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Leadership Styles of Oxford House Officers

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Abstract

Oxford House recovery homes are unusual compared to most recovery homes in that they function entirely without the use of staff; instead members are elected to officer positions. The aim of this study was to perform preliminary analysis of the types of leadership styles utilized by members of Oxford House. Twenty-nine house residents of five Oxford Houses were asked to rate their own leadership styles using the leader behavior description questionnaire and the multifactor leader questionnaire. Results showed that participants were more likely to use person-oriented behaviors above task-oriented actions. Transformational leadership was associated with higher outcomes than Transactional leadership. Implications for future research are discussed.

Keywords

Recovery homes; Oxford House; Leadership; Officers

Introduction

As of 2012, approximately 23.1 million people over the age of 12 needed treatment for a drug or alcohol problem [1]. Only 4 million received treatment. Upon completing treatment, most individuals return to the environments that fostered their addiction. Research has shown that living in an aftercare residential setting rather than the usual aftercare of returning home was correlated to better outcomes such as longer abstinence [2,3]. There is a powerful need to create and expand community-based aftercare for substance abusers [4]. One such community-based program is the Oxford House model, which is a mutual help setting that has created more than 1500 recovery homes since 1975 [5]. Oxford Houses are self-run, self-financed recovery homes that operate through democratic decision-making [5]. The Houses function without professional staff of any kind; instead the members elect officers who are “but trusted servants of the entire membership” [6].

The Charter of every Oxford House consists of three rules: the house must be self-run on a democratic basis, the house must be financially self-supporting, and any resident who drinks or uses drugs must be immediately expelled. Each member of an Oxford House has an equal vote and majority rules except in the case of accepting or rejecting new members when 80%

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majority vote is required. As long as abstinence is maintained, the rent is paid, and no disruption is caused, a member can live in the House for as long as they wish [6].

One of the significant ways that the Oxford House program differs from most recovery homes is that it does not use professional staff and instead functions through management by officers which are elected from among the residents. These officers do not have any more voting power or privileges than other members. While all OHs are required to have officers, individual OHs can create their own positions and responsibilities. Houses typically have a President, Treasurer, Secretary, Comptroller, and Coordinator [6]. The responsibilities of the officers are to ensure the House runs smoothly, to conduct regular House meetings, uphold the Oxford House traditions, and keep good financial records for the house. It is a general tradition of Oxford House that no person serves longer than a six-month term in the same office [6]. Groups of closely located Houses form chapters, which ensure the houses maintain compliance with the rules. The reliance on peer leadership structure without staff may explain why residents of OH are often more involved in their homes than people in staff-run recovery homes [7].

There have been two previous studies of leadership in Oxford House; both concerned on leadership in women's houses. Davis et al. [8] studied how women and mothers with children living in Oxford Houses defined leadership and their perspectives on the strengths and challenges associated with being a leader. This qualitative study found the women emphasized the importance of mutual support in the process of recovery. It also found that these women perceived of house leadership as a communal process and not in the typical hierarchical model with a single leader. Another qualitative study examined the experiences of women leaders of Oxford Houses [9]. Participants listed some recurring traits of Oxford House leaders as honesty and acting as a role model. Many felt that being a leader in their recovery house was a welcome distraction from the pull to return to substance use. Other benefits included increases in empowerment, self-esteem, and confidence. While some women reported partners who were threatened by her leader status, all women reported positive experiences in leadership in their professional lives. Some barriers to leadership that were mentioned were too much conflict in the house, low self-esteem, and responsibilities outside of Oxford House including family and friends.

There are a variety of leadership styles or behaviors studied by researchers. One of the earliest studies of leadership, the Ohio State leadership studies, put forth the two-factor theory of Consideration and Initiation of Structure [10]. The Initiation of Structure subscale describes task-related activities such as giving clear instructions to followers and defining work roles. The consideration subscale measures relation-oriented behaviors including attention to the well-being and contributions of subordinates. Meta-analysis has shown that both subscales are significantly positively related to follower satisfaction and leadership effectiveness [11].

A more recent paradigm of leadership behavior research is transformational leadership. Transformational leaders develop subordinates' needs to higher levels of achievement, affiliation, and autonomy and inspire them to go beyond their self-interest for the sake of the organization [12]. By contrast, transactional leadership is based in exchanges and contracts

of defining tasks and rewarding effort. Passive-avoidant leadership, which is sometimes described as the passive form of transactional leadership, involves waiting for mistakes to occur before defining tasks or goals. While transactional leadership is about getting the work done, transformational leadership is about getting employees to want to help the organization achieve success.

