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The Leader I Am

The leader I am today is not the leader I was yesterday, and will not be the leader that I am tomorrow. Leadership is an incessant process shaped by personal experiences in the dynamic world we live in. Every interaction that I have with another person, a text, and even with myself in the form of a reflection or a realization contributes to my identity as a person and as an evolving leader.

Although my definition of leadership has evolved at a greater rate this semester than ever before in my life (through the readings, discussions, and presentations), it has been evolving my entire life – even before I even thought about it. As I wrote in detail about in a discussion thread on BlackBoard, in response to the role culture and diversity played in my life, “When most people are asked who they are, they simply respond with their first name. Although everyone has a name by which they are called by, each has a unique history of how he or she came to be how he or she is today.” I went on to tell the story of my three name changes, my adoption, and my childhood in a tiny sheltered village in Wisconsin. The village is Kimberly, and still today most everyone fits the same mold: middle-class, heterosexual, Catholic, and content not straying further than 100 mile radius from ‘home’.  
 I cannot pinpoint what it was that made me yearn to know what else there was to know about outside of the life in this comfortable bubble. It was quite possibly the fact that I myself fantasized about where else I could have ended up had I not been adopted, or even worse, had my biological mother made one *different* decision – a decision that would have cost me the opportunity of knowing what life was like at all.

Growing up, rather than conforming to the norms of the village of Kimberly, I sought to make my own judgments and decisions. I took advantage of every opportunity that I could to get to know someone *different* or travel somewhere *different*. And I learned a lot along the way. I learned that Steve Urkel wasn’t just on TV; black people really existed. I learned that sometimes people can’t control their circumstances; instead, they may be forced to manage with the social inequities served to them. And I learned that sometimes someone’s face doesn’t match their story at all, and for this reason, I am compelled to listen to the stories especially of those that no one else wants to listen to. That’s where I’ve found myself learning life’s greatest lessons – challenging conceptions and appreciating intangibles.

I don’t blame my parents or my community for their limited tolerance of ideas different from their own, but I do feel blessed to have had the chance to experience a multitude of different people, places, activities, and ideas that they have not.

From the father responsible for my creation that I have yet to meet, to the daddy that raised me in my tiny village, a mi papá en España que me cocinaba cenas muy ricas todos los dias por cuatro meses, to my ‘Big Daddy’ who asks me every single day at work if I need anything (and I mean *anything*), each has had an notable impact on my understanding of what defines a culture of success.

Throughout the semester, I was reminded of excerpts of my personal history as we analyzed the concept of leadership in a variety of books, movies, and speeches. I made connections to my past and found myself appreciating exemplary characteristics of leadership in my present boss. I also found myself becoming more self-aware of my own strengths and weaknesses as a leader.

Particularly, I uncovered a theme near the end of the course - while discussing the influence of culture on leadership (Garcia and Lee articles) - that seemed to resonate with my perception of both how my personal history and my future initiatives will continue to influence my own leadership journey. The theme is this: *You have to get comfortable putting yourself through uncomfortable experiences if you wish to be able to see through someone else’s lens.*

Let’s face it. Learning isn’t easy, or everyone would be a doctor in something or another. There is some kind of struggle that happens every time you learn something new. A learning experience in itself is a struggle to negotiate meaning against existing conceptions. Therefore, I contend that one essential attribute all leaders must have is dedication to lifelong learning.

I argue that being dedicated to lifelong learning results in becoming more cultured, and by becoming more cultured, one gains a deeper understanding of the circumstances of others. By connecting with others, one builds relationships that also lead to an appreciation of differences. The marriage of understanding and appreciation allow the leader to uncover the unique needs of others, and ultimately, be able to better serve them.

A complete worldview is not possible because omniscience is not possible for any human being. Therefore, it is impossible to perfect leadership. This conclusion brings us back to the original claim that learning must be lifelong, and that is why leadership is an incessant process.

A major theme in the book readings, especially in Fullan and Wheatley, is adaptability. Since we are unable to know everything or control everything, we must be flexible and able to react as much as we enact. The world continues to change around us, and in order to be outstanding leaders, we have to be comfortable with change.

