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Abstract

This qualitative study is the first known effort to define the differing perceptions of public relations leadership at three distinct career points and explore the leadership development gaps and needs from these varied perspectives. Semistructured interviews with senior public relations practitioners, young professionals, and current students in the United States bring needed depth and clarity to prior scholarship on leadership development, a growing concern within the public relations industry around the world. Additionally, the findings pinpoint leadership development best practices for better infusing leadership development into undergraduate public relations education and into training and development programs for young professionals.

Keywords: leadership, leadership development, public relations, public relations curriculum, public relations education

Introduction

According to Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited's (2014) Global Human Capital Trends report, about two-thirds of companies worldwide report a deficiency in leadership development among their millennial employees. Other studies also indicate that millennials lack leadership competencies such as decision-making and planning, and are being moved too

quickly into management roles (Jamrog and Erikson, 2013; Sinar, 2013). The public relations industry is not immune to these concerns.

The Commission on Public Relations Education (2012) has called for leadership development to be better integrated into public relations education. Subsequently, the largest global study of public relations leadership to date, which was supported by the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations, affirms that need (Berger and Meng, 2014). And, although a recent Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) (2015) summit did not identify leadership specifically as a desired skill or knowledge in entry-level practitioners, the group did cite the need for "understanding influence and how it operates today" and "knowing how to change minds, hearts and behaviors" (2015, p. 8). How to best go about developing such competencies in the public relations leaders of tomorrow, though, remains a difficult question to answer.

Why do leadership and leadership development matter in public relations? Having a public relations leader involved in strategic management is a consistent predictor of excellent public relations (Grunig and Grunig, 2000). Excellent public relations leaders become involved in strategic management largely through environmental scanning and due to their experience and willingness to be team players (Grunig and Stamm, 1979; Grunig et al., 2006). Choi and Choi (2009) advocated public relations professionals practice organization-wide leadership because of roles as boundary spanners and influencers for decision-makers. However, how to become an excellent public relations leader, or a leader at all, is not clear; gaps persist in leadership development within public relations.

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to better understand leadership development gaps and needs within the public relations industry in the United States, and best practices for infusing leadership development into undergraduate public relations education, as well as training and development programs for young professionals. The findings should provide a helpful foundation for public relations leadership development efforts in other countries around the world.

Literature review

A global research study, supported by the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations, of thousands practitioners worldwide defined public relations leaders as sensemakers who help "people work together to try to make sense of their experiences and issues" (Berger and Meng, 2014). This study also indicated that the most pressing leadership development needs for the public relations industry are in the areas of change management, listening, and conflict management.

Leadership and leadership development

Leadership has been proven to be a difficult concept to consistently define. In the prior century alone, more than 65 leadership theories had been proposed (Fleishman et al., 1991). Several dimensions of leadership have been measured, including power distribution (Cogliser and Schriesheim, 2000), goal achievement (Piccolo and Colquitt, 2006), skills and personality traits (Judge et al., 2002), and situation specifics (Vroom and Jago, 2007). Northouse (2004) analyzed these many leadership theories and measures, concluding that

"leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 3).

Broom and Smith (1978) identified four distinct roles within the public relations function, namely, the expert prescriber, communication facilitator, problem-solving process facilitator, and the communication technician, the first three of which are often exemplified by public relations leaders (Kelleher, 2001; Leichty and Springston, 1996; Moss et al., 2005). By contrast, there may be a purely executive role that focuses solely on planning and decision-making, or a communication strategist role, blending all four public relations roles into one (Berkowitz and Hristodoulakis, 1999; Dozier and Broom, 2006; Werder and Holtzhausen, 2009; Wright, 1995).

Regardless of the role definition, leadership in public relations requires working successfully with others. Public relations leaders typically exhibit either transactional or transformational behavior, meaning they either collaborate to define a shared goal or set the agenda for needed change (Aldoory and Toth, 2004; Berger, 2009). Leadership behavior in public relations is often situational; some situations call for inclusive leadership, others require transformational leadership. Corporate communications manager must have a blend of skills and styles (Leichty and Springston, 1996; Werder and Holtzhausen, 2009).

