped-for capacity to play this ‘enabling leader’ (Uhl-Biehn et.al 2007; Lichstein & Plowman 2009) role by being required to compile a ‘leadership development journal’ (LDJ).

While one would expect to find that student reflection on course concepts and classroom exercises would comprise the bulk of the content of the LDJs, we found that about 25 per cent of student comment and reflection focused on leader stories, whether in the form of the real-life vignettes typically presented in the course reference material or fictionalized renditions such as those depicted in the film clips discussed in class. The significance students attributed to these stories is broadly consistent with the findings of leadership theorists such as Shamir & Eilam, (2005) that, as an important aspect of their own leadership development, aspirant leaders typically select and assemble learning experiences, as a ‘kind of collage work’ from the life-stories of other leaders (p.406).

It soon emerged that the expectation that weekly LDJ entries comprise no more than one to two pages inhibited the learning and developmental potential of these stories. We were curious to find out how students would self-organize to derive greater learning benefit from more in-depth research into a leader identified by a particular follower as being worthy of admiration. We will now discuss how our study was designed to this end.

3. The Study

The students were assigned the project at the beginning of the Fall 2012 semester and handed in the completed project in its last week. From then on the students teams were self-organized. The major milestones they are all had to address were:

- Formation of the team;
- Identification of the follower to be interviewed;
- First contact with the interviewee and identification of leader-role model;
- Preparation for the interview;
- Conduct of interview;
- Transcription of interview;
- Interpretation of interview;
- Write-up and hand-in of report; and
- Debriefing interview with instructor.

To complete these tasks they had to make a number of collective choices. These concerned: the diversity of the team the participants were to work with; the selection of the ‘follower’ to be interviewed; the interview strategy particularly insofar as it involved raising dissonant facts and interpretations encountered in preparation for the interview; and their evaluation of whether the leader merited the admiration conferred by the interviewee and their search in the literature on leadership for a vocabulary and rationale to support this evaluation. We will elaborate these in more detail, before going on to discuss whether they facilitated appreciative learning.

Formation of teams

Table One sets out the outcomes of the choices the teams made about their composition and the ‘followers’ they were to interview as well as the leader these followers selected as the subject of the interview.

TABLE 1: Follower, Leader and Teams in Study

Follower	Leader	Team Members
<u>Pakistani male</u> A prominent business and civic leader in DusChuk village in Punjab, Pakistan and supporter of Imran Khan (a rising reformist politician and former Pakistani cricket captain).	<u>Mohammed Jinnah (1876-1948)</u> Leader of the Muslim League during India’s struggle for independence, advocate first of unity and then of partition and First Head of the new state of Pakistan.	<u>4 members (mixed gender)</u> 2 male Pakistanis 1 female Pakistani 1 female Indian
<u>Indian female</u> Associate Professor at UAE University, President of regional association of scholarly network, Series editor of book .	<u>SheikhaLubna Al Qassimi (1962-)</u> UAE Minister of Trade, Successful Entrepreneur, prominent advocate of promoting women into positions leadership in UAE	<u>4 female members</u> 1 Palestinian 1 Iranian 2 UAE citizens
<u>American Female</u> Director of the Office of International Exchange Programs UAE university.	<u>Hilary Clinton (1947-)</u> Former First lady, US senator, candidate for Democratic presidential nomination and Secretary of State	<u>4 female members</u> 2 Germans 1 Pakistani 1 Iranian
<u>British Female</u> Assistant Professor at American-style UAE university.	<u>Anita Roddick (1942-2007)</u> British businesswoman, human rights activist and environmental campaigner, best known as the founder of The Body Shop.	<u>5 members (mixed gender)</u> 1 Iranian male 1 Lebanese female 1 Kenyan female 1 Emirati female 1 Syrian female
<u>Pakistani Male</u> President of national youth organization and Project manager of a Human Relief Foundation.	<u>Abdul SattarEdhi (1928-)</u> Head of Edhi foundation, one of Pakistan’s largest charitable and relief organizations with over 300 centers across the country	<u>3 female members</u> 2 Pakistani 1 Iranian
<u>UAE Male</u> Project Manager for private company in Abu Dhabi.	<u>Satoru Iwata (1959)</u> Fourth president of Nintendo Co. Ltd, one of the world’s largest video game companies.	<u>2 UAE male members</u>

Compared to undergraduate students at our institution, this group of MBA students had become relatively comfortable in working in diverse groups so, with the exception of one team that comprised only Emirati males, two of the remaining five teams were mixed in terms of gender and all were mixed in terms of nationality. The participants were, however, of similar age, being between twenty and thirty years old at the time of the study and had some work experience before enrolling in the course.

