

## **Nurturing Reflection and Connection through the Kiva**

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### **Abstract**

The Kiva, originating from Southwestern Native American governance processes, provides a structured group experience that encourages critical reflection and self-analysis through multiple, sequenced consideration of an issue by juxtaposing public and private self, and eliciting affective and reflective responses. As a sacred space and place of connection, the Kiva process accommodates personal and often emotional topics in leadership education.

### **Introduction and Background**

This paper explains and examines the applications for leadership education of a group reflection and discussion process called, Kiva. The Kiva experience provides a structured group experience that encourages critical reflection and self-analysis through multiple, sequenced queries regarding a single issue.

Historically and literally, a Kiva comprises a circular room, partially underground, with an entrance at the roofline. The Kiva was used by a number of ancient Southwestern Native American tribes, most notably the Pueblo, for a variety of religious ceremonies. It is believed that the use of the Kiva evolved to become a chamber for different governance, communal, and social processes (Cordell, 1994; Friesen, 1993; LeBlanc, 1999). The Kiva often contained a small hole in the floor through which it was believed that life or spirits entered the world, making the Kiva a place of connection and retreat from both the real and the spiritual worlds.

The Kiva as an ancient structure for ceremony provides an unique and valuable framework for reflection, learning, and discussion. For leadership educators, the Kiva as a place of connection encourages development in numerous ways. Within this sacred space, developing leaders can reflect upon who they are and who they are to become as the topic impacts their evolving identity. Participants also reflect on the connection between what they know and what they are to learn,

integrating the knowledge of others with their own conceptualizations. And, in a strategic and visionary sense, participants in the Kiva connect where they are as an individual and/or organization to where they are or want to go. As the process is explained further, the Kiva as a place of connection becomes increasingly clear.

The Kiva process facilitates the connection between head and heart. Leadership education requires a pedagogical approach that explicitly addresses more than the cognitive domain. In one of the limited references to Kiva as a pedagogical tool, George Reese (1998) asks, “What if we view mathematics as more than the set of information, algorithms, and proofs that make up our textbooks? What if our mathematics classes were places where students could question not just the problems from the text but the purposes of mathematics itself” (p. 1)? Reese’s query does not seem unusual to leadership educators. As is now commonly accepted, if not practiced, understanding and doing leadership requires emotional and social intelligence, ethical and spiritual development, considerable self-awareness and identity development, and a wisdom of self vis-à-vis others in both application and aspiration.

In a most insightful essay on the changing paradigm of leadership education, leadership scholars Rost and Barker (2000) explain that leadership education of the future must focus on the process nature of leadership, emphasizing the social connections between individuals. Further, they assert that, “Leadership education is little more or less than self-awareness in the Socratic tradition, where the integration and synthesis of nonlinear phenomena replace mechanistic principles as the ground of understanding” (p. 6). The Kiva technique creates an experience that opens the emotional barriers generally blocking deep self and other exploration – unveiling social structures and being critically educative (Foster, 1986).

The Kiva also facilitates connections between insight, knowledge, and application. This sums up one of the major challenges in leadership education, namely finding the balance between respecting and encouraging the intrapersonal journey and motivations of emerging leaders, the academic rigor and content that the leadership field strives to establish, and the real-world application of leadership. However, as most leadership scholars, educators, and practitioners acknowledge, successful leaders require both a well-informed set of skills and concepts, as well as a deep sense of self along with the lessons from the journey that formed that self. Although it seems contradictory to advocate tearing down mental constructions while simultaneously building them, it is indeed this process in which the most effective learning occurs – when mental models are critically questioned to allow a more full integration of new information (Brookfield, 1995; Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). The Kiva process provokes what Seibert and Daudelin (1999) refer to as proactive reflection, prompting participants to contemplate past experiences, consider personal and professional implications,

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and mentally simulate future activities (as cited in Fenwick, 2000). The result is a more mindful approach to leadership practice (Dickmann & Stanford-Blair, 2001).

The Kiva facilitates connection with self and with others. Theoretical and practical advances in the understanding of leadership continue to advance the notion of leadership as a process emphasizing relationships (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2006). The distinction between leader and leadership does not negate the importance of either. In fact, leadership education must of necessity recognize the importance of the individual. However, what that individual does (i.e., how the process of leadership is executed and facilitated) will vary with that individual's understanding of self and of others. The Kiva process can build one's capacity to see and consider other's perspectives because it essentially forces one to listen, reflect, and revisit the issue under discussion.

Overall the Kiva represents a unique tool for facilitating the learning and self-discovery of emerging leaders. The strength of the Kiva experience lies in the juxtaposition of public and private self, and the affective and reflective responses the structure elicits. Although anecdotal, others (Pavlik, 2003; Weiss, 1996) have found that the process provides a number of advantageous outcomes including:

- Kiva participants teach and learn simultaneously.
- Activates feelings, background experiences, and perceptions.
- Provides a structure that promotes reflection and processing ideas.
- Elicits awareness of interaction between background, perception, and emotions.
- Provides a variety of answers and considers an issue from different perspectives.
- Processes issue at a deeper level, illuminating connections and ideas.
- Provides a base for personal change and action through greater consciousness.

### **How Kiva Works**

For awareness of the Kiva experience, we thank Dr. Howard Fuller and Dr. Robert Pavlik at Marquette University's Institute for the Transformation of Learning. Much of the following explanation originated with a handout from Dr. Pavlik.

The Kiva experience consists of a group of participants sitting in nested, concentric circles all facing in toward the facilitator in the center. The innermost group engages in answering (out loud) individually directed questions about an issue of which: (a) they have personal experience (tell us about a time when), (b)

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they have a degree of knowledge (explain how you see this), (c) has affective and motivational facets (how do you feel when), and (d) has some degree of deep personal meaning to them (how does this impact your life – how does this influence your future). Thus, the great challenge in preparing an effective Kiva activity lies in the crafting of the questions by the facilitator.