Berger and Meng (2010) proposed nine qualities of excellent public relations leaders: "lead by example, strategic decision making, strong ethical orientation, complex communication and rhetorical skills, self-knowledge, strong desire to lead, transformational and inclusive leadership styles, passion that inspires others and serve as agents for change" (pp. 428–430). The literature shows that the growth of technology has created a need for additional leadership skills. "Having grown up wired, future leaders will think digital first. Decision-making will grow out of analysis of mountains of data and carefully targeted research, rather than intuition, past experience, or gut-instinct. Measurement will be refined, routine and demanding" (Berger, 2015). Bronstein and Fitzpatrick (2015) identified several studies conveying the need for college graduates to strengthen the following leadership qualities: "the ability to collaborate effectively, adeptness at critical thinking, and knowledge of how to communicate with diverse constituencies" (p. 78).

By definition, leadership development involves work-related experiences that help a person learn how to influence group behavior and achieve team goals (Avolio, 2010; Groves, 2007; McCall, 2010). A systematic review of research about best practices for leadership development within organizations identified six essential and sequential steps: a thorough needs assessment, a suitable audience, well-designed infrastructure, a system for implementation, evaluation methods, and consistent rewarding for successes and/or addressing shortcomings (Leskiw and Singh, 2007). Concurrently, other researchers have noted that effective leadership development is tailored to a person's level of experience, which may range from an individual contributor or first-level supervisor to that of a general manager or higher. Leadership development for experienced versus entry-level leaders shifts from basic individual and relational identities to more collective and dynamic identities that help senior leaders understand how to engage more effectively across geographic, functional, and other boundaries (Day and Harrison, 2007).

Experiential learning

Many public relations programs infuse experiential learning to replicate real-world public relations practice, sometimes as early as the introductory public relations principles course, and may achieve promising results (Neff, 2002). However, a well-established body of studies indicate that experiential learning can reinforce stereotypes and lead students to make generalizations based on limited data, devising solutions that are too simple to address complex real-world problems (Conrad and Hedin, 1990; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Raskoff, 1994; Stanton, 1990; Strand, 1999). In fact, the degree to which an individual student develops leadership skills from this kind of experiential learning experience has come into question. Millennials typically need a more diverse blend of teaching methods when it comes to developing leadership skills (Arensdorf and Andenoro, 2009). Bronstein and Fitzpatrick (2015) argued that undergraduate journalism and mass communication curricula need to place more emphasis on leadership development by integrating formal leadership training throughout the curriculum. Bronstein and Fitzpatrick noted that "to truly groom a generation of leaders for the future will require intentional leadership training" (p. 77).

Past research has suggested that public relations educators are advocates for leadership education, and that they believe case studies, group discussions, and student-led projects are the most effective ways to help undergraduate students learn and develop leadership skills such as communication, ethics, and problem-solving (Erzikova and Berger, 2012). That same study indicated that public relations educators believe in a holistic approach involving specialized leadership content, access to public relations leaders and role models, and opportunities for applied experiences outside of the classroom. Such experiences might include assuming leadership positions in university-affiliated chapters of professional organizations, such as the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) (Friedman, 2011; Nadler, 1997; Neff and Moulchin, 2011). Recent research even looked at the leadership mentoring that faculty advisors of PRSSA chapters may provide (Rogers, 2014). Haber et al. (2012) suggested that involvement in student organizations resulted in better emotionally intelligent leadership behaviors, especially if the student holds leadership roles in the organizations.

Program effectiveness

Benjamin and O'Reilly (2011) studied the leadership challenges MBA graduates confront in effort to determine the effectiveness of leadership development in MBA programs. They advocated that "curricula not only provide abstract concepts and frameworks but are also grounded in the real problems that our students will have to navigate" (p. 468). They also emphasized that leadership curricula should help students understand the differences in motivation among subordinates, peers, and bosses, and curricula should hone abilities to manage and motivate these audiences. Facca-Miess (2015) studied the relationship between teaching leadership to marketing students who are working on a group project and students' individual and group performances. This study documented a positive relationship between teaching leadership concepts in the capstone marketing course and higher performances on the group project (p. 150).

