COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF FOREIGN-BORN AMERICAN LEADERS: PATHWAYS TO STRATEGIC SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

Leadership has become one of the hot topics with universal appeal, and the interest in leadership is growing very fast. People are captivated by the idea of leadership, and they seek more information on how to become effective leaders. "Generally, leadership is a highly sought-after and highly valued commodity" ([31], 2001, p. 1), but still leadership remains an ambiguous, vague, and frequently misunderstood concept [41].

The focus of this paper is on personal traits that contributed to foreign-born American leaders' successes, the challenges they have overcome, and strategies they have used to overcome these challenges. The study documented the unique traits and success strategies of each participant.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As Stogdill's [38] review of leadership shows, there are as many definitions of leadership as people who have tried to define it: It is a lot like the words *democracy, love,* and *peace.* Even though each of us naturally knows what he or she means by such words, the words can have different meanings for different people. In spite of the large number of ways that leadership has been conceptualized, several components can be identified as central to the occurrence of leadership. Northouse [31] explains: They are (a) leadership is a process, (b) leadership involves influence, (c) leadership occurs within a group context, and (d) leadership involves goal attainment. . . . Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a   group of individuals to achieve a common goal (p. 3).

Northouse [31] adds that, although leaders and followers are closely linked, it is the leader that often initiates the relationship, communicates, and maintains the relationship in a way that shows that "leaders are not above followers or better than followers" (p. 4).

Trait Versus Process Leadership

 The trait view conceptualizes leadership as a property or set of properties possessed in changeable degrees by different people [23]. This suggests that it exists *in* select people and restricts leadership to only those who are believed to have special, usually inborn, talents. The process viewpoint proposes it is a phenomenon that resides in the context and makes leadership available to everyone.

Assigned Versus Emergent Leadership

According to Fisher [12] when others perceive an individual as the most influential member of a group, regardless of the title, that person is demonstrating *emergent* leadership. This kind of leadership is not

allocated by position, but emerged over time through communication, by being verbally involved, being informed, seeking others' opinions, initiating new ideas, and being firm but not rigid [12]. In addition to communication behavior, Smith and Foti (1998) found personality traits to leadership emergence in a sample of 160 male college students. Other members more often identified those students who were more dominant, more intelligent, and more confident about their own performance as leaders.

Leadership and Power

As it is clear from the word, position power refers to the power that comes from a particular rank in a formal organization, but personal power refers to the power a leader derives from the followers when the leader acts in ways important to the followers. French and Raven [13] conducted a great amount of research on the bases of social power and they identified five common types of power: reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, and expert. They concluded that each type of power increases a leader's capacity to influence the attitudes, values, or behaviors of others. Burns[8], on the other side, emphasizes power from a relationship standpoint and believes that power is not an entity that leaders use over others to achieve their own ends, but it occurs in relationships to reach common goals.

Leadership and Coercion

Coercion involves the use of force to effect change and is one of the specific kinds of power that are available to leaders. Northouse (2001) emphasized the importance of distinguishing between coercion and leadership. He implies that coercive people should not be used as models of what ideal leadership is. He adds that leadership is a term that is reserved for those individuals who influence a group of individuals toward a common goal: "Leaders who use coercion are interested in their own goals and seldom are interested in the wants and needs of subordinates" ([31], 2001, p. 8).

Leadership and Management

Kotter [26] argues that the functions of management and leadership are not similar; the primary functions of management are to provide order and consistency, while the prevailing function of leadership is to produce change and movement. Bennis and Nanus [2] also believe in the significant difference between the two. They state that to manage means to accomplish activities and master routines, while to lead means to influence others and create visions for change. They state "Managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right things" [2]. Northouse [30] states, "While the study of leadership can be traced back to Aristotle, management emerged around the turn of the 20th century with the advent of our industrialized society" (p. 8).

Trait Approach

The trait approach was one of the first systematic attempts to study leadership in the 20th century [27]. In this attempt in the early 1900s, leadership studies aimed to determine what made certain people great leaders, and the theories that were developed are called "great man" theories. According to Bass [1] and Jago [23] "great man" theories focused on recognizing the characteristics and inborn qualities of great social, political, and military leaders such as Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Mohandas Gandhi. The authors mentioned that during this time it was believed that people were born with these traits and only "great" people possessed them. These theorists concentrated on determining the specific traits that differentiated leaders from the followers through their research.

