Leadership & Mentorship in the Lives of Accomplished Millennials: Implications for Practice

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Abstract

Through in-depth interviews with 25 award-winning millennial public relations practitioners in the United States, this study examined if and how mentorship (having a mentor and/or mentoring others), leadership development (learning about and/or practicing leadership), and organizational culture (professional formal/informal development practices) helped award-winning millennial PR professionals succeed.

Findings suggest that these three factors – mentorship, leadership development opportunities and organizational culture – have the strongest impact over time. A cumulative effect is based on continual mentorship from a young age (e.g., parents, K-12 teachers, college professors, peers and organizational leaders), leadership development opportunities (inspired or provided by mentors starting at an early age) and an open and supportive organizational culture that rewards service in various forms and a desire for self-growth. This study also found that millennial professionals with high potential are not simply recipients but rather energetic pursuers of mentorship/mentoring and leadership opportunities, and the concepts of leadership and mentorship are intertwined in their minds.

Implications include discussions of areas of concerns that the 25 interviews revealed, including a lack of a firm grasp of communications ethics, the existence of a power gap that makes millennials leave the company and few (or no) development opportunities specifically designed for millennial professionals by their employing organizations.

Key words: Millennials, Public relations, Leadership, Leadership development, Mentorship

Executive Summary

Twenty-five awarding-winning millennial PR practitioners were interviewed via phone between August 2017 and April 2018 to help extend prior Plank Center–sponsored research on mentoring, leadership development, and millennial communications professionals in the workplace. Specifically, the study's purpose was to explore if, to what extent, and how mentorship, leadership development and organizational culture helped these young public relations practitioners become recognized as successful young professionals.

Despite the importance of leadership development (Martinelli & Erzikova, 2017), the area remains under-researched in the field of public relations. This study adds to a nascent literature by investigating the ways leadership development and mentorship enhance competency categories for PR leaders outlined in the integrated model of leadership in public relations (Meng, Berger, Gower, & Heyman, 2012). This model, which was tested and validated in a global project (Berger & Meng, 2014), includes the following personal dimensions: self-dynamics, team collaboration, ethical orientation, relationship building, strategic decision making, and communication knowledge management. The integrated model serves as a theoretical framework for the current examination that aims to analyze millennials' successes and offers suggestions for improving the preparation of leaders. Overall, this study advocates for a holistic approach to leadership development that includes launching/reevaluating mentoring

programs, developing/enhancing an open organizational culture, providing millennial employees with leadership opportunities and supporting their desire to become mentors.

Key Findings and Implications

- Mastery of PR leadership dimensions

While half of the participants felt particularly competent in their relationship-building skills, only one reported feeling that way about ethical decision making. In addition, participants noted the challenge of communications knowledge and competency in an ever-evolving technological age. Young PR professionals should be given ongoing development opportunities to help them be more competent and feel more confident in ethical and digital/analytics communications practice.

- Leadership development and practice

Organizational leaders who have been successful in hiring and retaining top millennial talent are seen as open and approachable, and effective leadership and mentorship practices are viewed as intertwined.

Organizational / PR leaders might also consider offering open door office hours or regularly scheduled open "brown bag" lunch sessions, where senior leaders can interact more personally with junior-level employees in an informal, authentic way to answer questions about the organization, management decisions, business climate, vision, etc. and obtain younger employees' feedback and perspectives.

- Mentorship

The vast majority of participants said they currently have formal and/or informal mentors, with most having multiple professional mentors, either within or external to their current organizations (or both), and they consider themselves to be mentors as well. Their most commonly named influential mentors, professionally speaking, are current or former organizational leaders and/or senior colleagues.

Intentionally pairing more senior-level employees with younger ones on projects, where the two regularly meet to discuss progress, challenges and decisions and where the younger employee is given leadership responsibilities, could help foster a greater sense of team collaboration, help hone strategic decision-making skills, and help reinforce the foundation of ethical decision making as well.

Introduction

The Millennial generation has emerged as a dominant demographic force accounting for 35% of U.S. labor force participants (Fry, 2018). Millennials are better educated than any previous generation in history (Fun facts about Millennials, 2018), a factor tied to a better chance of employment (Bialik & Fry, 2019). Recent research indicates that criticism toward Millennials as job hoppers is outdated: Their job tenure is longer than that of the previous one – Generation X (Fry, 2017). In addition, as Serini and Krider (2015) argued, millennials would need to step up into leadership roles much sooner than the previous generation simply because Gen X is too small to fill the employment gap.

