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SUPPORTING PROBLEM SOLVING IN THE LEADERSHIP CLASSROOM:

Using the pVASE Framework for Bridging Theory to Practice

Abstract

Several models of leadership outline theories on successful intervention such as "Observe, Interpret, and Intervene" within the Adaptive Leadership model (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009) or the "Five Practices" within Kouzes & Posner's (2012) work. However, during stressful moments of leadership practice, many models for leadership intervention are difficult for students to implement. The authors suggest the pVASE framework as an additional component to other intervention models of leadership in order to better support cognitive load and leadership problem-solving during real-time, emergent leadership moments within and beyond the classroom.

Introduction

One of the primary roles associated with the practice of leadership is the ability to solve complex problems; however, leaders often fall into old habits of isolationist thinking when faced with the pressure of responding to complex issues (Kellerman, 2004). For example, in an Adaptive Leadership classroom, when problems arise, students are challenged to put aside their default responses in order to employ adaptive concepts such as thinking politically, surfacing unconscious assumptions, or giving the work back (Parks, 2005; Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). However, leadership students sometimes find self-regulation challenging at best or impossible at worst (O'Malley & Cebula, 2015) because unconscious responses and default behaviors are often hard to override without specific training or tools (Sadtler, Quick, Golub, et al., 2014).

According to Sweller, Kirschner, and Clark (2007), minimally guided teaching techniques can set students up for failure in situations where stress overcomes the ability to recall earlier learning. In addition, authors within in Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) also assert that learning new habits requires guided teaching that eliminates extraneous processing while providing clear processes (Sweller, 1988). For leadership classrooms that strive to bridge theory with practice, these are important considerations for instructors to implement. For example, in Case-in-Point (Parks, 2005) or Intentional Emergence (Werner, et. al 2016) classrooms, in which leadership theory is taught using the events taking place in the moment, the cognitive load for students can be high enough to shut down critical thinking and the application of effective leadership knowledge. In such situations, it is critical for students to have a concrete tool to ease the cognitive discord while building a path back to learning. Even in other more traditional leadership courses that are discussion or lecture-based, students can struggle bridging theory to practice when trying to solve complex problems. For example, although many students resonate with Kouzes and Posner's

Five Practices (2012), novice leadership students may struggle to implement them in appreciable ways into problem solving contexts when they arise.

Cognitive Load Theory (CLT), developed in the early 1980's through experimental design studies, has been used to develop instructional design principles and strategies based on a model of human cognitive development (Sweller, 1988; Van Merrienboer, et. al. 2010). According to CLT, novice to seasoned students require different strategies for support. For example, guided teaching is an important variable for novice learners as is providing worked problems rather than problems to solve (Van Merrienboer, et al, 2010). In this sense, when bridging theory to practice or supporting students in complex leadership problem-solving, students benefit from more fully guided experiences. For example, telling novice leadership students to "intervene" without breaking down specific steps and giving concrete examples on how to intervene, could be problematic.

The purpose of the pVASE framework is to provide concrete problem-solving steps that support novice leadership students in more readily bridging theory to practice even during high cognitive load stress (such as times of ambiguity or applying new skillsets in unfamiliar contexts). The model was developed and piloted within a large, research-intensive, public institution, within an academic leadership program that employed problem-based learning such as Intentional Emergence (Werner, et. Al, 2016) and Case-in-Point pedagogies (Parks, 2005) across ten sections of the introductory course. Typically, within these leadership courses, a student volunteer was given a leadership problem to solve (e.g., set up the room in a way that offers maximum learning and supports the creation of community) within a specific time boundary. Through end of semester feedback and classroom observations over the course of two years, the teaching faculty noticed that students displayed common, often ineffective, leadership patterns when engaging in leadership problem-

solving tasks such as:

- Lack of an overarching purpose or big picture plan;
- Overlooking resources available;
- Unwillingness to ask for help or connect with the people around them;
- Confusing "working harder" with "working smarter" and not looking at their efforts in strategic ways;
- Skipping planning stages, moving into intervening as well as feeling a need to be the one doing the work instead of supporting, evaluating, and managing the work; and
- Forgetting to apply leadership theory to the situation in order to disrupt their default problem-solving approaches.

In order to address these common issues, the authors created a leadership problem-solving model that could be used to supplement existing leadership frameworks. The dimensions of the model were developed to specifically address the ineffective leadership patterns outlined above which had most commonly been observed across the undergraduate leadership classrooms in the program.

