Interviewing Leaders: A Reflection on Growth and Development

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Leadership is a dynamic process that involves both personal growth and the development of others. In this paper, we explore the theme of "growth of self and others" through the unique perspectives of leaders across various domains. According to Yukl and Gardner (2020), growth encourages the development of one's abilities, provides opportunities for learning, and allows individuals to learn from failure. After interviewing these leaders, it became clear to our team that formative experiences that shaped them both personally and professionally were essential in the development of their unique leadership style that now serves to foster others' growth. Our findings were consistent with research that emphasizes the strong developmental impact different experiences have on leaders and their own overall growth (McCall, 1998). Early work experiences, role models and challenging experiences all play a part in leaders' development. From an emphasis on effective training to a focus on empathy, each leader offers unique insights into fostering growth within themselves and their teams. In addition, we focused on transformative experiences, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted leaders to reevaluate their approaches and priorities.

**Introducing Three Unique Leaders**

The first interviewee was Ana De La Teja. De La Teja is a general manager at Cafe Bernardo, a distinguished restaurant in the small college town, Davis, California. Her work focuses on ensuring the productivity of staff members, upholding high standards of service, and engaging with various departments to coordinate logistics. De La Teja values inclusivity, respectful cooperation, and integrity. She trusts that individuals in her organization can effectively develop new skills if they are motivated to grow and appropriate support is provided.

The second interviewee was Dan Morton. Dan Morton has overseen many teams as a team leader, implementation manager, and manager of institutional design for companies like Edward Jones and Anheuser-Bush. Dan revealed the effects of different obstacles on teams, managing teams during the COVID-19 pandemic and major organizational shake-ups. His leadership style, focusing on empathy, adaptability, and mentorship, resonates with the importance of growth within oneself and others. During this conversation, Dan shared various approaches, hurdles, and strategies he employs to ensure his team’s growth aligns with his own professional development.

Our third interviewee was Kim Chandler. Chandler is the Athletic Director at the Division Three level for Whitman College in Walla Walla Washington. A total of 17 teams, 51 coaches, and hundreds of student athletes fall under Chandler’s direct supervision. It is an emphasis on individualized consideration and empowerment for direct reports that is key to her philosophy on leadership development.

The fourth interviewee was Dr. Lynette Bikos. Dr. Bikos is the Chair of the Clinical Psychology (CPY) PhD program at Seattle Pacific University. She oversees the CPY faculty and staff and serves as the director of the program. Dr. Bikos values relational leadership and encouraging growth in others by drawing on their unique strengths and fostering motivation. Her team is highly collaborative and has developed a culture of trust and shared leadership that allows them to excel in their work as a department.

**Developing Others**

**Ana De La Teja**

De La Teja’s approaches the development of workers by ensuring effective training, maintaining necessary support, and fostering a psychologically safe environment. When training new team members, De La Teja makes efforts to clarify roles and ensure individuals’ understanding about task processes. Often, she will provide step by step examples to exemplify her expectations for performance, takes time to correct misunderstandings, and emphasizes the importance of why certain processes must unfold in particular ways. By clarifying roles and objectives, ensuring understanding by defining responsibilities, setting goals, and assigning tasks, work activities are effectively coordinated, and role conflict and ambiguity is avoided (Yukl & Gardner, 2020).

When asked to recall a specific instance when she influenced the development of others, De La Teja reflected on a situation when she played a significant role in the growth of two subordinates, Roberto and Jenny. She explained her efforts to challenge them, while granting them the necessary resources to succeed. She described instilling confidence in the two by encouraging them to “step up”, acknowledging their capabilities, and ensuring her support. Roberto and Jenny are now perceived as successful leaders within their teams. This approach is quite effective in influencing the development of followers’ skills and attitudes. By setting challenging goals and expressing confidence their objectives can be achieved encourages team members to perform more efficiently and achieve better-quality work (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Further, De La Teja engages in supportive leadership by considering her teams’ attitudes and communicating her concern for their needs. These supportive behaviors allow her to foster effective interpersonal relationships with team members.

Fostering a psychologically safe environment is also important to De La Teja’s focus on development. She reflected on her past experiences with the company, explaining how prior team members were unkind and lacked motivation to achieve and uphold her expectations. She realized the negative atmosphere harmed the workplace and began seeking applicants who could cultivate a positive environment—considering how their personalities would fit into the team, rather than evaluating individuals solely on skills. Now, she feels that her team is friendly, trusting, and people feel comfortable speaking up when issues arise. By creating a psychologically safe environment based on trust, De La Teja fosters cooperative attitudes that produce positive impacts on teamwork (Salas et al., 2014).