A study of millennials as future organizational and public relations leaders showed that 70% of millennial communication professionals were enthusiastic about leadership opportunities and believed they had a high capacity to lead (Meng & Berger, 2017). However, these young professionals' supervisors had a much lower perception of their subordinates' abilities, specifically as they pertained to communication knowledge, vision, team leadership skills, ethical orientation, strategic decision-making, relationship-building skills and readiness to lead. On the positive side, PR professionals still see millennials as expressing "strong values for diversity, transparency and social responsibility" (Meng & Berger, 2017) and being "bright, optimistic and personable" (Serini & Krider, 2015). Indeed, millennials working in the PR field reported they value a team agency model, sense of camaraderie and open communication (Bulldog Reporter, 2017).

For public relations scholars, by analyzing these individuals' professional success there is an opportunity to simultaneously explore the topics of leadership development and mentorship. Because these professionals are relatively young, their college memories are likely still fresh. At the same time, because they are already accomplished employees, they have also likely learned much from their respective colleagues and organizational cultures. Understanding these highly successful young practitioners' formal and informal learning, leadership development and mentorship experiences, as well as their challenges and desired future training, could help inform both PR educators and organizations to thereby improve PR curricula and organizational practices.

Literature Review

PR leadership dimensions

The model of excellent public relations leadership (Meng, Berger, Gower, & Heyman, 2012) comprises six interrelated personal dimensions and one structural/cultural dimension. The personal dimensions are: self-dynamics (i.e. self-insights and vision), team leadership and collaboration capabilities, ethical orientation, relationship-building skills, strategic decision-making capability, and communication knowledge management and expertise. A seventh dimension, organizational structure and culture, influences the environment for, and practice of, leadership. A global study that surveyed nearly 4,500 public relations practitioners in 23 countries supported the universality of the seven dimensions in everyday public relations practice (Berger & Meng, 2014).

A qualitative study conducted in five countries revealed that young professionals and students viewed the *communication knowledge management and expertise* dimension as the main prerequisite to develop into a PR leader (Martinelli & Erzikova, 2017). Other personal leadership dimensions found to be "seeded" (learned) early in life included *self-dynamics*, *ethical orientation*, *team collaboration*, and *relationship-building*. As for *strategic decision-making* capabilities, they seemed to develop later, after a PR practitioner gained professional experience upon which to draw. In the global study (Berger & Meng, 2014), *strategic decision-making* stood out as "the most significant leadership condition in various situations and geographic locations" (p. 108).

As for the seventh dimension, *organizational structure and culture*, Meng and Berger (2017) found that a very open and positive culture is the main reason millennials join and remain with an organization. Mentors and role models – a potential source of leadership values and skills – significantly influence organizational culture (Berger, Meng, & Heyman, 2009).

PR leadership and practice

As an emerging occupation worldwide, public relations strives for legitimacy at different levels – from organizational to societal (Berger & Reber, 2006). It is crucial to discuss leadership in public relations because of its intertwining nature with power, the most important issue in public relations (Berger & Reber, 2006). Power and influence mean "the ability to get things done by affecting the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, opinions, decisions, statements, and behaviors of others" (Berger & Reber, 2006, p. 5).

To further advance the leadership research, Bowen (2009) found that public relations practitioners perceived leadership as one of the main routes to the dominant coalition, or decision-making authority in the organization. Gaining access to the highest level brings opportunities to ensure organizational effectiveness through participation in strategic management (White & Dozier, 1992). By providing a clear vision and acting as organizational change agents, public relations practitioners demonstrate the value of public relations and contribute to the overall success of an organization (Choi & Choi, 2009). Similarly, Meng et al. (2012) investigated aspects that shape leadership in public relations. They argued that work experiences and role models most strongly influenced practitioners' leadership values and beliefs. Werder and Holtzhausen (2009) found that an inclusive style (i.e., leaders are collaborative) is most utilized, followed by transformational leadership style (i.e., leaders provide a clear vision and inspire change). It appeared that public relations leaders use both styles, which are different but not mutually exclusive.

A recent cross-cultural study found that practitioners in five countries recognized that millennial PR practitioners seek transparent, collaborative leadership styles and meaningful work environments (Martinelli & Erzikova, 2017). Across cultures, public relations practitioners understood the need to continue to learn about and grow in public relations leadership. Participants also made clear that leadership skills are being developed through practice. Accordingly, the participants emphasized the need for experiential application of public relations skills and knowledge through college extracurricular activities, internships and hands-on coursework. In addition, many participants saw formal college coursework that not only provides technical knowledge and skills but that also discusses and teaches fundamentals of leadership as important.