The aim of this exploratory research study is to examine the styles and levels of leadership used by officers and members of Oxford House. The primary goal is to measure the prevalence of leadership styles of residents. The first hypothesis was that those who have resided at Oxford House longer would have held more officer positions because they have had more opportunities to be elected. The second hypothesis was that individuals who had held more officer positions would score more positively on leadership measures. This is because it may be that having more experience in officer positions could lead to more active leadership. Our third prediction stated that the sample would score higher on consideration than on initiation of structure. Given the lack of singular leader, it seems that officers would be more focused on maintaining a positive working dynamic rather than delegating tasks to members. Lastly, we hypothesized that leaders with more active leadership styles will rate themselves more highly on outcomes of leaderships: extra effort, satisfaction, and effectiveness.

Methods

Participants

This study was approved by the Institution Review Board at DePaul University and followed standard procedures. Five Oxford Houses in Northern Illinois were randomly selected and members were invited to participate through either phone calls or visits to the house. After giving their informed consent, participants completed surveys and a demographics questionnaire. Of the twenty-nine twenty individuals, 20 were men and 6 were women and three declined to respond. 56% were African American and 44% were Caucasian. Ages ranged from 30 to 64 ($M=43.73$, $SD=7.04$). Nine had completed high school, another nine had some college credit, three held college degrees and one held a postgraduate degree. Nine were single and 13 were employed full-time.

Measures

Participants were completed a series of surveys, including a demographics questionnaire. Individuals were asked if how important they consider good leadership and if they considered themselves to be a leader. Two leadership styles questionnaires structured to evaluate one's own leadership were given: the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire 5X-short (MLQ) and the Leadership Behavior Description Questionnaire Form XII (LBDQ) [10,12].

The LBDQ is typically administered to followers or group members to describe a leader's behavior in the group or organization. The current study utilized the LBDQ-Self form, which allows a leader to rate themselves. It has 100 items using a five-point Likert scale

indicating the frequency of the behavior specified, ranging from “Always” to “Never”. The subscales of Initiation of Structure and Consideration were used in this study.

The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire 5X-short was developed to measure a leader’s behavior on nine subscales using 45 agree/disagree statements. These subscales are divided into three types of leadership: transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant leadership which is characterized by an avoidance of leadership responsibilities. It has an additional three categories that measure outcomes of leadership: extra effort inspired by the leader, effectiveness of the team, and satisfaction with leadership. In this study, the MLQ-Self form was utilized so leaders gave assessments of their own leadership and related outcomes.

Results

Participants had lived in Oxford House for a time between one month and 6.17 years ($M=1.25$ years, $SD=1.80$) and had a length of sobriety between one month and 18 years ($M=2.09$ years, $SD=3.60$). Predictably, length of stay was significantly positively correlated to length of sobriety, $r(26)=.72$, $p<.01$. Four participants had never held an office and six members had served five terms in office, $M=2.31$ positions, $SD=1.64$. Unsurprisingly, there was a positive correlation between length of stay at Oxford House and number of leadership positions held, $r(28)=.73$, $p<.001$.

No significant relationships were found between number of leadership positions held and leadership scores. The greatest correlation was found with transformational leadership, $r(28)=.33$, $p=.08$. However, an independent t-test was conducted which showed that individuals who self-identified as a leader held more leadership positions ($M=3.00$, $SD=1.66$) than those who did not consider themselves to be a leader in the house ($M=1.45$, $SD=1.04$), $t(25.99)=-3.04$, $p<.01$. The self-identified leaders also scores higher on Transformational leadership [$t(26)=-3.04$, $p<.01$], Transactional leadership [$t(26)=-2.43$, $p<.05$], Initiation of Structure [$t(26)=-2.49$, $p<.05$], and Consideration [$t(26)=-2.74$, $p<.05$].

A paired sample t test was conducted to evaluate whether Consideration scores were significantly higher than Initiation of Structure scores. The result confirmed that Consideration scores ($M=40.00$, $SD=4.68$) were greater than Initiation of Structure scores ($M=33.52$, $SD=6.93$), $t(28)=6.61$, $p<.001$. The standard effect size, d , was 1.28.

The outcomes of leader effectiveness, leader satisfaction, and team extra effort were all significant and positively correlated to transformational leadership, transactional leadership, initiation of structure scale, and consideration scale as shown in Table 1. Transformational leadership was the most highly correlated to outcome variables. Passive-avoidant leadership was not significantly correlated to any outcome measures.