In a major review in the mid-1900s, Stogdill [37] claimed that no consistent set of traits differentiated leaders from non-leaders in different situations. He stated that a leader in one situation might not be a leader in another situation; therefore leadership is a relationship between people in a social situation rather than a set quantity of traits. The personal factors related to leadership continued to be important, but scholars challenged the earlier ideas, believing that these factors were to be considered to be relative to the requirements of the situation.

Style Approach

Leaders according to the style approach engage in two primary types of behaviors: task behaviors and relationship behaviors. How leaders use these two to influence others is the central purpose of the style approach. According to Northouse [31] three different lines of research, the Ohio State University studies, the University of Michigan studies, and the work of Blake and Mouton on the *managerial grid* have originated the style approach.

Ohio State research developed the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire, which identified *initiation of structure* and *consideration* as the core leadership behaviors. Later, "the Michigan studies provided similar findings but called the leader behaviors *production orientation* and *employee orientation"* ([31], p. 52).

Blake and Mouton developed a practical model that described leadership behaviors along a grid with two axes: *concern for production* and *concern for people.* How leaders combine these orientations results in five major leadership styles: authority-compliance, country club management, impoverished management, middle-of-the-road management, and team management ([31], p. 52).

The style approach has several strengths. First it has considered the behaviors of the leaders rather than only personal traits. Second, a wide range of research supports it. Third, it considers two core dimensions of leadership behavior: task and relationship. Fourth, it provides us with a broad conceptual map, in understanding our leadership behaviors [31]. On the other hand, one of the weaknesses of the style approach is that it has not been able to associate the outcome of leadership with morale, job satisfaction, and productivity. Second, the researchers have not been able to identify a universal set of leadership behaviors for effective leadership. Third, "the style approach implies, but fails to support fully, the idea that the most effective leadership style is a high-high style ([31], p. 53). In general, the style approach is not a distinguished and polished theory that offers an organized set of instructions for effective leadership behavior, however it provides a valuable framework for assessing leadership in broad ways, such as for leadership development and training.

Situational Approach

Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson [20] studied the role of the business situation in leadership. The result of their study was the situational approach, which has been a widely recognized approach to leadership and it has been used extensively in training and development for leadership in organizations. Situational approach has been revised several times since its beginning ([4];[5];[17];[18]). The important component in the situational approach is the ability successful leaders have to adapt to a changing organizational environment. Hersey et al. [20] argued that a follower's ability, willingness, and readiness to perform tasks would influence the outcome of a leader's action. They add that situational leadership is composed of both a directive and a supportive dimension, and each has to be applied appropriately in a given situation.

Transformational Leadership

According to Bryman [6] transformational leadership is part of the new leadership paradigm. It is a process is a process that changes and transforms individuals. It is concerned with values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals. Transformational leadership assesses follower's motives, satisfying their needs, and treating them as full human beings. It is a process that considers charismatic and visionary leadership.

Northouse [31] states that transformational leadership is an encompassing approach that can be used to explain a wide range of leadership actions, from influence on one person to influence on the whole organization and even an entire culture. He adds that the leader and the followers are complexly bound together in the transformation process.

Transformational leadership and charisma. Weber [21] defines charisma as a set of special personality characteristic that gives a person superhuman or outstanding powers, and it is set aside for a few, is of divine origin, and results in that person being treated as a leader. House [21] defines the personal characteristics of a charismatic leader, as being dominant, having a strong desire to influence others, being self-confident, and having a strong sense of ones own moral values. Charismatic leaders demonstrate specific types of behaviors. First, they are strong role models for the beliefs and values they want their followers to adopt. Second, they appear confident to follower. Third, they articulate ideological goals that have moral overtones [21].

Tichy and Devanna [39] studied 12 CEO's of large corporations to find out how leaders carried out the change process. The data gathered from their interviews were categorized in a three-act process. The first act was recognizing the need for the change. The second act was creating a vision, and the last act was institutionalizing the change.

Transformational leadership has several strengths, including (a) it has a lot of current research support it, (b) it has strong intuitive application, (c) it emphasizes followers and their growth in the leadership process, and (d) it puts strong emphasis on morals and values [31]. On the negative side, transformational leadership lacks conceptual clarity, it gives a framework that might be confused with the trait approach, it sometimes seems elitist or undemocratic, it focuses on senior-level leaders, "and it has the potential to be used counterproductively in negative ways by leaders" ([31], p. 158).