Mentorship

The traditional definition of mentorship as a "developmentally oriented interpersonal relationship that is typically between a more experienced individual (i.e., the mentor) and a less experienced individual (i.e., the protégé)" (Eby, 2010, p. 505) viewed mentoring as hierarchical

and comprised of a single, dyadic relationship within one organization. Today mentorship is conceptualized as a developmental network consisting of multi-level, multi-dyadic relationships both within and outside of the organization (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Within organizations, mentoring might focus on instrumental support, such as providing instruction and feedback to assist with career advancement, and/or psychosocial support, such as role modeling and encouragement.

Mentoring Research and Best Practices White Paper (n.d.) summarized scholarship on mentorship and drew a few conclusions:

> First, a mentor is described as a role model, teacher, counselor, talent developer, supporter and/or friend. Second, the process of mentoring is described as a partnership, a relational connection, a chain of supportive activities (e.g., coaching, conferencing), a power- and resource-based relationship, a non-evaluative relationship, and a mutually beneficial and learning relationship. Third, the development of interpersonal relationships between the mentor and mentee is deemed as the key to success, as real learning occurs mainly because of the relationship itself and not a particular pedagogy (p. 3).

The mentoring context (i.e. proximity between mentor and mentee, social and emotional connection, long-term goals, the immediacy in assessment) mirrors the development of transformational leadership (Middlebrooks & Haberkorn, 2009). Sosik, Godshalk and Yammarino (2004) argued that by imparting values and standards of behavior, protégés are likely to perceive their mentors as displaying various degrees of transformational leadership behavior (i.e., idealized influence, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation).

Public relations–specific mentoring studies are rare, even though relationships with mentors have been identified as a relational influence resource inside organizations (Berger & Reber, 2006). To fill the gap, the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations funded several research projects that directly and indirectly investigated a possible impact of mentorship on leadership development of public relations practitioners. In a global study (Erzikova & Petersone, 2014), participants clearly indicated that learning from mentors on the job about excellent leadership is more effective than university/workshop training. Martinelli and Erzikova (2017) also found that mentorship was highly valued across cultures by both mentors and mentees. However, 93% of recently surveyed U.S. millennial communication professionals said their organizations did not have mentoring programs (Bulldog Reporter, 2017).

The current project attempted to add further depth to and extend the previous projects noted above by using in-depth interviews to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1: Which of the previously identified leadership dimensions (Meng et al., 2012) do the participants feel particularly competent in at this point in their careers? Which are they still striving to improve?
RQ 2: When did the participants begin learning/developing these leadership dimensions? Did

education (K–12, university, post-graduation programs) play any role in their professional and leadership development?

RQ 3: Do the participants believe mentors contributed to their professional success?

RQ 4: What is the perceived importance of mentoring in organizations' efforts to hire and retain top millennial talent?

RQ 5: Do the participants consider themselves leaders, mentors or both? Do they believe leadership development and mentorship are intertwined?

Method

Participants. The Pew Research Center identifies anyone who was born between 1981 and 1996 as a Millennial (Dimock, 2018). Twenty-five individuals who were born in this time period and who recently (2014-2018) received a professional award were identified and interviewed via phone between August 2017 and April 2018 to help extend prior research on mentoring, leadership development, and millennial PR professionals in the workplace.

Data collection. All 25 interviewees had been recognized professionally: Seven participants received their PRSA Chapter (Minnesota, Ohio, Illinois, or Washington, D.C.) Young Professionals Award; eight had received the New York PRSA Chapter's 15 Under 35 Award; the remaining 10 were *PR Week* Outstanding Young Professional finalists or winners. Five men and 20 women were interviewed; at least four were from traditionally underrepresented groups (e.g., Hispanic, African American, Asian American). A majority of participants were employed by agencies or in-house PR departments; a few participants owned their own companies. Participants were awarded a $25 gift card for their time and effort.

The interview guide included 13 questions (see Appendix A). The average length of interviews was 50 minutes. They were audio-recorded and then transcribed for analysis. An overall summary of responses was developed and sent to the participants as member checks (Creswell, 2014), and participants were asked if it adequately represented their perspectives and opinions. If not, participants were asked to correct or add to the summary accordingly. The summary was disseminated a total of three times to all participants, with 12 (48%) of the participants directly responding. Of those who responded, only one added a thought/comment, and all respondents indicated the summary was an accurate reflection of their respective opinions.