At least two known studies have compared practitioner and student perspectives, with both studies suggesting that on-the-job experiences and individual initiative help students

grow into leaders (Meng, 2013; Meng et al., 2012). Pedagogical recommendations include a checklist of leadership qualities, self-assessment tools, case studies, issues analysis, role-playing scenarios, and assessment metrics for internships and group-based projects (Meng, 2013). However, prior research has not explicitly sought perspectives on how established practitioners or students define the process of leadership development, as opposed to simply the concept of leadership itself. Therefore, our understanding of leadership development in public relations, and how to best integrate that process within public relations education, and into the training and development provided to young professionals, is shallow, at best. Additionally, no prior studies have sought the opinions of young professionals, in addition to the opinions of established practitioners and current students. Finally, prior scholarship has not explicitly identified a set of best practices for leadership development in public relations, either as part of undergraduate education or ongoing professional development.

The researchers sought to expand knowledge and fill existing gaps in the literature by pursuing answers to three fundamental research questions: (1) In what ways do people with varying levels of industry experience (i.e., senior practitioners, young professionals, and current students) define public relations leadership and especially leadership development? (2) What leadership development gaps might exist in the public relations industry? and (3) How might the public relations industry and/or the academy best address these perceived leadership development gaps? In other words, and using a grounded approach, what are the best practices for leadership development in public relations?

Material and methods

Sample

This exploratory study involved semistructured interviews (total n = 49) in the United States, with a purposive snowball sample of three populations with differing experience levels in the public relations industry: (1) senior practitioners (n = 15) with more than 10 years of professional experience in public relations, with at least 5 of those years in a management or supervisory role; (2) young professionals (n = 17), working as a public relations practitioner, having completed an undergraduate degree in public relations within the past 5 years; and (3) current students (n = 17), currently working toward an undergraduate degree in public relations (Table 1).

Table 1. Background of interview respondents

Senior professionals (n = 15)	Young professionals (n = 17)	Current students (n = 17)
• 23 years of full-time PR experience (on average), largely in corporations or agencies • 11 years in management role (on average) • Extensive leadership experience as board members and/or volunteers for nonprofit associations, professional associations, charitable groups, and other organizations	• 3 years of full-time PR experience (on average), largely in corporations, agencies, or government • 6 months in management role (on average) • Generally no leadership roles outside of work, although a few do provide limited committee service to professional associations	• All but a handful are in their final year of study, balanced across public and private institutions • They mostly want to work in corporations or for agencies • All have completed at least one internship, and as many as five internships • Nearly all have helped lead campus organizations, including PRSSA, student-run agency, etc.

PR: Public relations; PRSSA: Public Relations Student Society of America

Procedure

Interviews were proportionally balanced in terms of gender, employer/institutional type, and geography, although not necessarily in terms of race/ethnicity. On average, the senior professionals had worked in public relations about 33 years and the young professionals had worked in the industry about 3 years. The majority of the students were seniors and nearly all of the students led campus groups, worked at a student agency, and/or held other leadership positions on and/or off campus. Subjects who fit the specific criteria for the three populations were recruited via a convenience sample of professional and academic contacts. For example, social networks such as LinkedIn were used to identify and recruit senior practitioners and young professionals with the appropriate number of years of professional experience. For the pool of current students, researchers identified (within their own institutions and with assistance from colleagues) students who demonstrate leadership within the classroom through academic performance and outside the classroom through involvement in student and community organizations, internships or other professionally oriented experiences. Recruitment efforts began with email messages tailored to each group.

The same semistructured interview guide was used for all interviews, which were conducted by phone—or email, when necessary—from January to July 2015 (Appendix 1). Interview transcripts and notes were reviewed using open and axial coding processes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Open coding helped identify dominant themes; axial coding on subsequent review identified specific examples representative of each dominant theme. Interview transcripts were read and analyzed individually first, then as a group, comparing narratives across all transcripts (Chase, 2005). Finally, the emerging themes and narratives from the field notes and interview transcripts/notes were cross-analyzed and compared as a collective whole. A selective coding process was used to help identify the ways in which dominant themes relate, or do not relate, to the central focus of this study.

Results

Distinct themes emerged from the open and axial coding of interview transcripts conducted by the co-researchers. They worked independently on the first round of open coding, and then cooperatively on the second round of open coding, and on the axial coding. Open coding identified the seven dominant themes; axial coding helped identify specific examples representative of each theme. Dominant themes are summarized below and aligned by research question. Several verbatim responses are presented that exemplify each theme to help illustrate and provide perspective.