The pVASE Model

The pVASE framework is intended to be simple enough for students to remember but robust enough to help them make progress on challenging issues through the messy work of leadership. As Figure 1 below outlines, there are five stages of action within the pVASE framework:

1. Purpose: What is the deep purpose of this work and why are we doing this?

2. Vision: What do we hope to achieve?

3. Ask: What are our assumptions, data,

4. Strategy: What is the plan we will use to get to the desired outcomes?

5. Execute & Evaluate: How can we implement the strategies while getting feedback and making adjustments along the way?
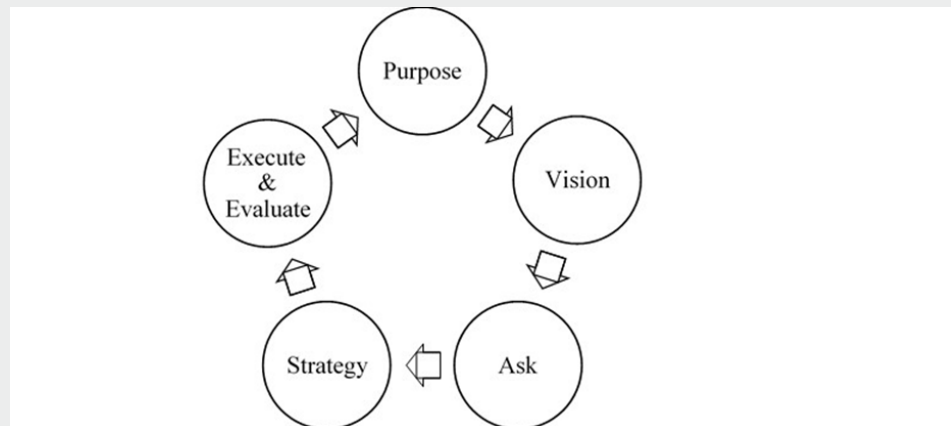

Figure 1. The pVASE Framework Cycle

The pVASE framework, developed in an Adaptive Leadership classroom, which uses both Case-in-Point (Parks, 2005) and Intentional Emergence pedagogies (Werner, et. al 2016), was designed to bridge the gap between leadership theory and student's lived practice of making leadership interventions. The pVASE framework, developed in 2008, has been used within a large, urban, public, research intensive university within an undergraduate leadership minor to provide guided teaching as students move to higher levels of proficiency within leadership theory to practice application. The authors spent two years conducting classroom observations and collecting end of semester feedback from students and instructors in order to establish baseline common "pitfalls" for teaching without the pVASE framework as well as to understand the benefits and limitations of implementing the model.

Most commonly within this pilot context, a student who has been given (or taken) formal authority typically has a short amount of time (on average 10 minutes) within their role either because their role "expires" or they are replaced by another student who has usurped their authority due to a perceived leadership vacuum. Due to the short time boundary, stress is often high and the pVASE stages happen rapidly. The pVASE framework was designed to be easily recalled not only during this stressful time, but beyond the leadership classroom in their applied practices.

Purpose. According to Sinek (2011), many seasoned leaders know what they want to do, where they are going and sometimes even how they plan on getting there, but skip the "why" (e.g., Why are we taking on this work to begin with? What does it matter?). However, "why" is a critical step that supports moving the work from the technical realm to the adaptive. For example, the deep purpose of a mentoring

program or a scholarship fund is not just about that one particular school or student, but also about educational equity; keeping this in mind shapes the steps we take to lead the effort.

Another benefit of identifying the underlying purpose of leadership work is that the "why" attracts other people who share in that belief--even if those people might be somewhat dispassionate about the specific technical work, they may show up for the adaptive challenge that matches their own values and beliefs (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linksy, 2009). Finally, one unexpected but often common result of identifying deeper purpose and sharing that with others, is the cultivation of hope, energy and resilience (Parks, 2011).

If seasoned leaders often overlook this critical step, it can be a complete unknown for beginning leadership students. This is the reason the "P" in the pVASE model is represented in lowercase while the other letters are capitalized--it is often the most hidden and forgotten element of the process, yet is foundational for how the rest of the process unfolds. Providing leadership students with questions to support their exploration of this stage can help them implement it more regularly. For example, instructors might provide the following questions for students when teaching about deep purpose:

- Why does what you are about to do matter?
- What is this for?
- Ultimately what are we trying to affect? Why?
- Why should people care about this?

The classrooms that have piloted the pVASE model, not only use the questions above, but also utilize the Simon Sinek TedTalk "Start with Why" (2009) as part of introducing the pVASE model.

Vision.   Vision identifies the gap between where a group is and where they want to be. It often doesn't matter if students are working with an entrepreneurial start-up, a social movement, a new organization or evolution in culture or norms, change generally begins when people see or are shown a different way of being. The challenge for beginning leaders is to steer clear of the desire to set the vision for the group without input or process. This can be seductive for new leaders because they don't have practice in asking others for input or help, but it can also be seductive because followers often want leaders to provide them with a clear vision (with a map for how to achieve it) and they apply pressure on the formal authority figure to do that quickly (especially if time is constrained as it is in the typical leadership classroom). During this stage of the pVASE model, the student who is tasked with leading is encouraged to slow down the process and avoid the seduction of coming up with a vision for the entire group by asking questions such as:

- What is the work in front of us?
- What is the gap between where we are at and where we want to go?
- What is our imagining for how we as a community can achieve, grow, thrive?
- How is this vision based on the dominant culture perspective?
- How might other, non-dominant culture, perspectives change this vision?
- Who is served by this vision?
- Who is disenfranchised by this vision?