Data analysis. Miles & Huberman's (1994) three-step approach (data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification) was used to analyze the interview data. The data reduction/condensation phase included a careful reading of the transcripts to identify, cluster and code re-occurring themes. To facilitate preliminary conclusion drawing, data were displayed in the form of short blocks of texts that were further arranged to study patterns. Preliminary conclusions were verified or collapsed into other categories during the entire data analysis process.

Findings

RQ 1: Which of the previously identified leadership dimensions (Meng et al., 2012) do the participants feel particularly competent in at this point of their careers? Which are they still striving to improve?

Almost half of participants said *relationship-building* is their strongest leadership skill (Table 1). An explanation that emerged from the data indicated that the ability to build relationships is either an innate ability or an "earliest" leadership skill set. One participant said,

> I think I personally succeeded in my PR career because I've developed an interest and hunger to go after new business, which is a big responsibility of mine. And I think that all comes down to relationship building. And within relationship building, I find a lot of the other dimensions come into play. But that's the one I would personally say for myself [is the one in which I'm most confident].

Unlike the leadership development study of Martinelli and Erzikova (2017), when participants seemed to agree that *communication knowledge management and expertise* was the prerequisite—or minimal-level—skill for PR leadership development, in this study nine respondents reported that they are still developing communication knowledge management and expertise—the most commonly cited dimension still being learned. However, many of these participants noted this ongoing development is due to the rapidly changing communications environment in which they operate. The following paraphrased quote is representative of many participants' sentiments: PR expertise and the ability to seek out, organize and effectively apply public relations knowledge to enhance the organization's overall communications effectiveness is most challenging in a constantly changing environment. In addition, participants emphasized that "Communication knowledge and expertise is truly being developed through practice."

In the Martinelli & Erzikova (2017) study, participants seemed to believe that strategic decision-making was a higher level leadership dimension that developed over time and with experience. In this study of young professionals, six of the 25 (24%) already felt competent in this dimension and only six specifically indicated they were still learning it. Most who did feel competent stated that they did not hone their strategic decision-making skills until they were established in their careers. Being given more responsibility, leading accounts, and being held accountable were all reasons cited as helping to hone its development. Therefore, it seems their practice of leadership helped them develop this competency, rather than the other way around.

Those who felt they were still learning strategic decision-making noted the following: "Well I think you're always going to—in PR—going to be looking to improve communication knowledge management and strategic decision making." "I don't think that you're ever done learning how to be strategic."

Only one participant said she has mastered the ethics dimension. Others were cautious. A few noted that professional ethical expertise comes with experience, meaning it develops through solving ethical dilemmas multiple times over many years. Speaking about the complexity of

ethics, one female stated, "There are some areas that are black and white but the longer I'm in the business it can get pretty gray." While reflecting on his first job, a respondent shared:

> I think throughout my career, there's always been ethical challenges. But a lot of them had to do with, you know, the people where I worked, the employers. It was more about the agency and if they want to do something unethical, how do you deal with that if it was your job?

Table 1. *Leadership dimensions that the participants have mastered and are still learning.*

Leadership dimension	Competent	Still learning
self-dynamics	5	1
team leadership and collaboration capabilities	5	4
ethical orientation	1	4
relationship-building skills	12	6
strategic decision-making capability	6	6
communication knowledge management and expertise	3	9

RQ 2: When did the participants begin learning/developing these leadership dimensions? Did education (K–12, university, post-graduation programs) play any role in their professional and leadership development?

Participants' perceived seeds of leadership development varied across the sample. A majority of respondents (n=16) said they started developing leadership skills prior to college/university through pre-school and K–12 extracurricular activities, such as team sports, student clubs and/or student media. One participant shared,

> That I served within my school and also within a Girl Scout troop really gave me leadership skills, so I would say—I would say it started off in elementary and then it kind of really grew from there. In high school, I served as a leader, a senior leader for the school … a point of contact for any of the younger students … and then that really grew even more in college. That's how I really got kind of plugged in during my undergrad [years].

Seven participants indicated learning leadership dimensions in college through their involvement with the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) and paid/unpaid internships. A participant said, "So, I was on the mass communication track, so I worked on the school newspaper and then the school TV news program. So, I certainly took leadership roles in both of those aspects. I was the editor-in-chief of the student newspaper, and I also anchored the school TV program."