Selection of followers and identification of leaders

Once the teams were formed, their first decision was to select an interviewee. While they were given the option of interviewing a relative of one of the members, none actually took this option. However, in all cases the interviewee was known by at least one member of the team. Moreover, in the eyes of the team members, they were all individuals who had commanded their respect as a result of the greater responsibilities they had already taken on in their careers. The followers of Abdul Edhi and Satoru Iwata were close in age to the team members while those of SheikhaLubna, Mohammed Jinnah, Hilary Clinton and Anita Roddick were of a different generation.

In cases where the interviewees suggested that they looked to a number of leaders as role-models, the team members were advised to press them to name one person who they considered to be their primary source of influence. Table One indicates that none of the interviewees selected a leader with whom they were in a close personal or working relationship. In this sense the interviewees could be viewed more as *admirers* rather than *followers* of these leaders since they had not engaged with them in pursuit of a shared organizational purpose. From the student's perspective, at this time of first contact, the most they could deduce about these leaders was that they had traits the interviewees admired and life-stories and legacies they drew on in developing their own leadership identity.

The choice of interview strategy

During the interlude in which the students were expected to research the leader's life-story in preparation for the interview, all the teams encountered facts and interpretations about particular leaders that could have created dissonance in the interview with their admirers. Table Two sets out these key sources of dissonance with respect to leader life-stories.

TABLE 2: Sources of Dissonance in Leader Life-Stories

SheikhaLubna	Adherence to traditional norms despite career focus and leadership in female empowerment.
Mohammed Jinnah	Departure from commitment to Hindu-Muslim unity, role in the bloody formation of a separate Muslim state and cultural disconnection from constituents.
Hilary Clinton	Failure of health initiative, humiliation of Lewinsky scandal and flawed primary campaign in 2008.
Abdul Edhi	Autocratic style, 'antiquated' financing strategy and failure to groom successor.
Satoru Iwata	Bankruptcy of firm managed prior to assuming presidency of Nintendo
Anita Roddick	Questionable motivation for engagement in causes – authentic social responsibility vs public relations or 'image management'.

Each team therefore had to decide how this were to manage this potential dissonance during the interview.

Evaluation of follower admiration

The teams eventually had to reach an evaluation of whether the leader in question was worthy of at least some of the admiration accorded them by the follower. Choices would then have to be made about whether or not this would be presented in the final reports as a consensual evaluation. The extent to which the leadership literature they had been exposed to could be revisited to find a vocabulary and rationale to further support their evaluation would also have to be considered.

The next section will seek to interpret the account of the interviews contained in the student reports to make sense of the choices made by the student teams.

4. Interpretation of Findings

Methodology

In seeking to make sense of student reports we took a social constructionist-interpretive (Vygotskiĭ, 1978) that focuses on the *hows* and the *whats* of the process in which learning relationships are constructed (Gubrium & Holstein 2000). This allowed us to explore and understand the complexity of sense making (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994). In particular, a post-project interview and debriefing allowed reflection together on the extent to which the choices described in the previous section moved the student teams toward or away from learning.

In this case the need to move in either direction emerged in two relationships constructed during the learning process: (i) that between aspirant leaders and respected admirers, and (ii) that between team members. We will examine, in turn, how each relationship generated emotions that need to be managed if learning was to occur.

The Management of Anxiety in the Relationship Between Respected Admirers and Aspirant Leaders

All the teams decided to continue the inquiry even after it became evident that the relationship between interviewee and selected leader did not fit the textbook definition of a leader-follower relationship². The topic of the subsequent inquiry thus shifted from leader influence to follower admiration.

To initiate a learning relationship with these admirers, the student teams had to accord them a measure of respect. This type of respect is essentially what Darwall (1977) calls 'recognition respect'. To accord such respect is to 'take seriously and weigh appropriately' (p38) the views and concerns of the person in question on the basis of their observable traits and social standing.