Through her efforts to guarantee productive training, sustain support, and nurture a psychologically safe workplace, De La Teja has confidence that her team will continue to develop and strengthen both interpersonal and task-related skills.

**Dan Morton**

In reflecting Dan Morton's’ journey as a leader, several pivotal events have permanently impacted his leadership style. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered the dynamic of his role, prompting a shift towards prioritizing the well-being of his team members over traditional productivity metrics. This experience underscored the importance of empathy and support in leadership as he learned to navigate through uncertainty while providing emotional support to their associates (Zivkovic, 2022). Similarly, the aftermath of the George Floyd shooting served as a reminder of the external factors that can profoundly affect the mental and emotional state of the team. Proactively addressing the event and encouraging open dialogue highlighted the need for leaders to recognize and respond to societal issues impacting their workforce.

Moreover, experiencing a major organizational transformation exposed them to the fears and anxieties of his team members regarding their roles and future within the company. By fostering transparency and providing reassurance, they learned the importance of effectively managing change and reducing uncertainties to maintain team morale and cohesion (Kleynhans, 2022). These experiences collectively emphasized that effective leadership extends beyond task management to incorporate empathy, communication, and adaptability in navigating challenges and supporting team members through adversity.

In developing leadership talent within his team, he adopts a multifaceted approach that emphasizes both modeling and mentorship. By exemplifying desired behaviors and facilitating opportunities for observation and reflection, he empowers individuals to cultivate their leadership skills over time (Steinmann et al., 2018). Additionally, investing in personalized development plans tailored to everyone's strengths and areas for growth fosters a supportive environment conducive to skill enhancement and professional advancement. Through ongoing feedback and mentorship, he aims to instill confidence and autonomy in emerging leaders, ultimately nurturing a culture of continuous learning and growth within the team.

**Kim Chandler**

When Chandler arrived in her position as Athletic Director, May of 2019, she was tasked with unifying 17 distinct teams into one cohesive department. Though each team had their own leader, who is an expert in their field, Chandler understands that sharing a compelling direction is instrumental to succeeding. For a compelling direction to orient, energize, and engage a team it must be clear and challenging (Stagl et al., 2007). Her mission is anything but simple, to develop the best student-athletes in their athletic conference. The department measures “best” through success on the field, GPA, graduation rates, and most interestingly the job or internship placements after graduation. Using a direct report’s future accomplishments as a marker of her own success as a leader is common for Chandler and a clear indicator of her emphasis on transformational leadership.

One unique aspect of Chandler’s position, compared to other organizations, is that each one of her direct reports has on job development opportunities. It is an important part of her leadership philosophy. During the interview Chandler spoke about creating a “completely new” position in her field, an Athletics Recruiting Coordinator. The person selected for the role was provided with some structure but ultimately had full autonomy in designing the positions day-to-day responsibilities. Many leaders may find it difficult conceding control, potentially micromanaging, of a new project to ensure it was a success. Instead, Chandler sought to empower her direct report by making the position their own. She believes providing them with room to make mistakes, learn, and adjust was key to their development and eventual move into greater leadership positions. Though Chandler may not have identified it directly, this role of empowering is central to transformational leadership (Avolio et al., 1999).

Chandler identified her time as a Head Coach under another Athletic Director as imperative to shaping her own leadership style. This individual supported, encouraged, and coached her through the process of becoming a Head Coach at the collegiate level; all aspects of individualized consideration which are significant to transformational leadership (Yukl and Gardner, 2020). These are tools that Chandler continues to use with her direct reports every day. During a check-in she wants to identify what team members have, what they need, and how she can help in supporting them. Understanding that each team member is dealing with different challenges and the support she provides will depend on considering individual situations.

**Dr. Lynette Bikos**

Dr Bikos’ approach to developing leadership talent in others is marked by individualized support, formative feedback, and modeling the behaviors she hopes to see on her team. As CPY chair, Dr. Bikos emphasized the importance of understanding the goals and resource needs of each faculty member to look for ways to support and set expectations. Dr Bikos’ leadership style is highly relational, she carefully considers all projects under her review and offers formative feedback throughout the year so there are never any surprises in performance reviews. Continuous feedback establishes trust and is a supportive form of leadership that builds an environment of psychological safety and frames failures as opportunities to grow (Edmondson, 2012). Dr. Bikos sets the expectations for performance by modelling with her own behavior the culture she hopes to build (Yukl& Gardner, 2020). She emphasizes the importance of being fully present, noting that sometimes presence is the strongest form of leadership. This approach to developing talent traces back to formative experiences in her first job as a career counselor at Wichita State in Kansas. Dr Bikos’ boss modeled relational leadership when top-down management was still very prominent. He frequently visited her tiny office for meetings rather than meeting in his, and he sought out ways to support her future growth by encouraging her to pursue a PhD and offering a spot on a publication for a qualitative study on campus.

