

Using Aha! Moments to Understand Leadership Theory

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Abstract

As Huber (2002) noted, striving to understand how leadership is taught and learned is both a challenge and an opportunity facing leadership educators. This article describes the *Leadership Aha! Moment* assignment used in a leadership theory course to help students recognize the intersection of leadership theories and their daily lives while practicing their written communication skills. The assignment requires a paper in which students describe when they experienced something outside of class during the semester that made them understand something from the course on a deeper level. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the assignment is helping students connect with course content on a more personal level.

“What’s really outstanding about those moments is usually when you hear something like that, it’s – it’s – it’s reminding you of what you already know. That’s what the aha is, ‘cause it feels like, ‘I knew this; I just didn’t know the words to put it,’ you know? That’s what it is. That’s what’s fabulous about it.”

--- Oprah Winfrey, The Oprah Winfrey Show, October 13, 2000

Introduction

In his book *On Leadership*, John W. Gardner shared, “the development of more and better leaders is an important objective that receives a good deal of attention in these pages. But this is not a how-to-do-it manual. The first step is not action; the first step is understanding” (1990, p. xviii). Fortunately for leadership educators in higher education, the academic study of leadership has boomed since the mid-1990s (Crawford, Brungardt, & Maughan, 2005). In an effort to help students understand leadership, many undergraduate academic programs include the study of leadership theories as one component of the overall program. In a Delphi study conducted with a panel of leadership educators, Morgan, Rudd, & Kaufman (2004) found the identification and application of key leadership theories and leadership models to be the second highest ranked objective that should be addressed by agricultural leadership programs. Furthermore, of the eight courses the panel agreed should be included in an agricultural leadership program, an introduction to leadership theory and practice course was the highest ranked. Unfortunately, however, the study of leadership theories can be confusing for even seasoned leadership scholars, not to mention undergraduate students studying the theories for the first time. Perhaps Bennis (1959) said in best:

Of all the hazy and confounding areas in social psychology, leadership theory undoubtedly contends for top nomination. And, ironically, probably more has been written and less is known about leadership than about any other topic in the behavioral sciences. Always, it seems, the concept of leadership eludes us or turns up in another form to taunt us again with its slipperiness and complexity. (pp. 259-260)

Many experts support the notion that leadership is a scholarly discipline that can be taught (Bass, 1990; Bennis, 1994). The study of teaching and learning has yielded many principles, including those necessary to reach millennial college students. Reardon and Derner (2004) noted, “Learning happens when brains are connecting in meaningful ways with the subject matter. It occurs when learners make patterns based on existing schema as they seek to understand new content” (p. 10). “A variety of pedagogical approaches – such as cooperative learning, direct instruction, inquiry, reading, writing, and experimentation, to name a few – foster learning” (p. 10). Jackson and Parry (2011) cited five ways to study leadership which include – “You can actually attempt to lead, you can observe leadership in action, you can talk about leadership, you can read about it and you can write about it” (p. 1). Sweeny (2006) found millennial students learn best when (a) they are in a collaborative environment where they can learn and work in a team, (b) they are in a challenging environment that connects information with their future plans, (c) the learning environment is student-centered and

flexible, but with structured goals and objectives, (d) technology is utilized to make the lesson more connected to their experiences, and (e) the environment exists where all ideas are accepted and respected. Consistent with these arguments, Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) noted, “For many kinds of learning, the richest resources for learning reside in the adult learners themselves” (p. 66).

Leadership educators are continuously implementing new and innovative teaching practices to connect what is taught to the experiences of students. Research shows previous practices used to accomplish this task include capstone projects, interviews, personal growth projects, blogs, portfolios, book reviews, film reviews, debates, simulations, and role playing assignments and are successful in helping students apply and synthesize leadership concepts (Boyd & Williams, 2010; Gifford, 2010; Gifford, Cannon, Stedman, & Telg, 2011; Goertzen & Rackaway, 2007; Hickam & Meixner, 2008; Kamler, 2006; Moore, 2008; Moore, Odom, & Wied, 2011; Olsen, 2009; Smith & Roebuck, 2010).

