Examining Perceptual Dilemmas of Young Leaders with Respect to Ageism

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to present a review of the existing literature and derive possible propositions and future agendas in the context of young leaders and the issues they might face due to ageism and lack of experience. The literature was searched through specific keywords on online data bases and journal publications were taken as the base for the review. The analyses indicated that demographic details played an important role in influencing young leaders' decision making, and could contribute to their work related dilemmas. Additionally, the role of older workers in organization cannot be relegated to the background. The key is collaboration among different cohorts and this also involves plugging the gaps occurring due to age and lack of experience, if any. The study aims to offer some insights for both practitioners and academics.

Keywords: Ageism, Older Workers, Demographics, Perception, Young Leaders

1. Introduction

Organizations are facing newer challenges in an age of intense competition which necessitates managing a diverse workforce as well as more acceptance of change. Demographics, more than technology or pecuniary concerns is becoming an important concern for organizations (Drucker, 1998). These aspects are placing new demands on leadership (Wachs, 2000). Due to such demographic progression, older workers are seen to be reporting to supervisors and leaders much younger to them (Shore et al., 2003). Most young leaders are leading teams comprising individuals who may be way older than they are so lots of generation gaps and clashes in working styles exist which leads to conflicts.

Most of today's young leaders are faced with the similar situations that older ones faced- the constant need to build trust and maintain strong relationships, and the importance of advancement and growth. However, occasionally, being a young leader may also stimulate envy and bias from their older colleagues. They may constantly question the lack of experience of the young leaders and be resentful towards the fact that they were not been given the opportunity to lead instead of the latter. Scholars

like Amin and Kamal (2016) noted that the older team members with more work experience tried to influence the leadership direction in teams led by younger managers. Young leaders had less acceptance due to which team effectiveness was negatively affected (Schreiber, 2015). There is no denying that age and related differences at workplace have important and significant effect on team productivity, cooperativeness, and individual behaviors and thought processes (e.g. Kearney & Voelpel, 2012). Literature scantily focuses on the discrimination and perceived predispositions when it comes to young leaders in organizations. Much research has been documented on stereotypes against the elderly but there has been relatively lesser focus on the biases faced by the younger people due to their age. An understanding of how perceived lack of age and experience of the young leaders in the opinion of older workers warrants discussion in organizations.

Our research inquiries, hence, are as follows: do young leaders face challenges due to their age or perceived lack of experience, what is the nature of the difficulties faced, if any, and do they get affected by age or experience related negative perceptions? To what extent the perceptions of the older workers hold true? The present study begins by reviewing the existing literature and then setting out the

propositions before describing the analyses. The paper concludes by considering implications for employers. Our aim is to explore the following objectives of this paper.

a) To study age as a possible challenge in young leader and older subordinates' relationship.
b) To study experience as a challenge in young leaders' and older subordinate relationship.
c) To study the role of perceived bias due to lack of experience on quick decision making by young leaders.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Ageism

The term 'ageism' was originally coined by Butler (1969). He defined it as follows:

"Ageism can be seen as a systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplishes this with skin color and gender. Old people are categorized as senile, rigid in thought and manner, old-fashioned in morality and skills. . . Ageism allows the younger generation to see older people as different from themselves; thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings" (pp.139).

Studies on ageism have traditionally focused on the older workers (Spedale, 2019; Weller, 2007) and the discrimination faced by them due to their age (Maltby, 2007). They have mostly not taken up or underplayed the perceptual biases of older workers against the young leaders in the workplace and the latter's perspective towards such thinking patterns. At the same time, today, not only the mean age of the employees increasing, there are multi-generational, inter-generational cohorts working side by side and even as same teams (Iweins et al., 2013). This provides greater opportunities for increased collaboration and reducing the negativities associated with age. But the stereotypes are also being applied to younger workers by their older counterparts (Parry & Urwin, 2011), which could be more negative than those faced by older workers (Truxillo et al., 2015).

2.2 Young Leaders and the Need for Acceptance

To strongly identify oneself as a leader is the most important factor for an individual's development as one

(Lord & Hall, 2005). The more resolute self-image is as a leader, the more an individual will seek developmental opportunities to fortify his/her foundation in that position (Day & Harrison, 2007). A steady talent pipeline is necessary for organizations to survive and sustain (Eversole et al., 2012). Grooming young leaders for taking up the mantle to face the environmental complexities was strongly advocated by Heifetz (2006). Scholars have highlighted that young leaders learn best through observation and interaction with the environment and experienced leaders (Ghosh et al., 2013) to hone their leadership skills further.