Defining leadership

People with varying levels of industry experience (i.e., senior practitioners, young professionals, and current students) define public relations leadership and especially leadership development in distinct ways. Senior professionals tend to emphasize being accountable, managing organizational reputation, and having the ethics and integrity necessary to serve as the conscience of an organization. Recent graduates consider leadership to be more about thinking ahead and being innovative. Current students, on the other hand, most often defined leadership as being ethical and providing guidance:

> Integrity. Whether you're dealing with your staff, clients, industry associates or employees, you are who you are, and you will be known for that. (Senior practitioner with 30+ years of experience)

> In public relations, I don't think that leadership is defined by position; rather, it's defined by responsibilities and how an individual acts on them. In doing so, a leader in his/her field inspires new ways of thinking, challenges traditional ideas or processes, and thinks outside of the box. (Young professional with 3 years of experience)

> Leadership in public relations means bringing vision to a team, being flexible and transparent, and, above all, remaining ethical and encouraging ethical behavior. (Current student)

While perceptions of leadership and leadership development varied among the three groups, the senior professionals' and current students' perceptions align mostly closely, and with a strong focus on ethics. Young professionals tend to share a more future-oriented view of leadership in the public relations field; they prioritize change management and active listening as vital to leadership in public relations, consistent with findings by Berger and Meng (2014).

Likewise, young professionals were more likely than senior professionals and current students to embrace the premise of public relations leaders as sensemakers who "help others interpret environments, experiences, and issues" (Berger and Meng, 2014). Young professionals often related this metaphor to the significant impact of technology on the public relations field. This group is entrenched in executing social media strategies on behalf of

their employers and/or clients, which is a role in stark contrast to senior leaders and current students.

While most senior professionals and students, as well as some young professionals, agreed that public relations leaders help make sense of things, each group saw the dimensions of that public relations leadership role differently. Senior professionals believe advocacy, consensus building, and strategic direction along the best moral path are the primary responsibilities of public relations leadership. Students see leadership responsibilities more as setting direction for strategic planning, ethical decision-making, and providing career guidance to young people like themselves.

Leadership development gaps

Leadership development gaps seem to exist in the public relations industry in the United States. Young professionals and current students are hungry for mentoring. Both groups emphasized the vital role that internship supervisors, professors, and even parents play in their personal and professional development. They want to work effectively with others and understand how to adapt to changing situations. These emerging leaders seek validation, but they also want to grow in maturity and independence. They would like to be more self-confident, especially when it comes to ethical challenges:

> My internship helped inspire my confidence. Being able to have a strong relationship with a strong leader taught me a lot. (Young professional with 3 years of agency experience)

> I pay attention to the people in leadership roles at my place of employment and in the community. I learn from how they listen and respond to people, attempt to resolve conflict, and make business decisions. (Young professional with 4 years of in-house experience)

> I think agencies and corporations should invest more time in facilitating internal mentorship relationships between executives and young associates. When entering a new industry, it's natural to become overwhelmed—seeing someone else who is where you want to be, and can give you advice, can really propel a young professional forward. (Young professional with 2 years of agency experience)

Addressing leadership gaps

A set of five best practices for leadership development in public relations emerged from these cross-generational interviews. The suggested practices include (1) stepping one's way into leadership responsibility, (2) being able to take some risks without fear of failure, (3) working hard to earn trust and respect, (5) having access to leadership-specific education or training, and (5) networking, with an emphasis on mentoring and reverse-mentoring.

