The Great Leader Project

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Teaching & Learning

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Abstract
This paper examines a project that has been incorporated into an under-graduate *Leadership and Decision Making* class. The project, the *Great Leader Project*, focuses student attention on the fact that effective leadership is not only a function of the specific traits and behaviors of a leader, but also a function of the characteristics of the followers and the leader's context. In this project, a leader is randomly assigned to a group of students who are charged with analyzing the leader (both in a written report and an oral debate) using the concepts discussed in class. At the end of the semester, the groups compete against each other in a debate to determine which leader is the ''greatest.'' A complete discussion of the project is provided along with student feedback regarding its effectiveness.
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Introduction

Academics are continually looking for new teaching methods to increase student learning, retention, application, and interest. In this paper, an innovative course project, *The Great Leader Project*, is presented that may help some organizational behavior faculty increase student interest in the subject matter of leadership as well as lead to increased student retention and application of the topics discussed in the class. In addition, faculty from other disciplines (e.g., Human Resource Management (HRM), strategy, etc.) may find this project applicable to their classes. Although the title of the project is the ''great leader,'' the primary focus of this project is *not* to demonstrate that great leadership is only a function of the person (i.e., traits), but rather that great leadership is also a function of the context of the leader. Also, this project demonstrates that the idea of leadership is socially-constructed (Grint, 1997) in that one person's or society's view of a ''great leader'' can be very different from another's view. In the sections that follow, a complete description of the project is provided. In addition, anecdotal evidence is provided regarding the effect of this approach on student interest in the class and on retention of course material.

Background information on the Great Leader Project

The idea for the Great Leader Project occurred to me while watching a television show on the *Discovery Channel* that was attempting to determine the ''Greatest American.'' Similar shows were broadcast in Canada, the United Kingdom, and many other countries. During these shows, a list of 100 ''great'' individuals are

narrowed down over the course of several weeks until the viewing audience (at home) picks the ''greatest.'' During the broadcast, the studio audience is separated by their support for their leader. Each group takes time during the broadcast to discuss reasons why they believe their particular person is the greatest. In effect, these various members of the audience end up in a debate about who is the greatest. Also included during this show are ''experts'' that provide their opinion on the various individuals selected.

As I watched the Greatest American on television, I started to imagine how this type of project could be conducted in my *Leadership and Decision Making* class. Instead of focusing on great individuals, I could modify the project to look specifically at great leaders and the context in which they lead (or led). My goal when designing this project was to help the students understand that effective leadership is not only a function of the personality characteristics of a leader (e.g., trait theory), but also the *contextual* elements that allow a leader to be considered ''great'' (i.e., follower and situational characteristics). Considering this is a typical undergraduate leadership class, the students could apply countless leadership theories to the chosen leader. For example, trait theory (e.g., Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991), the behavioral approach (e.g., Blake and Mouton, 1964), situational leadership (e.g., Fiedler, 1967; Hersey and Blanchard, 1969; House and Mitchell, 1974), charismatic leadership (e.g., House, 1976), implicit leadership (e.g., Lord and Maher, 1991), ethical leadership (e.g., Johnson, 2005), transformational leadership (e.g., Bass, 1985), organizational culture (e.g., Schein, 1992), leading change (e.g., Beach, 2006), as well as international culture and leadership (e.g., House *et al.*, 2004) could and should be applied to their specific leader.

This project is also designed to build interest in the topic of leadership by allowing students to tie the course concepts discussed in class with an in-depth study of a leader. Class discussions throughout the semester allow students to apply the concepts, theories, and research to contexts and situations that most students did not expect (i.e., non-business settings). My hope is that as students study their influential leader and participate in class discussions regarding other leaders, they realize that the course concepts relate to the real world and potentially to their own leadership situations.

As this is designed to be a group project, the Great Leader Project also may assist in the development of teamwork skills. Students in this class must work together to create a written document and participate in an oral presentation that builds a persuasive argument that their particular leader is the ''greatest'' in the class. During the process of creating the written document and oral presentation, students will be faced with managing problems that are common in the team environment. For example, students may have the opportunity to manage communication problems, conflict resolution, role conflict, and develop team chemistry, all of which are important leadership skills (Gratton and Erickson, 2007). In addition, this project is designed to allow the students an opportunity to develop their public speaking and charismatic skills. Research has shown that individuals can learn to project charismatic qualities that increase follower or audience perceptions of the person being charismatic and inspiring (Conger, 1991). Students in this class are taught these skills and given opportunities to develop and practice their charismatic behaviors. The students then put these skills on display at the end of the semester during the oral debate among the various leaders.