Overall, participants valued highly the leadership development opportunities provided by K–12 and universities. A participant said, "Yes, I would definitely say it, K to 12 helped and in

some way, whether I knew it or not, whether studying biology or trying to figure out calculus … I guess they helped. I think that helped me in the idea of being … self-dynamic and the collaboration side."

Another respondent acknowledged: "It's more [that] the university education helped me become a better leader. In the university setting, we had more opportunities to actually [speak up] and do research. Most of my university education I spent doing research for my department, so, it helped me become more of a better spokesperson for my department, in a sense, with my professors."

Only two respondents stated their leadership development started after they were hired full time as PR specialists. All but one participant reported being involved in various professional/leadership development opportunities at work: "I think I'm constantly seeking professional development within PRSA, within my mentors, within my network, but nothing more official than that." Formal professional/leadership development activities included participating in workshops, seminars and summer schools through industry organizations (e.g., PRSA) and/or their companies: "I was a member of the local Public Relations Society of America Chapter. And then through that I was involved a lot in their awards program."

Networking and self-learning were the most commonly cited informal professional/leadership development activities. Said one participant: "I'd always find the smartest people at the agency and the ones that are most talented and kind of latched on to them, built relationships with them. And they are the people I still go to for corporate counsel every day when I'm talking through issues."

The perceived beginnings of leadership development seem most often to be linked to participants' most memorable leadership experience. For example, one participant believed she began developing five of the six leadership dimensions while being in charge of a high school marching band and "having to foster trust and credibility with the other students to run the band as a peer instead of as the director."

RQ 3: Do the participants believe mentors contributed to their professional success?

Participants unanimously agreed that mentors should be given, as one participant said, "the most credit to for the development that I'm able to do professionally." As in the Martinelli and Erzikova (2017) study, family members (mother, brother, grandfather) were again cited most often as being the most influential mentors in these millennials' lives. A participant said, "My grandfather, who has since passed, was probably the most influential, you know, figurehead in my life from both a professional and personal standpoint." Another one stated, "I'll definitely say my mother actually. Just because she had a great career, but also, she was a single mom and working, and I think she just taught me a lot."

Importantly, several respondents stated they have actively sought mentors instead of passively waiting for mentors to reach out or be assigned to them. Five participants reported having mentors in K–12 and eight in university. Nine respondents said they had mentors at both

K–12 and university. A participant said, "When I was in high school, I had a writing teacher who, I think, probably had the biggest effect on me professionally. She was just a really great teacher and she taught like a college writing course that I took when I was in high school. So I will say that she probably was the closest thing to a mentor I had."

However, based on the interview analysis, mentorship in college might overshadow mentorship in K–12. Mentorship in college/university is more professionally oriented and encompasses guidance and encouragement from multiple sources – professors, internship supervisors and fellow students. A participant said, "So a mentor that stands out is like a professor who helped guide a lot of what I was involved in." Another respondent shared her memory about peer mentoring in college: "We would learn different things through our own networks. We would all go to the meetings for PRSSA and share that knowledge with each other." Based on the data, PRSSA chapters were often leadership incubators for these successful millennials.

All but one participant said they have formal and/or informal mentors currently. Interestingly, a majority of respondents are mentored by several professionals, either inside or outside (or both) of their current organization. Former, older colleagues, their organizations' CEOs/leaders, or current colleagues with more professional experience were most commonly named as their most influential professional mentors.

Mentors are seen as having contributed to participants' success by being a sounding board, helping them to set personal and professional goals, providing guidance, and serving as intentional models. A participant said, "It's great just to have somebody that you're using as sort of like a 'north star' for what might be possible for your own career." Another respondent echoed, "She's my current supervisor, and the person who I hope to be when I grow up."

Mentors who are also leaders might be more attractive for mentees than mentors without a formal or informal leadership role, as indicated by one study participant: "I would never – I am not saying this is my goal, but I would never want to be a CEO of a public relations firm if I didn't ever see a CEO of a public relations firm because I don't think you would understand that that's a goal that you can accomplish."

RQ 4: What is the perceived importance of mentoring in organizations' efforts to hire and retain top millennial talent?

