Leadership for Dummies: A Capstone Project for Leadership Students

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Abstract

Capstone courses in leadership provide students opportunities to synthesize prior knowledge about various aspects of leadership. This article describes the *Leadership for Dummies* project, which could be used as a capstone experience for leadership majors. Based on his experiences as a psychological researcher, Gardner (2008) identified five minds individuals should develop: the disciplined mind (being an expert in one area), the synthesizing mind (gathering information from multiple sources and combining the information in a meaningful way), the

creating mind (building new boxes and thinking outside the old ones), the respectful mind (valuing the differences of others), and the ethical mind (doing what is right). The *Leadership for Dummies* assignment requires students to use their disciplined, synthesizing, and creating minds to develop new ways of thinking needed by tomorrow's leaders. Anecdotal evidence suggests the assignment is helping students make meaning out of their undergraduate experience while taking ownership of their own learning.

Introduction and Conceptual Framework

Within the leadership education literature, the goals of leadership educators have been well documented. According to Huber (2002), "As leadership educators, we help people to understand what it means to be a leader" (p. 31). To that end, we generally hope that at or near the end of their undergraduate education, our students are able to synthesize what they have learned about the various aspects of leadership. Many in higher education incorporate capstone assignments and courses into the curriculum to accomplish this goal. In fact, Morgan, Rudd, and Kaufman (2004) found that leadership faculty considered a capstone experience to be an essential component of leadership programs. Furthermore, Cannon, Gifford, Stedman, and Telg (2010) noted that leadership educators should not overlook the importance of providing leadership students with a meaningful and valuable capstone experience. While capstone experiences have been defined in many different ways, many have noted that capstone courses provide students the opportunity to synthesize the prior knowledge and make connections between the various parts of their education (AAC, 1985; Schmid, 1993; Steele, 1993).

For several years, many have advocated the need for students to develop strong synthesis abilities, such as those developed in capstone courses and assignments. According to Cleveland (2002), "The trouble is, our whole educational system is still geared more toward categorizing and analyzing the patches of knowledge than to threading them together – even though it's the people who learn how to thread them together who will be the leaders of the next generation" (p. 215).

Pink (2006) further argued that success in today's world requires a more creative or artistic mindset than what has previously been required. According to Pink, "The last few decades have belonged to a certain kind of person with a certain kind of mind – computer programmers who could crank code, lawyers who could craft contracts, MBAs who could crunch numbers. But, the keys to the kingdom are changing hands. The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind – creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers" (p. 1). He suggested such people as "artists, inventors,

designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big picture thinkers – will now reap society's richest rewards and share its greatest joys" (p. 1).

Based on his work as a psychological researcher, Gardner (2008) published the book *5 Minds for the Future* in which he identified "minds" he believes individuals should develop to command a premium in the years ahead. These minds are (a) The Disciplined Mind, (b) The Synthesizing Mind, (c) The Creating Mind, (d) The Respectful Mind, and (e) The Ethical Mind. Below are brief descriptions of each of these "minds."

- "The *disciplined mind* has mastered at least one way of thinking --- a distinctive mode of cognition that characterizes a specific scholarly discipline, craft, or profession" (Gardner, 2008, p. 3).
- "The *synthesizing mind* takes information from disparate sources, understands and evaluates that information objectively, and puts it together in ways that make sense to the synthesizer and also to other persons" (Gardner, 2008, p. 3).
- "Building on discipline and synthesis, the *creating mind* breaks new grounds. It puts forth new ideas, poses unfamiliar questions, conjures up fresh ways of thinking, arrives at unexpected answers" (Gardner, 2008, p. 3).
- "The *respectful mind* notes and welcomes differences between human individuals and between human groups, tries to understand these 'others,' and seeks to work effectively with them" (Gardner, 2008, p. 3).
- "The *ethical mind* ponders the nature of one's work and the needs and desires of the society in which one lives" (Gardner, 2008, p. 3).

Gardner's *minds* served as the conceptual framework for the development of a capstone assignment to help students develop the new ways of thinking needed by tomorrow's leaders.

Description of the Project and Learning Outcomes

A quick trip through any book store shows a thriving self-help market. Numerous books are readily available as references and resources for readers. The "for Dummies" series of books is especially popular. Within this series books range from leisure activity books such as *Facebook for Dummies* (Pearlman & Abram, 2010) and *Sewing for Dummies* (Maresh, 2010) to fitness books such as *Yoga for Dummies* (Feuerstein & Payne, 2010) to more academic books such as *Psychology for Dummies* (Cash, 2002) and *Chemistry for Dummies* (Moore, 2003). And yes, there is even a *Leadership for Dummies* (Loeb & Kindel, 1999).

These books offer many things to many people, not the least of which is a synthesized view of a particular topic from which readers can make meaning.

Wren (1994) noted that students in leadership courses "should have enhanced powers of analysis, and increased capabilities in oral and written communication" (p. 77). Coupling this notion with the popularity of the "for Dummies" series, the authors developed the *Leadership for Dummies* capstone project.

