

A Case Study of a University Leadership Seminar

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Abstract

This paper is a case study of a five year leadership seminar at a mid-sized university. The paper will discuss the progress of this seminar in meeting the goals set by the university's leadership model. Discussed in detail will be the model and theories used in and the implementation of the seminar. The successes of the seminar to this point are meeting the organizational objective for leadership, having continuous executive support and a very integrated seminar that includes both formal and action learning. Further steps include a survey of graduates to determine a successful return on investment and add a coaching program that will provide more one-to-one learning for the seminar graduates to develop their leadership abilities more.

Introduction

Effective leadership is commonly accepted as central to organizational success. The reasons for the need for effective leadership are varied but include increasing (a) technological complexity, (b) interest in the integrity and character of leaders, and (c) pressure to demonstrate a return on investment due to dwindling resources (Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2006). Universities are definitely not immune to this need for effective leadership as they face similar challenges as any other organizations.

Current leadership in organizations has to be different than the traditional command and control style that focused on a few leaders to have the "right stuff" (McCall, 1998). Neilson, Pasternak, and Viscio (1998) state that the new leadership model has to be based on an entrepreneurial one where the President/CEO cannot be a lone star, but creates a culture that reinforces innovation, the capacity to change, and most importantly, cascading leadership where everyone is a leader. This leadership, according to Meyerson (2001), challenges the status quo and requires many acts of everyday leadership to

achieve small wins that is defined as a “limited doable project that results in something concrete and visible” (p. 102).

This new leadership requires the development of leaders to have more focus on the value of self-directed change and growth (Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2006). The authors go on to state that these development practices need to be linked to the strategic goals of the organization. These goals include (a) a full endorsement of senior-level managers (Zenger, Ulrich, & Smallwood, 2000), (b) a clear-cut organizational objective (Zenger, Ulrich, & Smallwood, 2000; Conger & Benjamin, 1999), and (c) pressure to demonstrate a return on investment (Kincaid & Gordick, 2003).

This paper is a case study involving a university leadership seminar that has been trying to achieve these stated goals over the last five years. The paper will describe the (a) the background of the seminar, (b) the foundation/theories supporting the program, (c) implementation of the seminar and follow-ups, (d) results to this point, (e) future steps, and (f) conclusion.

Background

The seminar is a one-day event based on the distributive leadership which is one of the university’s goals for excellence. The basic principles of distributive leadership are aligned with the new type of leaders needed in organizations today. The principles include that every employee can be a leader, teamwork is essential in solving problems, and the status quo is not necessarily the best way (see Table 1 for all of the principles). The process of developing this seminar has followed these basic principles over the last five years. The process has definitely been an evolutionary process that is ongoing. From the first seminar to the most recently offered seminar, there have been many positive changes. The majority of changes have focused on getting participants more active, tying the seminar’s activities to the participants’ on-going work, and having the participants leave the seminar with a goal to achieve. An example of this change is the integration of the three model/strategies that are discussed below. Future steps to this evolutionary process include two aspects: demonstrating a return on investment (ROI) for the seminar and establishing an extended program that gives more assistance to the graduates of the seminar to become more effective leaders.

Foundation Model/Theories

Distributive Leadership Model

The central principles of the distributed leadership model are for people to succeed in a climate of shared purpose, teamwork, and respect. If successful, the process will create an atmosphere where staff and faculty can reach out and help one another. The principles of Distributive Leadership are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Distributive leadership principles