Based on analysis of participants' responses, their companies utilize a number of mentoring-related approaches to hire and retain top millennial talent. They include a personalized (formal) matching process to make sure a mentor and mentee's goals and interests overlap. The formal program is supplemented by a supportive organizational culture, as explained by one participant: "[it goes] beyond the formalized program, just everyone intangibly and without an official rulebook being so open to guiding the direction of junior staffers' careers and goals." Others noted frequent meetings with a supervisor and opportunities to lead: "They constantly check in and want to make sure that you're doing OK. And, you know, your work

load, it's not too much; it's not too little. You're doing things you're interested in. You're learning about things you want to learn about." "The biggest thing is just like allowing me to have a lot of responsibility and learn from my mistakes. But, definitely, having people and mentors there that can help when I need it."

In addition, data revealed that effective leadership and mentorship practices are intertwined. In particular, these accomplished millennials admire companies headed by great leaders who are mentors, too. One respondent said, "When you have senior leaders who are

successful that are encouraging and believe in you, and are guiding you, I think it pushed me to be better for my clients, and to have more confidence in myself when assessing client needs or drafting recommendations."

Organizational leaders who have been successful in hiring and retaining top millennial talent are viewed easily approachable. One participant explained: "They're very open. And talk about all the ways that we could improve. And then try to find ways to implement it. So I think the open communication is the most important part." Mentors also provide constructive criticism and take young professionals outside of their comfort zones: "I think just exposing me to a wider world outside of my day-to-day, whether that is leadership skills, whether that is the communications profession or industry, I think has been helpful in most regards."

Based on collected interviews, successful companies are putting employees first. One study participant said: "So our whole premise is that we fired clients because employees don't like working with them…. Because, to me, nothing is more important than the people that work here in the company, right?"

Being in a supportive organizational culture is more important to this study's millennial practitioners than participating in a formal mentorship program. Some believe an informal mentorship program is more authentic and effective. Participants believe that it is up to organizational leadership teams to facilitate formal or informal mentorship systems to foster leadership development of new employees. A participant admitted, "One of the reasons that I'm here and doing well here is that we have such strong senior leaders who care about their teams." Successful organizations have a "clearly laid out track for advancement" and actively and consistently nurture promising millennials:

> [My mentors are] able to share more information with me about how decisions are made here, which then helps me better understand how business decisions are made, so that I can grow even more quickly, and really be more of an agent of change within my peer set…. I'm asking questions, and hearing information, and getting opportunities to be more involved in business decisions—or, hear about those types of things.

Further, organizations that intend to hire top public relations talents should be aware of millennials' stance of the issues of gender equality and multiculturalism:

I actually think more women in different multicultural backgrounds need to be leaders because then, once we have more leadership from Latinos, or Asian communities, or the Black communities in the PR space, then we can actually mentor up-and-coming people who are from different backgrounds too – so, there is more diversity in the leadership workforce.

RQ 5: Do the participants consider themselves leaders, mentors or both? Do they believe leadership development and mentorship are intertwined?

The vast majority of study participants said they consider themselves formal leaders at

work. A majority of them reported playing additional (both formal and informal) roles within industry organizations (e.g., PRSA), within their communities (e.g., church), as well as being leaders among their peers, who reach out for guidance and advice. A participant said, "Yes [I am a leader]. I would say professionally with peers; this definitely has been in my role for a while now. And so definitely I'm kind of a go-to for things and also just kind of a sounding board as well. So I do feel like I'm at least in my organization, I am seen as a leader."

Another respondent said:

I feel like the opportunities for me to demonstrate my leadership abilities are what kind of help me to say it without saying it. I'm very proactive, in terms of jumping at opportunities to lead. So I am currently the youngest person on the state PRSA Board. I internally jump at opportunities for things. Like I mentioned, whether it's dropping a blog post for our agency blog about a current hot topic, or things like that….

All but one participant considered themselves to be a mentor as well. The person who said he was not a mentor did say he might have mentored people indirectly. Participants reported mentoring their younger colleagues, interns and students. Participants reported modeling their mentors while mentoring others. A participant said, "I would say [mentoring] professionally with peers, definitely, has been in my role for a while now. And so definitely I'm kind of a go-to for things; also just kind of a sounding board as well."

Importantly, all participants said leadership and mentorship overlap. A majority believed, as one participant stated, "I think one can be a mentor without being a leader, but you can't be a leader without being a good mentor." Another respondent explained: "I would say that I have learned a lot of my leadership—what to do and what not to do—from my mentors. So, I would say maybe they cross inadvertently. I don't know that they're meaning to teach you leadership skills in our mentoring relationship, but I've certainly learned from them how I would have handled the situation differently."

A participant pointed out that "to be a good leader you should also be able to mentor so that people can learn from you and be leaders themselves." Another respondent noted that "mentors recognize mentees' leadership abilities even before they [mentees] realize they can lead."