The primary learning outcomes for this project were centered on the first three of Gardner's (2008) *minds*. The first three minds deal primarily with cognitive forms while the last two deal with our relations to other human beings. While all five are no doubt important, this capstone project requires students to focus on the first three. Specific learning outcomes include:

- Using their *disciplined mind*, students should reflect on their study of leadership as a discipline within the major. In order to accomplish this, students must have completed or be enrolled in at least four of the five foundational leadership courses included in their degree plan. Students then select three facets of leadership that they consider to be the most fundamental and powerful concepts impacting leadership.
- Using their *synthesizing mind*, students assimilate what they learned about each facet of leadership and put that into their own words. They are not to regurgitate the information from the course(s); rather they are to teach it to an individual who is unfamiliar with leadership jargon.
- Using their *creating mind*, students then write an 8-10 page "chapter" appropriate for a *Leadership for Dummies* book for each of the facets of leadership they selected. Students are asked to add clip art, graphics, pull quotations, spotlight sections, and other relevant items to enhance the overall presentation of their final product.

To accomplish these learning outcomes, the following items were identified as required components of the project:

- A creative title for each chapter, based on the course/content of the "chapter" (related to the concept that inspired the chapter).
- A quotation related to the concept, to be used as the sub-title.
- Important, pertinent information related to each of the concepts selected. NOTE: This information must be in the student's own words – they are the author/expert. In cases where information is cited directly or indirectly from a source then they are to use proper citations.
- Examples of how the material was learned and how it is relevant to everyday life.

- Students may reference (or use excerpts from) assignments completed in their courses as an example for the readers, but must also include a reflection related to that assignment, describing its importance in helping others learn about that particular facet of leadership.
- There may be no more than two typed pages (total) of excerpts or examples of course assignments completed for that particular concept.
- Examples from famous leaders/leadership styles or real-life leadership examples from the student's life that illustrate the idea of the chapter.
- A discussion of how readers can apply this information to their lives.
- At least five action items for readers to practice in their own lives (the "now what").
- Images, additional quotations, and even more creativity to support chapter content.
- A "Top 10" list: At the end of the chapter on each respective topic, a list of the "Top 10" things to remember about that particular facet of leadership. This list includes the "nuggets" of information most important for readers to take away from the chapter.

Discussion and Conclusions

Crunkilton (as cited in Andreasen & Trede, 2000) identified six educational outcomes of capstone courses. These outcomes included:
- Decision making.
- Critical thinking.
- Collaborative/professional relationships.
- Oral communications.
- Written communications.
- Problem solving.

The authors believe the Leadership for Dummies capstone project helps students not only use their disciplined mind, the synthesizing mind, and their creating mind, but also meet several of Crunkilton's educational outcomes (e.g., decision making, critical thinking, and written communications).

In his discussion of capstone courses Wagenaar (1993) noted that students in his capstone course should view material from a holistic, synthetic perspective. Wagenaar noted, "It might even be conceptualized as an "advanced introductory" course. The introductory course exposes students to the basics of the discipline. The capstone course revisits these basics" (p. 211). The authors kept this notion in mind as they developed the requirements for "the Dummies" assignment. Students must decide on the most fundamental and powerful concepts they found related to their courses, perhaps even the introductory and survey courses.

Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests students enjoy being able to choose what to write about as opposed to being assigned specific topics. This freedom encourages students to take ownership of their own learning.

In writing their "chapters" the students essentially provide their own definition of leadership and explicit knowledge related to it. According to Cartwright (2002), "A key aspect of leadership education is that everyone has his or her own definition of leadership, most often at the tacit level. We all know what a leader is, but we find definitions and explicit knowledge hard to come by" (p. 70).

The authors also discussed timing of this assignment within the undergraduate program. Dickinson (1993) noted the effects of senioritis as an issue for having capstone courses. "In their last semester, perfectly good majors mysteriously weaken and become reluctant to engage in serious work, especially if they have already secured a job or a place in graduate school" (p. 218). Sargent, Pennington, and Sitton (2003) also found evidence of the senioritis syndrome in their study. Based on such findings, the authors of the *Leadership for Dummies* assignment arrived at the requirement that four of the five foundational leadership classes must be completed or currently in progress. Because three of the four classes are not offered to students until they are juniors, the majority of students would not be able to complete this assignment until the end of their junior, probably the beginning of their senior year.

The authors have just begun using this capstone project on a trial basis with a limited number of students. The purpose of this pilot test is to gain feedback from students prior to determining if it should be implemented as a required assignment for all students. Anecdotal evidence suggests the project is helping students make meaning out of their undergraduate experience. One student who has completed the capstone project commented that "the assignment helped me further understand all of the leadership concepts that I chose to write about. It did this because in order to explain and relate it to real life situations I had to grasp the concept and really apply it. It did help me gain a greater knowledge of leadership because now I know the different types of leaders, styles of leaders, and how they may differ."

The authors further hope that a project such as this will provide valuable feedback about the program as a whole. As Steele (1993) noted, "The capstone course cannot correct the deficiencies in a department's curriculum or teaching. It can, however, enable faculty members to identify and address such deficiencies, and it can enable students to see themselves as rooted in an important tradition of social analysis" (p. 244).

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