Background

Survey of Leadership Theory is a three credit-hour course designed to help students understand the complexity of leadership through the study of leadership theories. Within the course, students study many historical and contemporary leadership theories with the objective of arriving at a deeper understanding of the professional leadership process. Upon satisfactory completion of this course, students should be able to: (a) analyze and evaluate the major leadership theories and models; (b) compare and contrast the major leadership theories and models; (c) explore the relationship between leadership theories and models in daily life; (d) model leadership skills in a learning community; and (e) increase written and oral communication skills.

Over the years, various writing assignments, including a great leader analysis, a film analysis, a group film review composed of a written leadership analysis and presentation, a case study analysis, a group case study analysis and presentation, and assignment self-evaluations have been used to meet course objectives and requirements. Course instructors recently incorporated the *Leadership Aha! Moment* assignment as a written course requirement that is to be completed by students on an individual basis.

Description of the Leadership Aha! Moment Assignment

The *Leadership Aha! Moment* assignment was developed and implemented in the *Survey of Leadership Theory* course in the Fall 2011 semester to help approximately 200 students meet course objectives while “tapping into the experience of the learners” (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005, p. 66). The purpose of the *Leadership Aha! Moment* assignment is two-fold: First, the assignment provides students with the opportunity to better understand the complex phenomenon of leadership by relating it to their daily life. The assignment is meant to help make connections between what students are studying in the classroom and examples of leadership they witness and experience every day. The second purpose of the assignment provides students with an opportunity to practice and improve their written communication skills. This is not only beneficial to students, but ensures that the course is meeting the minimum requirements to maintain its “C” course designation.

Each student was expected to document one *Leadership Aha! Moment* and discuss its impact on their personal leadership learning. There are many definitions of “aha! moments.” According to Safire (2009), psychologist John Kounios defined them as a sudden comprehension allowing a person to see something from a different perspective. The term can also be found within popular media. Oprah Winfrey (2006) has referred to them those unforgettable, connect-the-dots events when a person realizes everything has suddenly, somehow changed. While they probably occur at different times and in different places and situations, these moments of realization and clarity can happen to all of us. Aha! moments can come from any number of activities and experiences, yet they all somehow provide a moment of clarity about a particular problem or concept.

This assignment was designed to help students critically reflect upon and analyze their own leadership learning related to the theories and models covered in the course. It is discussed with students on the first day of class, throughout the course lectures, and within the assignment sheet for the *Leadership Aha! Moment* assignment that each student will likely have moments when something they have read or something we have discussed in class suddenly makes sense with unexpected clarity. It is these moments this assignment is designed to capture.

For this assignment, students were asked to write a four to five page paper discussing a *Leadership Aha! Moment* they experienced during the semester. Students were specifically instructed to:

- Provide a substantive description of their *Leadership Aha! Moment* and explain the theory or model they suddenly understood on a deeper level. Students were to clearly describe and discuss the situation they

found themselves in that had a clear tie to a theory or model studied during the semester.

- Explain why the *Leadership Aha! Moment* was important to personal leadership learning and how the moment helped the individual to better understand content covered in class. Just a recount of the experience was not acceptable. Rather, a deep reflection on the experience and discussion of how their *Leadership Aha! Moment* influenced, and will continue to influence, their learning as a leader was expected.
- Use vocabulary from assigned readings and class discussions related to leadership theories and models.

Grading was based on professionalism, spelling, grammar, completeness, and how well the objectives of the assignment were addressed. As it was used in this course, the assignment was worth 150 points out of a total of 1000 points for the course. Students earned between zero and 50 points for the substantive description of their *Leadership Aha! Moment* paper, between zero and 50 points for their discussion of the importance of their *Leadership Aha! Moment* to their current and future leadership learning, and between zero and 25 points for their writing effectiveness including grammar and/or spelling errors, organization and flow, use of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA) style, and length of their paper.

Results and Experience with the Practice to Date

A formal assessment of the use of this assignment within the *Survey of Leadership Theory* course has not been conducted. However, several students who took the course during the Fall 2011 semester provided comments about the assignment. Overall, it appears as though the assignment has had a positive effect on students' understanding of leadership theories and that students enjoyed the assignment.

Specific comments from students indicated that the assignment was successful at helping them accomplish the course objective of exploring the relationship between leadership and their daily lives. One student noted:

The Leadership Aha! Moment was a great opportunity for students to reflect and understand how many areas show leadership every day. It was good to look back and really see how many leadership moments we actually have every day.

Similarly, another student stated:

I think writing our Aha! Moment papers in [course] were very beneficial. It made me stop and think more deeply about what we had learned and really apply to concepts to my daily life.