It is extremely uncomfortable for me to feel like I am not in control. Hahn speaks to us about change in a different way than the other authors. He writes, “When something upsets you and you want to change it, stop and contemplate.” This seems obvious, but this is my weakness. For me, the discomfort of being upset and not having control is so powerful that I would rather find a way to get out of the uncomfortable state than remain there and think deeply about the best approach to deal with it.

Too often, I have regretted impulsive decisions because of my weakness. What is incredible to me is that I wasn’t aware of this weakness until I had some revelation near the end of this course. And even since, I have found it extremely difficult to correct. The process is gradual, and my patience lacks endurance. In order to become a better leader, I have to concentrate on becoming more comfortable in uncomfortable situations. This is a recurring theme. By focusing on this one matter, I will not only become more cultured and better able to see through others’ lenses, but I will be able to see more clearly through my own lens!

I truly had a tough time relating to the themes of Thich Nhat Hanh. His ideas made logical sense to me, but they just didn’t seem to fit into my lifestyle. I justified this by claiming that everyone is different, and so, it makes sense that some of the leadership lenses would resonate differently with each individual. Now, I realize that what I was *really* doing was trying to justify moving past an idea what was uncomfortable to me instead of taking the time to seriously consider it.

Most will agree that you take a liking to what you are good at. I admit that I am not good at being fully present in the moment. Hahn noted that the three wisdoms are: mindfulness, concentration, and insight – in that order. I’d like to become an insightful person. I feel like my boss is a more insightful person than I appreciated before. To become insightful, I have to get past mindfulness and concentration first. I now realize that sometimes I am so caught up in checking items off of a list that I miss out on deeper learning opportunities. And even though I often succeed at the items I’m crossing off the list, I’m failing to see the big picture.

Wheatley writes about the whole and its parts, and her message directly applies to this stage in my journey of leadership. “Seeing the interplay between system dynamics and individuals is a dance of discovery that requires several iterations between the whole and its parts. We expand our vision to see the whole, then narrow our gaze to peer intently into individual moments (Wheatley, p. 143). As Mimi also pointed out, I’d like to adjust Wheatley’s line to read ‘requires infinite iterations’ instead of ‘requires several iterations.’ With each iteration of focusing intently on a part, we gain a clearer vision of the whole, but, as I repeat again, the whole is never completely attainable. Omniscience is not within reach, and we attribute this to nonpermanence. But all great leaders continue through the infinite iterations as lifelong learners, to be as informed as possible about the changing world around them and about themselves as well. ( omniscience/the whole where f(t) is the recursive function of iterations…Sorry, had to ☺)

Being self-aware is essential in forming a vision. Gardner claims that we must first decide what we want to do and then choose our opportunities. If we choose our career first, our choice is not wholesome; it will not bring true happiness, and our destinies will suffer.

This idea of wholesomeness parallels with Hahn’s cravings and powers. Often leaders are motivated by wealth and fame, but true happiness can only come from happiness; it cannot be created. We must reflect before we act. It is important to be able to react to change, but we must create a vision first. As Gardner states in his preface, “rewards will go to creators – those who have constructed a box but can think outside it.”

Peter Stearns, George Mason’s provost, outlined four essential qualities of an academic leader. The one most related to staying true to one’s vision is ‘acknowledgement of mistakes.’ Stearns asserts that good leaders “admit, apologize, forgive themselves, learn, recalibrate, and move on.” I will extend his assertion by asserting myself that true learning after a mistake cannot take place without reflection and identifying the misconception or misjudgment. After making a mistake, it is important to get back up and onto the racetrack, but without taking a step out of traffic to recalculate (I can hear my GPS speaking to me…haha), one might get trampled instead. If the phase of reflecting on what exactly needs to be recalibrated is overlooked, one may lose sight of vision.

Thinking back to the context of education and considering particular struggles, it’s hardest when the goal is correct but the procedure is not. Most often both parties lose, but it is the leader’s responsibility to admit fault and then make necessary changes in the procedure such that the mistake is not repeated and the vision is preserved.

