**The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?**

The word leadership is a very common word and, yet, it’s also complex ~~at the same time~~. I originally thought that there is such a thing as an ideal leader. However, my family has shown me otherwise: my father is the democratic type, my mother is the transactional type, and my two sisters are the transformational and strategic type. And this is how I was first introduced to the kind of leadership that I think I could be.

This “incident” took place when I was given the chance to be the head of the school store by Ms. BJ - the school principal. The task at hand was to open up a school store to raise funds for banquets like the senior prom or retreats. As we planned to sell school supplies and consumables for the locals, students, and teachers, it was obvious that I needed to determine our business model, strategize our marketing, find suppliers, and monitor operations. Our team was able to figure out most of these details.

~~The business model, marketing strategy, and operations were straightforward: the traditional retailer model, social media and posters, and a retail operations approach, respectively.~~ So ~~our team was able to pretty much figure out those details.~~ While we had three months to prepare for our school store reopening since the pandemic, we’d been struggling with sourcing the vendors. Our first strategy was to have the supply team compile a list of potential vendors and then cold-call them to negotiate a working customer-seller deal. While we easily compiled our list of vendors, unfortunately, narrowing them down was harder than we could have imagined.

With limited capital, one of our issues is budget. Another issue would be supply delivery time. So we would take those factors into consideration. For example, a highly-reviewed vendor with close distances would have a higher price-point while there’s a similarly highly-reviewed vendor with much lower price, but with three times the delivery time. Just when we thought we’d find the perfect fit, there’s an issue in their responsiveness. There are basically so many variations of pros and cons for each potential vendor. As a result, we couldn’t really decide which vendor is optimal for us and spent too much time pondering on this seemingly never-ending problem.

As the clock was ticking with a few weeks left until the reopening, the supply team began to panic, got demotivated, and frustrated. Highly anxious, I spent days racking my brain for a solution while ensuring that all other aspects of the store were well-prepared. I’d then tried to calm them down by proposing a solution in the form of a scoring system to rate the vendors in our list based on four factors: stock-readiness, price, distance, and responsiveness. Prior to our discussion on this matter, I’ve also prepared a spreadsheet complete with formulas to automatically rate each vendor. Once they calmed down, I showed them how to use this spreadsheet and try to lift their morale by guiding the members on the action plans to collect the vendors data for the spreadsheet’s input value based on the stores needs.

With a clearer plan and specified goals, the supply team was finally able to secure multiple vendors as our supplier within two weeks, leaving us two more weeks to get ready to finally reopen our school store. And it was a success!!

This experience has taught me that being able to stay collected during times of adversity will enable me to keep focused on the big picture, which is evaluating the most appropriate vendor for our store. Being a good leader doesn’t necessarily mean that he/she has to be able to pave a smooth road for the team. Instead, it’s about being able to stick together with the team even during hard times, stay calm, give assurance by providing actionable solutions to pull the team out of a distress, and become the pillar of support.

Hi William,

Firstly, I’m happy to see that you aspire to be a good leader. However, since this is a Common App essay rather than a supplemental essay, I’d suggest that you restructure your essay to make it more vulnerable and unique. As of now, your essay would be a good supplementary leadership essay or an answer to a prompt that asks you to highlight specific qualities of a good leader.

Personally, I feel that your essay focuses more on the challenges that your group faced and how you finally decided to deal with them. You’ve indeed provided a personal reflection on what qualities you think a good leader should have. However, remember that most of the other candidates at UPenn most likely also have the qualities that you’re describing in this essay. Thus, I’d suggest that you restructure parts of your essay.

There are four essential questions that all exemplary Common App essays should answer:

1. "Who am I?"

You’ve mentioned that you originally thought there was no such thing as a perfect leader. However, your family has proven you wrong. They all excelled at being unique leaders. I think the admissions counselors would be more curious to see what it was like to grow up in such a healthy environment and how that shaped your understanding of what makes a good leader.

1. "Why am I here?"

Here you can talk about your experience and the obstacles you faced as the appointed head of a school store. Why were you appointed? Did you show leadership qualities before this? (See above comments)

1. "What is Unique About Me?"

This is the section where you should really delve deep. You’ve written about a lot of the challenges. However, they sound rather like "telling" rather than "showing". Focus more on your emotional response when things spiraled out of your control. What made you desperate to fix it? Is being a leader something that’s expected of you from your family, or is it something that you highly value because you’ve been a good leader so far?

If the readers can sympathize with you, it’ll make your essay more impressive and relatable. Here is also the part where you apply the leadership qualities that you’ve learned from your family members.

The counselors are more interested in reading *how you think* than *what you did.*

1. "What is important to me?"

How are you applying the life lessons you’ve learned from this experience? (see comment above)

Best of luck!

Melinda