

Leadership Philosophy

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When I registered for the *Foundations of Leadership* course I was curious to see how leadership could be taught in a classroom setting I honestly thought there really is not that much to it, you are either good at it or not, and what can we possibly do for ten weeks. Surprisingly, I was completely wrong. This course has opened my eyes to the vast array of information and research available on so many aspects of leadership. In this course, leadership theories and techniques have been introduced while research has both validated and disputed some of these theories. The applications of leadership theories as well as leadership skills and techniques have been presented highlighting both the strengths and criticisms of these techniques. Northouse's leadership evaluation instruments have allowed for self-reflection and self-awareness of my current approach to leadership and provides the opportunity to use this information to improve my skills as a leader.

I was fortunate to have exceptional role models and mentors when I began working in each of my careers, nursing and dentistry. The leader I worked with, as an ICU nurse was the supervisor of the unit. I watched how she earned the respect of the staff, initially as a result of her technical expertise. The three skills approach to leadership includes technical, human, and conceptual skills (Northouse, 2010). The nature of the ICU is high tech and fast paced thus it is critical that a first line supervisor exhibits technical expertise. The human or people skills this mentor displayed has truly become the foundation for my development as a leader. The atmosphere she created in the unit was one of trust, respect and camaraderie. The staff respected her as a leader and wanted

to work hard for her and the unit, it was an “in-group “ situation for the entire staff (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975).

As I transitioned from nursing to dentistry, I had another opportunity to learn from a remarkable leader and mentor. It was here that I expanded many of the values that have become ingrained into my leadership style and philosophy. I witnessed how important honesty and respect are and that these attributes provide the foundation for how you are viewed by both the patients and employees as not only a leader but a person. One of the key elements I took away from this mentor was that everyone makes mistakes, what is important is how you deal with adversity. Be honest and upfront about an error, hiding or brushing over a mistake is unethical; deal with the situation head on even if it is uncomfortable for it will work out in the long run.

The ethical behavior of a leader is incredibly important in the health care arena. “ Ethics is central to leadership because of the nature of the process of influence, the need to engage followers in accomplishing mutual goals, and the impact leaders have on organizational values”(Northouse, 2010, p. 353). In an organization, whether it is a dental practice or a large corporation, the leadership establishes the character of the organization. The leader has their own beliefs and values and these often have influence on the overall attitude of the organization (Palestini, 2011). We have seen countless examples in the media of leaders who behaved unethically and sometimes illegally, this culture of moral and ethical corruption often comes from the top down. This person at the top sometimes uses their power to influence subordinates to do things that are unethical or immoral.

When I started my own dental practice, I had little to no leadership experience and looking back, I made many mistakes. I inherited a staff all of who were experienced in the operations of a dental practice. I was completely lost and had no idea how to run a business. As a result of my lack of experience, I deferred to the staff, figuring they knew what they were doing. At this point in my career my weakness was a result of my inexperience and resulted in a laissez-faire attitude. It was not until a disaster struck that I realized I was the one in charge and had to provide a roadmap for the direction I wanted the practice take. I had a vision for the practice but up until this point I was not able to articulate that vision. Once I established my goals and vision, things began to fall into place.

I think that leadership can be learned but in my case it was by trial and error. The basis of my leadership evolution however came from the values and ethics I observed under my mentors. The disaster that occurred in my practice was a result of lack of leadership on my part; no one was minding the store. I was not assuming responsibility to lead the group due to a lack of confidence in my abilities.

The contingency theory of leadership emphasizes the importance of matching the leader to the situation and it must be appropriate for the leaders style, this theory is a type that matches the leader according to the situation (Fielder & Chemers, 1974). Styles of leadership tend to be either task or relationship oriented. My philosophy of leadership has emerged over the years with a heavy focus on relationships. I aim to instill confidence in my employees and encourage them to achieve things they never imagined. This has empowered the employees and improved their self-esteem, and as a result of this effort I have had employees who are extremely loyal to my practice and me. As described in the

Leader-Member Exchange theory these employees have become “in group” employees, they have more influence, confidence and concern from the leaders (Northouse, 2010).

A leader must be able to adapt their style to the situation. Blake and Mouton’s article, *A Comparative Analysis of Situationalism and 9,9 Management by Principle: Organizational Dynamics* illustrates a poor example of situational leadership. In the scenario a new employee is being trained on how to answer the phone; the boss is very rigid and wants the exact wording with no deviation what so ever. Ultimately the simple task of answering the phone becomes extremely difficult and stressful as the employee tries to memorize the script (Blake & Mouton, 1982). This one-way communication from the boss is extremely ineffective, the employee was so focused on reciting the correct verbiage that if they stumbled on one word they would lose focus and could not complete the sentence to even answer the phone. I experienced similar phenomena in the practice where I currently work. The office implemented a practice management philosophy that relied heavily on verbal scripts. There was a script for every interaction the front office staff had with patients. The office manager was extremely rigid ensuring the scripts were followed exactly. It was an absolute disaster; the receptionist who had been in her position for 15 years was terrified to answer the phone as she worried about getting the script mixed up.

