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Emerging Scholars: Empowering the Ensemble: Followership Practices in Collegiate Student-Led A Cappella

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This scholarship-to-practice paper examines a popular campus activity: collegiate student-led a cappella. As musical groups that sing without instrumental accompaniment, collegiate a cappella groups are often student-run without the direction of faculty or staff. While a formative opportunity for students to develop skills of self-authorship and community building, a cappella groups can face challenges in leadership. Guided by the premise that understanding the importance of leader and follower interaction, this paper explores a workshop designed to empower the development of followers within a cappella groups.

Introduction

Contemporary a cappella is a common practice in higher education. Student-led groups work together to sing songs in popular genres without any instrumental accompaniment (Duchan, 2012). As student-led groups, they rely on their undergraduate members to make both musical decisions, such as song selection, and leadership decisions, such as managing conflict. With typically only one music director and an executive board for managerial tasks, groups can execute democratic strategies for formal decisions (Berglin, 2015). That said, the lack of association with a formal leadership development program may leave room and opportunity for groups to develop skills to engage in effective leader and follower practices.

Contemporary leadership theories consider the interaction between leaders and followers within the context of their work (Foley, 2015; Hughes et al., 2022; Kellerman, 2016). Scholars, such as Kelley (1988), paved the way to understand the role and significance of followers in leadership models. Focusing on Chaleff's (1995) model of followership styles and grounded in prominent student leadership development competencies described by Seemiller (2013), this paper describes the workshop: *Ensemble Leadership: Leveraging Strengths Beyond the Sheet Music,* an a cappella workshop that provides student-led a cappella groups the opportunity to understand their own leadership perspectives, learn about followership, and practice empowering behaviors within the context of a rehearsal simulation.

Collegiate Student-Led A Cappella

A cappella or "in the chapel style", synonymously understood as singing unaccompanied by instruments, is a centuries-old musical artform which predates even its own name (Clark, 1969). While the Italian-originating name, *a cappella*, rose in the 18th century to differentiate the musical style, Renaissance polyphony, from other practices at that time (Holmes, 2001), the practice of singing without other instruments dates back even earlier, with records of religious practice of a cappella performances in 70 A.D. or secular practices in 150 A.D. (Kegerreis, 1970). A cappella showed some emergence in United States higher education institutions in the 19th century where collegiate glee clubs arose from Harvard, Yale, and others (Duchan, 2007).

The formation of collegiate groups spiked in the 1990s with 313 new groups beginning in colleges across the United States. At the time, male groups were the most popular with over 700 male groups in existence by 2005 compared to under 300 female groups and even less mixed gender groups (Duchan, 2007). These proportions have likely since changed with a cappella groups now being an expressive outlet for students to find their gender and sexuality and breaking its binarized, exclusive roots (Mantie & Talbot, 2020).

It is common practice for collegiate a cappella groups to be student-led, where faculty advisors are typically a nominal role required by the university (Mantie & Talbot, 2020). While students do not need to formally study music, possessing musical independence or the "ability to evaluate, select, refine, and perform" music without help allows student-led a cappella groups to function without faculty assistance (Berglin, 2015, p. 53). Informal pedagogy (Cain, 2012) or nonformal learning (Haning, 2019) arises as musical practice is led by students who do not yet hold musical or teaching degrees, if these students even major in said degree programs. Regardless, a cappella groups can exhibit democratic functionality where members collaborate or vote on repertoire, solo designations, and other decisions (Berglin, 2015; Haning, 2019).

While collegiate student-led organizations can offer students opportunities of self-expression (Mantie, 2013) and practical experiences running organizations (Komives et al., 2009), these groups can also face several challenges. While it is typical that the person in charge of leading musical rehearsal, the music director, is musically independent, they are likely new or inexperienced in teaching. While this can be an opportunity for students to develop, their time to do so is limited. As university-bound student organizations, collegiate a cappella group members typically do not stay beyond graduation. This means there is always a rotation of students joining and leaving the group assuming students attend four-year undergraduate institutions. High turnover in any type of organization can make long-term growth and sustained success a great challenge (Huang et al., 2021). For a cappella groups, they must balance both musical and technical considerations, such as balanced voice parts, as well as extramusical strategies, such as leadership structure and group dynamics (Sharon et al., 2015).