The student teams therefore sought to learn from interviewees as 'respected admirers'. But is it not an oxymoron to be a 'respected admirer'? Certainly some theories of pathological or narcissistic leader-follower relationships treat the 'blind admiration' that followers place in the false 'images' or misleading myths surrounding particular leaders as a kind of vice. This blind admiration may meet follower needs for the type of security they came to expect in early childhood from authority figures (usually parents) as well as compulsive leader cravings that have similarly early roots in the narcissistic injuries associated with childhood abandonment (Post 1986; Kets de Vries; Popper 2011). However, it can only serve to allow misleadership through the perpetuation of myths. Gemmil & Oakley (1992) describe these leader myths as 'iatrogenic' reifications that arise from 'a search and wish for a messiah (leader) which intensifies at times of deepening social despair and massive learned helplessness' (p.115).

The admiration that interviewees expressed toward specific leaders was therefore an emotion that had to be legitimated. To convince interviewees that they were more than just 'blind admirers' they had to give reasons for their admiration and expose themselves to the risk that, if the students uncovered information in their own research that was at odds with these reasons, they would be unable to respond satisfactorily. They could thus be expected to experience some anxiety at the prospect of having to authenticate their admiration

in the interview. The students would experience some anxiety, too, at the prospect that their questions would make the interviewee defensive and thereby inhibit the generation of fresh insight and leadership knowledge in the interview.

Two key findings emerged: (1) in advance of the interview, students appeared to have constructed strategies to manage the risk-reward tradeoff involved in introducing dissonant facts and interpretations into the interview; (2) the need to manage anxiety in this way diminished once interviewees reframed their relationship with the leaders as one of 'appreciative learning' rather than 'pure', 'exclusive' or 'blind' admiration. We will elaborate these in turn.

In a post-project interview all the student groups confirmed that they designed a set of questions in advance so as to manage anxiety on both sides of the respect-based relationship. Three strategies appear to have been followed that can be viewed as three possible points in a risk-reward continuum.

Firstly, those interviewing the admirers of Sheikh Lubna and Anita Roddick followed a low-risk strategy of asking 'safe', open-ended questions that did not address any of the dissonant facts and interpretations they uncovered in their own research. Unlike the other groups they did not go beyond the following types of questions:

Can you share some specific influences the leader has had on you?

How would you describe the leader's style?

What qualities of the leader do you implement or wish to implement in yourself?

What do you most admire about the leader?

These left it to interviewees to describe just what it is they admire about the leader and how it is they have inspired their own practice of leadership. Since sources of dissonance could be addressed in final reports, the students could avoid introducing them into the interview since this would have inhibited interviewees opening up about the qualities of the leader that elicited their admiration.

A more active role in the interview process was planned by the teams interviewing admirers of Mohammed Jinnah and Satoru Iwata. In both cases they supplemented the basic set with additional questions that explored further reasons why these leaders were worthy objects of admiration. Thus the admirer of Mohammed Jinnah was also asked:

Jinnah was known for charisma, his razor sharp intellect, and his steely determination to succeed. Do you think it was the combination of the three that aided his purpose or did one quality contribute the most?

Jinnah had made various speeches throughout his career, does any speech or saying stand out the most to you? Give us examples of instances you have acted based on your inspirations from Jinnah?

Similarly, the admirer of Satoru Iwata was posed the following questions by students:

And you are from totally different culture than he is, so how can he influence you and yet you haven't even met him?

Nintendo is doing really well especially when they just recently launched the Wii U. But still, that is a very daring move. Not a lot of managers do that. In your mind why there aren't many managers do that, especially in our society?

Through such questions the students were not just inviting the interviewees to give reasons for their admiration but they were also signaling that they have reached a similar view of the leader through their own independent research. They thereby provided the interviewee with cues to elaborate the leader's admirable qualities and achievements.

A second strategy that was potentially more 'efficient' than the first passive one appears to have been pursued by these two teams. Without taking the risk of challenging the admirers, these teams sought to draw

a more expansive response from them. Their interview strategy was thus geared toward generating a greater 'learning reward' without additional risk.

An additional risk was, however, taken by the interviewers of the admirers of Hilary Clinton and Abdul Edhi. In addition to asking

How do you explain Hillary's incredible reserve of energy? And is there something you can take out of it?