1. *Distributed Leadership* does not mean *delegating*. Instead, it means finding the best path by tapping the expertise, ideas, and effort of everyone involved.
2. Distributed Leadership brings success in handling problems, threats, and change. It not only encourages idea sharing; it demands it. Good ideas can come to fruition because a team is ready to ignite the process moving from concept to reality.
3. “The way we've always done things” isn't necessarily the best way. Using Distributed Leadership, we can look for better ways and test them through controlled, reasoned risk taking.
4. In a Distributed Leadership environment, mistakes often lead to discovering valuable new approaches.
5. In Distributed Leadership, not everyone is a decision-maker, but everyone is an expert whose knowledge contributes to the decision-making process.
6. Distributed Leadership is not for mavericks and lone eagles.
7. Distributed Leadership is about cooperation and trust, not about competition among units and factions. We all share the same mission, even though we contribute to it in different ways.
8. Distributed Leadership empowers everyone to make his or her job more efficient, meaningful, and effective.
9. Under Distributed Leadership, everybody matters

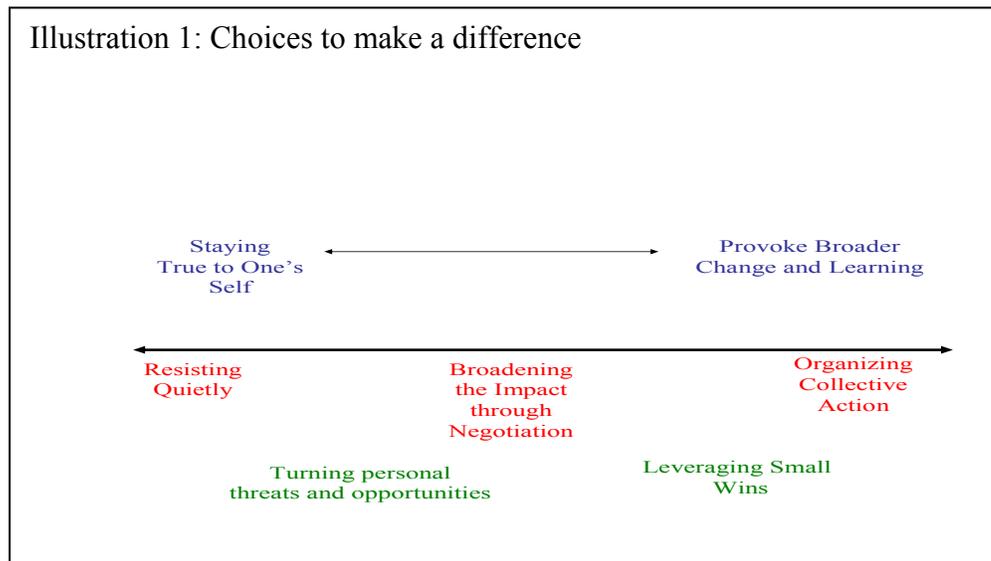
These principles support two important concepts. The first concept is that staff and faculty are not to accept the status quo environment. Instead, the distributed leadership environment reinforces a learning organization where people are allowed to take risks, experiment, and make mistakes. This learning will allow for rigorous examination of existing beliefs, habits, and assumptions that will help the organization and its people to acknowledge ineffectual practices and to accept and implement change (Arsenault, 2004). The second concept is how to frame

leadership. The traditional mythology of heroic leadership is not advocated. Instead, leadership is viewed as an everyday task for staff and faculty to challenge assumptions, meet unaddressed needs, and learn and force organizations to adapt to impending challenges (Myerson, 2001).

Tempered Radical

To coordinate distributive leadership with the seminar the Tempered Radical Leadership Model (Myerson, 2001) is used. The model has been found to be an excellent fit. Tempered Radical leadership is about people that work within the system to create change. These tempered radicals work under-the-radar engaging in small battles that push back organizational conventions and create change (Meyerson, 2004). They provide non-traditional leadership by acting as agents of “positive deviation” that instigates small wins and creates learning.

Myerson (2001) believes constant small incremental changes in organizations often go unnoticed as opposed to revolutionary change that is often dramatic and attention getting. The author states that incremental change is more honest and realistic for people who care to make a difference in their organization. There is no template to be a tempered radical, but several strategies exist to achieve success that range from resisting quietly and staying true to one’s “self” to a more transformative change (Myerson, 2004). Refer to Illustration 1 for a look at all the strategies.



