Out of the Mouth of Babes, Principles of Leadership

By Chuck Dinerstein, MD, MBA — October 6, 2020

Social science describes several views of the hierarchy of our societies. There's the near-Darwinian dog-eat-dog concept of dominance. Then there are the more leadership-driven ones, where individuals respect and defer to those in charge. Leadership hierarchies can evolve from election, regulation or prestige – where influence flows from the leader's eminence. The truth is that social hierarchies are a bit of all these abstractions.

In a new study, researchers were interested in how a child develops an understanding of these leadership forms. While there is a rich literature on how children learn to identify leaders, less is known about how they perceive leaders from the follower's perspective – in other terms, what makes a leader different from a follower. For most adults, leaders have a responsibility to guide their followers in the appropriate direction and, in turn, be rewarded with privileges and honors reserved for the chosen few. We all make a mental tradeoff between what is the balance between responsibilities and entitlements. Where do children draw those lines?

The researchers presented stories to 5-year old children [1]. In each, a leader had been selected who took them to an amusement park. Each ride required two participants, allowing the researchers to control whether that pairing was the leader and a follower or two followers. The ride required a joint contribution of tokens. Children were asked how many tokens each should
contribute and judge the acceptability of the contributions, large and small, by the leader or fellow follower. In one story, rather than paying, a prize was given at the end of the ride and divided between the two participants. Again, the children were asked how the prize should be shared. The story identified a leader “marked by consensual group election and granted a mandate to make few or many decisions (depending on condition) over the group” — modeling how adults identify their leaders.

- When the two participants were both followers, the children expected equal contribution. The children found either too small or large a contribution by their partner unacceptable.
- When the leader was part of the dyad, the children expected a more generous contribution from the leader. When told the leader’s contribution was smaller or larger, both were acceptable, although the leader's greater contribution was "more acceptable."
- Children saw leaders as having increased responsibility, "rather than increased entitlement."

In subsequent variations of the experiment, the researchers manipulated whether the leader was elected or simply identified and whether leaders could exert control, in this case of which ride and pairing were chosen.

- Children continued to assign elected as well as presumed leaders more responsibility, whether they had power or not in the decision-making process. The power to make decisions did not affect the children's view of the leader's additional responsibility.

In the final story, looking at entitlement quantified by the dividing up of the prize coins.

- The children favor an egalitarian split, 50:50. A greater share taken by the leader or follower was judged worse than a smaller share taken by either.

Here is the bottom line.

- Children anticipate that the leaders will be more responsible, contributing more, and expect their equals to be just that, contribute equally.
- It made no difference whether the leader was explicitly chosen or not (the case of leadership by eminence or expertise).
- The leader's ability to control the situation and make decisions only had a small impact on that judgment of more responsibility.
- When it came to rewards, children again wanted equality; leadership brought no entitlement.

We see these same ideas in our adult thoughts, but our life experience causes us to weigh them differently. Some would describe that weighting as cynical or practical, Realpolitik, or ideology. It makes no difference to me. I just think we might serve ourselves better by listening to the less-filtered thoughts of our children. After all, the idea of a servant leader, promoting our collective well-being, is what our founder's thought most important and how they acted.

[1] Forty-eight five to six-year-old Israeli children taken from both secular and religious kindergartens.