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Final Paper – A Personal Analysis of Leadership

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Introduction

Over the semester, I have been asked to look at various theories and models of leadership and leadership practice. As I read each text, I considered whether or not I could apply the theories and approaches to leadership to my professional and academic life. I actually had not really considered my personal life all that much throughout the semester and in the past, often kept this part of my psyche separate from my obligations as an English teacher, team leader, or a doctoral student. Because of a personal desire to keep my private life exactly that – private, and because of some bad experiences in past job environments, I have kept personal issues and information close to the vest and put that part of my life into a separate category, one that almost did not apply to anything I was learning in the doctoral program. I certainly never let my personal life affect my professional responsibilities and have always completed all obligations and responsibilities due despite any turmoil at home as I always have been taught and thus considered not completing my responsibilities or folding up into a helpless ball a form of weakness.

Lately though, I am beginning to see how leadership theory could be applied to my personal life as well. A painful situation completely beyond my control had caused me to revisit many personal issues and occurrences in my life and coupled with the sentiment of Hanh, “Everything is related to everything else. Your well-being and the well-being of your family are essential elements in bringing about the well-being of your business or of any organization where you work” (Hanh, 2007, p. 41) I am just starting to reconsider and review some of the major events of my life and consider what I may need to do differently in the future in order to 1) be the leader I want to be and 2) to be happy with my life and myself. This will be a process for me and cannot be done in one week, one month, or probably even one year but may require a shift in

my thinking and in how I perceive everything else around me. Had I been writing this paper a month ago, or even two weeks ago, my thought processes might have been completely different. On the other side, if I were writing this paper next semester, with some distance from recent personal family events, I feel this paper would also be completely different. For the purposes of this paper, I am going to divide my analysis into three parts – leadership within my family, leadership in my current professional capacity, and hopes for the future. The final section will also include information about personal goals that might enhance or further my aptitude for leadership.

Comment [pme1]: It's all about context.

Leadership within My Family

To begin, I am aware that all families are complicated and have their quirks. In order to provide some succinct background, I will say that my parents are bitterly divorced and my only sister (I am three years older) and my mother have not had a relationship with each other for about 15 years. As a result, my two nieces have never met their grandmother and only know my father as “Pop Pop”. Part of my decision to move to Virginia was a desire to be able to stand on my own without interference from various segments of my family as there has always been a lot of fighting due to clashes of cultures, religions, and later, the divorce.

I am both the oldest child and the oldest grandchild in the family. My sister and I are very different people – I was and still am the academic and probably more serious one while my sister was more jovial, joking, and carefree. She is now a dental hygienist. When I was about to graduate college with my first undergraduate degree, my maternal grandfather, who my sister and I loved dearly, suffered a stroke. Eventually, over a two year period, he had a series of small strokes that paralyzed one side of his body and generally made life unbearable for him. While

starting my first job, I moved into my grandparents' home in order to help my grandmother take care of him. This care included cooking, helping my grandfather do exercises, and later, providing medication, cleaning, and relieving my grandmother when the stress of caring for my grandfather became too much. My grandfather kept his mental faculties for the entire two years but often cried loudly that his suffering was too much to bear. My grandmother and I supported each other throughout that two year period until I received a 6 a.m. phone call that told me he had gone.

In terms of leadership, I feel as if I was acting a co-leader with my grandmother, albeit without portfolio. Thinking back to that time, no one else in my family really stepped up to be there during many of the tough days. There was a concerted effort in my family not to allow my sister to see certain things in relation to my grandfather; their relationship, one of always joking around together, dictated that she would not be able to handle seeing him in the condition he was in at the time.

On the other side of my family, probably because my personality is to be very serious and often thoughtful, there is a tendency to translate that into the idea that I possibly cannot handle things and should not be told about them at all. For that reason and because I have maintained relationships with both parents throughout and after the divorce, there is a definite lack of information that often gets to Virginia. I have learned about relatives in the hospital months later and even found out only recently from someone on my mother's side of the family over spring break that my father had had surgery three weeks earlier. No one calls Virginia to give my husband and me information. The reason for this is that my father has not allowed me to have any leadership role when it comes to him or his side of the family because he believes that I have not chosen the correct side. My husband and I consider this "our punishment" for leaving New

Jersey. I am no longer under my father's control and he cannot possibly know what I am doing at all times. In contrast, my sister is very open with her life in reference to my father and is rewarded well for it. In addition, their common bond against my mother also aligns them and my relationship with my mother alienates me.