  Dr. Bikos identified the CPY Program Manager (PM) as someone she has invested in developing as a leader. She works very closely with the PM and sees this subordinate as a trusted partner, meeting weekly to plan short-, mid- and long-term projects with one another. Dr. Bikos’ coaching style is based on the importance of drawing out the strengths in others that are already there, and providing the tools and training needed for them to be successful. Her management style is based on Hersey and Blanchard’s (1977) Situational Leadership Model that considers the interaction between employee motivation and skill on a scale of low to high. Dr. Bikos adjusts her behavior based on these factors to encourage the best possible performance from her employees.

  A culture of collaboration and development had historically been set up for Dr. Bikos’ team, but she maintains this culture by always encouraging collaboration over competition. Academic environments are often competitive, but Dr. Bikos always encourages relationships before tasks.  The team has a shared mental model based on a therapy working alliance that has demonstrated good work together is informed by agreement on goals, tasks, and strong relationships (Horvath& Greenberg, 1989). Collaboration is fostered by sharing the load, communicating goals, and getting to know one another in a way that builds trust. The challenges the department has faced have also created a strong bond of trust and shared efficacy between members that allows them to continue to face challenges and work effectively with one another.

**Conclusion**

These interviews have provided us with valuable insights into effective leadership practices. By prioritizing empathy, adaptability, and continuous learning, we can foster environments conducive to growth within our teams. Embracing psychological safety, transformative experiences, and individualized support can empower us to become more effective and inspirational leaders. Through ongoing reflection and application of these lessons, we can drive positive change within our organizations and strive towards personal and collective growth.

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**Appendix A**

1. When you think about your career as a manager or executive, certain events or episodes stand out in your mind—things that changed you in some way and have ultimately shaped you as an executive. Please choose three of these experiences that have had a lasting impact on you: For each event, what happened?  What did you learn from it (how did it change you)?
2. What is your approach to developing leadership talent in others?
3. Please think of a specific person for whom you played a significant role in his/her development as a leader. Tell us the story—how you decided to invest in this person, what you did, what the person did, why you think things turned out so well.

**Appendix B**

1. Ana De La Teja, Cafe Bernardo, General Manager
2. Dan Morton, Edward Jones, Team Leader
3. Kim Chandler, Whitman College, Athletic Director
4. Dr. Lynette Bikos, Seattle Pacific University, Associate Dean of Research/Chair and Professor of Clinical Psychology

**Appendix C**

**Ana De La Teja**

Violet interviewed Ana De La Teja, Manager at Cafe Bernardo in Davis, California. She has worked for the Paragary Restaurant Group for over 8 years, was promoted from waitress to supervisor in 2019, and took on her management position in 2022. She is responsible for process management and the oversight of all staff at the Davis location. She reports to corporate leaders in Sacramento, Califonia.

De La Teja is a unique leader because of her origin and lack of work experience prior to her positions at Cafe Bernardo. She spent her early childhood in Mexico City and moved to California with her family at the age of five. Since moving to the United States, she efficiently adapted to a new culture, excelled in school, and was determined to find ways to support herself financially. Her resilience led to her first position with the restaurant and allowed her to “climb the ladder” to her current leadership position. This distinctive experience has shaped her relational leadership style, which emphasizes inclusivity, psychological safety, and developing others through the assessment of their needs.

The interview was guided by the three questions provided. De La Teja was Violet’s supervisor in the past, so they spent the beginning of the conversation getting reacquainted and catching up with one another. Additionally, because Violet had been a subordinate of De La Teja, she was able to reflect on her own experience to better consider De La Teja’s leadership style. The beginning of the interview focused on the values that guide De La Teja’s leadership, as well as how she approaches the development of others. The second portion was focused on the culture and environment of the workplace, and how it shapes the growth of all employees. Lastly, De La Teja shared insights about how she hopes to face challenges in the future.

**Dan Morton**

Dan Morton, a seasoned leader currently serving as a Team Leader at Edward Jones, was interviewed by Ashley Morton. Given his extensive experience spanning over a decade in various leadership roles, he had many insights and advice invaluable for gaining a deeper understanding of effective leadership in different contexts.

Dan Morton was chosen for the interview due to his wealth of experience in leadership positions for more than ten years. His background in diverse contexts provided valuable perspective that could offer valuable insights into the challenges and successes of leadership, particularly in times of crisis and organizational change. He went through a series of career changes early in his career, making his journey even more interesting.

