Existential Leadership

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## ORGL 680

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Beginning the Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership was a different experience for me than for many others. Entering into the program as an employee of Gonzaga University, and as a non-matriculated student left me without a traditional academic advisor and without guidance about which courses to take. So I began the program not with ORGL 500, but with an elective course (which is no longer offered) that piqued my interest, Heroic Leadership. This course was centered in the Jesuit tradition and model of leadership, dubbed *Heroic Leadership* (2003) by Chris Lowney, a former member of the Society of Jesus. Additionally I completed ORGL 504 – Leadership in Imagination, as a three day intensive during that first summer of coursework. These two courses combined with my experience as an undergraduate and employee of Gonzaga ripened my leadership philosophy before the beginning of ORGL 504 and placed me at a unique vantage point for articulating my personal brand of leadership.

The influence of these experiences can clearly be seen in my discussion of self-leadership and the idea that anyone within an organization can and should be a leader. Self-leadership is the principle that all leadership starts with the leadership of self (Lowney, 2003, Kindle Location 84). Until you know who you are, and how to direct the person at your core, you will be unable to lead others. Self-awareness is not easily attained, but it is worth the struggle in order to best understand our motivations and to know how to work with others. This belief, paired with the idea that anyone can be a leader, establishes a strong foundation for my leadership philosophy, and ground the distinction between leadership and authority. Authority is granted through title or position and can amplify leadership, but an individual does not need to be in a high position within an organization to be a leader within it. Leaders should emerge from every level of the organization and do not have to be the same in different situations.

Attitude is also a crucial tool in the kit of any leader. The attitude which a leader holds affects the attitudes held by their team, and thus, while it is important to have a healthy dose of realism, optimism is a key to developing a team that is not easily dissuaded. We as leaders and individuals are not able to control all of the experiences which befall us, but what we do have total control over is how we allow those events to affect us. An attitude that setbacks are an obstacle to be overcome and not a dead-end encourages followers to find alternatives and not become deterred when things do not go according to plan.

A final crucial set of tenants in my foundational leadership philosophy was rooted in communication. Communication is crucial both through how a leader communicates to their followers and through how a leader accepts the communication (feedback) of their followers. The first of these two forms of communication is how a leader conveys their ideas, methods, and philosophy to their followers. Proper communication from a leader helps to develop buy-in and share a greater vision but more important than that to my initial, and current, leadership philosophies is communication received from followers. A leader should not try to lead without the help and support of those around them, the support and leadership of their team. As I eloquently espoused in my ORGL 500 paper titled *Collective Leadership* “A teacher must also learn from their students, an artist must also observe other artists, and a leader must also follow.” The members of a team commonly hold strengths and specializations which leaders do not, and if you wish to empower your team to be leaders (even if they do not have positional authority) you must be receptive to their input.

Many of these dimensions of my leadership philosophy have been affirmed by the lessons of the program and fine-tuned under the guidance of the faculty who has also helped to uncover new dimensions of leadership. One area which I had overlooked prior to commencing the Organizational Leadership program was the ability of a leader to unite their team behind a greater vision which will help to motivate followers through the belief in something greater than the individual. This is a power which helps to unlock the potential of the organization or team by providing the feeling of being a part of a greater mission. I stumbled upon this realization while studying different organizational frames in ORGL 505 (Bolman & Deal). I had already learned about mission driven organizations (Conrad & Poole) in Organizational Communication (ORGL 504) but had not realized the power to further the impact of being mission driven through the use of symbols. Through an organization’s mission you can unite different individuals around a common goal, combine that with the power held by symbols and stories, even beyond that of true events, and you find how a symbolic vision can be a powerful tool to motivate even committed team members.

This foundation built through the past eight and a half years at Gonzaga (as an undergraduate, staff member, and graduate student) is filled with valuable tools for motivating others and leading myself, but the biggest challenge that awaits during the journey ahead is the application of these lessons beyond the boundaries of Gus campus. I have grown beyond what I could have imagined as I left Skyline High School at age 17 (and even beyond what the 21 year old version of myself thought as completed my Bachelor’s degree) but no I must take the lessons I have gained here and apply them for the good of others in the wider world. In order to continue fostering my growth as a leader and to retain the lessons I have learned I will rely upon reflection and discernment tactics learned from the Jesuits. Spending time bettering myself, through better understanding myself, is a requirement for maintaining the foundation of self-awareness upon which my leadership philosophy is built.

On top of the time I will spend developing self-awareness, I will spend time reflecting upon, and communicating with, the leaders I wish to use as role models. Furthering apprenticeships with the leaders who have helped foster my development, in the classroom and in the workplace, will allow me to continue carrying their examples with me throughout my career. I have been blessed with many great leaders who have invested in me, from my employer (Julie McCulloh, Dean of Admission) to my professors (especially, Dr. Joe Albert), and after I graduate continuing to keep touch with them will allow me to continue studying under there tutelage, though in a different capacity.

Staying firmly rooted in the lessons of Gonzaga and the Organizational Leadership program will be one of the toughest challenges of my, albeit short, professional career, but it is one that I am well equipped to battle. I have been provided the tools and guides to develop into a caring and dedicated leader and I owe all who have invested in me to remain vigilant in my development as a leader for others. My growth at Gonzaga is not limited to my experiences in the Organizational Leadership program, but it has been multiplied through the concrete lessons and courses I have undertaken, and now I happily pick up the teachings of my professors and carry them with me toward whatever challenges lay ahead.

References:

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Lowney, Chris (2003). *Heroic Leadership: Best Practices from a 450-Year-Old Company That Changed the World.* Kindle Edition, Loyola Press.