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Ghania Zgheib

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Professor Gary Galluzzo

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Leadership in an age of information and change

The term “leader” is a characteristic rather than a person who occupies a managing

position at a certain organization. This was based on my synthesis of the readings for this course. Any person could be in a leading position and could be a good or a weak leader depending on whether he possesses the necessary skills and the right character to maintain a learning environment that fosters a shared vision, individual/personal mastery, shared expertise, ethics, and flexibility. Thus leading does not have to be top down and anytime a person from any level contributes to the growth of an organization, he will be leading in a way. More specifically, when using the term “leader”, from my perspective, it should be referred to any person who possesses most or all of the following qualities:

* Knowledge
* Personal mastery
* Seeks advice
* Creates a learning organization
* Shared vision
* Convincing
* Ethical
* Flexible

To begin with, I believe that *personal mastery* is the most important attribute that a leader

could possess. Personal mastery is “the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively” (Senge, 2006, p.7). In other words, it is the personal growth that an individual might possess by being intrinsically motivated to learn which results in goal-setting to achieve knowledge in a field. A leader could lack knowledge in some areas, but if he possesses personal mastery, he could “be more committed… take more initiative… and learn faster” (p. 133). This enthusiasm to learn and be progressive makes a leader outstanding in some way.

Living in an information age makes *knowledge* an attribute that is equal to personal mastery. Wheatley (2006) dedicates a whole chapter in her book on the role of knowledge in creating “new order”. She also emphasizes that the lack of knowledge does not lead to creativity and development. Therefore, a leader should possess the minimum level of knowledge required to fill his position, but at the same time possess personal mastery to keep up with a progressive world of knowledge. Moreover, this age of information, where knowledge is accessible instantaneously through the web and mobile technologies, provides a competitive world of leader vs. follower. It actually eliminates hierarchies and boundaries between the two which results in more systemic, flat organizations.

Machiavelli in Connell (2005), Senge (2006), and Wheatley (2006) highlight the importance of *advice seeking*, but each approached it in a different way. Machiavelli suggests that a leader should seek advice from knowledgeable people he assigns only when they are asked to provide it. Machiavelli’s approach is team engaging when the leader allows it but at the same time dictatorial because the leader does not accept new ideas all the time. A more engaging approach to advice seeking is presented by Wheatley and Senge who emphasize the importance of knowledge sharing and team learning. I think that a successful leader should possess this modest attribute of seeking advice from other members who might be more knowledgeable in areas that he lacks knowledge in.

An organization that possesses a *shared vision* has a visionary leader who does not focus on his personal vision only but rather on that of other people in the organization. Senge (2006) highlights the significance of fostering a shared vision in an organization where the leader or any employee shares his vision and engages the employees in developing this vision for the whole organizations’ benefit. I concur with Senge who explains that a shared vision can create a big motivation for individuals to learn and work harder since they feel that they are part of the planning and execution process even if the project was extrinsically interesting to them.

To foster a shared vision, I also believe that a leader should be *convincing*. Just as Kotter and Whitehead (2010) portray Hank the spokesperson who is trying to foster a shared vision among the people of Centerville to install computers in the library, a person in a leading position should provide solid reasons and listen to others’ ideas when trying to convince others to adopt a proposition. Most importantly is the leader’s ability to provide a logical argument to convince others to adopt an idea rather than impose it on them as the Machiavellian leader is depicted.

Gardner et al. (2001) discuss the role of *ethics* in genetics and journalism at length to draw the attention to paradigm shifts in both fields and how ethics shift as a result. I agree with Gardner et al. that a good leader should possess “core values, exemplary beliefs and values, and a sense of moral identity” (p. 210) in order to possess a top-down or bottom-up leadership role. No matter how the circumstances change for a leader and how much pressure he gets, morals should play an important role in stopping anything that might go wrong. Unfortunately politics interfere in several kinds of jobs and sometimes leaders have to submissive, but a good leader is one who is not impacted by the politics and stands up for his ethics and moral values in performing his duties.

Furthermore a leader should be very *flexible* in a chaotic world (Wheatley, 2006) to accept change and learn from others. Wheatley discusses the non-linearity of the world based on the principle of quantum physics and explains that order comes out of chaos. In being systematic and linear, a leader might hold his organization off from evolving. A leader should go with the flow of what best works at his organization and adapt to what is best. “Nothing is written in stone” should be one of the core beliefs that a leader possesses. When freedom is limited, Wheatley agrees that creativity is limited as well. That’s why a good leader fosters freedom and welcomes new thoughts of others in order to nurture growth. However, this adds another layer of a leader’s attributes which is knowing how to set limits to avoid things going out of control. Allowing freedom with some kind of control on some of the irrelevant ideas is really important. Kotter and Whitehead (2010) present some characters in the Centerville case who try to distract the listeners from the central point of the meeting. A leader should have the skills to identify the people who focus on the little distractors and find a good approach to redirect their attention to the main point.

