

Echoes of Leadership Education: Reflections on Failure, Forgetting, and Our Future

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Abstract

Despite the popularity of leadership education on college campuses, little is known about what individual participants learn and remember. This longitudinal study examines the impact of a leadership education retreat through the eyes of six undergraduate college men. Entry and exit interviews, along with intensive one and two year follow-up interviews, were conducted. Cross case analysis reveals that leadership identity was reshaped by perceived personal failure during crisis. Longitudinal analysis suggests that students attribute improved leadership capabilities less to leadership education than to their own development and leadership experiences. This study questions the value of stand-alone or short-term leadership education models and suggests new curricular approaches to leadership education that incorporate potential future crucible experiences.

Introduction

In an era when leadership education supporters are trying to justify their inclusion on the college or high school campus, it is clear that claims of the efficacy and importance of this type of curriculum have not been adequately substantiated. The literature offers evidence that is sparse, weak, too general, and unable to prove programs' claims of impact on individual students over time.

A growing chorus of researchers is calling for more and better evaluations of the impact of leadership education programs and courses (Bell, 1994; C. Brungardt, 1996; C. L. Brungardt, 1997; Burkhardt & Zimmerman-Oster, 2000; Endress, 2000). In McMillon's (1997) review of leadership education programs, for example, she found that those providing leadership education programs felt they were successful, but there was not sufficient evaluation processes or documentation to support this claim. McDade (1994) found that what little evaluation is done in the campus setting is almost completely addressed through self-reported, anecdotal commentary with virtually no empirical evidence. Another problem with recent assessment data is that it is almost always a

programmatic evaluation with little comment on how these programs impact the lives of specific students (C. Brungardt, 1996; Burkhardt & Zimmerman-Oster, 2000; McDade, 1994).

In relation to academic settings, there is concern about the virtual nonexistence of investigations that look at the impact of academic leadership courses on individual students (C. L. Brungardt, 1997). Several researchers report that while single day or short programs were often ineffective on leadership behaviors of participants, when provided an extended and sustained class on leadership, students reported that their attitude and leadership behaviors were different after class (Cummins, 1995; Townsend, 2002). This belief in the stronger impact of a more extended academic exposure on student recollection of leadership theory, skills, and practice is supported by other studies (Endress, 2000; Williams, Townsend, & Linder, 2005). Endress found that completion of a leadership class enhanced the ability of the participants to engage in relational leadership. Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, and Burkhardt (2001) reported one of the strongest cases for the positive impact of leadership education on students. In their extensive longitudinal study of 875 students at 10 colleges and universities, they found that leadership participants showed growth in civic responsibility, leadership skills, multicultural awareness, understanding of leadership theories, and personal and societal values. Though it did not include individual student voice, this study was especially helpful for the field because it incorporated a longitudinal measure that gathered data at the time students entered college and again through their fourth year of college.

Of course, any excitement about the impact of leadership education is tempered by the results that show little or no impact. Several recent studies report the ineffectiveness of leadership education on college campuses (Cummins, 1995; Montgomery, 2002; Townsend, 2002). These have found there is little evidence that one-shot programs, while they often add awareness of leadership theory, practices, and styles, are effective in true learning and behavior changes (Faulkner, 1997; Townsend, 2002).

Many in the research community call for longitudinal studies that are qualitative in nature, especially the use of interviews before and after a leadership education experience. For conceptual and methodological reasons, longitudinal research remains uncommon in the leadership education literature (C. L. Brungardt, 1997; McDade, 1994; McMillon, 1997; Ployhart, Holtz, & Bliese, 2002; Pugh, 2000; Russon & Reinelt, 2004). One related concern is that those who measure the impact of leadership education do so within a specific framework at a point in time. Most scholars of higher education would argue that maturation in college occurs across a broad range of constructs and is developmental in nature (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Leadership educators do not usually measure the individual development of students and

when they do, this measurement is often merely self-rating on a scale on very specific components of leadership. What the teacher, host academic institution, or leadership theorist considers evidence of leadership can be limited and static.

Methodology

College men from the United States and Canada have participated in *The Institute for Men of Principle* on a mid-western campus since 1999. Each summer undergraduate members of the host fraternity gather for sessions of this leadership training institute. The theoretical frame employed is based on the leadership practices in Kouzes and Posner's (1995) book, *The Leadership Challenge*. Each session runs for five days and includes 60-100 participants. These students are selected to attend in a variety of ways. For the most part the process is one of self-selection. The Institute is advertised in mailings, on a website, and in personal recruitment efforts. Up to six members per chapter/college are allowed to attend one of five summer sessions. Usually, the undergraduates have shown some leadership potential by holding an office in a chapter or on campus and they seek to accentuate their skills and abilities.