As student-led organizations, collegiate a cappella groups can mirror student organization executive board structures: president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary, with the addition of the music director. As a cappella groups have unique needs, they may have different leadership titles or roles, including business or performance manager (Sharon et al., 2015). While there is

diversity in administration roles, it is typically the sole responsibility of music director to lead rehearsals. With the remaining members presumably functioning as followers within the context of the rehearsal, this leaves opportunity for groups to leverage followership practices to enhance the overall sense of engagement, empowerment, and execution of their mission.

Recognizing Styles of Followership

Origins of Followership

The exploration of leadership studies has changed over the years with 19th and 20th century scholars narrating "great man theories", which fixate on traits individual leaders hold (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). While controversial at the time, later 20th century research began investigating factors that impact leadership effectiveness beyond the traits a single individual holds. Scholars, such as Fielder (1967), began to recognize the prominent role followers and the context in which leaders and followers interact play in the practice of leadership in his contingency theory. Further, Hollander (1978) contextualizes these ideas in his transactional approach to leadership, arguing the importance of the dynamics between leaders and followers. This contributes to more contemporary leadership models, such as Hughes et al.'s (2022) interactional framework for analyzing leadership. This interactional framework not only highlights the impact of the individual parameters: leader, followers, and the situation, but it also explores how the parameters interact with one another to make leadership either more or less effective. They argue the complexity of interactions and factors which contribute to leadership necessitate observation through various parameters.

Kelley (1988) reframed followers as a necessity for the success of organizations and understanding the practice of leadership. Several theorists also generated models of followership to understand how follower behaviors, motivations, and goals vary between individuals and contexts. Kelley (2008) later authored dimensions for understanding followership styles, such as how independent followers are in their critical thinking and how active followers are in their engagement in the organization. Observing followers through different lenses provides pathways to understand followers within one's own organizations, teams, and groups.

Chaleff's Five Dimensions

Another prominent followership scholar is Chaleff (1995) who continued the work of understanding the role of followers within the contexts of various systems in relation to leaders. Chaleff (2008) poses that followers do not serve a leader but instead work with leaders to serve a common purpose. With the aim to shift how society understands followers from a pejorative term to an empowering role to contribute to change and reaching goals, Chaleff poses five dimensions necessary to encapsulate *the courageous follower*:

> 1. The courage to support the leader and do everything possible to contribute to the leader's success. 2. The courage to assume responsibility for the common purpose and act whether or not receiving direct orders from the leader. 3. The courage to constructively challenge the leader or group's behaviors or policies if these threaten the common purpose. 4. The courage to participate in any transformation needed to

improve the leader-follower relationship and the organization's performance. (Chaleff, 2008, p. 72)

Two of these dimensions, the courage to challenge and the courage to support, lead to Chaleff's styles of followers which acts as the foundational theory for the a cappella followership development activity explored in this paper. The next section explores these styles in depth and how members of a cappella groups can leverage them in rehearsal settings.

Significance of Followership

Students can develop as followers within the classroom in educational settings (Johnson, 2009). Various scholars created pathways for students to explore the interconnected nature between leaders and followers and understanding the prominent role followers play in the dynamic of organizations (Raffo, 2013). Followership education is not limited to leadership classrooms. Music educators explore student participation in ensemble settings where directors engage many student musicians in bands, orchestras, and choirs. Orzolek (2020) described high levels of engaged and effective followership in various parts of ensemble settings, such as modeling warm-ups and sectionals, sharing constructive criticism, supporting goals inside and outside of rehearsals, and reflecting on individual effort in relation to the ensemble.

Beyond the classroom, students can develop as more effective leaders and followers in student organizations. Rosch and Collins (2017) described the significance of participating in student organizations to develop their leadership abilities, such as exploring self-authorship, increasing self-awareness, and developing effective interpersonal behaviors through navigating various responsibilities, receiving peer feedback, and collaborating with peers to develop strategic decisions.

Practicing Followership in A Cappella

Workshop Context

A Cappella Education is a non-profit that provides musicians opportunities and resources to perform music, develop skillsets, and share their knowledge and passion for a cappella (A Cappella Education, 2025). One of the A Cappella Education's initiatives is holding three-day event which comprise of group performances, masterclasses, and workshops titled The National A Cappella Convention (NACC). With over 20 high school and collegiate a cappella groups engaged in each festival, NACC is an ideal environment for student-led a cappella groups to enhance their followership understanding and skillset through a workshop. For the 2025 NACC, this paper's author developed and facilitated a workshop titled *Ensemble Leadership: Leveraging Strengths Beyond the Sheet Music.*

Workshop Framework

The design of this workshop was grounded in followership development theory (Chaleff, 2008) and co-curricular learning frameworks (Seemiller, 2013). Seemiller identifies competencies, such as self-awareness, communication, and collaboration, as essential to holistic leadership

development. To achieve this, the workshop utilized Chaleff's (1995) styles of followership as a framework in a rehearsal simulation. By identifying different follower styles a cappella members hold when contributing to rehearsals, students could explore how members can deepen their connection to the rehearsal process and adopt inclusive behaviors to increase engagement.