Another student shared:

I believe the Leadership Aha! Moment assignment was awesome! It made me take the material and relate it to my life.”

Building upon the fact that the assignment helped students reflect upon the relationship between leadership and their daily lives, students commented on the fact that this was an individual and somewhat personal assignment.

One student shared:

The Leadership Aha! Moment paper really made me sit down and think about when I am a leader in my life... I learned that I showed leadership best if I used Situational Leadership.

Similarly, another student noted:

I would have never realized I had an Aha! Moment if I had not had this assignment to do. It was a great way to take the material from the class and get a new perspective on all the theories. So, with that said, my Aha! Moment was real, and actually happened to me!

Another student went so far as to say:

With other assignments I usually just start writing and let the words flow. This was not the case with this paper. I actually had to sit and think about it because I had to think back to when leadership moment clicked for me. Out of all the papers I've had to do over the past year, this one has by far been the most thought-provoking because it was MY moment.

In addition to describing how the assignment made course content relevant on a personal level and how it helped them understand the course content, students also seemed to have enjoyed writing this paper.

One student shared:

When we were assigned the Leadership Aha! Moment paper I thought it was going to be another assignment that I would do and forget. This was not the case for this particular paper” (7).

Two students noted:

I enjoyed writing this paper...Overall, it was a fun and reflective paper to write” (5) and “I enjoyed the Leadership Aha! Moment paper because it put a name and a reason to my leadership” (2).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that this assignment was successful at helping students translate theory into practice. For example, one student had this to say about the *Leadership Aha! Moment* assignment:

Throughout the semester, I sat through particularly engaging lectures and discussion groups that dissected each theory and every concept. However, I lacked a more direct and more personal application of those theories. This assignment allowed each student to take a personal experience where they could watch certain leadership theories unfold and play-out. Even more, it allowed a critical analysis of each theory that showed real life actions with real life results. With this assignment I was able to better understand Leadership. It demonstrated through real experience the importance of being conscious of my every action. In order to become an effective and efficient leader, it is crucial to instill trust in every follower and make sure they know that I am attentive to all their needs and motives. (6)

Survey of Leadership Theory course instructors also reflected on the utility of the *Leadership Aha! Moment* assignment. It was found that in prior course assignments students more frequently used foundational leadership theories to conduct analyses. However, in this assignment, students analyzed and applied more complex leadership theories taught in class to the situation in which their “aha! moment” occurred. Assignments demonstrated a deeper understanding and comprehension of leadership theories, as well as a more practical approach to viewing leadership in everyday life. Course instructors also recognized that students exerted more effort in completing the assignment because it was related to each individual’s personal leadership learning.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, it appears as though the *Leadership Aha! Moment* assignment was successful at personalizing the course content in such a way that students were able to see the relevance to their daily lives while gaining an increased understanding of leadership theory. Students took a more critical approach to writing about leadership theory than they had with previous assignments and were better able to clearly analyze the use of some of the more complex theories. Because they were able to relate what they were learning to their own experiences, students took an interest in the assignment. They found this assignment to be more rewarding and less daunting than writing assignments that were used in past semesters because of the personal nature of the assignment.

Because a student's *Leadership Aha! Moment* can occur at any point during the semester, it is recommended that the goals and objective of the assignment are conveyed and the grading rubric discussed repeatedly throughout the semester, beginning on the first day of class. Although students were not required to submit the assignment until late in the semester after most of the theories had been covered in class, some students wrote about a *Leadership Aha! Moment* they had early in the semester. Giving students both ownership and flexibility in their learning resulted in better overall learning and is consistent with Sweeney (2006) who noted students learn better when in environments that are student-centered but have structured goals and objectives.

An unexpected benefit of the personal nature of the assignment was that course instructors got to know students on a deeper, more personal level by reading about their "aha! moments." Unfortunately, because of when the assignment is due, this comes almost at the end of the semester. However, this benefit did not outweigh the need for students to have covered multiple theories over the course of the semester prior to the assignment being due. Therefore, course instructors did not alter the due date of the assignment.

The use of the *Aha! Moment* paper should be further studied. The fact that students found the assignment useful and enjoyed writing it is encouraging. However, its use as a writing assignment should continue to be investigated. The question must be asked, is the assignment truly helping students increase their written communication skills?

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