Enter leadership roles

Young professionals want to step their way into leadership, rather than simply watch and observe. They often mentioned being able to manage less-sensitive aspects of a bigger

project as a way to step into leadership. They also like serving as team leader or primary contact for a small project or pro bono effort and serving as a subject matter expert or technical resource for communication colleagues or event for internal partners or external clients:

> The hierarchy at most work places is not conducive to breeding leadership. As an entry-level person here, though, I get to take leadership of smaller projects, and serve as point person for our whole department. (Young professional with 1 year of corporate experience)

> I've earned leadership opportunities with clients, such as being the PR lead, or primary PR person assigned to the account, which occasionally involves directing others on larger projects. I've also earned opportunities to take on internal/agency projects and lead or co-lead a group of employees on a particular topic. Two examples—I've had a lead role in developing our new intranet site, and I'm also the co-chair of our communications committee. (Young professional with 2 years of agency experience)

> There is no reason why you have to be a "manager" in order to lead. In fields like public relations your work speaks for itself—an employer wants to know you can do the next job before you're promoted. If you wait for the title of "manager" to start taking ownership over projects then you will never get the title. (Young professional with 2 years of in-house experience)

Take risks

All groups discussed the significance of overcoming the fear of failure to become a better leader; experience builds leadership. Young professionals need to feel comfortable taking some risks without fearing failure. To that end, senior practitioners advocated the value of letting young professionals and students fail and teaching them how to rebound:

> Provide clear direction, but don't hand-hold. We cannot grow if we never think on our own. (Young professional with 2 years of experience within government)

> The best way to encourage new leaders to emerge is to trust younger employees with new projects once they have proven they are ready to do so. Even if those projects are small, and even if they involve oversight by a manager, inspiring a young employee to take charge can have a domino effect. (Young professional with 1 year of agency experience)

> In my current role, my coworkers are most influential in developing leadership. Surrounding myself with an inspiring group authentically inspires me to want to perform well and develop leadership qualities. (Young professional with 3 years of agency experience)

> You have to get over the fear of failing. I grew into leadership by making a lot of mistakes, and having a supervisor who helped groom and push me into management. (Senior practitioner with 30 years of experience in corporate and agency settings)

> You have to provide a safety net, but also push people to trust their knowledge level and skill set and trust their gut instincts to take big leaps in their career and move to the next level. (Senior practitioner with 25 years of experience in agency, corporate, and nonprofit settings)

Young professionals and current students shared that encouragement from peers, professors, supervisors, and others often motivated them to assume leadership roles. Identifying effective mentors in the work and academic environments can help ensure both young professionals and students learn sound leadership skills.

Work hard

Young professionals and current students seem to understand the importance of hard work; a sense of entitlement didn't shine through in the interviews. Rather, recent graduates and students proactively mentioned that hard work and proving themselves is what will earn them leadership responsibilities. They also mentioned the importance of active listening and continual learning:

> When I commit to a job, I commit to it 100 percent. I don't complain. I just do the work. My bosses last summer saw that. They gave me some tough, tough assignments. (Senior public relations student)

> In my experience I have found that proving your value within a team is the best way to stand out as a leader. Going the extra mile, working on the next step before being asked, and communicating well with the entire team has earned me multiple opportunities to own projects or lead the charge on different initiatives. (Young professional with 2 years of agency experience)

> During my time in an agency setting, there was high turnover and a scramble to keep clients. I had a passion for the clients that I worked for, and while other colleagues left the company, I stepped up and took on the responsibilities of those above me to maintain the workload and deliver on clients' expectations. (Young professional with 3 years of experience in agency and in-house environments)

> My bosses have noticed my desire to try new things and have rewarded me with more opportunities to do more. It then becomes a snowball effect, where if things go well, I am given more opportunity to try new things, work on more projects, and lead more efforts. (Young professional with 4 years of in-house experience)

Young professionals also tended to emphasize the evolving role of digital communications in the field, and their perceptions may be influenced by the senior management's reliance on young professionals for their digital skills set and eager embrace of emerging technology. This finding identifies an opportunity for young professionals to capitalize on their digital savvy to grow their leadership skills in the workplace by mentoring others in this practice area. Interestingly, both the young professionals and students conveyed that proving their value to a team or organization helped them earn leadership roles. Sharing digital expertise would certainly be one way to do so.