Ethical Leadership

The importance of the principles of ethical leadership has been talked about from as far back as Aristotle in ancient times, and its significance is clear in a variety of disciplines including biomedical ethics (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994), business ethics [2], counseling psychology [25], and leadership education [26], to name a few. Principles of *respect, service, justice, honesty,* and *community* provide a foundation for the development of sound ethical leadership.

Ethical leaders are just. One of the major concerns of ethical leaders is fairness and justice, this characteristic helps to bring people together [33].

Ethical leaders are honest. When leaders are dishonest, people come to see them as undependable and unreliable and lose faith in what leaders say and stand for; therefore their respect for leader is diminished [24].

Ethical Leaders build community. As compared to a transformational leader that tries to move the group toward a common good that is beneficial for both the leaders and followers, an ethical leader takes into account the purposes of everyone involved in the group and is attentive to the interests of the community ([8]; [14]; [30]). According to Rost [35], ethical leadership demands attention to a civic virtue, and leaders and followers need to go further than their mutually determined goals. They need to consider the community's goals and purposes as well.

After 20 years of wrestling with the question "What is the essence of leadership?" Cashman [9] has come to the profound realization that "leadership is authentic self-expression that creates value" (p. 20).

He believes as the person grows, the leader grows. That is why all major growth and development begins with self-leadership, that is, mastery of oneself. Nash and Stevenson [29] studied hundreds of high achievers and realized that lasting success is based on making a positive difference and enjoying the process. They found that some of the most successful people have gotten where they are precisely because they have a greater understanding of what success is really about and the flexibility to make good on their ideals. The research took a look at the assumptions behind success and revealed four irreducible component of lasting success: (a) happiness, (b) achievement, (c) significance, and (d) legacy.

Daniel Golman [16] in *What makes a Leader* states that although intelligence and technical ability are important ingredients of strong leadership, *emotional intelligence* is also an essential trait. Emotional intelligence has five components. These components are self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social kills.

The purpose of this study was to explore the success strategies and common personal traits of successful foreign-born American leaders identified as instrumental to their success.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research methodology of phenomenology was applied to allow for the essence of the experience of the participants to be explored. Participants of this study were chosen through a combination of purposeful sampling strategies. All the participants were bilingual Iranian Americans who were born in Iran and came to the U.S. mainly because of social changes in Iran and they became U.S. citizens, or U.S. residents. The Iranians currently residing in the United States have achieved a high level of success in the United States due to economic prosperity at the time they immigrated. Iranian Americans are the most highly educated ethnic group in the United States. According to the 2000 Census, the percentage of Iranians over 25 years of age who have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher was at 57.2% in comparison to 24.4% for the rest of the U.S. population. In addition, more than one in four Iranian Americans (27.5%) hold a master's or doctoral degree, the highest rate among the 67 ethnic groups listed [22]. Percentage-wise, Iranian Americans hold five times the number of doctorates than the national average [22].

Iranian American leaders, as defined by this research, have either attained (a) a senior leadership position at companies with more than $200 million in assets, (b) a tenured academic position at a top-rank U.S. university, (c) a national honor, or (d) a strong standing in the community in the U.S. within the years of 2000-2005. Recommendations for the most remarkable examples of successful leaders were obtained from knowledgeable experts [28]. Through the use of maximum variation and purposeful sampling, 12 participants from a pool of candidates were selected, based on gender and different professions. In-depth semi-structured interview questions validated by a panel of experts were used to explore success strategies of Iranian American leaders. Each interview was recorded and verbatim transcriptions became the source of raw data. The researcher, to identify meaning units from the interviews, performed inductive content analysis. Two co-raters independently coded the transcripts and the results were compared with those themes identified by the researcher and consensus of themes was achieved.

Findings :

This study has shown the success strategies of foreign born American leaders. The participants, as a group, believed the characteristics/traits contributing to their success were:

1. **Self-confidence:** This theme is identified by the ability to be sure about ones competencies and skills. It includes a sense of self-assurance and the belief that one can make a difference, and a sense of personal

identity.