Chaleff's (2008) styles of followership are products of two courageous follower dimensions: the courage to challenge and the courage to support. This results in four different styles of follower. A follower with a low level of challenge and support for their leader is known as a resource. Resources only contribute minimum engagement to retain their membership in an organization. A follower who does not support yet will challenge their leader is known as an individualist. Individualists may speak up when other followers do not, yet they will not productively support leaders in seeking solutions and making change. Completely opposite of an individualist, a follower who supports but does not challenge their leader, is known as an implementor. Implementors will execute leader requests, yet will not warn them to avoid mistakes if it requires disagreement or conflict. Finally, a partner both highly supports and challenges their leader to serve the common purpose of the group. To introduce these follower styles and explore how leaders can empower followers to develop supportive and constructive behaviors to become partners, Chaleff (2008) recommended hypothetical scenarios, role-playing activities, and coaching applications.

Workshop Procedure

Aligned with leadership development models applicable to co-curricular education, the workshop was designed to exercise students' self-awareness, communication, and collaboration (Seemiller, 2013). By implementing Chaleff's (2008) strategies, Seemiller's competencies were woven through the workshop's four phases: (1) Understanding Leadership Perspectives, (2) Identifying Styles of Followership, (3) Simulating Follower Empowerment, and (4) Analyzing Applications Beyond NACC.

Phase 1: Understanding Leadership Perspectives

The first phase aimed to stimulate participant self-awareness and communication by prompting students to ideate and verbally articulate their preconceived notions about leadership. The first of two brainstorm questions asked students, "In one word, what do you believe leadership to be?" After a silent minute of reflecting and generating their response in writing, students verbally shared their responses to the entire workshop group. After briefly drawing connections between responses, students were posed with a second question: "What is a follower?" After another silent minute, students were instead asked to raise their hand if the word had a negative connotation. This transitioned into the second phase with the aim to destigmatize the word follower and instead elevate its prominence in the leadership framework.

Phase 2: Identifying Styles of Followership

The second phase further engaged participant self-awareness by challenging students to consider their leader and follower biases while posed with frameworks and models likely foreign to them. Exploring the Hughes et al. (2022) Interactional Framework of Analyzing Leadership allowed

students to visualize the need for both leaders and followers to achieve shared goals within the context of a given situation. Any change to the leader, follower, or their situation can impact how the three parameters interact with one another. This created a pivoting opportunity to discuss Chaleff's four styles of followership. Engaging in hypothetical pedagogical strategies, each style was introduced through a story about a hypothetical a cappella singer who embodied the style to provide levity and allow for students to assimilate their own experiences with the example shared. Understanding there were likely a mix of students who held leader positions looking to strengthen their skills and followers looking to make greater contributions to their group, the next phase aimed to demonstrate how (1) leaders can guide all followers to the partner style through empowering behaviors and (2) followers can challenge and support leaders to serve the shared goals of their group.

Phase 3: Simulating Follower Empowerment

Rooted in collaboration and communication, the third phase was the rehearsal simulation, inviting students to collectively learn music, navigate challenges in real time, and generate solutions together. The author of this paper functioned as the facilitator of the rehearsal, providing all students with sheet music they have never seen before. The facilitator emulated an a cappella music director by teaching students music. After splitting the students into four voice part sections: soprano, tenor, alto, and bass, and distributing sheet music, the facilitator distributed note cards to a random selection of students. Each note card had two messages. The message on the outside of the folded card provided directions for the student to act out behaviors emulating one of the four follower styles. Once a student began acting out their notecard role, the facilitator would address the behavior using an inclusive behavior which would recognize the follower style and encourage both support and challenge. Once demonstrated, the student would read the inside of the card which was a first-person statement describing the perspective of the follower and why they might have demonstrated their assigned behavior during rehearsal. This note aimed to humanize the various behaviors and perspectives of different followers to leaders and other followers who behave differently. Table 1 outlines an example of each note card follower role and its correlating behavior prompt, leader response, and behavior motivator.