After permission was granted by the host fraternity to use the 2001 Institute as a site for research, all students scheduled to attend received an invitation introducing this research. It briefly described the aim of the study – to garner their thoughts about leadership before and after The Institute. Six students volunteered for the study and were accepted. The requirements of participating were articulated, which included agreeing to arrive early and stay late so as to be able to participate in extensive entry and exit interviews. When the decision was made to make this a longitudinal study, participants agreed to in-person follow-up interviews one and two years after their participation in the program. These interviews were conducted at various locations across the country. The research paradigm and data analysis employed reflects appropriate methodological practice for qualitative study in the field of case study as laid out by Cresswell (1998) and others. Qualitative software was used for coding and analysis of the data.

Cross Case Analysis and Discussion

What follows are six cases that highlight the coherence of experience the participants had around the themes that emerged in the interviews. First, I present the crucible of leadership as experienced by each participant. This section represents the key crisis in leadership that each student experienced. I expected to see that the experience of leading would transform these young men, as Burns (1996) suggests. I, however, did not expect that the transformation would hinge around a key failure that became an opportunity for self-reflection and growth. Recently, Bennis and Thomas (2002) reported this same phenomenon while

studying older successful leaders in the United States. Each of these leaders experienced a significant crucible as a leader that had a lasting impact on his views of leadership and his image of self as a leader.

Next, I look at how each student speaks about the impact of the Institute over time. Pugh (2000) and others have reported early upward bumps in self-assessed leadership scales taken immediately following a leadership retreat. This study was not designed to address these issues. I present these cases as telling cases, borrowing generally from several researchers in the field of discourse analysis (Gee & Green, 1998; Mitchell, 1983, 1984). When I present a case, it is for the purpose of broad comparison and possible presentation of grounded theory rather than deep ethnographic analysis. By doing this I attempt to make theoretically visible what had not necessarily been visible before.

In order to highlight the experiences of the participants across the emergent themes, I present two tables. The first table, *The Crucible of Leadership*, represents the unifying phenomenon that each of these students experience – a crisis and perceived failure in their leading that caused them to evolve in their thinking about leadership and their style of leadership. The second table summarizes the *Impact of the Institute* on the participants based on how the students described the experience. These tables are arranged thematically across each of the six participants (Tyler, Brad, Dan, Kevin, Mike, and Nick). They contain critical summative information from the appropriate interviews. The table representing *The Impact of the Institute* was drawn from all four interviews. *The Crucible of Leadership* table includes information from the one and two year follow-up interviews.

The Crucible of Leadership

Table 1
Cross Case Comparison – The Crucible of Leadership

Tyler	Brad	Dan	Kevin	Mike	Nick
-Chapter alcohol crisis during Sophomore year	-Two accused sexual assaults during “his” chapter party Sophomore year	-Personal injury led to removal as fraternity officer	-President during major fight at fraternity during Junior year; police and university involved	-Chapter alcohol crisis Sophomore year	-Father died 16 days before one-year follow up interview
-Lost credibility as leader and withdrew; almost quit	-Leader can’t just be worker, must improve organization	-Became alienated and separated; Junior year “breakdown”	-Feeling overloaded led to collapse; did	-Choosing sides meant losing friends; replayed old family dynamic	-Learned to really cherish his father’s style of leadership; unselfish and non-
-Decided personal		-Kicked out of university;		-Major confrontation	