2. **Self-discovery:** This theme refers to knowing their individual strengths, talents, interests.
3. **Values/Ethics:** The traits include having strong values of honesty, trustworthiness, and work ethic.
4. **Vision:** This theme is identified by the ability to envision an uplifting and ennobling future, to have a dream, a mission, to see the pattern, and to establish goals for themselves.
5. **Humility:** Believing in good luck and possibilities beyond ones control, appreciating what life is giving, modest and willful, humble and fearless .
6. **Commitment:** Establishing challenges, expectations, and applying themselves with focus and patience.
7. **Persistence:** Following through, endurance, and not giving up in pursuit of goals.
8. **Optimistic:** Seeing challenges as the beginning to a new success, and willingness to tolerate frustration and delay with optimistic outlook.
9. **Family oriented:** Respecting family values, and familial influence including other, father, and extended family identifies this theme.
10. **Creativity:** The components include in theme are venturesomeness and originality in problem solving, thinking out of the box, and multi-cultural problem solving approach.
11. **Drive:** The desire to do more and more, and the drive to exercise initiative in social situations.
12. **Learner:** The traits include pursuit of knowledge, and believe in life long learning.
13. **Communication skills:** The qualities included in this category are being articulate, having people's skills, listening skills, public speaking, and being able to communicating ideas.
14. **Passion:** This theme is defined by being passionate about what they are doing and putting their heart into it.
15. **Responsibility:** This theme is identified by taking the responsibility in achieving what they think is important, and willingness to accept the consequences of their decisions and actions.

Figure **1** contains a summary of the themes and frequencies identified by the researcher associated with question one.
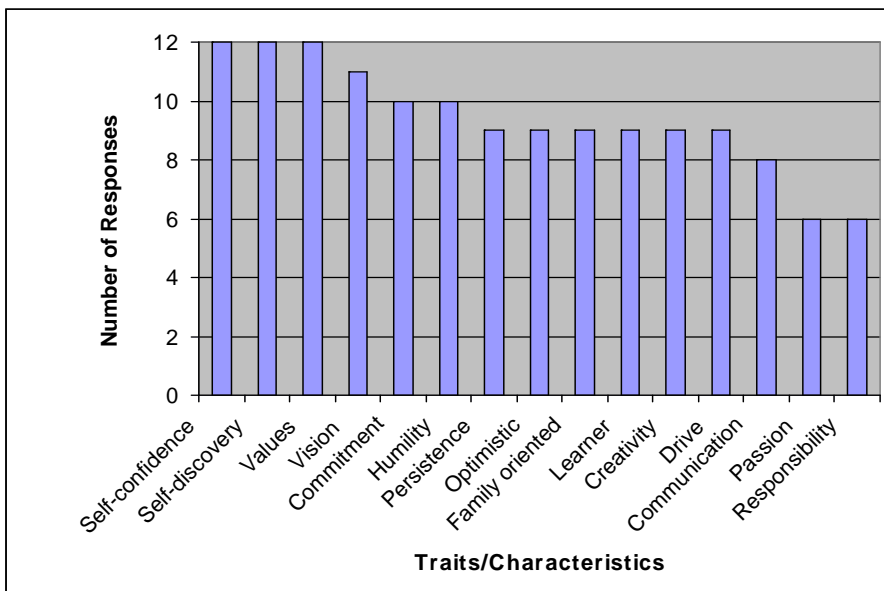

Figure 1. Frequency of response for themes identified by question one.

Some of these traits are the qualities that are traditionally associated with leadership and are aligned with the trait approach. However, themes such as self-discovery, humility, and family oriented are not clearly mentioned in the trait approach to leadership.

Self-discovery as a theme presented by all the participants is supported by Buckingham and Clifton [7] as one of the secrets of successful and fulfilled people in that they have the ability to discover their strengths and to organize their life so that these strengths can be applied. Example of this is:

"I am relatively honest person, not relatively; I am extremely honest, relatively intelligent and extremely passionate about what I do" (P12, personal communication, September 29, 2005).

Humility was a theme found by 10 of the participants in the study and is consistent with the research done by Collins [10]. He discussed a Level 5 leader that refers to the highest level in a hierarchy of executive capabilities, as an individual who blends extreme personal humility with intense professional will. Similar to Collins, other researchers also mention that "Many scientists and inventors, like artists and entrepreneurs, live in a paradoxical state of profound humility—feeling guided by forces beyond their making" ([36], p. 11). Examples of this are:

"I think everything in our life somehow was mandatory. I think I had a mission in my life, and I had to be here and I had to build this place" (P2, personal communication, August 5, 2005).