Source: Myerson, 2001, p. 8

Storytelling

Often forgotten, storytelling is an ancient art (Kouzes & Posner, 2003) that is a valuable learning tool. Kouzes and Posner go on to state that stories are able to change metaphors that changes how employees are conditioned. For example, one storyteller at the seminar tells a story of how he was told by many conditioned employees in the old university way that the university could not buy a building for graduate business classes. The employees said that purchasing property was impossible because this was not the traditional way of doing things. But, he moved ahead, getting approval by the university to purchase the building which now successfully houses graduate business classes.

Laufer (2000) adds that organizational stories stimulate curiosity and provide context for memorable lessons. Most importantly, stories are catalysts for discussion as they stimulate dialogue, reflection, and action (Ready, 2002) and are a quick way of conveying a sense of what is important (Tushman & O'Reilly, 2005).

Mediated Dialogue

The mediated dialogue process enhances the changing of metaphors by creating levels of shared meaning especially with a complex issue such as leadership (Palus & Drath, 1999). To accomplish this, a dialogue via visual imagery has to be established that suspends assumptions (Isaacs, 1994). Suspending these assumptions (i.e., I cannot change the status quo) can be accomplished by reconstructing the meaning by displaying the assumption in front of the group and then re-constructing the accumulated knowledge of the group (i.e., yes we can change the status quo through this new knowledge).

Implementation of Seminar

Recruiting participants for the seminar is a key for success. With inadequate resources allowing every staff and faculty member attend the seminar, deans, and administrators invite participants to the seminar who they think would benefit the most from the seminar (see Appendix 1 for a schedule of the seminar).

The seminar starts with a speech by the president of the university. The president reinforces the connection between this seminar and distributed leadership. Special emphasis is placed on the need for change and how the participants need to be the inspiration for others. The president goes on to state that she expects participants

to think in different terms, take calculated risks, and to be life-long learners who can work together to anticipate and solve problems (Adler, 2006).

After the president’s speech, another facilitator has everyone introduce themselves and share with the group who is an important leader to them in their life and explain why. The author, who now is the facilitator of the seminar, utilizes these responses to make the transition into why the participants have been invited to the seminar by integrating what they said about their important leader and the goals of the seminar.

To begin the dialogue, the author raises the question, what type of leadership is needed in the 21st century? Participants are asked for their responses that establish the assumptions that are needed for mediated dialogue. After the discussion, the author then presents Rost’s (1991) definition of 21st century leadership – “leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend that reflect real changes that reflect their mutual purpose” (p. 102).

A discussion then follows about the four key elements of the definition (see Chart 1) and how this definition changes or reinforces the participant’s assumptions.

Chart 1: Four elements of leadership

1. The relationship is based on influence that is multidirectional and non-coercive.
2. Leaders and people are in the relationship.
 - a. Followers are active.
 - b. Relationship is inherently unequal because influence patterns are unequal.
3. Intend real changes- leaders and followers purposefully desire real certain changes - Real because the changes must be substantive and transforming.
3. Develop mutual purposes that are common ones.

Source: Adapted from Rost, 1991, p. 102

Now that the assumptions have been surfaced among the group, the author then presents the question what leadership model is most appropriate for the university? A series of power points are then presented on the Tempered Radical Leadership Model focusing on what makes a person a tempered radical, the strategies he or she can use to be successful, and how this behavior and related actions are a perfect match for the goals of distributive leadership. The author shares that tempered radicals are people who want to succeed in their organization but want to act as agents of deviation that instigates small wins, challenge and

question assumptions, and experiment to do what is doable. Then strategies to make a difference ranging from resisting quietly to organizing collective action are reviewed along with the attributes of a tempered radical (Myerson, 2001). The final power point in this discussion is how the theory relates to the distributive leadership model. Special emphasis is placed on leadership not being a “lone eagle” type but a leader that coordinates a team-based approach. The example of a “lone eagle” leader used in the seminar is the actor John Wayne, who in many movies, single-handedly came to the rescue of helpless people (Wills, 1997). The author uses the 1956 movie *Searchers* as an example of John Wayne’s role as a “lone eagle” leader.