Negative insolences and discernment on the basis of age especially against older adults (Ayalon, 2013) are unfortunate aspects observed in organizations globally. The phenomena of prejudice against the elderly people was described as 'ageism' which meant discrimination against them on the basis of their age (Butler, 1969), an example of negative ageism. It automatically becomes positive when older age is associated with greater wisdom and/or knowledge versus a younger age group (Iversen et al., 2009). Though the experiences of senior personnel in organizations are leveraged, a unique challenge arises when the younger employees assume leadership positions. This happens either through lateral hiring or in-house promotion, sometimes even by bypassing the senior employees. In such circumstances, young leaders might find it challenging to manage the concerns or perceptions of individuals older than them (Leger, 2000). This is often due to higher level of expertise or technical skills.

For younger leaders to exercise a positive influence on the older subordinates and the team, there must be acceptance, approval, and respect (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Absence of acceptance will render such leaders' positions as less steady and open to being challenged more often (Halevy et al., 2011).

2.3 Age as a Determinant of Acceptance

The ages considered for categorizing young leaders by scholars are 30 (Zenger & Folkman, 2015) to 40 years of age (Smith & Harrington, 1994). There are no clear answers to what constitutes being too old or too young for a position, but the associated age when people face negative perceptions which translate into 'refused employment', 'dismissal from jobs', or 'denied promotions, training or other benefits because of their age' (Warr,1994) can be said to be an influence of age discrimination. Older workers

might not feel comfortable taking instructions from very young leaders and the latter might find it difficult in giving orders to the former (Perry et al., 1999). Young leaders are mainly driven by achievement of results, followed by learning, and their working style might be drastically different from that of their older subordinates. They tend to be more excited by challenging opportunities to achieve critical outcomes and also by the tedious process of investigation and reinvention. Generational differences could contribute to how older workers identify or do not identify with the leadership of their young supervisors (Arsenault, 2004). This can affect work relationships and lead to negative outcomes such as lack of support for young leaders.

Another aspect that brings out the inherent skepticism towards age related bias could be that of the senior employees for young employees, especially if they are given more responsibility and accountability of important tasks. This could magnify in case of young leaders. There is evidence that the positive leadership capabilities and strong physiological virtues of young leaders are vital for the success and sustainability of any organizational competitive advantage (Luthans and Youssef, 2004). At the same time, managing the multigenerational workforces with younger bosses and older workers might not be easy for organizations.

It is important to set and distinguish the various properties and dimensions that identify the relationships which will help to uncover underlying patterns so as to present the analysis. The major risk that the young leaders face is perceived inexperience from their subordinates who are senior to them in age and experience.

This is a huge hurdle to overcome and is the cause of major conflicts in the corporate scenarios. Another one is the risk of appearing arrogant for instance, and with more and more young people taking chances and pushing the boundaries even further than that of what is expected. They are given more status and respect than their older and more experienced counterparts because they achieve the same results in a shorter time span. This might lead to animosity and jealousy towards the young leaders. This could also result in difficulty in decision making and them aligning and gaining the acceptance of the decisions made. There are always multiple risks associated with young leaders in order for them to manage and gain the respect and acceptance of their older workers at work. A lot of patience and a good hand at communication are essential.

Proposition 1: age related biases affect young leaders' decision making efficacy.

Proposition 2: perceived lack of experience has an effect on young leaders' acceptance among older workers.

2.4 Reasons for Biases towards Young Leaders

Promoting younger employees with relatively lesser years of experience could be rewarding as well as risky for organizations. Most of the young leaders are likely to be smart and aggressive and recognized for their accomplishments more than their ability to handle people. For organizations, denying them promotions could mean losing them as they would have more job opportunities in the market. Having them will also be important for technical competencies. At the same time, researchers have advocated soft leadership and emotional competence as crucial drivers for leaders' success (Goleman, 2003; Goleman et al., 2001) and shown that these traits become more importance as one rises up the hierarchy.