Hillary Clinton possesses a huge personal and working – related network, which is supporting her, meaning that she built her success on the impact of an entire group movement. Does this also apply for you?

the Clinton team also challenged the interviewee with following question: 'What do you think about the fact, that she supported her husband although he betrayed her, what kind of characteristic does this portray for you?' This still left some space for the interviewee to offer a positive interpretation of this potentially dissonant fact.

An even more direct approach was taken by the Edhi team. After asking a number of exploratory, appreciative questions, they challenged the interviewee with the following:

You are a leader of an organization that thrives in collaboration (of youth). We've read that Edhi has a very command approach and believes in giving orders. Do you think this is the right approach to follow in this work line? If you disagree, then why do you think this has worked so well for Edhi?

Can volunteers voice their concerns to Edhi without fear of backlash?

How approachable is Edhi? Does his popularity make him an intimidating figure? Does he have an open door policy like his wife (BilquisEdhi)?

Don't you think the welfare system that Edhi wishes to establish could make people more dependent than independent? Could it be a double-edged sword?

Why then did this team take the risk of introducing dissonance into the interview? This could be seen as what Vince (2002) would characterize as a move toward learning by embracing risk. The team members appeared to have been genuinely troubled by evidence of authoritarian leadership behavior that ran counter to the more democratic approaches encountered in work or in studying about leadership. At the same time, they were finding much to admire in the life-story of Abdul Edhi, so much so that one of the highly idealistic Pakistani members was considering working as a volunteer for his organization after completing her degree. They were thus looking to the interviewee to resolve some of this dissonance for them. They were prepared to introduce this into the interview to generate a greater learning reward.

Bearing in mind, the small size of the research, a number of conclusions can be tentatively advanced about these interview construction strategies:

1. There is a perceived inequality in these relationships. Students engage in the interview on the understanding that both sides see the one side, the students, learning from the other side, the 'respected admirer' even if information asymmetries are reduced through pre-interview research;
2. Such research does, however, create potential anxiety that needs to be managed according to strategies that take into account a risk-reward trade-off;
3. A risk averse bias was demonstrated by the students participating in the study with only two out of the six teams introducing dissonant facts and only one making them the focus of the interview;
4. There is no discernable gender bias in these choices. Even in a Middle-Eastern context where females are expected to show more deference or respect than males in public interactions, female teams chose both every low and high-risk strategies while the predominantly male groups chose a middle-of-the road strategy that was nevertheless more efficient than that chosen by the low-risk

female groups. It could be surmised that efficiency considerations are less important for females but obviously a much larger research sample would be needed to substantiate this proposition.

How the interviewees sought to defuse the climate of anxiety surrounding the interview by reframing their relationship with the leader as one of appreciative learning rather unbounded admiration must now be considered.

The Management of Admiration by Interviewers

Once the interviewers selected a public figure as the leader they admired, they must have known that they would have to legitimate their admiration for this person knowing the students would have access to dissonant facts and interpretations. The fact that they all did this indicates that they welcomed the opportunity to do so. It is thus interesting to see the ways in which they reframed their relationship with this person as one of appreciative learning both to legitimate their leader admiration and to defuse some of the anxiety surrounding the interview process.

Firstly, most were at pains to emphasize that they found it difficult to pinpoint one leader they admired since a number were influential in their leadership development. For example, the admirer of Hilary Clinton stated:

Well, I mean before you asked me this question I had never sat down and thought “Oh, Hillary is my hero”, so I really had to think about who was my rolemodel. When you asked me it wasn’t easy to think of somebody...Actually I don’t really follow any person. Let me just say that I find her way of achieving goals and taking risks really inspiring.

Secondly, in all interviews, once these caveats had been made, the interviewees proceeded to provide lists (or at least succinct statements) of the specific qualities they admired in the leaders concerned. Table Three sets out the qualities listed for each leader.

Table 3: Leader Qualities Admired by Followers

Mohammed Jinnah	Courage, autonomy, hopefulness
SheikhaLubna	Consideration, political skills, passion, entrepreneurial drive
Hilary Clinton	Intelligence, resilience, forthrightness
Anita Roddick	Decisiveness friendliness, and thoughtfulness.
Satoru Iwata	Consideration, courage, ‘passion for the market’
Abdul Edhi	Integrity, simplicity, zeal

These statements tended to anchor and frame their responses to subsequent questions. In both the high- and low-risk interviews, the interviewees legitimated their selection of these qualities with stories about how the leaders demonstrated them in crucial moments of their lives. The implication is that the qualities that characterize these leaders at their best are most clearly demonstrated during what Bennis and Thomas (2002) called ‘crucible experiences’.