Seek leadership-specific education

Students would benefit from leadership-focused learning. Young professionals and current students both mentioned that they wish their undergraduate experience more explicitly addressed leadership. They suggested leadership exercises as part of upper-level courses, or a leadership-specific course or workshop. Recent graduates suggested that leadership development would be a valuable workshop that could be offered by a professional association such as the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Senior practitioners emphasized networking and continuous learning as ways in which students and young professionals could develop such competencies:

> Faculty can help students develop leadership by getting to know their students' strengths and offering them opportunities to lead that appeal to these strengths. They should also challenge them, though—allowing students to succeed all the time will lead to a harsh awakening in the working world. (Young professional with 2 years of in-house experience)

> These (leadership development) experiences should start earlier in a student's education, rather than primarily in junior/senior years of college. I think there should be a more even ratio of class time to "real-life" work experience time. This is especially important because getting up and actively performing tasks and realizing roles in the public relations field will better inspire confidence and passion. (Young professional with 1 year of agency experience)

> Taking a peer leadership training workshop boosted my confidence. It taught me how to communicate with broad audiences and make everyone feel included. I gained experience managing that room without being overbearing. (Junior public relations student)

> I'm fortunate to work at an agency that encourages and supports involvement in professional and community organizations. Our agency leadership has seen the value provided through networking, continuing education, and professional development. (Agency executive with 32 years of experience)

On-the-job experiences and individual initiative are imperative to leadership development (Meng, 2013). All three groups strongly emphasized the importance of experiential

learning, volunteer work, and campus organization leadership opportunities for students to develop leadership skills. Influential mentors who lead by example and encourage risk-taking in a nurturing environment are vital for both senior and young public relations professionals as well as students.

Network

Senior practitioners touted the importance of mentors, and of listening to and observing other leaders. Some of the young professionals spoke proactively about having already adopted such strategies:

> Get a good mentor who's going to challenge you and make you really sweat as you think through what it is you want to do and who you want to be. I had one person who was almost unrelenting with pushing me to try things. (PR professional with 30 years of industry experience)

> Encourage mentoring. Many valuable leadership skills can be developed outside the office, and we should honor and encourage those opportunities. (Agency executive with 18 years of industry experience)

> The one skill that has been most valuable to me is listening more than I speak, which historically has been difficult for me. The more I allow other people to share their ideas, the more I am able to learn from them and understand how I can best be of service to them. (Young professional with 4 years of in-house experience)

All three groups emphasized the value of mentors in helping to develop leadership skills. The students clearly articulated the value of hearing encouragement from professors, advisers, and peers to take on leadership positions. They crave reinforcement about their leadership and communication skills and favorably respond to encouragement to serve leadership roles. Yet, young professionals and students convey the value of independent learning and problem-solving, which supports a blended approach of providing guided and independent leadership development training.

Discussion

This study affirms that young public relations professionals and students are hungry for leadership development and that senior professionals believe leadership development is essential for the profession. Findings reinforce existing scholarship about effective approaches for leadership development in undergraduate education. The findings support pedagogical recommendations of a checklist of leadership qualities, self-assessment tools, case studies, issues analyses, role-play scenarios, and assessment metrics for internships and group-based projects (Meng, 2013). Likewise, opportunities to study and gain hands-on experience with leadership activities focused on communication, ethics, and problem-

solving within and outside the classroom are vital, according to this study and to prior research (Erzikova and Berger, 2012).

These new findings, though, signal a strong desire from current students and young professionals for learning more about team-building and collaboration, consistent with established theories of leadership development (Avolio, 2010; Day and Harrison, 2007). Indeed, both senior leaders and young professionals touted the important role relationship-building plays in earning leadership roles. Additionally, this study identifies opportunities for leadership in digital expertise, which may provide rich promise for young professionals and current students. Yet, this tendency to focus on young people solely for innovation and digital expertise may result in a lack of understanding about the broader responsibilities that come with leadership.

The importance of mentoring emerged as a theme across all three groups. The literature supports the value of both traditional and reverse mentoring across all demographics (Guiniven, 2008; Hall, 1988; Perry, 2009; Swanson and Hays, 2011). Mentoring can educate employees about new concepts and skills (Clark, 1992; Hays and Swanson, 2015) and ethical issues (Neill and Weaver, 2017; Rhodes et al., 2009), builds confidence among employees, and improves workplace culture (Hays and Swanson, 2015; Swanson, 2011; White et al., 2010). The literature supports the need to plan and evaluate mentorship activities (Hays and Swanson, 2015). There might be a more proactive role that faculty members and supervisors could play, respectively, in helping current students and young professionals identify and secure mentors, and/or foster mentoring relationships. Swanson (2011) advocated the value of training students about peer-to-peer mentoring through student media and agencies. It should not be assumed that students and young professionals know how to build such relationships, or that senior practitioners know how to serve as effective mentors, or even recognize the need to mentor at all. This may be where professional associations such as the PRSA, and the PRSSA, can help.