Mark Ginsberg, the new dean of the College of Education, spoke about depersonalizing disagreements. I always thought that I did a pretty good job respecting and embracing differences, even in difficult situations, but I never thought about ‘depersonalizing disagreements.’ Separating the agenda from the relationship is a brilliant way of facilitating a shared vision without sacrificing the relationship itself. And likely, overcoming the disagreement will result in the exact opposite – an appreciation for an opposing viewpoint.

As my own understanding of leadership continues to emerge, I will continue to honor the viewpoints of others. Whether it be anonymous surveys from teachers after a professional development presentation, formative assessments of students’ understanding, new ideas in research articles, words from a speaker or actions of a role model, by taking the time to be mindful of those around me, I will be preparing myself to be a more flexible yet mindful leader myself.

Eisner writes that it is “in our self-interest to be able to describe and appraise what we experience: It is a necessary skill in our negotiations with other and in deciding what a situation calls for (p. 86).” As I also wrote earlier about learning from the actions of a role model, Eisner goes on to talk about using observation to be able to explain and predict. He states, “Knowing what to look for makes the search more efficient. At the same time, knowing what to look for can make us less likely to see things that were not a part of our expectations.” He warns of the danger that being too focused inhibits open-mindedness, as admittedly I have been guilty of.

Lieberman’s article about making practice public is a terrific example of how we can fuse focus and open-mindedness. Making practice public encourages participants to invite criticism of others while focusing on their own particular examples from practice. Instead of using a top-down method of professional development where an administrator decides to adopt an idea, facilitate training, and expect it successfully integrated in classrooms, we now start with an example from the classroom and seek to improve the practice – making it more personal, more practical, and more relevant. Teachers have the opportunity to refine the knowledge and skills they already have, rather than being expected to adopt and use foreign ideas. Topics are not predetermined; rather, each has the autonomy to determine their areas of weakness. In this way, teachers are becoming students of their own practice. They take ownership for their ideas and are excited about modifying them in the infinitely iterative process Wheatley refers to.

Wheatley also contends that people support what they create. In this sense, a community of practice is formed as other teachers see that their input is valued. They inform each other simultaneously; all are engaged and productivity consequently increases.

One of my major job responsibilities is to be an advocate for teachers, more particularly the mathematics teachers that are members of NCTM. (Did I just call that a job? As Gardner stressed, it’s important to decide what you want to do and then seek out fitting opportunities. My profession and my passion are not separate. I feel blessed to have gotten one aspect of being a good leader mastered before this class ☺.)

My boss helped me understand the importance of giving the teachers what they want and more. What I mean by this is that teachers are all in their own points in their leadership journeys. Some just want lesson plans. I give them lesson plans, discussion questions, and a reflection for themselves. Others want multiple representations of rational numbers, for example. I give them a graphical organizer that can be used throughout the entire school year to promote flexible thinking and extensions. This not only builds trust, but it also scaffolds them into that ‘getting comfortable being uncomfortable’ state. They begin to feel comfortable in the next step of their journey and eventually understand that there is no end to their journey – that being a teacher is being a leader, and that there is always opportunity for growth.

As Fullan appreciated that leadership takes place on many different levels, I’d like to add that leaders in higher leadership positions can learn just as much from a subordinate as a subordinate can learn from them. The same applies to a teacher and a student. The student is striving to be able to see through the same lens of the teacher such that they can master the concepts, but as they struggle, it is up to the teacher to negotiate meaning with the student if he can see through her lens and craft an explanation that is within reach. In this way, teaching is an art, just as Hahn titles his leadership book The Art of Power.

Although the negotiation of meaning is reciprocal between teacher and student, it is the teacher’s responsibility to set up the environment for the learning to occur. This reminds me of another of Mark Ginsberg’s talking points. I know I changed his quote contextually, but it went something like, “Instead of asking, ‘How can I get these students ready for algebra?’ as leaders, we should be asking, ‘How can I get algebra ready for these students?’”

The leader I am today is not the leader I was yesterday, and will not be the leader that I am tomorrow. I cherish the never-ending journey, but at this time, take on the challenge to become more mindful because “mindfulness is the foundation for acting in the world in a way that reflects our true power.”

Thank you, Dr. Fox, for such an enlightening experience ☺

* Sarah

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