goals were higher than group goals at the time -Eventually re-engaged and became a contributor -Teamed up with rivals with different leadership style; learned from each other	-As President he succumbed to peer pressure and lost integrity -Realized he couldn't control group; received hate mail -Withdrew as leader, working on personal goals -Didn't feel guilt then, does now	reinstated -Connected with dad and reminded he must be grounded as a person first -Now takes comfort in informal leadership positions; allows him to connect without all the pressure	not reach out for help -Couldn't deal with all the stress; "house of cards" crumbled -Crash helped him relax and realize he can't do it all himself -Became less rigid in beliefs about leadership, life and religion	with coaches about his role on football team -Became alienated and disillusioned; withdrew -Learned how and when to challenge authority; reliance on emotion was not helpful as a leader	judgmental -Impacted by show of love at funeral -Wants to fill his father's shoes -Learned to care more about people as a leader; didn't really do so as a younger leader
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The idea that leaders are shaped by defining moments in their life is not a new one. Countless biographies and autobiographies provide evidence that one's views of leadership can crystallize and change with key life experience. Leadership researchers Bennis and Thomas (2002), in *Geeks & Geezers: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders*, studied highly successful leaders under 35 and over 70 years of age. They report that all successful leaders were shaped by one major event or epiphany – crucibles of leadership. This corresponds to the findings in this study as each of the six participants reported a personal failure as a leader during a crisis or crucible of leadership that reshaped their views. Tyler withdrew from the fraternity and almost quit – eventually reengaging in a new way. Brad withdrew his final semester and had virtually nothing to do with the fraternity. Instead, he worked on personal and career goals. This was true of Dan and Kevin as well. Dan was removed from leadership roles and eventually reengaged in a more informal way. Kevin collapsed and was forced to employ a more collaborative model. Mike's crucible enabled him to adopt a different leadership style altogether and team up with former adversaries to create a much more effective model. Nick's crucible led him to appreciate and incorporate relational and nurturing facets of leadership.

A key experience impacted the organization of meaning around leadership for each of these young men. It is also evident that all six participants paid a heavy price for being a leader. Leaders have long been conflicted by competing values and the needs of a variety of constituencies. Student leaders are no different. In

the end, all became more flexible and collaborative. Clearly a transformation had taken place in each. This relates to the work of Burns (1996) in that true leadership has a transformational effect on the leader, the follower, and the organization. The transformational impact that each of these students had on their organization and followers were not conclusive. There is no question, however, that these six participants were transformed as leaders in college. The next section investigates the degree to which this can be attributed to the fact that they attended the Institute.

Impact of the Institute

Table 2
Cross Case Comparison – Impact of the Institute

Tyler	Brad	Dan	Kevin	Mike	Nick
-Supported things he already knew; knew the concepts	-Taught humility by experiential activities and the ropes course	-Liked seeing different styles; drawn to quieter styles	-Needed to become more of a friend and less of a dictator	-Gave him more styles to choose from	-Surprised different styles worked
-Clearer vision afterwards with more confidence	-Learned that he has to bring followers along	-Felt he received more resources; mainly fellow leaders	-Knew the concepts, now had terms to go with them	-Enjoyed connection with other leaders	-Tried to incorporate more in year one but just accepted self as he is
-Reported on near spiritual experience	-Sees competitive style doesn't always work	-Remembered <i>The Knot</i> and other experiential activities	-Individuals must have a connection with the values of the organization	-Needed to "encourage the heart" more and listen more to followers	- <i>Institute</i> reaffirmed things he already had been taught
- Remembered experiential activities two years later	-Doesn't remember all five leadership practices but does know he needs to grow as a leader; does think back on <i>Institute</i> from time to time	-Resented those back home; hard to apply leadership principles there	-Able to change culture of presidential leadership from dictator to more democratic servant	-Connected him to deeper or religious aspects of leading	-
-Learned Institute was not like the real world				-Leader needs zero conflicts between self and aims of organization	- Experiential activities showed him importance of more democratic leadership style
-Failed in every goal as a leader in year following Institute; succeed in year two	-Have to be solid yourself, then help others and organization do the same	- <i>Institute</i> could not have helped him with ordeal—had to learn it by experience	-Frustrated trying to lead back home	-Credits mostly his high school teacher and things he learned there	-In final interview credited <i>Institute</i> with affirming he can lead and doesn't have
		- <i>The Institute</i> gave him	-Realized need to get back to his		

<p>-Has same definition at end but is more effective</p> <p>-Credits life experience for positive changes in leadership style, not participation in <i>The Institute</i></p>	<p>-Leadership is deep inside you; not superficial</p> <p>-Did not impact long-range goals but changed perspective</p> <p>-Credits changes in style to developmental dynamics, not <i>The Institute</i></p> <p>-<i>Institute</i> not like real world</p> <p>-Falls back into old style if not careful</p>	<p>other options; could lead in a different manner</p> <p>-Life experiences more important than the impact of <i>Institute</i></p> <p>-Realized old style left him alone and is self-defeating</p>	<p>core</p> <p>-If <i>Institute</i> helped it was more with applying things I learned there to life more than fraternity</p> <p>-Being a leader is on-the-job training</p> <p>-Leadership is already bred into you, <i>Institute</i> gives you a clean shine</p>	<p>-Institute is like repeating CPR certification; remembers experiential activities</p> <p>-Doesn't prepare you for real-world conflict back home</p> <p>-Didn't change me; driving force still there</p> <p>-Maturing, dealing with divorce, and personal growth is responsible for helping him as a leader</p>	<p>to dominate</p> <p>-Connection to principles of organization</p> <p>-Frustrated when home because couldn't lead that group</p> <p>-More like father while leading now; listens and gets to know people on a personal level</p> <p>-<i>Institute</i> can't change what 22 years have made</p>
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While analyzing the impact of the Institute over time two phenomena seem significant. The first is that, while there was a range of attribution offered immediately following the retreat (some reported new understandings while some claimed it gave them names for things and concepts they already knew), with time the participants gave credit for their growth as a leader to maturation and experience rather than the Institute itself. This was evidenced in four areas: (a) the sense that leadership needs to be grounded in something substantial and personal, (b) that being exposed to different styles of successful leadership was helpful in providing future options as a leader, (c) that memorable experiential activities provided valuable lessons on leadership, and (d) that newly-formed relationships and friendships with other leaders at the Institute were important resources for future consultation and support.