Short-term goals are then presented as a coalition of leaders that accomplish small wins. These wins which start as ink blots eventually bleed through the organization (Hamel, 2000) creating leadership examples that other members of the college community can model. The long-term goals, as explained by the author, are small wins accumulating into a collective action that changes the university’s culture.

A new facilitator then introduces the importance of storytelling. With many antidotes, the facilitator delivers a presentation on the constructive principle of story-telling and leadership. The presentation includes how stories are a powerful way to define an organization’s reality by transporting the imagination, that the university’s potential for positive change is under told and under sold. The goal of hearing these stories is to give weight to “can” versus the “cannot” change at the university (Orr, 2006). Invited storytellers are then introduced to tell about impossible change.” Each storyteller (usually two to three per seminar) tells a story of how he or she was successful in achieving his or her goal overcoming many of the obstacles of the status quo assumptions. Examples of these successful stories have ranged from how morale was increased in the admissions office (status quo assumption: “you can’t change how people think around here”) to buying a building off campus to house the graduate business program (status quo assumption: not possible legally or financially”) (Orr, 2006).

After a break, the seminar becomes action oriented. The participants inspired by the stories are asked by the author to draw a picture of their personal vision of the university. The process of doing this creates images that are rich in metaphors and helps participants make personal connections to the goals of the seminar. Participants are then asked to explain their picture. (Note: Probing techniques are used to get the participants to give more insight into their vision.)

After everyone explains their original pictures, the participants are asked to add or redraw their picture to show how they would like to see the university in the future. Again, some of the participants are asked to share and explain their pictures. Probing questions are focused on the changes and the meaning to the participant. Examples of pre-to-post university pictures are varied, but one consistent theme is the lack of communication due to the university silo or specialized domains. Orr (2006) describes one related story:

One person drew a picture of a fiefdom, where castles were separated by a moat without boats or bridges. “This is how I see the University as I entered the room this morning. We stay in our castles; it is hard to travel between colleges. I drew the picture in black and white. She then showed her picture of an ideal future with travel across moats in colorful boats and floral-draped bridges that would be built to bring greater community to university life (J. Orr, personal communication, June 12, 2006).

After a lunch break, a facilitator then introduces Force Field Analysis (Lewin, 1951) and Mind Mapping (see Appendix 2 for an example). The Force Field Analysis approach invites participants to challenge the status quo (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) by assigning pressures for change and resistance to change to opposite sides of an equilibrium state (Osland, Kolb, Rubin, & Turner, 2007). Mind Mapping, another visual thinking technique, is used to represent words and ideas linked to and arranged radially around a key word or idea (Buzan, 2003). The participants are first given the Force Field sheet that asks for a bold idea and what are the restraining and driving forces surrounding this idea. They are given individual time to respond to the questions on the sheet. A facilitator then asks some participants to share their bold ideas and the forces behind their idea. To further enhance this process, the participants form groups of four to five participants where they share their bold ideas and forces. This group exercise lasts for approximately 40 minutes.

After the allotted time, individual participants are then asked to present one of the groups' force field analysis and bold idea to the entire group. Facilitators ask probing questions to help try to bring to the surface any important forces that might have been forgotten or not been discussed enough. Because there is often difficult restraining forces to overcome, the author shares some pointers on overcoming resistance/barriers as issues based on the Tushman and O'Reilly's (2005) and Osland, Kolb, Rubin, and Turner (2007) work. The author ends this part of the seminar on a positive note explaining the concept of low hanging fruit or the easiest task or the most readily achievable goal. This concept, the author

goes on to explain, helps in finding early success, therefore reducing resistance both individually and with others.