In the high-risk interviews, the interviewees countered criticisms of the leaders by pointing out that even in those instances where the leaders showed traits or behaviors for which they could be criticized, they continued to demonstrate the qualities they admired them for.

Thus in response to an implicit criticism of Hilary Clinton's continued support for her husband through the Lewinsky affair, the interviewee emphasized once again how this highlighted her 'strength' and resilience: 'What I felt was that she was really strong through that and she kept a clear focus on what she was trying to achieve in her life, what she wanted to do in the public sector, what she needed for her life.'

Similarly, with reference to questions about Abdul Edhi's authoritarian leadership style, the admirer of this leader pointed out that it is a by-product of the very qualities he admired him for – his integrity, simplicity and zeal:

Abdul SattarEdhi's work policy is very similar to like one is treading on a thread. It's not easy to fulfill the criteria he demands from his team. But, surely that makes them professional, dedicated and passionate about this work since the constant realization they are made to go through develops them into better professionals.

He went on to point out that it although these qualities make Edhi a hard task-master, they also evoke considerable loyalty from his large body of volunteers:

Several times, in media reports, one may read about Abdul SattarEdhi firing his staff members for miscellaneous reasons relating to productivity at work. At the same time, his welfare centers are always ready to accommodate volunteers who want to raise funds or want to spend time with the vulnerable Edhi is sheltering.

This interviewee did admit that the very qualities he admired Edhi for, may also be related to a certain rigidity in terms of cultivating a base of rich donors, modernizing outdated systems and collaborating with other organizations, but saw his consistency in displaying them as evidence of his authenticity.

Indeed authenticity seems to have been a kind of meta-value that all the interviewees used to legitimate their admiration for particular leaders. It was attributed to leaders on the basis of their consistent demonstration of a small set of qualities that admirers judged to be worthy and possible of emulation in their own lives.

The interviewees thus managed their admiration by channeling this emotion into an appreciative learning process which was easier to legitimate since it neither focused exclusively on the leader nor placed them beyond criticism or emulation. Rather it focused on a limited set of qualities that leaders displayed when they were at their best during crucible experiences, that could at times diminish their effectiveness, but which followers could apply in their own lives.

Managing Admiration in Student Teams

The student teams were all persuaded by arguments that the consistent demonstration of a limited set of admirable qualities by the leaders in question rendered them worthy subjects of appreciative learning. Moreover, this was presented in the final reports as a consensual evaluation. No dissenting voices were reported. We would suggest that the interviews not only enabled them to learn more about the particular admirable qualities of these leaders but how to manage this admiration so that it could be interpreted as a form of appreciative learning that was easier to legitimate and so reach a consensus on than pure, unbounded admiration. In other words, they learnt the whats and hows of a particular process of social construction.

During the final stage of their project they revisited the literature they had been exposed to during the course to find a vocabulary and rationale for the appreciative lessons they derived from the interview. Table Four indicates how the teams drew from theories of 'authentic', 'adaptive', 'new paradigm', 'post-conventional' and 'level-five' leadership to deploy strongly normative concepts and arguments to support these lessons.

TABLE 4: Normative Leadership Theories Exemplified By Selected Leaders

Quality	Incidence
<i>Authentic Leadership</i> (George 2007) 'Authentic leaders demonstrate a passion for their purpose, practice their values consistently, and lead with their hearts as well as their heads. They establish long-term, meaningful relationships and have the self-discipline to get results. They know who they are.' (George, 2007:130).	SL, HC, AE,SI, AR
<i>Adaptive Leadership</i> (Heifetz, Linsky&Grashow, 2009) Leaders mobilize a capacity within a group to seek collaborative responses to 'wicked problems'	MJ, SL, HC, AE,SI
' <i>New paradigm leadership</i> ' Daft (2011) The leader focuses on empowerment and catalyzing change rather maintaining stability or control.	MJ, SL, HC, AE
' <i>Post-Conventional leadership</i> ' (Kohlberg, 1976) The leader internalizes universal principles of justice and right and acts in an independent and ethical manner regardless of expectations of others.	MJ, SL, HC, AE
' <i>Level Five Leadership</i> ' (Collins, 2001) The leader exhibits sustained humility and fierce resolve in pursuit of a shared purpose	AE,SI

Note: MJ, Mohammed Jinnah; SL, SheikhaLubna; HC, Hilary Clinton; AE, Abdul Edhi; SI, Satoru Iwata; AR, Anita Roddick.