Discussion

Talent management, or attracting and retaining millennials, has become a key organizational challenge (Meng & Berger, 2017). This study extends previous research on millennial communication professionals by examining their perceptions of whether and how mentorship, leadership development, and organizational culture have helped them succeed.

Mastery of PR leadership dimensions

Even these relatively young, accomplished PR professionals feel the pressure of today's dynamic communications sphere, and as a result, many believe they are still learning

communication techniques/tactics and how best to manage them—a finding at odds with the Martinelli and Erzikova (2017) leadership development cycle study, which indicated this dimension was a "first step" in professional PR leadership development. At the same time, many—albeit a lesser number— reported still learning strategic decision-making skills, which is consistent with the previous study's findings that this ability is mastered later in one's career. While half of the participants felt particularly competent in their relationship-building skills, only one reported feeling that way about ethical decision making.

Leadership development and practice

Organizational leaders who have been successful in hiring and retaining top millennial talent are seen as open and approachable, and effective leadership and mentorship practices are viewed as intertwined. Although most participants believe mentors do not have to be formal leaders, they believe leaders should mentor others if they are to be effective in their roles.

In accordance with Martinelli and Erzikova's (2017) study, participants believe being given or taking opportunities to lead is the most effective leadership development activity, i.e. practicing leadership is more effective than either formal or informal leadership training. In addition, participants believe that successful organizations offer millennials opportunities to lead under senior employees' guidance and articulate a clearly defined path for advancement.

Mentorship

Although we may think millennial PR professionals are different from older generations, they are clearly watching and observing family members, leaders and senior colleagues as role models to emulate, while also recognizing their own influence on peers. Consistent with previous research (Godshalk & Sosik, 2003), learning-oriented mentees received more support from mentors. The vast majority of participants said they currently have formal and/or informal mentors, with most having multiple professional mentors, either within or external to their current organizations (or both), and they consider themselves to be mentors as well. Their most commonly named influential mentors, professionally speaking, are current or former organizational leaders and/or senior colleagues. As in the Martinelli and Erzikova (2017) study, family members were again cited most often as being the most influential mentors in their lives overall.

Implications

This study suggests that the technical savvy expected of and reported by millennials in previous research (Meng & Berger, 2017) could be fading. With the emergence of Generation Z and the rapidly changing communications environment, what was viewed in the Martinelli and Erzikova (2017) leadership development study as a prerequisite to leadership development (competence in communication knowledge management and expertise) is now an area of competency concern among many of these award-winning millennial PR professionals.

Perhaps even more concerning in terms of leadership development, a firm grasp of communications ethics may be lacking. This finding corroborates a Neill and Weaver (2017) study, funded by the Arthur W. Page Center and PRSA Board of Ethics & Professions Standards, which found that a large majority of millennial practitioners did not feel prepared to offer ethics counsel at work, and a lack of mentors and training contributed to that inadequacy. Sadly, a 2018 study by Deloitte found that less than half of millennials overall believe businesses behave ethically, down from 62% the previous year (Brinded, 2018). Michele Parmelee, global talent leader at Deloitte, was quoted as saying, "They don't believe business shares their values, they don't think business is doing enough to prepare them for the future, and they don't feel business is sufficiently committed to improving society" (Brinded, 2018).

In such a climate, even highly accomplished, relatively young PR professionals should be given ongoing development opportunities to help them be more competent and feel more confident in ethical communications practice and in incorporating emerging, digital and social media, analytics, and measurement as part of strategic program planning and management. This recommendation is underscored by Meng and Berger's (2017) findings that professional leadership development opportunities were rated low by millennial communications professionals, and that providing greater opportunities for mentorship and professional association development and training opportunities were noted among the areas of greatest need for improvement.

Organizational/PR leaders might also consider offering open door office hours or regularly scheduled open "brown bag" lunch sessions, where senior leaders can interact more personally with junior-level employees on an informal basis in an authentic way to socialize and to answer questions about the organization, decisions, business climate, vision, etc. and obtain younger employees' feedback and perspectives. Such opportunities for dialogue could help enhance the workplace culture through establishing a deeper sense of organizational vision, mission, values, community, trust, openness and fun. Research by Stanton (2017) found that, regardless of generational cohort, engaging with employees on an individual level creates long-lasting bonds and is positively associated with enhanced job satisfaction and engagement.