A recent addition to the seminar has been a further analysis of every participant's bold ideas. A facilitator explains that each participant is to work and implement their bold idea. The participants are told that the facilitators will be following up to see how they are doing with their bold idea. The author concludes the seminar with emphases on the idea that the seminar is the beginning and not the end. The point is made that there are follow-ups and assistance with their bold idea.

Follow-Ups

Tushman and O'Reilly (2005) state following up is an integral part of developing leadership because it keeps people (graduates of the seminar) involved in directing their own development and enables them to become more committed. There are two vehicles that the facilitators use to follow up with the graduates of the seminar. The first vehicle is that approximately two times a semester, follow-up lunches are held. These lunches are designed for networking and support. The first part of the lunch is to have one-to-one and small group discussions. The second part is to celebrate small wins. Participants are asked to describe their small wins as celebrating accomplishments is an important leadership concept as it reinforces the bonding feeling of "we are in this together." (Kouzes & Posner, 2001).

Results

The results to this point are qualitative. From the 170 plus participants there has been positive feedback. Most of the participants state they benefit from the disseminated information and their interaction with other members of the university community. The president of the university continues to be an active participant as she has praised the program in her annual welcome back speech and designated the seminar as one of university's major success stories a few years ago.

The facilitators feel that the implementation of the seminar now works very well. There are three major reasons why. One is that the facilitators agree that the seminar process meets the three goals of mediated dialogue: (a) selecting an object (traditional leadership) and changing its meaning (to tempered radical), (b) sharing the object and its meaning with others (need for change to this type of leadership), and (c) opening the object and the meaning to inquiry, including the new construction of the shared meaning (Palus & Drath, 1999). This process has

allowed for an extended dialogue that is essential for learning (Dixon, 1996). The second reason is that participants are more active in their learning as they are now able to link their ongoing work with the content from the seminar. The third reason is the introduction of the bold idea that has allowed for participants to leave with an idea that can become a small win.

There have been small wins. The small wins include a study skills program for students and the restructuring of freshman orientation. The most visible small win has been a summer academy for gifted children that have increased the university's involvement with the community and summer revenue for the university.

Next Steps

What needs to be done is make the seminar more accountable. At this point, there is not enough quantitative information to know if the seminar is meeting its short and long-term goals. The seminar has to show quantitatively that it is providing a ROI. The facilitators, as stated by Hernez-Broome and Hughes (2006), have not closed the loop for developing leaders through systematic evaluation thus stopping from making assumptions about the seminar's efficacy based on hunches, reactions and anecdotes.

The facilitators have recognized this as a necessary next step. The facilitators are planning to survey former participants to determine the effectiveness of the seminar. The survey will ask participants about the benefits of the seminar focusing on how they have applied the knowledge gained from the workshop to their position, what small wins have to be accomplished, and how the seminar can help them more. Therefore, the results from the survey can close the loop as discussed above by demonstrating a successful return on investment.

Another necessary next step is to expand the roles of the facilitators and possibly other faculty or administrators by establishing a coaching program for seminar graduates. A coaching program, a one-to-one learning technique, will enhance learning as a coach can help further develop a participant's leadership within their day-to-day workplace. In addition, a coach can help a participant in setting measurable goals that can lead to behavioral change (House, et al., 1999).

Conclusion

The need to develop the next generation of leaders has become a challenge to organizations. This seminar has made progress to develop a new generation of leaders that meet one of the university's goals of excellence. The reasons for this progress are having executive level support, a clear organizational objective and a well-developed seminar.

Where further progress needs to be is in demonstrating accountability of the seminar and extending help to participants in their day-to-day work. Demonstrating accountability connects developing leaders to relevant organizational outcomes (Martineau & Hammonds, 2003). Adding a coaching program will help participants become more effective leaders in their current positions. Implementing these steps will ensure that the university meets its goal of developing effective leadership.

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NOTE: A copy of the Appendices can be requested by emailing the author.