The number of leaders an instructor could pick from is almost countless. In addition, an instructor can (and probably should) pick controversial leaders to demonstrate that leadership is socially-constructed (Billsberry, 2009). One person's hero can be another person's villain. From a pedagogic standpoint, choosing controversial leaders can also be very effective at reinforcing the idea that great leadership is a function of the leader him/herself, the followers, and the situation. Finally, by picking controversial leaders, the instructor has the opportunity to broaden his/her student's perspective on leadership. While some of the leaders that are chosen may have been in power hundreds or even thousands of years ago and their particular situation and culture may have changed dramatically in the centuries that have followed, the students in this project still come to an understanding that they must understand their followers and the situation to be effective as a leader.

To create a list of influential leaders in history, I started by researching various web sites that listed great/influential leaders in history. These leaders represented a wide variety of contexts, including among others, politics, military, social movements, and business. From these web sites, I generated a preliminary list of leaders that I considered appropriate for my class (see Appendix A). The leaders included in the project primarily depend on the

instructor's objectives for the project and their comfort (and discomfort) with particular leaders. Next, I created an online survey that listed these leaders and then asked my colleagues to offer their opinions on these leaders and add any additional leaders they think might be missing. Again, please note that not all of these leaders would be considered "great" in the United States. Even though someone is unpopular in the United States they may still be considered great to their specific followers.

Organization and procedures of the Great Leader Project/debate

On the first day of the semester, the Great Leader Project is described in detail to the students. Specifically, students are told that the group project consists of two parts. First, they are told that they will be *writing a paper* that applies the theories and research discussed in class to their leader. The paper should be approximately 15 pages in length and *must* focus not only on the characteristics of the leader, but also the followers of the leader, and the situation that led to the effectiveness of that leader. In fact, students are given a scoring rubric that I use when I grade the project that shows they will be judged on focusing on all three areas of leadership (person, situation, and followers). If students choose to focus only on the personal qualities of the leader, their grade on the paper will suffer. A stronger paper is considered to be one where the students accurately and appropriately apply a number of leadership theories to their leader.

Second, they are told that in addition to writing a paper for the project, they will be participating in a *debate* at the end of the semester that eventually results in the "greatest leader" being chosen. At that time, I ask them to start thinking about who they want to work with in this group project (I let them select their own student teams). At the end of the first week (or beginning of second week), we hold a "drawing" for the great leaders. I put the list of leaders in a box and I go around the room and have one representative from each group pick their leader. This causes the assignment of the leaders to be random, helping to keep students from placing blame on the instructor for bias in assigning leaders to particular groups (e.g., "they got a good one" or "my leader is too controversial"). Who the students get for their project is simply the luck of the draw.

After the students draw their great leader, I randomly assign them to a debate day where they will be matched up against three other "great" leaders (This is assuming a total of eight teams. The specific number of teams will depend on the size of a particular class as well as how many individuals a particular instructor likes to have in a group. In the past, I have kept the group size to three to five people.) Again, this helps remove any perceived bias on the instructor's part in terms of matching who will be debating against whom.

The first day of the debate comes at the end of the semester. The first four groups are given 10 min to make their case that their leader is greater than their competition on that particular day. Their classmates are the audience to whom they present. After all four teams have presented their arguments, each team has the option of a 5 min rebuttal. During this rebuttal, each team has the opportunity to further discuss the greatness of their leader, to respond to some of the criticisms the other teams have raised against their leader, or to attack the quality/greatness of the other leaders. Finally, the class is given the opportunity to ask questions to each of the groups. At the end of the day, the class votes on who made the best case that their leader is the greatest, based on their assessment of the application of course materials and the quality of the presentation. (Note, only the teams that are not presenting on a particular day are allowed to vote.) Specifically, the class votes for the best leader and then also provides me with a rank of the second and third best leader. This allows me to break any ties that may occur (i.e., I use the second place votes to break a tie). The two leaders who receive the highest vote total (i.e., the most first place votes) advance to the final round. The same procedure is held on the second day where the remaining four teams debate the quality of their leaders, with the groups who receive the top two highest vote totals moving on to the final round.