Finally, a leader cannot perceive his ideas as a separate entity from the whole organization. In all the course readings, the idea of being part of a group was emphasized. Even in Machiavelli, the idea of delegating was brought up despite the individualism of the Prince. Senge (2006) and Wheatley (2006) emphasize the importance of creating learning organizations rather than learning individuals. We belong to a world in which we cannot function distinctly from it because it is created for us and by us. Wheatley uses the term “self-reference” to describe the relationship between our independent self and how it is connected and situated in the world around us. Even Gardner et al. (2001) highlight the role of ethics in journalism and genetics to point out the impact that any job could have on the whole world. By extracting information from the world around us or from the genes of a human being, a journalist or a geneticist, are using this information to inform a larger population. Kotter and Whitehead (2010) provide us with two groups of people in the Centerville case who possess a shared vision each. It is important to see how each of them played a role in maintaining the library to its current status and how together, they were defending one cause, a library that could serve the needs of the people in Centerville.

The qualities I discussed above might all be present in one person or in different persons in an organization. A good leader can use his skills to foster a learning organization or use the skills of the individual people who possess such skills in the organization to achieve systems thinking.

Not only this course made me reflect on my own leadership skills as an instructor, but it also made me reflect on my motherhood skills, communication skills with my colleagues, husband, and friends. I was already aware of some of the leadership attributes that I possess, but I was reminded of them. I also felt that growing up in a Lebanese culture and moving to the United States has changed my leadership skills in a way. Simply by experiencing a different culture, an individual can be more aware of his existing identity and adopt other skills that might be useful to him. The graph below is a visual representation of my previous leadership skills (prior to moving to the United States), my perceptions of my current leadership skills (while in a doctoral program and living in a new country), learning experiences that could influence my leadership skills in the program, and where I aspire to be as a leader.

The chart summarizes how I perceive myself individually and connected to the world around me. I strongly reemphasize the paradigm shift in my leadership skills which I attribute to experiencing a different perspective and culture in the first place and becoming more mature and experienced as I grew older. But basically before I moved to the United States, I was more of an individualistic leader who thought of her ideas as the best but at the same time had individual personal mastery goals that were used collectively when necessary or when given the opportunity. Growing in a collective society, I learned how to share and involve others although I was sometimes “traditional” in my teaching and told my students what to do. I attribute this to a society that raised me as such and always told me what to do without questioning. I have discussed the importance of a leader to have a logical argument that could be convincing for others. Unfortunately, critical thinking was not part of the school curriculums or the culture that I grew up in, but it has improved over the years.

**Learning Experiences during the PhD Program**

**My current leadership attributes**

**My previous leadership attributes**

**My leadership goals**

I do believe that living and studying in the United States, which I consider as a free country, has changed a lot the way I perceive things. Of course, I became aware of different educational systems, communication styles, freedom of thought, flexibility, and critical thinking abilities. My enrollment in a Master’s degree and PhD program in the United States have reinforced my critical thinking abilities and gave me self-confidence and self-reference in a wider context. I have to admit that it has given me a high level of knowledge that reinforced my leadership skills. That is why in the first part of my paper, I discussed the importance of knowledge. Not only that, I also believe that my personal mastery was broadened due to the resources that are available to students in this PhD program. Working with scholars in this program, and sharing ideas with peers is a big motivator for me to develop professionally.

Along the way, I am working on setting clearer goals for myself as a leader in my field.

My ideas are scattered all over the place, but through peer interaction, coursework, and talking to my advising committee, I hope to be establish a clearer vision of what type of a leader I would like to be in my field. I always try to explore existing problems in my field and try to think about how I could contribute to my field. At this point of the program, I am trying to elevate my research skills to be able to find possible solutions for the issues that educators face in instructional design. Presenting at conferences and attending them is one way to feel involved in the field. Peer feedback is very essential as I move along this PhD program because it engages me with the views of other people in the field.

My ultimate leadership goals are stated in the chart above. Whether I get a teaching position in my field after I graduate or I get a leading position in higher education, I hope to make a change in the field of instructional design. As online learning is advancing, more research is required to make sure that quality learning is achieved through online courses and that digital learners maintain motivation and self-regulation in order to complete online courses. I would also like to look at pedagogical strategies to maximize student learning in an online learning environment. Instructional design can encompass any field of education in my opinion, and it cannot be looked at as distinct from teaching and teacher education, special education, multicultural education, etc. In all the fields of education, designing training and instruction supported by technology has become central. Therefore, I would like to develop an interdisciplinary view of a leader in the field of education who looks at different variables when designing technology supported learning environments.

Ghania, a pleasure to read. You’ve outlined some attributes that can propel you in the field. Develop your research skills; study online learning and lead the field that way. You’re in an advantageous position of entering an emerging field, like genetics was. Look at how inquiry “led” before people did. A

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