They thus appear to have self-organized to pursue an implicit appreciative learning agenda in which there is a place for admiration providing that it is legitimated.

In a post-course interview we asked them a number of questions related to their perception of its impact on their own leadership development but also the following one which related to their perception of the legitimacy of admiration: 'Is it possible to be both an admirer and an authentic follower?' This elicited uniformly positive responses from the students. Their comments included the following:

Role models motivate me if I have something in common with the person I admire....

I am inspired by their authenticity to be true to myself...

Their resilience in the face of difficult challenges gives me hope...

The leader's humility humbles me...

I didn't expect the leaders to be perfect but it is more helpful to focus on their good qualities rather than their flaws.

This suggests that they came away from the project with a shared understanding that admiration can be legitimate and respect for admiring followers maintained if it is managed within a process of appreciative learning from the qualities leaders demonstrate when they are at their best.

However, while these responses to the post-project interview suggest that teams could self-organize to learn appreciatively from the interview, it also became apparent such self-organization could not be relied to generate more critical discourse. Thus in response to the questions: 'How would the FAP have functioned if the role of one member had been to dig up dirt, to question every admiring claim made about the leader?' and: 'Would you have been comfortable playing that role?', the students uniformly admitted that none had considered this way of stimulating dissent. Some indicated that this may have been an interesting approach to follow if they had directed to pursue it. Others suggested that both they and their team members would have been highly uncomfortable introducing such cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) into their interactions with each other and the interviewee.

These responses are suggestive of the limits of the FAP as a learning exercise. The teams will spontaneously organize to manage anxiety and admiration so as to learn appreciatively about a particular leader from a respected admirer and their own research and re-reading of the leadership literature. However, they are less likely to be willing to structurally incorporate conflict-generating mechanisms into their deliberations, and will only do this if they are explicitly instructed to do so.

This does suggest, though, that there is scope to use the FAP to reflect with students on the scope and limits of self-organized learning. The implications this has for future research will be considered by way of conclusion to the paper.

5. Conclusion

This study contributes to leadership education and training. The classroom experiment (i.e. FAP) discussed in this paper can be used to help students reflect on the scope and limits of self-organized learning from followers with the purpose of enhancing their own leadership development. The pattern that emerges of followers seeking to legitimate their admiration by learning appreciatively from the life-stories of these leaders and of students seeking to accommodate whatever concerns they uncover in their own research within the bounded admiration implicit in this appreciative mindset, is one that could be tested longitudinally and in different national contexts. We would suggest that the FAP has been designed so that it could be relatively easily replicated in this way.

The sensitivity of the self-organized learning it allows to various instructor interventions could also be assessed. The possibility of requiring some team members to act as 'devil's advocates' was considered in the last section. A number of interventions could also be tried to test the proposition that relationships of respect both constrain appreciative learning by requiring students to choose how to manage the anxiety associated with introducing concerns from their own research and add value to it by allowing students to see how interviewees are prepared to put their own self-respect on the line by expressing and seeking to legitimate the admiration they have for a particular leader.

Thus instead of each team being asked to interview a prominent person, some could be asked to go through the same process by interviewing some of their classmates. Would this free them to be more critical and/or would it diminish the value they derived from the interview experience as an input into their leadership development?

Alternatively, followers could, be encouraged to interview students about what they had found out about the leader in question so as to foster greater mutuality in the learning process. This would be in line with the practice of appreciative inquiry where an alternation of interviewer and interviewee roles is encouraged as the starting point – the 'discover phase - in a process of building a possibilistic 'dream', 'design' and 'destiny' for a focused process of personal and/or organizational development (see Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2003).

We would suggest, then, that there is enough scope to adjust the guidelines of the FAP to generate data for reflection on what is a common leadership development experience: namely the process of constructing a temporary relationship with a self-identified follower/admirer to reflect on and perhaps learn from the admiration they have for an identified leader.

¹The students were not introduced to the principles of appreciative inquiry nor exposed to the different forms it can take in practice prior to undertaking the project.

²Daft (2010:8), for example, defines leadership as 'An influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes and outcomes that reflect their shared purposes'.

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