After answering the initial questions, as the other circles listen and reflect, the participants change places, moving one circle closer to the center and the innermost circle moving to the outer circle. The same questions are asked of this new innermost circle group as the others listen, reflect, and synthesize their conceptualization of the issue/topic. The number of questions to prepare in advance is at least as many as one-third of the group size. The following discussion summarizes the Kiva process.

### **Kiva Set-up**

Seating arrangement of chairs in 3 concentric circles, aligning the chairs such that there are rows of three arranged in a circle. Allow ample room in the center of the innermost circle for the facilitator to stand and address the inner circle of participants.

### **Processes**

1. After explaining the process, ask the participants to focus on the issue – perhaps taking them through a visualization of an applicable situation in which they likely have experience. Ask participants to engage in one to two minutes of silent reflection about the issue.
2. Invite each person in the inner circle to individually answer a question prepared by the facilitator. Rather than answering with definitions and reasoning, participants should share their feelings and emotions to the extent they feel comfortable.
  - Each person may choose to answer the question or ask for another question. Questions may be asked more than once or not at all.
  - All participants in the middle and outer circles are to listen, not talk until they are in the inner circle and asked a question.
  - After each person in the inner circle has answered a question or questions, ask participants to move up one chair to the next inner circle of chairs, with participants in the innermost circle moving to the outer circle.
  - Repeat until all participants have had a turn in the inner circle (i.e., answered the questions).

3. After all three groups have answered their questions they may remain in their seats, or stand, or move to another chair for a large group discussion.
4. Invite participants to discuss the issue and their insights from this process. Some questions that the facilitator might ask include: What surprised you in listening to the answers? How did you feel as a listener? As one of the respondents? What did you learn about the issue? What questions do you have about the issue now?

### **Preparation**

Facilitator prepares in advance: (a) a brief visualization, (b) a set of questions for participants, and (c) key discussion questions and points to assert as appropriate.

As a leadership educator, it is critical that one engage in the Kiva experience first as a participant. For example, one's organization or department might engage in a Kiva experience focusing on their role as a leader in the classroom and the critical (theory) participative approach they embrace or fear. Begin by having participants visualize themselves in their teaching setting – perhaps their first time teaching, students with whom they have worked, courses and activities taught, or upcoming teaching tasks.

Questions for participants can be designed such that they align with the strengths of the Kiva, focusing on the Kiva as a place of connection and tapping into participants experience, knowledge, emotions, and what they find meaningful. Some questions for participants might include: What is the most important thing a student can get from your program/course? How is your role of teacher also the role of leader? As a student, describe your best learning experience. What made it the best? What is your greatest fear as a teacher?

Following the experience, participants should engage in a brief summary discussion to reinforce the lessons and practical applications of the Kiva experience in their teaching context.

### **Conclusion**

The Kiva process offers a considerable number of applications for leadership education from the examination of a single issue or topic to experiencing a leadership process such as consensus decision-making or group formation. All Kiva applications offer individuals the occasion for self-examination, awareness, and growth. The author has used the Kiva successfully with both experienced leaders pursuing graduate degrees as well as with undergraduates with little to no

leadership experience. Each group requires careful consideration of Kiva content to match their experience and interest.

While the Kiva directly elicits personal perspectives and experiences, the overlapping questions and reflective listening of the outer circles prompts continued thinking and rethinking about one's perspective, allowing for a much deeper consideration. For example, in one experience with doctoral students, a Kiva was used to explore perspectives and experiences with racism and other forms of discrimination (Middlebrooks & Slupski, 2002). In this instance, students in the inner circle were asked questions like, "Consider a time when you were treated as unimportant – How did you feel?" And, "What did it feel like when you were told you didn't fit in?" These questions built up to more direct questions about diversity and prejudice, helping to make one's implicit beliefs more explicit to self.

In addition to being a powerful examination of ideas and perceptions, the process opens up a variety of new perspectives for learning about specific theories and practices. It is one thing to explain a leadership theory, and quite another to connect it to a personal, emotional story. The Kiva helps bring these concepts to life by emphasizing that which is most uniquely human – the motivation, emotion, and uniquely personal perspective of individual story. As such, the Kiva has been used to illustrate the concept of in and out groups in Leader-Member Exchange Theory, the idea of service as a reciprocal giving relationship in Servant-Leadership, levels of moral reasoning in the study of leadership ethics, emotional intelligence, and the nature of spirituality in leadership, among many other applications.

The Kiva technique represents a very useful tool for leadership education. Facilitating the growth and development of effective leaders requires attention to what an individual knows, but perhaps more so to how they conceptualize themselves and their role as a leader vis-à-vis others – the social connections perspective advocated by Rost & Barker (2000). The Kiva offers a space out of the real world as a place of connection, allowing for an integration of individual conceptualization and experiences with that of others. And, this is particularly important for topics that are not as easily discussed in a more formal or inhibited environment, topics that elicit the personal and the emotional as part of personal growth. Pedagogical approaches and techniques that can bring forth, explore, and question those closely held personal conceptions provide opportunities for leadership educators to link the personal of the past with the theoretical and applied that will serve leaders in the future.

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## **Biography**

Tony Middlebrooks, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Leadership in the School of Urban Affairs and Public Policy at the University of Delaware. Prior to his academic career, Dr. Middlebrooks spent 10 years in non-profit leadership positions. He currently teaches courses in a variety of leadership topics, consults in leadership and program evaluation, and pursues research in leadership development. Dr. Middlebrooks holds a doctoral degree in Educational Psychology from the University of Wisconsin at Madison.