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Educational Leadership Philosophy

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What a difference seventy-two days can make! EAD 867, Case Studies in Educational Leadership, has provided me with an excellent opportunity to refine my conception of leadership. I came to this course just ten days removed from completion of EAD 801, Leadership & Organizational development. In EAD 801, with Professor Marylee Davis and Teaching Assistant Monica Marcelis Fochtman, we focused on understanding the different theories on leadership, mainly using *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, written by Peter G. Northouse in 2007 and *Leadership That Matters: The Critical Factors for Making a Difference in People's Lives and Organizations' Success*, written by Marshall Sashkin and Molly G. Sashkin in 2003. To conclude the course, we were asked to write a statement of our leadership philosophy. I finished writing mine on April 19. Seventy-two days later, it is June 30 and I am asked to define my educational leadership philosophy. Has anything changed? Do I see the leadership in a drastically different way? I will use this paper as an opportunity to reflect on where I began this course, in terms of my leadership philosophy as stated for EAD 801, my learning journey through EAD 867, and where I stand today with my educational leadership philosophy.

EAD 801: My (Previous) Leadership Philosophy

I am excited to use this exercise of defining my educational leadership philosophy to reflect on how my conceptualization of leadership has grown in just two months. In order to understand this growth, I must understand where my thoughts on leadership stood at the beginning of EAD 867. Accordingly, I am including my concluding thoughts from the leadership philosophy I wrote for EAD 801.

After undertaking a thorough and thoughtful review of my experiences with leadership and my beliefs about leadership, I could see an idea emerging of the leader I hoped to become.

Throughout the more than three months I was enrolled in EAD 801- in readings, class discussions, and assignments- the concept of transformational leadership most strongly resonated with me. Out of all the leadership approaches and theories we read about and discussed - skills, behaviors, traits, followership, situational, contingency, and path-goal – my thoughts kept returning to transformational leadership. This was partially explained by my personal definition of transformational leadership. I thought of transformational leadership as leadership that goes beyond how our class defined leadership in one of our first sessions. In our EAD 801 class session on January 22, 2009, Dr. MaryLee Davis and the class defined leadership as a process that influences others to accomplish a common goal. While our class came up with this as a most basic definition of leadership, I did not hold this kind of leadership as the best form of leadership. Getting people to accomplish common goals is difficult, but I wanted leadership to mean more than this. I acknowledged I was being idealistic about leadership, but I could think of no better arena to dream grandly than a philosophy of leadership statement.

In my most idealized view of leadership, which I termed transformational leadership, much more than accomplishing a common goal occurs. The most important parts of my idealized transformational leadership came from ideas of different leadership theorists. From Kotter and Heskett, I took the concept of “including followers’ needs in the vision” (Sashkin & Sashkin, 2003, p.182). I thought it was important to involve followers in defining a vision for an organization. In my current position as Honors College Admissions Counselor at Michigan State University, we have had a few changes in leadership. In 2007, a new Dean joined the College and in 2008, a new Associate Dean came to the organization. They have worked diligently to involve the Honors College staff, who have been with the college for a range of a few months to over twenty years, in the process of thinking critically about the college’s mission and how our

actions fit into that mission. I have realized that people work best when they believe in what they are doing.

Communication of this shared vision was another part of my idealized conception of transformational leadership. Strong vision communication is a concept shared by most leadership theorists (Sashkin & Sashkin, 2003). Paula Cunningham, former president of Lansing Community College, also strongly emphasized the importance of communication for good leadership in her comments in EAD 801, on March 19, 2009. Strong communication between the leader and followers tied directly into my first concept of idealized transformational leadership, the development of a shared vision. The leader must listen to and communicate with followers to keep them up to date and sharing in the vision.

A third concept of my idealized view of transformational leadership was empowerment of followers, another concept shared by many leadership theorists (Sashkin & Sashkin, 2003). This is a concept I have seen employed by my current supervisor, Bess German, MSU Honors College Director of Admissions & Student Affairs. When followers are encouraged to grow and develop as people and leaders themselves, the organization is strengthened and the shared vision is furthered.

An important leadership behavior in my idealized conception of transformational leadership, which underlies all three previously mentioned concepts, was charisma, which Bass endorses (Sashkin & Sashkin, 2003). I viewed charisma as what Provost Kim Wilcox, in his talk in EAD 801 on April 4, 2009, called “being a person people want to be around”. Leaders are charismatic and help other people want to share and work towards a common vision when they are true people. Genuineness is most important.

To summarize and review, I ended my time in EAD 801 in April with the idea that transformational leadership - consisting of a shared vision, strong communication, follower empowerment, and charisma - was my most ideal form of leadership. I was hoping to use this conceptualization of leadership in my career and life more generally.

EAD 867: A Learning Journey to Refine my Conceptualization of Leadership

Upon the advice of Dr. Marylee Davis, my professor for EAD 801 and my advisor, I enrolled in EAD 867 for the summer 2009 term. Dr. Davis said EAD 867 would be a great follow-up to our work in EAD 801. How right she was! While EAD 801 focused on learning about the development of leadership theory, EAD 867 put that knowledge, and many more ideas on leadership, into action.

Overall, the readings for EAD 867 were less focused on leadership theory and more focused on leadership practice. By this, I mean that the readings seemed to apply the ideas I had learned about in EAD 801 to particular issues. In addition, the case-based format of EAD 867 allowed for the application of leadership concepts to be applied to particular situations. This allowed me to test out ideas I developed from the readings on leadership issues that could happen in the real world. This learning style helped me refine my conceptualization of my leadership philosophy.