On the final debate day, the four groups that won in the first round are matched up against each other. During this day, each group has up to 20 min to make the case that their leader is the greatest. I give them extra time during the "championship" round so that they can get creative in their presentations. During this final round, students usually modify their first day presentation dramatically by incorporating videos, role-plays, audience participation, and so forth. In addition, all groups on this final day still have a 5 min rebuttal and receive questions from the class, and again the class votes on who is the greatest leader. The group that gets the most first place votes is considered to have

made the strongest case that their leader is the "greatest," at least compared to their competition.

Prior to any vote during this exercise, I make an announcement that all voting should be based on how well the group presented their arguments and applied the course material. I mention how it should not be based on the students' own personal opinion of the leader. Again, I am trying to focus the students' attention on the fact that leadership is a function of the leader, follower, and the situation. In addition, while all the groups are presenting, the audience is given a "scoring rubric" to help them in their decision (see Appendix B for a sample scoring sheet). The questions on this rubric focus on how well the group applies the course materials to their leader. It is designed to remove some of the bias that may be involved when evaluating well-known leaders *vs* lesser known leaders as well as controversial leaders. With the use of the announcement and the scoring rubric, I have not seen very much bias in the voting (i.e., I believe that the teams that should have won have won based on my assessment of the quality of the presentations and application of course materials).

At the beginning of the project, students are told that they will receive bonus points for their performance in the leadership debate that will be added to the score they receive on the written paper. Specifically, the bonus points are based on how far they advance in the debate. In terms of point totals, the team that wins the competition gets the most points (i.e., eight), with the second place team getting fewer points (i.e., six). The teams that come in third and fourth get four points. The teams that lose in the first round (i.e., the first day), are awarded two bonus points to their paper. The reason that the students who lose on the first day are still given bonus points is that I have found this causes them to give a serious effort on the first day of the debate. In addition, the students who lose on the first day are required to come to the championship round to earn their bonus points, as they will be the ones voting for the winner. Although I give the particular bonus points above, the number of bonus points that are awarded by other instructors will differ depending on the total number of points a particular class has available to earn.

Feedback

The informal and formal feedback from the students has been very positive for this project. I have often received comments about how much fun and how exciting this project is from the students' perspective. My own observation is that the students appear to be applying and learning the course materials better using this project (not to mention they appear to be very motivated by the project). In classes where I have used the Great Leader Project, I found that the average score on the final exam increased approximately 16% compared to my previous classes that did not use the project. In addition, I found that student attendance increased more than 6%, which may be related to student perceptions of a worthwhile and valued learning context (Pearson and Chatterjee, 2004). Finally, at the end of one of my classes, I posted an anonymous survey consisting of seven questions (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree) online for students to rate the Great Leader Project. For the students who chose to answer the survey ($n=19$), the means and standard deviations for each question are provided in Table 1. Of the respondents, 84.21% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the project helped them learn the course materials. The ratings for the remaining items were also very positive based on a five-point

Table 1 Feedback from students on Great Leader Project

	Mean[a]	Standard deviation
1. The Great Leader Project contributed to my learning the leadership topics discussed in class.	4.21	1.36
2. The Great Leader Project was a useful learning exercise.	4.11	1.33
3. I believe I learned more researching my leader and then applying the course concepts to him/her then I would have if I had completed another project for the class.	3.84	1.26
4. I enjoyed participating in the Great Leader Project.	4.11	1.20
5. The Great Leader Project contributed to my application of the leadership topics discussed in class.	4.00	1.25
6. I voted for the best leader based on the quality of the presentation of the group and not on any other factor (e.g., personal bias, voted for weaker group so I wouldn't have to face them in next round, etc.)	4.05	1.31
7. I would recommend the continued use of the Great Leader Project in this class in the future.	4.11	1.37

[a]All responses were coded 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree.

scale. I realize that my enthusiasm for teaching the class utilizing the Great Leader Project may have indirectly influenced student interest in the class and perhaps even their performance. However, the feedback from my students has overwhelmingly been positive and I truly believe the students are learning and applying the course material better than students in my previous classes that did not use this project.

Discussion

In this paper, I have described the design and operation of a new teaching tool called the Great Leader Project. The informal and formal feedback from students has been generally positive. In addition, I have found that this project is an effective method to get students to focus on the fact that effective leadership is not only a function of the personal characteristics and behaviors of leaders, but also of the situation and follower characteristics.