Getting back to Hanh's idea of "Everything is related to everything else," (2007, p. 41) I am convinced that my leadership skills are often developed through interactions with my maternal grandmother. In dealing with my grandfather, she and I developed an unspoken bond that often allows me to provide her comfort when others cannot. She is extremely excited when I come to visit her and has been tremendously supportive of my goal to get a doctoral degree, as I will be the first family member to do so. The thought of losing her is unbearable to me and as I write this paper, writing about her is the most gut-wrenching for me, as the recent events of the wildfires in North Myrtle Beach and the total loss of her property are still fresh in my mind. I think that Hanh's sentiment about everything being related has previously driven me to make sure that everything in my professional life was done correctly because I might have been looking for some balance or compensation for the fact that a lot of my family's activities were quite askew. On one hand, I have a wonderful relationship with my grandmother, and then on the other, I receive no information and am treated like an outsider by my father.

Another idea of Hanh's that I am attracted to right now is "True happiness is based on peace," (2007, p.81). In light of recent occurrences, I am thinking that this might be something I need to start thinking about in terms of leadership and my life in general. Life happens and I also need to start taking care of myself instead of always worrying about everyone else. Traditionally, I have been terrible at relaxation and my mind is always thinking, always moving. I often plan lessons as I lay down to sleep, write outlines for papers in my head, and create "to-do" lists. I

have occasionally asked my husband how to quiet my mind and go to sleep. I need to figure that out but I think the starting point might be is to believe that the world will not crash if I don't get everything done today.

Leadership in My Current Professional Capacity

In my current job as an International Baccalaureate (IB) English and remediation teacher, I fulfill two leadership roles – one with portfolio and one without. The leadership role that I assume with title is that of the IB English team leader and I have nine team members. As a team leader, it is my job to train (in-house) new teachers regarding IB assessments and requirements, lead meetings, and organize senior internal assessments each February. I also make myself available as a resource for teachers who have individual program questions, need assistance with parent concerns, have book challenges or have other concerns. Sometimes I also mediate between faculty members regarding curriculum.

In regards to these activities, the hardest part of my job is to navigate the different personalities I have on my team. In reviewing the literature we have studied, this semester, Michael Fullan's idea of relationship building is the most helpful to me. Relationships are extremely important and I need to know when to push and when to back away from certain members of my team. Every member of my team has a common goal – to see our students be successful on the IB English A1 HL examinations during May of their senior year. This goal unites us and it is I who has to continually keep this target in mind as I read individual wants and personalities at any given time. Talk show host Rachel Maddow said, "Humans are ambitious and rational and proud. And we don't fall in line with people who don't respect us and who we don't believe have our best interests at heart. We are willing to follow leaders, but only to the extent that we believe they call on our best, not our worst" (Johnson Lewis, 2009, para 13). I

continually ask my team members to give their students their best each day and I try to keep my direction fair, impartial and correct, realizing that these teachers have an increased load teaching IB and often have two additional preparations.

The other leadership role I fulfill at my school is one without portfolio and is one that I actually enjoy a great deal. As I have been teaching for nearly 15 years and have been at my current school for eight, I am the person in my English department with the most experience. In addition, I have taught all forms of secondary English, from 9-12, remedial to English as a Second Language, to honors, AP, and IB. In terms of curriculum, I have taught most of the accepted canon literature and also, because of the IB programme, know many non-canon works and pieces of world literature that might fit in nicely with other commonly taught works. Department members often come to me for suggestions regarding curriculum, as a mediator for problems, and as a sounding board on how to handle sticky situations with students, parents, other teachers, or administration. I like this role because I can speak openly with all department members and not always have to worry about the politics involved. Because I am not the department chair, some teachers will come to me when they do not want the information they relay to be official. I like that I am trusted in this way.

Hopes for the Future

As for the future, I realize that throughout my doctoral program, I will be revisiting the idea of leadership. In my personal life, I plan on continuing to provide support to my grandmother and will need to begin to start thinking about how to lead within my own family, with or without portfolio. In my own household and marriage, this is no issue. With relatives in

New Jersey, this may be a struggle but that's okay; I just need to keep in mind that my happiness and my peace are ultimately important.

Comment [pme2]: Yes. Always remember to pay yourself first.

In my doctoral program and academic life, I would like to demonstrate leadership through research and writing. In order to get there, I need to develop a capacity for research that will hopefully, eventually influence policy by providing research data coupled with compelling written analysis. As I was a reporter at one time, I miss writing and am eager to get back into that arena.

As for my professional life, I have recently applied for a leadership position in my school and am waiting to see what happens. This position would be an IB coordinator position and is something that I have wanted for a long time. If I am honored with this position, I can definitely see me trying to incorporate some of the ideas of Hanh, many of the ideas of Fullan, and Howard Gardner and then trying to put my own individuality into the mix. I think doing that might serve me well.

Very thoughtful and, as usual, well written. 20 points.

References

Hanh, T. N. (2007). *The art of power*. New York: HarperOne.

Johnson Lewis, J. (2009). *Respect quotes*. Retrieved April 28, 2009, from Wisdom Quotes:

Quotations to Inspire and Challenge Web site:

http://www.wisdomquotes.com/cat_respect.html