

# **Surviving the Reality of Leadership: Using Reality TV to Portray Leader Focused Theories**

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## Introduction

Popular media has been increasing in its use in leadership education, but rather than using snippets of many movies embedded in a lecture, we decided to design an interactive workshop for freshmen leaders on the campus of Texas A&M that revolved around reality TV shows and their participants, while showcasing characteristics from three leader focused theories (style, trait and skill—Northouse, 2005).

Reality TV was selected as our medium of choice because students are able to witness leadership in a more “real-world” setting since the participants on the TV show are portraying themselves in a “real-life” setting (or, as close to real-life as one can get when cameras and crew people are around all the time).

Learner objectives for the workshop are as listed:

- After completion of this workshop at the Freshmen Leadership Development Retreat, the learner will be able to:
  - Identify skills, traits, and styles that leaders portray.
  - Participate in knowledgeable group discussion and a skills builder activity that portrays that leader’s skills can be developed through practice.
  - Recognize and differentiate between the types of leadership styles.
  - Develop basic knowledge of leader-focused leadership theories.

## Background

Popular media’s popularity continues to increase in education, particularly in teaching leadership. One of the reasons the use of popular media is effective in teaching leadership is the fact that learners are able to understand complex issues through the stories used in different mediums (Hamilton, 2003).

Callahan and Rosser (2005) state, “Popular culture artifacts are ideal for teaching leadership because they allow learners to both identify with current trends and process concepts by using tools that capture their interest” (¶ 2). (Popular culture artifacts include novels, non-fiction stories, TV and movies. Callahan and Rosser, 2005).

Callahan and Rosser (2005) also discuss that by using stories from popular media, learners are better able to handle situations that may not normally arise. Because of the stories from popular media, the learners have different lenses with which to view problems and situations.

## How it Works

Participants in the Freshman Leadership Development Retreat will be introduced to the leader focused theories through Reality Television. All aspects of the program are highly interactive and give students the opportunity to share ideas.

Throughout the workshop, the participants are continuously engaged through viewing TV clips, discussion with others and completing the assessments and tasks. According to Callahan and Rosser (2005), using popular media to teach leadership theory allows participants to take ownership of what they are learning.

#### Agenda of the Program:

- An ice breaker using popular media advertising introduces the group to the influence of the media and prepares the students for the upcoming lesson.
- Style Approach
  - a. All students answer the Leadership Style Questionnaire to be implemented later in the program.
  - b. Introducing Blake and Mouton's leadership theory through power point presentation.
  - c. Using reality television to teach Blake and Mouton's leadership theory. Short clips from "The Apprentice" are shown to highlight three different leadership styles of contestants on the show. Discussion of leadership styles will follow each clip shown.
  - d. Revealing of Blake and Mouton's managerial grid and plotting the characters on the grid. Students will plot themselves on the grid based on the questionnaire.
  - e. Discussion of Blake and Mouton's managerial grid and personal leadership styles.
- Trait Approach
  - a. Each student will draw his/her ideal leader on a sheet of blank paper.
  - b. Small group discussion/writing of leadership traits on easel paper.
  - c. Class discussion on what traits do leaders have and why do we think that leaders have these traits
  - d. Pictures of winners of reality television shows. Most of the winners will not look like the drawings done by the students.
- Skills Approach
  - a. Introducing the skills approach through a power point presentation.
  - b. Using reality television to teach the skills leadership theory. Short clips from "Survivor" are shown to highlight the skills sets of leaders on the show.
  - c. Discussion of leadership skills will follow each clip shown.
  - d. Students will individually create a paper airplane. A contest is held to see whose airplane flies the farthest. Facilitators will teach the entire class how to make a paper airplane that flies far. Students learn that skills can be developed.
  - e. Discussion of skills and how they can be developed through time and practice.
- Class wrap-up
- Evaluation form

#### Results

The participants at the Leadership Development Retreat master the concepts of leader focused theories through the use of reality television. During the initial teaching of this program, participants were asked to plot their own leadership styles on the Blake and Mouton managerial grid. The majority of leadership styles fell near the “Middle of the Road”. However, one participant was off the chart on task orientation. The program requires no previous knowledge of the leader focused theories and creates a fun opportunity for participants to learn.

Reality television teaches students from a perspective of popular media that is unlike any other. Characters on reality television shows are playing themselves which allows students to see leadership through “real” people.

The reviewers of the program enjoyed the engagement of the participants. They noticed the high level of discussion upon viewing the clips and discovery of where they scored on the managerial grid. Comparing to other workshops that day, the reviewers noted that this workshop allowed for maximum engagement between participants and the popular media.

### Conclusions/Recommendations

In conclusion, we feel that using an interactive popular media format, especially reality TV, helps the learner better relate to and identify different leadership theories and see how the theories interact with one another in real life.

We encourage educators to try various popular mediums when teaching leadership since it helps give students perspective when learning about leadership.

Points to consider when using reality TV include keeping up with current seasons of whatever show you are using in order to keep students captivated. Also, be aware that technology, while useful, has kinks that can sabotage your lecture/presentation. A tip is to always have a back-up of the media, especially if you embed video or TV clips in your PowerPoint presentation.

With all the reality TV shows on television today, this can be a fun and interesting way to spice up theory lectures. Have fun with it and try something new!

## References

- Callahan, J. & Rosser, M.H. (2005). Putting it all together: Incorporating popular media into a leadership program. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, [in press].
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