"First of all it was a very humbling experience that lots of people need in life. I think for a lot of Iranians the whole Revolution was a humbling experience. So the benefit of that brought me totally down to earth, and I realized OK, practically everything that I had taken for granted was gone, and I have to learn, really have to start and have to do everything on my own" (P3, personal com., August 6, 2005).

The findings of this study are also aligned with Goldsmith's [15] findings, which indicate that successful people tend to have four underlying beliefs: (a) I choose to succeed, (b) I can succeed, (c) I will succeed, and (d) I have succeeded (p. 10). Each of these beliefs can be labeled as self-determination, self-efficacy, and optimism. These findings are also consistent with Covey's [11] finding on character ethics, Cashman [9] authentic leadership, Covey [11] finding your voice, and inspire others to find theirs.

These leaders when speaking about their challenges, cited:

1. **Work related Challenges:** The factors include lack of work permit or U.S. residency, lack of professional network and job experience, and the challenge of finding their venue.

2. **Cultural Challenges:** The components included in this theme are cultural shock, individualistic culture vs. communal culture, stereotyping, discrimination based on religion and national origin, and language deficiency.

3. **Social Challenges:** The factors included the lack of social support, family related challenges, and political labeling inside the Iranian community.

4. **Financial Challenges:** The components include in this theme are financial limitations, and lack of money or credit.

Figure **2** contains a summary of the themes and frequencies identified by the researcher associated with question two.
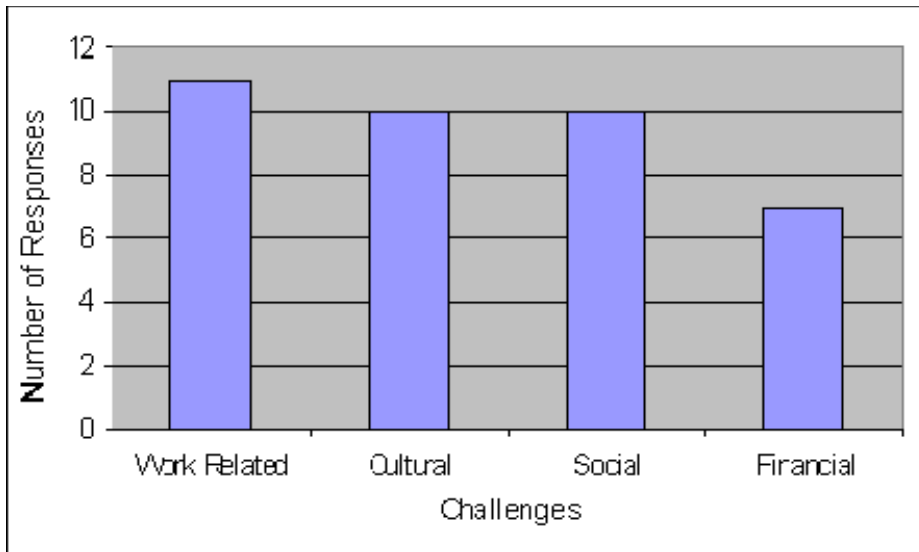
Figure 2. Frequency of response for themes associated with interview question two.

To overcome the challenges, they applied the following success strategies:

1. **Self-awareness:** Hallmarks of this ability are self-confidence, realistic self-assessment, which extends to a person's understanding of ones strengths, values and goals.
2. **Motivation:** Factors included having passion, work ethic and optimistic outlook.
3. **Social skills:** The components included building strong relationships, teamwork, community involvement, and communication skills.
4. **Bicultural Approach:** Learning work habits of different cultures, understanding the culture and the society, learning the system, and embracing both cultures.
5. **Education:** Factors included attaining good solid higher education, learning from success stories, and mentors.