One breakthrough I had during EAD 867 was a realization that terms are not the most important part of leadership. Throughout EAD 801, we focused on transactional and transformational leadership. Many of our readings carefully outlined the differences in these two leadership styles. To me, it seemed as though there was a great debate between leadership theorists on which style of leadership was best. Thus, when I developed my leadership philosophy for EAD 801, I felt it was necessary for me to clearly choose one style or another, to

delineate which camp I belonged to. Readings in EAD 867 brought me to the conclusion that I am not very concerned with the debate about transactional and transformational leadership, or even “TranformActional” leadership as conceptualized by Bugay (2001). While it is important to understand these terms have an important place in leadership theory, I have realized I do not need to shape my leadership philosophy around this debate. I choose to move past these terms, and the varied definitions different authors assign to them, and focus on the components of strong leadership as I see them.

My Educational Leadership Philosophy (Version 2.0)

In this section of my paper, I will reflect on changes to the leadership philosophy I developed for EAD 801 that have come about through readings, class discussions and class assignments for EAD 867. I will refer to my revised leadership philosophy as Version 2.0.

Developing a shared vision was the foundation of my ideal form of leadership in my previous leadership philosophy. I was able to think more carefully and critically about developing a shared vision throughout EAD 867. In particular, Wheatley (2001) recommends that leaders make a plan to invite every person that is going to be affected by institutional and organizational change to participate in that change. I believe Wheatley means that all stakeholders must be involved in conversation about the change.

After EAD 867, I still see the development of a shared vision as one of the most important pieces of strong leadership. While reflecting on Case Problem Three, that of Capital City Community College (CCCC), I realized the extreme difficulty of developing a shared vision. Ideally, a leader will be able to work with all team members of an institution, including faculty, staff, students, trustees, community members, and other stakeholders, to develop a shared vision. But it can be quite overwhelming and impossible to get every person to agree

with an idea. From my work on Case Problem Three, I realized I must temper my idealized concept of a unanimous shared vision. The case of CCCC allowed me to understand, through a class project, something that would have been hard to come to terms with in a real life leadership situation. Accordingly, in my Leadership Philosophy Version 2.0, I still believe that development of a shared vision is critical to good leadership, but recognize it will be a difficult and possibly messy process.

Another tenet of my first leadership philosophy was follower empowerment. I initially conceptualized follower empowerment as a leader encouraging a follower to grow and develop as a person and as a leader. One of the EAD 867 readings resonated deeply with me and helped me refine my idea of follower empowerment. In “Places of Realized Potential”, De Pree (1997) provides characteristics of a place of realized potential. From reading this article, I have come to see the empowerment of followers can come through helping them, and the organization as a whole, realize the potential within. I hope to help the organizations I am a part of be places of realized potential by being open to change, giving others the chance to grow, providing challenging work, treating people with trust and forgiveness, and celebrating (De Pree, 1997).

Another component of my previous leadership philosophy was charisma. I defined charisma in a non-traditional way. I thought of charisma as genuineness and being a true person. “The Journey to Authenticity” from George (2004) helped me to refine my thoughts on charisma. George (2004) explains that there are five qualities that leaders must develop and exhibit: “understanding their purpose, practicing solid values, leading with heart, establishing connected relationships, and demonstrating self discipline” (pp. 1-2). George’s conception of an authentic leader corresponds well with Provost Wilcox’s idea of being a person others want to be around. Authenticity matters. Charisma, in the traditional sense of charm or power over others,

is less important. In my Leadership Philosophy Version 2.0, I replace the idea of charisma with that of authenticity.

Conclusion (and Beginning)

One of the most significant developments in my thinking about leadership came from Hargreaves and Fink's (2004) "The Seven Principles of Sustainable Leadership". Prior to this article, I had not spent any time thinking about the importance of sustainable leadership. In EAD 801, my focus had been on leadership in the here and now. What does a person need to do to be a good leader in a particular situation? From Hargreaves and Fink (2004), I realized a good leader needs to think much longer term than the issues that are currently facing an organization. A good leader must continually work to ensure that the leadership they enact will carry the organization through the future. I believe that the first three tenets of my Leadership Philosophy (both Version 1.0 and 2.0), developing a shared vision, communication, and empowering followers, provide a strong basis for sustainable leadership.

Another one of the most important developments in my thinking about leadership came at the end of my analysis of Case Problem Two. After reanalyzing the issues at Tortuga State College (TSC), I realized that the second set of readings led me to different possible next steps than I had come to when utilizing the first set of readings. This worried me. I am a person that likes to find the right answer. How can there be a right answer when I come to different conclusions about the same issue based on different leadership ideas? I answered myself then, and must continuously remind myself in future leadership situations, that there is no right answer. A leadership challenge can be successfully encountered in many different ways. What is essential is carefully analyzing the situation, considering many possibilities, and working diligently to tackle the issue at hand. A comment from Kyle Carter on this line of thinking

provided even more clarification and guidance for the future. There is never going to be a right answer to a leadership issue, but if I am able to encounter the issue from multiple perspectives and approach the issue with thoughtfulness, I am probably going to be okay. While this is not the grandest notion of leadership, I think it will serve me well in every future leadership situation.

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