Taken as a whole, this study suggests that leadership development must be a more dynamic process, both in undergraduate education and in early career development among young professionals. Students and young professionals hunger for ethical and strategic context and for clarity when it comes to the complexities of collaboration and team implementation. Educators and supervisors who make occasional use of leadership checklists, case studies, assessment metrics, and so on, may not be adequately meeting the leadership development needs of their students and employees, nor the broader profession. They would be wise to review and follow the identified steps for best practices in leadership development, beginning with thorough needs assessment and infrastructure design, continuing through to consistent evaluation and reward/reinforcement (Leskiw and Singh, 2007). An ad hoc approach to leadership development is not likely to be successful or sustainable.

The researchers suggest a greater focus on leadership development as a career transition that begins during undergraduate education and should continue through early career development and beyond. That approach will require a broader, more holistic view based on the themes emerging from this study, and building upon the recommendations from prior studies.

Closing the leadership development gaps in public relations may require specific pedagogical adjustments by educators and practical steps for young professionals. Notably, the undergraduate experience in public relations must create opportunities for every student to assume a leadership role, either during the course of an academic term or, at the very least, during some point in his or her program. These should be assignments without the burden of grading or formal evaluation of any sort; a student should be able to "try on" leadership, and to do so knowing that mastering leadership takes time and involves risk.

Leadership principles must be taught. If a program does not allow for a leadership-specific course, then leadership should be a core principle taught in a public relations course, or, preferably, across all public relations courses. If that is not feasible, then students should be able to learn leadership through a public relations student organization, student-run public relations firm, or other similar venue. Finally, as students move through these leadership development experiences and begin to build their careers, they need exposure to established professionals who can serve as mentors. Professors should consider ways to connect their students with prospective mentors, while students and young professionals should be actively seeking out professionals in their preferred industries who might be willing to provide mentoring and advice.

Limitations and future research

Qualitative research is appropriate for an area of study such as leadership development within public relations that has only been researched to a limited degree (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002). By nature, though, a qualitative study such as this one does not yield objective, measurable data that can be generalized to the universe of public relations professionals. Rather, this study identifies the dominant themes that reflect distinct perceptions of leadership and leadership development to people at varying stages of their public relations careers.

This study can serve as a valuable springboard for subsequent, systematic research about generational perspectives on leadership and leadership development in public relations. Drawing upon the seven themes from this study as well as key findings from related studies, a survey could be developed and implemented in order to generalize findings to the broader population of professionals. This would require conducting the survey among a representative sample of professionals from each stage of career development: university student, young professional, and senior practitioner. Furthermore, future research could analyze curriculum and perceptions of educators to determine how and to what extent best practices for leadership development are implemented in undergraduate public relations education.

Finally, it should be noted that leadership is a phenomenon involving both leaders and followers. Studies that broadly seek input from people across geographies and organizations inherently miss the deep understanding that might come with participant-observation or other field research that closely studies the leadership process among individuals, rather than simply asking otherwise disconnected individuals about their leadership and leadership development experiences. Field research of that nature and scope would be exceptionally time-consuming, and, ultimately, not generalizable.

Conclusion

This study affirms that leadership is a pressing need for the public relations industry, and layers on a multigenerational concern that more work must be done to adequately foster leadership development within the profession. Mentoring one another, being involved in professional organizations, reading about leadership in the communications field, participating in training opportunities, learning to collaborative effectively, gaining a range of experiences, and stepping into broader responsibility enhances leadership competencies for everyone, from an inexperienced first-year undergraduate to a seasoned public relations practitioner with decades of professional experience. Leadership development is a dynamic, ongoing process, as the participants in this study suggest, and one that takes thoughtful integration and requires diligent attention.

Ultimately, both educators and senior practitioners share responsibility for helping students and young professionals understand the complexities of leadership, and for facilitating an ongoing, dynamic process for leadership development. Meanwhile, young professionals need to take ownership of their own leadership development and advantage of leadership opportunities in digital communications as well as recognize the importance of honing core leadership competencies. The themes emerging from this study should provide a helpful platform for all.