During the interviews following the Institute, the students all reported feeling more connected to an inner core that made them feel more confident and less fearful as a leader. They also learned the importance of integrity and fidelity to deeply held beliefs. Immediately after the Institute they tended to credit the experience for this understanding. By the time of the final interviews, the

participants all cited growing up and becoming more mature as the reason they were more comfortable and more grounded as a leader.

Another common response to the Institute is that all six enjoyed seeing a variety of styles of leaders and leadership. They discovered that they did not have to lead all the time or they could lead in different ways – often less personally demanding and more successful in achieving group goals. A key component of the Institute’s curriculum, each student was eager to incorporate some of these into his thinking about leadership and his future performance as a leader. All six participants ended up doing exactly this, but the longer time passed since experiencing the Institute, the less credit was given to their attendance. All six students remembered most of the experiential activities, even two years after the Institute. These were, by far, the most-remembered curricular components. They all ended up incorporating most of these curriculum objectives (collaboration, inclusiveness, sharing of power, enabling others to act) into their future leading, but did not credit the Institute. The students reported that the success of these activities (especially the ropes course) was due to the fact that they were forced to take a good look at their strengths and weaknesses. Each suffered in performing tasks at the Institute from a weakness in their leadership style and was obligated to adjust their approach in order to proceed successfully through the activities.

All participants reported extensive learning at the Institute immediately following the experience. Two years later, the remnants of this learning could still be seen, but it was attributed to other factors. What is inconclusive is whether the educational experience had significant impact or none at all, or whether it was one of a number of educational and experiential influences that impacted student learning. It is fair to ask whether students just forget what they learn or forget to connect their current notions of leadership to the curriculum.

The second phenomenon that stood out was the sense of anger and disillusionment that each participant felt when he returned to his home organization. In interviews one year after the Institute, each claimed that the experience did not prepare them for what he had to face when leading back in his own environment. They found the setting in Oxford, Ohio, conducive to learning and leading – a captive audience of interested students came together to learn how to lead better. The dynamics were very different back home, as all of them met resistance and/or apathy in their attempts to lead and change their organization. What was fascinating is that in the final round of interviews two years after the leadership training, the students all asserted that the Institute could not have really helped them with their crucible of leadership. Each felt that experiencing the crisis, whether in their organization or their personal life, and learning from the difficulties was the only way to develop new or better styles of leadership. When I pressed them for possible ways of incorporating preparation for a crucible into the curriculum of the Institute, none of them offered any suggestions. In fact, they

discouraged me from even trying to do so while they maintained fierce loyalty to the need for young leaders to “go through” something as the critical piece to their learning.

Analysis of the data is inconclusive as to how much learning is really being taken up by students over time. Claiming the Institute did not change them much during the final interviews, the students credited experiences as a leader and personal development and maturation as the keys to their evolution as leaders. This is consistent with the work of Astin (1984, 1993) and others contributing to our understandings of higher education student development. Each student, however, did change as a leader and some of the ways that they changed can be traced to things they said about leadership immediately following the Institute.

Discussion

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. Each of the six participants was self-selected in this study. By interviewing only those who volunteered, I might have a skewed sample of students. Would the other 54 participants have responded differently? What was behind their eagerness to participate and how might that have impacted their answers?