Intentionally pairing more senior-level employees with younger ones on projects, where the two regularly meet to discuss progress, challenges and decisions, and where the younger employee is given leadership responsibilities, could help foster a greater sense of team collaboration, help hone strategic decision-making skills, and help reinforce the foundation of

ethical decision making as well. Such actions could help buoy perceptions of work place culture and help attract and retain millennials in the work place. Having an open and positive culture with better and more frequent managerial communications and mentoring and providing growth and development opportunities were listed as important factors for the majority of millennials in the Meng and Berger (2017) study. Helping millennials to advance through leadership opportunities and exposure to organizational decision-making can help contextualize and personalize the process of engaging millennials in systematic and strategic leadership development, they said, and their findings were reinforced in this study.

The current project also illuminated specific implications for the public relations curriculum. Opportunities to connect theory and practice at the college level emerged as a vital step in preparing students for a future leadership role. As Shatto and Erwin (2016) argued, "More than any of the current generations, Generation Z students learn by observation and practice" (p. 253). This study recommends incorporating real-life PR projects (e.g., campaigns for local clients) in class and/or PRSSA activities. Based on participants' comments, some PRSSA chapters are leadership hubs that facilitate students' professional growth through such activities as job shadowing, workshops, seminars, networking, building relationships with community, and various mentoring opportunities (e.g., professor–student, practitioner–student, younger and more experienced student).

Conclusions

The uncertainty in communication ethics and communication management and expertise are concerning. The need for enhanced mentorship and opportunities to practice leadership are clear. In the leadership development study, Martinelli and Erzikova (2017) found that mentoring was highly valued by both mentors and mentees across cultures. This current study seems to reinforce the need for professional development to remain current and confident; a safe, caring work place community to enhance risk tasking and work place commitment; a professional network to help feel connected and ease anxiety; open, honest and constructive feedback to facilitate growth, advancement and leadership; and ethical role models. In today's rapidly changing environment, millennials face great professional pressures and many still regard senior colleagues and leaders as role models. As such, these senior colleagues should work concertedly to further facilitate millennials' development, so they may confidently lead and enhance our dynamic profession, as they usher in and incorporate talented Generation Z within it.

Limitations and future research

This study examined if, to what extent, and how mentorship, leadership development and organizational culture helped 25 award-winning millennial PR practitioners become recognized as successful young professionals. The insights collected from this limited number of selected interviewees are not generalizable and, thus, may or may not be reflective of other successful millennials who practice public relations in the US. However, some findings were consistent with previous studies (e.g., Berger & Meng, 2014; Meng & Berger, 2017; Martinelli & Erzikova, 2017) and thus, lends credence to them.

The study identified common patterns and differences that deserve future investigation.

For example, data showed the importance of organizational culture in leadership development. A future study might examine best practices of leadership-rich organizational cultures. The study also showed that participants tended to pick mentors who are leaders. Future research should examine well-recognized industry leaders' approaches to fulfilling both professional roles – leader and mentor, and the fact that participants associated the beginning of leadership development with their most memorable leadership experience also deserves examination; for example, what elements combine to make it memorable and impactful? Finally, differences and similarities in leadership development, styles and preferences should be explored among and contrasted with Generation Z.

Acknowledgment

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Appendix A
Semi-structured interview questions

1. When and under which circumstances did you begin learning/developing the following leadership dimensions:
   - self-dynamics

- team collaboration
- ethical orientation
- relationship-building skills
- strategic decision-making capability
- communication knowledge and expertise?

2. Which of the identified leadership dimensions do you feel particularly competent in at this point of your career?
3. Which do you believe you are still learning/acquiring/striving to improve? Are you given opportunities to do so?
4. What was the role of formal education (K–12, university) in your professional leadership development?
5. What kinds of professional leadership development have you completed at this point in your career?
6. Were you mentored while at K–12 and/or university? Do you have mentors now?
7. Do you believe mentors have contributed to your professional success? If yes, in what ways?
8. Who would you consider to be your most influential <u>professional</u> mentor?
9. Who would you consider to be your most influential mentor overall (i.e. in any capacity: personal, academic, peer, professional …)
10. What does your current employing organization do well in terms of mentorship and leadership? What do you believe your organization could do better/differently?
11. To what degree and in what circumstances do you consider yourself to be a leader (i.e. formal/informal leader personally, academically, community, with peers personally/professionally?) A mentor?
12. Based on your experience, to what degree, if any, leadership and mentorship overlap?
13. Any other issues related to leadership development and mentorship that you believe we should discuss?