

Followership Styles in the U.S. Hospitality Workforce: A Multi-Generational Comparison Study

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Abstract : The latest advance in leadership research has revealed that leadership is co-created through the combined action of leading and following. The role of followers is as important as leaders in the leadership process. However, the previous leadership studies often conceptualize leadership as a leader-centric process, while the role of followers is largely neglected in the literature. Until recently, followership studies receives more attention because the character and behavior of followers are as vital as the leader during the leadership process. Yet, there is a dearth of followership research in the context of tourism and hospitality industries. Therefore, this study seeks to fill in the gap of knowledge and investigate the followership styles in the U.S. hospitality workforce. In particular, the objectives of this study are to identify popular followership practices among hospitality employees and evaluate hospitality employees' followership styles using Kelley's followership typology framework. This study also compared the generational differences in followership styles among hospitality employees. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the workforce in the lodging and foodservice sectors consists of around 12% baby boomers, 29% Gen Xs, 23% Gen Ys, and 36% Gen Zs in 2019. The diversity of workforce demographics in the U.S. hospitality industry calls for more attention to understand the generational differences in followership styles and organizational performance. This study conducted an in-depth interview and a questionnaire survey to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. A snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants working in the hospitality industry in the San Francisco Bay Area, California, USA. A total of 120 hospitality employees participated in this study, including 22 baby boomers, 32 Gen Xs, 30 Gen Ys, and 36 Gen Zs. 45% of the participants were males, and 55% were female. The findings of this study identified good followership practices across the multi-generational participants. For example, a Gen Y participant said that 'followership involves learning and molding oneself after another person usually an expert in an area of interest. I think of followership as personal and professional development. I learn and get better by hands-on training and experience'. A Gen X participant said that 'I can excel by not being fearful of taking on unfamiliar tasks and accepting challenges.' Furthermore, this study identified five typologies of Kelley's followership model among the participants: 45% exemplary followers, 13% pragmatist followers, 2% alienated followers, 18% passive followers, and 23% conformist followers. The generational differences in followership styles were also identified. The findings of this study contribute to the hospitality human resource literature by identifying the multi-generational perspectives of followership styles among hospitality employees. The findings provide valuable insights for hospitality leaders to understand their followers better. Hospitality leaders were suggested to adjust their leadership style and communication strategies based on employees' different followership styles.

Keywords : followership, hospitality workforce, generational diversity, Kelley's followership topology

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