Phase 4: Analyzing Applications Beyond NACC

Finally, phase four provided a reflective opportunity for all students. In this section, students were prompted to reflect on which type of follower they typically embody, which type of follower with which they struggle interacting, and realizations they have not considered before the activity. The facilitator finished the workshop by opening the space to all questions, whether they were questions about specific leadership challenges faced in a student's group or broad questions about growing as a leader or follower. By framing the applicational reflection through a broader context of student leader and follower development, the activity solidified Seemiller's (2013) student leadership competencies of self-awareness, communication, and collaboration.

Table 1. *Note Card Roles, Behavior Prompts, Leader Response, and Behavior Motivator.*

Note Card Role	Behavior Prompt	Leader Response	Behavior Motivator
Implementor	Your music has missing lyrics, likely a printing error. Try to sing the lyrics that make sense to you, but do not ask the director for help.	Recognizing this challenge only after the Partner (next card), thank the Partner, apologize to the Implementor, and ask for the two to share this rehearsal. It is important to acknowledge the director's mistake and remind the group they are encouraged to point out mistakes like this.	I cannot read my music, but I am too nervous to interrupt the director. I do not want to distract from the group's work. I will try my best with what I have in front of me.
Partner	Your neighbor's partner has missing lyrics, likely a printing error. Raise your hand to let the director know and offer to share music.	Same response as above (a paired card role).	It seems like my neighbor is facing a challenge. I want to let my director know so they can make a correction. I am willing to share my music in the meantime.
Resource	Your part has a lot of rests, and you are not being asked to sing. Pull out your phone and look distracted.	Instead of calling out the resource, call them into the decision-making process as they do not have a singing role. Have them stand on a chair to add levity and energize both the singer and the rest of the group. Task them to offer insights from what they hear from a new vantage point in the next run-through and offer suggestions.	My parts are usually easy, and I don't sing often. It makes rehearsal boring. I feel like I am not valued, and my role is not as important as everyone else.

Individualist	You realize that the music is being sung with little musicality. With frustration, complain to the music director about this. Only after prompted, share the idea to enhance dynamics through shaping.	Instead of shutting down the singer for their comment, empower the singer to also support the group by making a recommendation on how to enhance the section after the next sing through. This allows time for the singer to generate a supportive suggestion.	I feel like I have a lot of ideas to offer, but no one believes in me. I am frustrated that we do not sound better.

Recommendations

Beginning the workshop with an opportunity for students to articulate their understanding of both leadership and followers not only helps them think critically about these terms but also provides the facilitator with a gauge on the room's general understanding. The leadership question generated responses commonly focused on an individual person instead of a group or process. Most students raised their hands when asked if their follower answer held a negative connotation. These provide the collective group a starting point in their leadership perspective and important transition into both the interactional framework and styles of followership. Beginning with the interactional framework offered students a model which showcases how leaders, followers, and situation/context interact with one another. It is important to offer examples of each follower style so that students can imagine group members or themselves who may potentially demonstrate similar behaviors. Offering hypotheticals with levity not only humanizes each style but also makes the flaws of each non-partner style acceptable for students with which to identify.

Role-play simulations can help students identify styles of followership and how to address them (Chaleff, 2008). It is vital to simulate follower styles within rehearsal simulations as this is where students would realize these behaviors and understand how they can shift their interactions in constructive ways. By incorporating the behavior motivator on the inside of the card, students could get an insight look as to why a follower may demonstrate a particular behavior. Not all followers behave the same way because they think differently and are motivated differently (Hughes et al., 2022). It is recommended to take time to pause and have students reflect on how the motivator connects to the behavior demonstrated.

Finally, taking time to open the floor for questions can allow students an opportunity to consider how they can apply lessons learned from the workshop to their own groups. It is recommended that the facilitator prepares questions in case students need guidance reflecting on takeaways of the activities. Reframing questions to not only be applicable to multiple groups but also as an opportunity as opposed to a complaint can also showcase to students that as leaders, they will need to uplift challenging followers to guide a positive change in behavior.

Conclusion

Developing leadership and followership practices can be challenging in student-led organizations as groups function without the guidance of individuals beyond their own group members. Placing students in an environment where they can actively engage leadership scholarship with their organizations provides a practical and direct path of student leadership development. Furthermore, offering simulation workshops where students engage in analyzing their leadership biases and practice behaviors while considering diverse follower styles can help groups enhance how they interact with each other. With the desire to continue improving workshops like this, the author aims to continue bringing opportunities to student-led a cappella groups. These campus activities can provide students an opportunity to not only develop as an a cappella group but also cultivate transferable skillsets of collaboration, problem-solving, and innovation beneficial beyond the sheet music.

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