All of the participants were white males who had chosen to be members of the same international fraternity. In a real sense, these descriptive factors reflect a level of privilege that might impact their access to leadership roles, abilities as leaders, and their ability to talk about their leadership experiences. The perceived culture of fraternities might also tend to attract young men that already have a certain leadership style or personal characteristics. High-achieving student leaders might disproportionately join fraternities, thus calling into question claims of developing leaders. It is not uncommon for athletics to be a key component of fraternity life and all six participants had extensive athletic experiences. This study leaves open the question of whether or not race, gender, age, and specific collegiate affiliations has an impact on the crucibles one faces and impact of leadership over time. Another limitation is the fact that I did not attempt to triangulate or verify claims that the participants made about their leadership. I had no real way of knowing how they led or how they changed as leaders. This study was very much about how the participants described their lives as leaders, and made no attempt to actually determine whether what they claimed was true.

Implications for Leadership Education

These findings suggest crucible experiences have a significant impact on learning to be a leader. Less clear is the role of formal leadership curricula and how these interact with leadership experience and individual maturation over time. The participants posit that mere exposure to leadership opportunities is paramount. If this is true, time might best be spent creating opportunities for students to lead and fail as part of an effective curricular model. In every case the students reported that they learned to lead from a core or place of greater personal integrity by making mistakes. If this is true, how do we help our student leaders prepare for a crisis ahead of time? Is it possible to practice “crucibles?”

As the work of Townsend (2002) suggests, and these six participants assert, is mere involvement in leadership experiences the most effective way to learn or are personal development and maturation the key factors in leadership development? Is it a combination? If so, then what is the role of leadership classes or retreats? As reported earlier by Cress (2001), if connecting co-curricular experiences to academic classes shows promise in positively impacting student leadership, then how do we provide that link? How do we help students remember? A great deal more money, resources, and holistic curriculum planning is needed to develop leaders than what is currently being done.

Many parents, teachers, coaches, university student affairs professionals, schools, and colleges have a great deal invested in believing that participation in any number of leadership camps and courses is having a positive result – that they are creating leaders. If stand-alone experiences have little impact over time or if participants report little impact, how can they be used to scaffold future learning? Several participants of the Institute that took part in this study stated that leadership training should begin in grade school and continue after the Institute. This would suggest the need for more long-term and comprehensive academic programs. Related to this, how can those who provide leadership education classes document learning and success over time? If more is being learned at leadership retreats and classes than is being attributed, what new research designs need to be employed to support this notion?

From a curriculum design perspective, by far the most-remembered aspects of the Institute were the experiential activities. In addition, the lessons of these activities were remembered for the most part. Did these work more for our participants because they are athletic males or does this kind of activity work for all students? Also, while the students remembered the activities, they did not necessarily adjust their behavior to match lessons learned from the activity until they were forced to do so in a crisis.

From a social justice perspective, is leadership education going to be mandatory across educational settings? If not, what kind of gap are we creating? Are we providing selective leadership programs for the predisposed or those whose family life has somehow prepared them for the role?

Future Research

Perhaps the next step in leadership education research is to look deeply into the lives of students and document learning about leadership across the lifespan. It is imperative that we also investigate where and how students attribute their learning in a variety of leadership contexts and cultures. We must also approach integrated notions of leadership that blur traditional theoretical boundaries. This will, indeed, take a great deal of resources. What may emerge is a new model of leadership education that is highly individualized. Within this model students would be encouraged to reflect on antecedent variables as well as assess the positives and negatives of their current leadership styles and practices given those variables. They would then decide if they want to change or improve as a leader and select from a curriculum and life experience plan for their specific needs. At regular intervals reflection, feedback, evaluation, and training would continue across the lifespan of the leader. This study suggests that new models must recognize that students do not come to us as blank slates and that learning about leadership is ongoing within and outside of the classroom.

In our efforts to determine the impact of leadership education, it is critical that we commit to a more complex process and cast a wider net. We must accept that linear theoretical frames and evaluations are just snapshots in time and no longer suffice. Any picture that ignores what has preceded the leadership education experience distorts the image. Any view that omits what follows, what takes, and how people change over time is lacking as well. This study responds to calls for a rich, qualitative, longitudinal approach in investigating new understandings of leadership and efforts to teach leadership to students.

As student leadership education fights for legitimacy it will need to prove its worth. Until that time, honest appraisal will call into question whether leadership education is a passing fad or a legitimate endeavor in the educational setting. University mission statements often claim that they are developing leaders. What I would suggest is that these schools may or may not be doing what they claim and if they are, it might not be accomplished in the way they think. We have not yet answered key questions about the impact of leadership education courses and initiatives on individual students. If we are intentional in our efforts to teach leadership to students, we must fairly measure the impact. If we claim we are doing leadership education, we best not take too much credit – not just yet.

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Biography

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