Figure **3** contains a summary of the themes and frequencies identified by the researcher associated with question three.
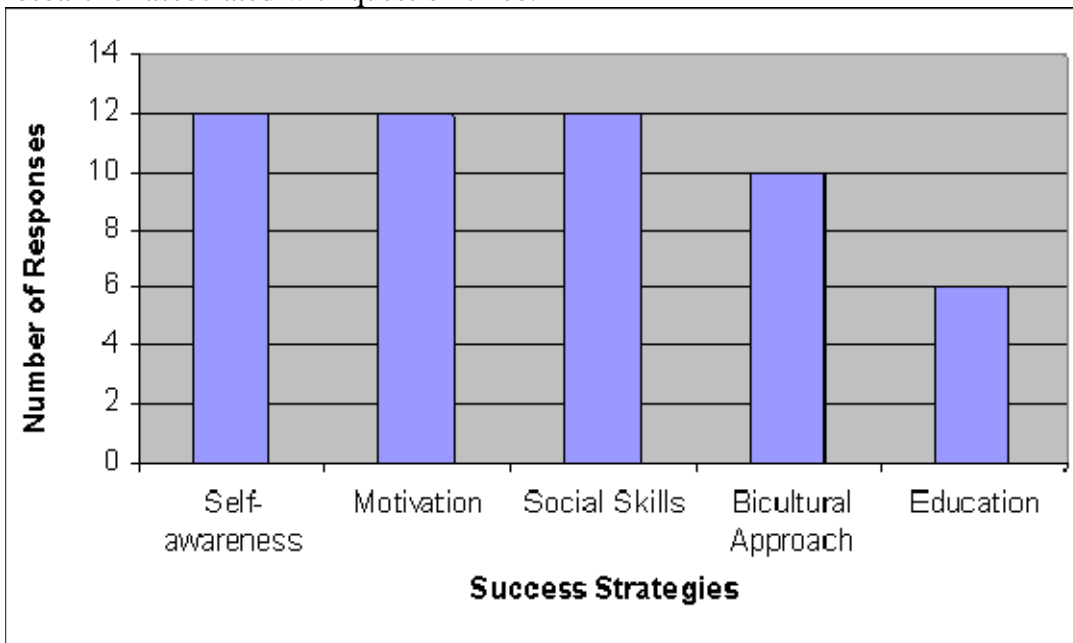

Figure 3. Frequency of response for themes associated with question three.

The themes self-awareness, social skills, and motivation are aligned with the findings of Goleman [16] that discussed the importance of these factors in emotional intelligence. Empathy is another important factor of emotional intelligence with the hallmarks of cross-cultural sensitivity and it is similar to the bicultural approach theme of this study.

Literature regarding success strategies contains numerous references that are aligned with the findings of this study. In the collective soul-searching promoted by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Nash and Stevenson [29] found that many high achievers revisited their notion of success. They discovered that the people who achieve lasting success rely on a kaleidoscope strategy to structure their aspirations. The findings of this study are also consistent with Palin-Brinkworth's [32] findings, which stated that if you have the same level of energy, skill, discipline, and will as the other guy and you are not successful, it isn't persistence that is holding you back. It is really your Glass Cage that is custom designed and developed by you. Further she states that "discipline develops dreams, so if you want something, make small commitments and require yourself to keep them. Then miracle happens" ([32], p. 2). Iranian leaders applied the same strategy and made their dreams happen.

I tried to capture their entire experience filled with trials and challenges, and ultimately with success strategies. This study was written to illustrate that there are role models among the first generation immigrants and to get their strategies on how to be successful in a new country with a different culture.

Conclusions and Implications of the Study

It is important to acknowledge foreign-born American's success, leadership and contributions for two reasons. First this study helps to fill the literature gap, to add the success strategies that were lacking in the documentation of immigrants. Second this study provides insights that can help immigrants who are still struggling to have hope and direction in achieving success. There are many ways immigrants have yet to use their influence to create positive change and become more active participants in their communities. This study provides educational benefits by describing what good leaders do, for those aspiring to be future leaders.

While challenges faced by these immigrants are not precisely the same as those experienced by other immigrant groups, they are not unique either. As such, when examining ways to prepare future immigrant groups to socially and economically succeed in the U.S., it is believed that the strategies and experiences documented in this paper can provide guidelines for developing educational and coaching opportunities.

The findings of this study may also benefit immigrants by (a) providing youth with role models to emulate and appreciation for their heritage, (b) encouraging immigrants to involve themselves in service and leadership as these role models have, (c) increase the political involvement of immigrants, and (d) building a bridge between their countries of origin and the United States.

References:
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