The interview with Dan Morton was packed with experiences and advice. Through the sharing of experiences during significant events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the George Floyd incident, and organizational transformations provided profound insights into effective leadership strategies. Dan’s emphasis on the importance of empathy, communication, and fostering a collaborative culture are all important principles any strong leader hopes to foster. Additionally, his detailed stories of mentoring and developing emerging leaders, illustrated through Elaine’s transformative journey, showcased practical tactics for nurturing talent within a team. Dan’s emphasis on empowering individuals to voice their opinions, challenge ideas constructively, and rotate leadership functions within the team highlighted actionable steps for fostering a culture of collaboration and development. Overall, the interview with Dan Morton provided invaluable perspectives and actionable strategies to be applied in future leadership journeys.

**Kim Chandler**

Kim Chandler, Athletic Director at Whitman College, was interviewed by Bryce Mulder. Chandler has been at the helm of Whitman’s athletic department for five years but has over 30 years of leadership experience. Her previous stops include 10 years as Athletic Director for Macalester College, multiple years as Assistant Athletic Director at Beloit College and Saginaw Valley State University, and Head Women’s Basketball coach multiple Universities, including Ohio Northern University and California State University, Northridge. Most recently Chandler spent time in the office of the CEO for North Star Resource Group, a firm which provides financial services.

On top of Chandler’s years of experience in leadership, she possesses a particularly fascinating journey and perspective on leadership. Identifying as a women and part of the LGBTQ+ community, Chandler is a minority in multiple ways within her field. Roughly 20% of collegiate athletic directors identify as female, and only about 15% are part of the LGBTQ+ community. Additionally, she has been instrumental in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion during every stop of her journey. These challenges have greatly impacted how Chandler leads her team to this day. Bryce had the chance of teaming with Chandler several times over the years. It was her consideration and empathy for team members that left the longest lasting impression, and ultimately made Chandler a great individual to interview.

After exchanging some small talk about Kim and Bryce’s favorite leadership books, the three questions provided in appendix A guided the interview. Chandler began the interview by drawing on experiences from multiple different jobs. Speaking to lessons learned from over three decades shows how important learning is for Chandler, she believes she is always able to grow herself through experience. An additional question about leading through proximity was asked to Chandler. This is a way of distinguishing between her and other leaders, you may see her at any given event or time in the workday. She believes that when people can see her face that they are more likely to approach, talk, or express concerns. This is one of the many ways that Chandler creates a psychologically safe environment.

**Dr. Bikos**

Jessie interviewed Dr. Lynette Bikos, Associate Dean of Research/Chair and Professor of Clinical Psychology at Seattle Pacific University. Dr. Bikos has worked as a professor in the Clinical Psychology department at SPU for the past 17 years, serving as Chair of the Clinical Psychology department in the last two years. Dr. Bikos holds a doctorate in Counseling Psychology, is board certified and licensed in Washington State, as well as an APA fellow.

Dr. Bikos has served in many different leadership positions over the course of her career and has been a member of a variety of task forces related to her expertise. Her primary interests are vocational, global, and sustainable psychology. She has years of experience in career development and mentoring doctoral students in both the clinical and Industrial-Organizational psychology programs. Dr. Bikos is known for her relational leadership style and unwavering work ethic and support for her students.

When interviewing Dr. Bikos, the three questions in Appendix A were used to frame the conversation. The interview started with Dr. Bikos reflecting on her first postmaster’s job as a career counselor at Wichita State University in Kansas. It was clear that Dr. Bikos’ first supervisor had a profound impact on her development as a leader in the way that he modeled relational leadership and investment in his subordinates. In her first month, he said to her “just so we’re clear, I don’t expect you to be here in three years. We are about the business of growing people.” There wasn’t much opportunity to move up at her first workplace, so he did everything he could to ensure that she would be provided with the opportunities to move to the next stages in her career. Exactly three years later, Dr. Bikos became a doctoral student at the University of Kansas. This early leadership style that was modeled for her has influenced the style she has taken on as CPY chair. When asked about a person whose development they have invested in, Dr. Bikos talked about her relationship with Jessie as the CPY Program Manager. Dr. Bikos has said similar things to her about expecting her to move on in a few years and encouraging her to pursue graduate level education. Within the department, Dr. Bikos is known for her supportive and encouraging leadership style. The team frequently begins meetings with icebreakers in order to touch base with their humanity but is also highly productive and focused on their goal of developing clinical psychologists. Dr. Bikos has mastered leading the team in a way that balances both relational and task-oriented leadership.