Women’s roles in leadership have been the subject of many studies and are frequently seen in the media. We are all familiar with the term the “glass ceiling” which illustrates the difficulties women have advancing into top leadership positions. There are often pre-conceived notion that women are less ambitious than men and not as dedicated to their jobs. “Expectations of women and how women are supposed to perform and

behave are shown to be different to expectations of men's performance and behavior (Elliot & Stead, 2009, p.97). My experience observing female healthcare professionals particularly dentist and physicians, has been a harshness towards female subordinates. Of course this is not true of all women, but I have noticed this often. A study by a Dartmouth MBA student surveyed students to see whether they would prefer a male or female manager. Shockingly 90% of women preferred a male (Casserly, 2010). A female colleague once asked me for advice regarding an employee who wanted a morning off since her mother was having surgery, I did not understand what was the problem. She said that if she allowed this person to take off the rest of the staff would want unplanned days off and it would turn into a staffing nightmare. I was horrified that there was even a question about this matter. Finally she shared that she felt if she were to "soft" the staff would take advantage of her.

In my opinion an effective leader is one who is able to adapt their leadership style to the situation at hand. We see this concept in the Situational Leadership Theory here the leader needs to be attuned to the situation and the needs of their subordinates. There may be one situation where a leader should be directive, for example teaching a new skill or in an emergency situation, and other situations where they must be supportive. I have been fortunate that as a result of my relationships with my staff, I am often able to determine which approach is appropriate for the employee in a particular situation. I have had instances where employees lack confidence and need a little nudge to attempt a new skill or tryout a new idea. This confidence I show in them has improved the employees willingness to try new things without fear of failure or retribution. My experience has been that the best way to motivate a staff is to have them take ownership of a project.

They must feel excited to pursue a project for their own benefit whether it is a tangible reward or an emotional reward for a job well done. Task such as learning a new skill, developing a protocol or simply re-organizing the office space will be more successful if they feel ownership. I use this concept with my children as well, quite successfully. I encourage them to do the best job they can in school for their own benefit not for mine. When they tell me about a success they have I say you must be very proud of yourself, you did a great job. I am not concerned with their grades but with their effort, I ask if they did their best and if so that is good enough for me. Consequently they own their academic achievements and accomplishments, fortunately this has worked well. This leadership philosophy of mine has been instrumental in developing the inner drive, strength and confidence in my team. I have seen staff member grow and mature over the years to take on challenges they never would have imagined when they began working for me and this is extremely rewarding for me.

On the other hand, I have witnessed situations where employees are terrified of the people they work for and I feel that this type of atmosphere is not only unhealthy, but tends to be unproductive. This autocratic style of leadership tends to stifle creativity and initiative. The employees become risk averse due to fear; personally, I would not want to work in this type of environment.

The way one views their role as a leader can have a significant effect on the culture of the institution. I personally feel that everyone wants to do a good job and given the opportunity and tools they will succeed. I view my team as my most valuable asset and feel it's my job to guide and nurture them to be the best they can be. Some leaders view staff as basically lazy and are afraid they will be taken advantage of. These leaders

often thrive on the power they have over their subordinates, and their behavior may be a result of a lack of self-confidence or other emotional issues. They want to be seen as the “best” and put their subordinates down criticizing them in an attempt to make themselves feel superior.

As a leader, I recognize the strength each employee has and try to build upon that strength. There are certain tasks that must be accomplished in my office and a good leader needs to identify who is best for certain tasks. One staff member loves to call patients and review treatment options and financial arrangements while another staff member loathes this task but prefers to track inventory. The previous office manager was assigning these tasks “evenly” so everyone did his or her fair share. A good leader would identify these issues and make assignment allowing the task to be completed while everyone is enjoying what they do, and ultimately this is quite productive.

The leadership interview was significant in allowing me to appreciate the value of receiving constructive feedback from others. I tend to have a stubborn personality and felt threatened by negative comments viewing them as attacks on me personally. Through the interview process I realized the feedback provides an opportunity for growth and improvement, however I must be open to receiving honest assessments and use this information as a tool for self-improvement. This interview also made me aware that I need to make my expectations very clear and by doing so there is no misunderstanding regarding accountability.

Thinking about issues that may face leaders in the future will present new challenges and require adaptation from one’s current style of leadership. As the work environment shifts to more home offices, remote teams are involved in projects and this



presents a unique situation for a leader. The lack of face-to-face interaction eliminates many queues and body language, which may be significant in understanding the dynamic of the team. Some virtual team leaders may be closely involved with the team having daily contact while other leaders may “check in “periodically. The team members may view one leader as apathetic and uninvolved while the other leader may be seen as overbearing. The leader must be aware of the potential issues and be upfront with the team regarding their style and expectations. If the leader says, for example I will follow the project on line and unless I hear from you there is a problem; we will meet weekly, this then provides the team a framework to work within. The virtual leader needs to be in tune with the subordinates and pick up on subtle queues. A team member may be completely frustrated, ready to quit and no one has any idea there are issues.

The most significant concept I take away from this course is that leadership can be learned. Although the early leadership theories such as the Great- Man theories focused on the innate abilities and characteristics one has for leadership we now know that leadership skills can be learned (Northouse, 2010). Indeed leadership skills can be developed and cultivated over time. The weekly leadership instrument we completed in this course was beneficial for me as a tool allowing me to critically evaluate my leadership style. These questionnaires addressed many issues I may have contemplated in the past and by answering the questions honestly and evaluating my results in relationship to the leadership theories it has been enlightening.

I have been able to identify my strengths and weaknesses as a leader, but most importantly I understand that I can overcome my weaknesses. Being directive, focusing on task and avoiding confrontation are weaknesses I have struggled with over the years.

Although I knew I was lacking in these areas I did not appreciate that I could create a balance, I think I was afraid if I became too task oriented or directive it would compromise my focus on developing and nurturing relationships. I must learn to maintain a balance so that neither is neglected and both flourish.

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