As the pVASE model was initially piloted, there were sections that implemented it and other sections that were not yet using the framework. Informally, instructors found that in spaces where pVASE was not implemented, leadership students often skipped the purpose, vision, and ask stages--instead moving directly to strategy. On the other hand, within the leadership classrooms where pVASE was implemented, students learned to engage with the vision stage for a greater period of time and often found that the strategy and execution stages better supported the desired outcome.

Ask.   It is widely agreed that leadership is not an

individual act and this is true on both small and large scales. Yet one of the most common pitfalls seen across the pilot leadership classrooms (and identified earlier) was that students who were given the temporary formal authority of "leadership" (e.g., to solve a case study, lead a small group, lead a class activity, etc.) often moved back to default behaviors that include isolationism or a "rugged" individualistic approach; thus, placing barriers to other's participation in meaningful, co-creative, and coordinated ways.

By giving the "ask" stage its due consideration, a leader better supports constituents, even those who may oppose the vision, in joining the work in generative ways. Some questions that mark this stage include:

- Has the problem been properly defined?

- Do we have the right data to really understand what is going on (or is it simply a set of narratives, anecdotes or an individual perspective)?

- How can we get data from perspectives we are missing?

- Do we have all the people at the table who need to be involved in this work?

- Whom do we ask from a power and resource aspect? Whom do we ask from stakeholders in the community aspect?

- What has already been done, and who else might be working on this issue?

- Are there best practices or lessons that can be learned before we start as if no one else is working on this (or has worked on this)?

- What kinds of strategies have worked in similar contexts in the past?

- What areas, outside of this one, have faced similar problems and how can we adapt that work to meet the needs of this context?

- How do we invite people to join us?

- How do we invite people to bring their talents and passions to the work?

- What are the resources we have available to us and what are the resources we think we will need?

- Where do we need to intervene?

- What is the adaptive work?

- What is the technical work?

It is important for the leader to make sure that the asking process is authentic and that they are open to getting feedback that wasn't anticipated (or desired). For example, what happens when followers don't share the vision and may want to take it in a new direction? What happens when leaders engage others as co-creators of a vision who want authoritative power in the process? Sometimes, the work falls apart. However, even with these risks, the ask stage is a critical bridge from vision to action and provides leaders a way to better anticipate where future issues may arise in the process.

Strategy. Through classroom observations, we found that without the pVASE framework, students often jumped to strategy or execution at the start of a new leadership challenge. Unexamined "good intentions" became the foundation for their actions in lieu of a methodical approach to leadership problem-solving. As a result, inexperienced leadership students often stood alone at the front of the room (literally and metaphorically) while attempting to implement an unexamined vision with little to no data or supporters while the rest of the class watched the scene unfold.

In contrast, we found that when students used the pVASE model, by the time they moved to the strategy stage, because they had already exercised the "ask" technique to have followers share their vision, students were usually also more willing to ask for help in creating strategies to move forward. Leaders using pVASE appeared more likely to have examined their assumptions (and the assumptions of the group), understand the resources available to them, have a guiding vision and have allies who were able

to assist in carrying out effective strategies. Lastly, leaders engaging in pVASE were also seemingly more willing to engage in a critical (but often risky) element of leadership: pause. In this stage, the following questions are often useful:

- How should we begin? (i.e., What's the plan?)

- How is this intervention strategy based on the dominant culture perspective?

- How might other, non-dominant culture, perspectives change this strategy?

- Who is served by this strategy?

- Who is disenfranchised by this strategy?

- How can we intervene adaptively as well as technically?

- How can we effectively make use of everyone involved and the resources we have? (i.e., How can we divide up the work so that one person isn't doing all the work while others have nothing to do?)

- How can the leader most effectively move from the balcony to the dance floor during this work?

- Do others need to move from the balcony to the dance floor? (When and how will this happen?)

Execute & Evaluation. Many leadership students in the pilot classrooms demonstrated a belief that it is the leader's job to deliver on the vision created. However, the pVASE model requires the leader to step back from the technical execution and engage in the activities of resource development, encouragement and support, and the on-going adaptive work or evaluation of the vision.

Within the pVASE framework, the final stages unfold simultaneously. The group executes the strategies identified in the previous stage while at the same time evaluating the implementation and making corrections along the way. For example, within the Adaptive Leadership model, this might be the Observe, Interpret, Intervene framework (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). Within in the pVASE framework, however, there is also a larger, more formal evaluation that supports the group in understanding key factors such as how effective they were in achieving their vision, how effective their strategies were, how they performed as a group or team, if their intervention leverage points were the correct targets, and/or the satisfaction of themselves and others.