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Appendix 1

Semi-structured interview guide

Thank you, again, for volunteering to participate in this research project. Today's interview should take less than 15 minutes.

As you know from our email exchange, we are studying leadership development within the public relations industry. We are talking with senior practitioners, young professionals, and current students. We will then analyze and compare their responses. Our hope is to help make recommendations to the industry and to higher education about how to better develop the next generation of public relations leaders.

Your email reply served as your written consent for participating in today's interview. I'd like to remind you that your participation in this study is voluntary. You may now refuse to participate, or if you choose to participate as intended, you may stop today's interview for any reason and at any point in the process.

Your individual responses will remain strictly confidential; only aggregate themes and nonidentifiable insights will be incorporated into the final report.

Finally, I need to remind you that research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 541-346-2510 or by email to ResearchCompliance@uoregon.edu. If you contact the IRB, please refer to study number RCS #12192014.032.

Do I have your permission to record this interview? The only use of the recording is for data collection and analysis. Do you have any questions or concerns before the interview begins?

1. Let's begin. I would first like to confirm a few details, simply for statistical purposes.

   For senior practitioners and young professionals:

   - Please tell me how many years you have been practicing public relations.
   - If applicable, how many of those years have been in a management or supervisory capacity?
   - Reflecting on your career as a whole, with which type of organization have you most often been employed: corporation/business, agency/consulting firm, nonprofit organization, government, or other? (please specify)
   - Have you or do you serve in a leadership role for organizations outside of your full-time job? If so, please summarize those roles.

For students:

- Please tell me how many years you have been studying public relations at your college or university.
- Which type of employer would you most like to join upon graduation: corporation/business, agency/consulting firm, nonprofit organization, government, or other? (please specify)
- Have you completed an internship and/or gained hands-on public relations experience?
- Have you or do you serve in a leadership role for any organizations? If so, please summarize those roles.

2. In your own words, tell me what you believe leadership means today in public relations.
3. Researchers who recently completed a global study of public relations leadership believe that public relations leaders are sensemakers who help "people work together to try to make sense of their experiences and issues"(Berger and Meng, 2014, pp. 7–9). They feel this metaphor is particularly appropriate given the dramatic changes that social media and other technologies have brought to our profession. How do you feel about this assessment of public relations leadership? Why?
4. Let's switch gears and talk about your own leadership development. How have you earned leadership opportunities thus far in your career, or in your studies (for students)? What skills or competencies have proven most valuable? (Probe for specific opportunities; then inquire about specific competencies.)
5. How have you developed these leadership skills or competencies? What or who has been most influential?

    - *For senior professionals:* Probe about what responsibilities and individuals played an influential role in his or her leadership abilities.
    - *For young professionals:* Probe about leadership in college, opportunities for leadership on the job, ask if employer encourages participation in Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), American Marketing Association (AMA), and other organizations. Ask if employer encourages community involvement.
    - *For students:* Probe for specific classes, organizations, activities.

6. What do you feel would be the best way to develop the next generation of public relations leaders?

    - *For students:* What advice would you give other college students about leadership development? How can faculty help students develop leadership skills?
    - *For young professionals:* What advice would you give college students about leadership development? How can faculty help students develop leadership skills?

- *For senior practitioners:* What advice would you give both college students and young professionals about leadership? How can managers help new hires/ young PR professionals become valuable leaders in their companies?

7. By definition, leadership development involves work-related experiences that help a person learn how to influence group behavior and achieve team goals (Avolio, 2010; Groves, 2007; McCall, 2010). How can we improve the work experience in public relations to better focus on developing the next generation of leaders? (For students, how can we improve the academic experience?)
8. The global research study that I mentioned earlier identified, through a survey of thousands of practitioners worldwide, that the industry believes that the most pressing leadership needs are in developing change management skills/capabilities, listening skills, and conflict management skills. How do you feel about this assessment? Why?
9. For any or all of the three leadership needs I just mentioned, what would be the best way or ways for an aspiring person to develop such leadership competencies?
10. We are nearing the end of this interview. What haven't we touched on today about leadership development in public relations that is important to include in this study?

Thank you very much for your time.