Bunker et al. (2002), through inclusion of multiple instances of issues faced by young leaders, stated in their work that young leaders often are susceptible to arrogance, lack of collaboration, weak inter personal skills, micro management, less comfort with handling conflicting situations and managing feedback. Emotional competencies develop with time and experience. The lack of experience or confidence in influencing and persuading skills might be a dampener in young leaders' growth story and could even affect the organization negatively.

3. Discussion

Our findings suggested that prejudice on the basis of age may have negative consequences for young leaders. This may hamper their perception about the organization and overall effectiveness, implying that there is a robust business case for addressing this concern. It was identified that the common challenges that the young leaders struggle with throughout their early career years were perceived inexperience, the inability to make effective decisions, and the frictions faced from senior members during their work processes.

At the same time, it is equally important for young leaders to understand the rationale behind such negative perceptions. The tedious and intricate process of working through the above-mentioned challenges is what has

led many of these young leaders to change the way that they've approached and practiced leadership, thereby facilitating their growth and evolution towards becoming experienced leaders. They mainly need to overcome these by using their skills and giving the seniors members time to adjust. Gaining the latter's trust was another good solution to the problem. Working on the areas which need improvement, taking feedback into consideration, and self-reflection are needed for young leaders to develop into seasoned professionals who find acceptance by all. Sometimes, it makes practical sense to evaluate the negative perceptions critically to identify the gaps and fill them. Organizations must have a robust 360-degree feedback system to identify and address the requisite concerns. Another angle that the study emphasized was the need for young high potentials to be given assignments which involved people skills before promoting them to leadership positions to avoid any clash of ideas, styles, or perceptions with other employees, especially the older subordinates. Influencing the latter without being in leadership position would be the real test of young high potentials' mettle.

4. Implications

Organizations create value for the stakeholders within the internal and external environment. The role of leaders in creating a success story runs through generations in an organization. In this context, it is imperative that there is cumulative attention on organizational behavior with reference to their applications in organizations especially with respect to diversional barriers. This study aimed to offer some insights for both practitioners and academics in the allied area of ageism affecting young leaders. Firstly, it highlighted the growth of young leaders in today's world. The focus is more on skills and abilities than on years of experience or the age. Secondly, it brought forth the challenges and perceptions that the young leaders often encounter from the older subordinates. If the young leaders are given more status and respect than their older and more experienced counterparts because they achieve the same results in a shorter time span, this could lead to animosity and jealousy towards the young leaders.

Third, the paper provided a valuable prospective for the policy makers in organizations to infuse interventions to fill the gaps in skills and attitudes of the high potential young employees before promoting them as leaders. This

would help in their conditioning and grooming much before assuming senior positions, which may provide insights for future leadership studies with respect to age and experience.

Lastly, the study highlighted the way young leaders are perceived and can handle age and experience related biases. Therefore, it also added value to the leadership research by considering challenges faced by leaders of younger age and if all challenges were indeed unwarranted. The study also advanced the role of age and experience and their influence towards decision making and problem solving and hence added value to the existing literature.

5. Limitations and Future Scope of Study

The study limits the generalization of results due to its theoretical nature. Therefore, future researchers are encouraged to conduct an empirical study to validate the findings. A regression analysis could also consider more intervening factors in the propositions to evaluate environmental and personal factors which might affect the perceptual biases. Lastly, different contexts such as gender of the employee, gender and political inclination of the study can also be studied in the future.

6. Conclusion

Young leaders are usually high potentials who have risen up to higher positions in the hierarchy due to their efficiency and effectiveness coupled with technical prowess. However, they might face perceptual challenges on their path to carve out their own identity if they do not win the trust and respect of other employees, especially the older subordinates. The way they are perceived by the older workers reporting to them is essential to understand for creating a culture of greater understanding and collaboration by tackling such biases. Leadership development is very often stated as an important and top organizational priority. Younger leaders will be needed for their strengths and competencies. Savvy organizations must be able to leverage these traits for higher productivity. The role of older subordinates must be positive and supportive with their wealth of experience. The support system must be robust for young leaders to prosper by helping them identify their

weaknesses and working on them. Having strategies to build greater recognition of talent irrespective of age and experience is a critical foundation for organizational growth and development. Developing them by taking both the technical and people skills is the key for talent management.

7. References

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