Within the pilot context, students often did not engage in formal questions around execution because their time was limited to about 10 minutes and they typically spent the majority of their time on the previous stages, so had little time left for questioning at this point. However, during the debriefs of these leadership exercises, the instructors asked students how this would have gone differently if the group had weeks instead of minutes to complete the task. In addition, within the pilot classrooms, students often did their own spontaneous mini-evaluations while executing and adapted the agreed upon strategy to meet new emergent realities. This could be the result of priming from the previous steps (e.g., because the followers' ideas and feedback had been heard and incorporated in the planning stages, they were primed to continue questioning and making adjustments to the plan once they were given the authority to work on their own smaller tasks within the larger one).

For students within a leadership class, the debrief of the task is a critical component of the pVASE model and serves as the larger, more formal evaluation students will do in their own contexts when using the pVASE model. Within the pilot context, students were given a formal authority role, a specific task to complete within a short amount of time, and some limited resources. They then used the pVASE framework to attempt to complete the given leadership task. However, the instructor typically led the final evaluation of the task. What made the debriefs effective is that the pVASE framework had been introduced to the class previously so by the time

they received their first leadership task, students had a common language as well as a step-by-step process that could be used to objectively break down their work without making the identity or the skills of the leader the main element of evaluation. Rather than the question "how did they do?" the community took up evaluating "how did the process go?" This put the work back on the group.

To achieve this result, first, the instructor publicly debriefed with the formal leader of the task by asking some variation of the questions below:

- Did people see the bigger vision of what you were doing?
- Did you present your vision and ask people to share in it?
- How did you invite people into the work?
- How effectively did you use the resources you had?
- Were you happy with the strategy you came up with?
- Did it get you to the outcome you wanted?
- During the execution/evaluation stage, how did you spend your time?
- Did you see it as your job to execute this plan or was it your job to support and manage others to execute?
- How effective were you in moving from the balcony to the dance floor?

Next, the instructor debriefed with the entire class, often asking variations of the questions above, but opening it up for the class to reflect not only on their own roles and behaviors, but those of the leader as well. Examples of these questions include:

- Where did the process work well?
- Where did things fall apart? Why?
- What was your role in the success or failure of certain aspects?
- What was the leader's role in success

or failure from your perspective?

- If we had two weeks to complete this task, what would we do differently?
- What patterns emerged for us? Have we seen these patterns play out in our class before?
- Where have you seen these patterns play out in other contexts (work, school, groups, etc.)?

Sometimes a task begins to fall apart at various stages (most commonly this happened at the execution/evaluation stage because students skipped or rushed the previous stages). In cases where the task stopped providing productive tension, instructors had the option to pause the task (and the clock) to do a small public debrief with the leader. For example, within the pilot courses, the instructors often asked questions such as:

- Do people see the bigger picture of what you are doing (do they know the "why?")
- How are you inviting others into the work with you?
- How happy are you right now with the strategies you have chosen? How could you imagine changing them?
- If you keep going with this strategy, do you think you will reach the outcome you desire?
- Are you using all the resources at your disposal right now?
- Are you trying to solve this problem alone while others watch? If so, how can you get input and help from others?
- How can you empower others to act?
- Are you getting caught on the dance floor? How can you go to balcony?

After this mini-debrief, students went back to the leadership task and generally were able to more productively work the task. After using the pVASE

model for a while, most classes did not need a mini-debrief and are able to implement the pVASE model on their own without additional support.

Summary

According to Heifetz, the deep purpose of the Adaptive Leadership Model is to ease the wasteful suffering in the world (Parks, 2005)--the pVASE model was created from the same desire. The most striking manifestation of this deep purpose is seen in the difference between students within in Case-in-Point (Parks, 2005) or Intentional Emergence (Werner, et. al.) classrooms who have either studied the pVASE framework in addition to the Adaptive Leadership model or who have not been exposed to the pVASE framework in addition to the Adaptive Leadership model. Within the pilot classrooms, the authors observed that students were more likely to complete leadership tasks effectively and within the time given than students who were not exposed to the pVASE framework.

In order to provide a process for leadership problem-solving in adaptive emergent contexts, the pVASE framework has been used for over a decade in an academic program that served 1,800 undergraduate leadership students a year. The model has also been adopted by other academic and co-curricular contexts across the U.S. The framework has been initially evaluated through observations and has been found to be successful in supporting students in managing the stress of temporary formal authority while leading groups to common goals. More research is necessary to understand the framework's role in mitigating cognitive load during times of stress, but pilot observations indicate the framework may offer a process that once taught, students can recall and implement during moments of leadership ambiguity.

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