Discussion

This study was the first quantitative study of leadership in Oxford House to date. As an exploratory investigation, the main goal was to measure the prevalence of leadership styles that members perceived in themselves. It was found that longer-term residents had held

more officer positions than newer members. The constructive styles of leadership (transformational, transactional, initiation of structure, and consideration) were all positively correlated to each other. Finally, analysis of leadership styles with outcomes showed positive results.

The finding that members of Oxford House members who had resided in the house longer had held more officer positions is not surprising. The Houses surveyed had 4 to 9 members, $M=6.80$, $SD=1.94$. With each house having typically 5 rotating officer positions with terms of six months, it would be very hard to stay in the house for more than 6 months without having to take up the responsibility of a leadership role. The only members who had not held officer positions had been in the house less than three months.

While the hypothesis that the number of officer positions held would be associated with higher leadership scores was not supported by the data, further analysis showed an interesting relationship between the self-identification as a leader and number of officer positions. This is most likely because officers with more positions have been in the house longer, take more responsibility for the house, and are often role models for those in earlier stages of sobriety. These self-identified leaders scored higher on all positive measures of leadership. This could be explained by residents with good leadership capabilities are more confident and aware of their strengths. However, this could also be explained that those who consider themselves to be leaders rate themselves more highly out of vanity more than accurate self-reflection.

As predicted, consideration scores were higher than Initiation of Structure scores. Given the lack of a clear hierarchical structure and an environment more focused on mutual responsibility, the relation-based skills measured by consideration would be necessary for collaboration. Initiation of structure focuses more on the skills of a leader in a position of power over subordinates. As none of the members are more subordinate to another, this skill set would be less prevalent.

The positive forms of leadership were all significantly related to the outcomes of leader effectiveness, leader satisfaction, and extra team effort. Transformational leadership was most highly correlated with outcomes, which is consistent with prior findings [12]. As with previous samples, transactional leadership also had a positive impact on outcomes.

There are a number of limitations to the present study. The sample size was quite small and disproportionately men. In the future, a larger sample with more women would allow analysis of any gender differences in leadership style. A greater number of participants would also lead to results of greater statistical power.

Another drawback to this study was the utilization of self-report surveys rather than a follower's report of a leader's behaviors and methods. Research has shown that a leadership style measure such as the LBDQ may not measure the same thing when used as a self-rating than when it is employed as an external assessment [13]. There was also a greater "halo effect" in self-assessments which makes points to a certain amount of bias in these self-ratings. Further study by Baril, Ayman, and Palmiter found substantial inconsistencies in comparing supervisor self-ratings and subordinates' ratings of the supervisor [14]. The large

majority of prior research with these two leadership surveys had been done employing the subordinate rater form rather than the self-rating form used in this study. Thus, comparing these results with prior research is very difficult. In future studies, it would be useful to use subordinate rater forms and self-ratings to gain a more comprehensive view of leadership among Oxford House residents.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, there was a lack of objective outcomes measured in conjunction with leadership styles. In future research, combining a leadership survey with a measure like the perceived sense of community or the community oriented programs environment scale, which have both been employed with Oxford House residents in the past, could reveal very important data about how leadership influences the social climate of an Oxford House [7,15].

As the first quantitative study of leadership in Oxford House, this paper provides a starting point for more in-depth future research. The implications show that leadership measures, which are typically used in work settings, can be applied to a more communal organization like a recovery home. Although a mutual help setting like Oxford House does not have a the typical top-down hierarchy, leadership is still required to make decisions, enact the rules, and pay the bills. This research has shown certain styles of leadership to be more effective than others. Given the lack of any kind of staff in Oxford House recovery residences, it is vital to discover what kind of styles of leadership are most helpful in this democratic environment, which is a dynamic characteristic of what makes Oxford Houses successful.

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Table 1

Summary of Correlations for Leadership Styles with Outcome Measures.

Leadership Style	Correlation Coefficient		
	Effectiveness	Satisfaction	Extra Effort
Transformational Leadership	0.67**	0.61**	0.75**
Transactional Leadership	0.55**	0.43*	0.54**
Passive-Avoidant Leadership	0.04	−0.04	−0.01
Initiation of Structure	0.61**	0.55**	0.44*
Consideration	0.56**	0.50**	0.47**

Notes:

*
 $p < 0.05$,**
 $p < 0.01$