For instructors who decide to adopt this project in their classes, there are a couple of important factors to consider. First, the goal of the Great Leader Project was not only to increase student interest in and application of leadership concepts, but also to improve their team-building, public speaking, and charismatic skills. However, I have not directly examined the degree to which students actually became better at working in and developing teams. In addition, I did not examine the degree to which the students developed charismatic skills. My observations are based on anecdotal evidence only. Also, the results of the oral debate could be biased by the talent of a particular student at public speaking. Although this is undoubtedly possible, I do try to take steps to focus the students on the application of course materials in the debate (through my own announcements prior to voting and the scoring rubric distributed to the class). In addition, when asked about bias in rating the presentations, the majority of the students indicated they based their vote on the quality of the presentation and not on their personal biases (see Table 1).

Conclusion

Instructors who decide to adopt this type of project in their class will find that it is extremely easy to modify to fit the time structure, size, and needs of your particular class. For example, I typically have eight leaders (i.e., teams) in each class, where my class size is typically 40 students. It would be very easy to reduce the number of leaders to four and just have one day of debates in a much smaller class. In addition, instructors may decide that they want to include more controversial figures in the project to really emphasize the interaction of leader characteristics, followers, and the situation in determining leadership effectiveness. Finally, I utilized this project in a leadership class, but it could easily be modified and incorporated into other management classes (e.g., strategy, human resource management, motivation, etc.). Perhaps this is one type of project that faculty can use to enhance the motivation, retention, and learning of class topics so that students become more effective, ethical, and efficient business leaders.

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Appendix A: Sample list of leaders used in project

Please note that the potential names to include in a list of ''great'' leaders can be almost limitless. Each professor should choose leaders he/she is comfortable with and believes will provide the greatest learning for his/her students. With this said, I have provided a sample list of leaders I have included in this project in the past.

Abraham Lincoln	David Ben-Gurion	Joan of Arc	Mohandas Gandhi
Alexander the Great	Eleanor Roosevelt	John F. Kennedy	Mother Teresa
Anita Roddick	Elizabeth I	Joseph Stalin	Napoleon Bonaparte
Augustus	Fidel Castro	Julius Caesar	Nelson Mandela
Ayatollah Khomeini	Franklin Roosevelt	Kwame Nkrumah	Oprah Winfrey
Benjamin Franklin	Frederick the Great	Lech Walesa	Ronald Reagan
Bill Clinton	Genghis Khan	Malcolm X	Sitting Bull
Catherine the Great	George W. Bush	Mao Zedong	Susan B. Anthony
Charlemagne	George Washington	Margaret Sanger	Tenzin Gyatso
Che Guevara	Hillary Rodham-Clinton	Margaret Thatcher	Theodore Roosevelt
Cleopatra	Jack Welch	Martin Luther King, Jr.	Vladimir Lenin
Cyrus the Great	Jimmy Carter	Mary Kay Ash	Winston Churchill

Appendix B: Great leader debate scoring rubric

I use the following rubric for the students to focus their attention on the application of course materials in the presentation. If we have four leaders being presented on a particular day, the following scoring sheet would have Leader #1, Leader #2, Leader #3, Leader #4, etc.

Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.
Leader #1 _____

Please rate each group based on their discussion of the leader	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. Prior to this presentation, I thought this leader was ''great.''	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. Discussion of ''greatness'' of leader was convincing/ persuasive.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. Utilized course materials/topics/discussions to support the leader's ''greatness.''	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. Presentation was stimulating and held my interest.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. After this presentation, I understand how this leader could be thought of as ''great.''	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Comments:

Again, I have this rubric for all of the groups that present on a given day. On the last page of the handout, I ask them to vote for the group that made the best case for their leader being the greatest. This vote is conducted after all of the groups have finished presenting.

Based on your responses above, who do you think made the *best case* for their leader? In other words, who do you think won the debate? *Please only list one leader below*:

_____ (First place)

Based on your responses above, who do you think make the *second best case* for their leader? *Please list only one leader below*:

_____ (Second place)

About the author

James P Burton is an assistant professor of management at Northern Illinois University. He earned his Ph.D. in organizational behavior at the University of Washington. His current research interests include Workplace Fairness, Abusive Supervision, Employee Retention, and Teaching Effectiveness in University Settings. He can be reached at jburton@niu.edu.