

My Evolution as a Scholar-Practitioner of Executive Leadership

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Professional Essay: My Evolution as a Scholar-Practitioner of Executive Leadership

Introduction

This essay reflects on my leadership development journey and emerging expertise within the Doctor of Executive Leadership program. The path to this point has been shaped by both successes and significant challenges that fundamentally transformed my understanding of effective leadership. My journey began with painful lessons about my own leadership shortcomings. As a young leader, I made serious mistakes that taught me hard but necessary lessons. These early failures became the foundation for my pursuit of leadership excellence—not despite my struggles, but because of them.

A pivotal moment came in 2012 when a superior told me I was "stupid" and would never become smart enough to succeed academically. This devastating assessment created a deep wound but ultimately ignited a determination to prove this judgment wrong. Words can destroy or build, and I chose to use this harsh feedback as motivation rather than allowing it to define my capabilities. Experiences like these connect with the concept of resilience as a dynamic quality rather than a fixed trait (Vella & Pai, 2019). They also highlight how negative feedback, when reframed, can trigger growth pathways from pain to resilience (Brendtro, 2019). In fact, leadership scholars emphasize that personal adversity often becomes a catalyst for transformation in leadership development (Richardson, 2019).

My military service with the Ranger Battalion provided the structured environment where I could rebuild my professional identity. The rigorous training and clear leadership expectations helped me understand that being an effective leader meant more than just accomplishing missions. It required becoming a better human being, developing both technical skills and character. The

Rangers taught me that leadership flows from who you are, not just what you know or what position you hold.

The decision to pursue doctoral studies stemmed partly from professional barriers I encountered due to communication challenges. I recognized that despite my operational expertise, my effectiveness was limited by my ability to articulate ideas clearly. Leadership requires not only good judgment but the capacity to express that judgment in ways others can understand and follow. The DEL program offered an opportunity to strengthen this critical aspect of leadership while deepening my theoretical understanding of leadership principles (Santiago & Davidson, 2021).

Through these experiences, I have come to view leadership development as an ongoing journey of self-awareness, resilience-building, and continuous learning. This essay explores how the DEL program has accelerated this journey, refined my leadership philosophy, and positioned me to contribute more effectively to both my professional field and the broader leadership community.

Personal Leadership Philosophy and Evolution

At the beginning of my leadership journey, my philosophy was primarily focused on survival and reaction. I believed leaders were born rather than developed, and that leadership was a natural quality some possessed while others did not. This limited perspective led me to approach leadership challenges with rigidity rather than adaptability. My early mantra, "through pain we see clarity," reflected my understanding that difficult experiences provide valuable insights, but I had not yet developed a framework for translating those insights into effective leadership practices.

The military environment reinforced aspects of this perspective while also beginning to transform it. The structured hierarchy provided clear examples of both effective and ineffective

leadership styles. I observed how some leaders fostered trust and loyalty through their actions while others created fear and resentment. These observations helped me recognize that leadership was not simply about position or authority but about the relationship between leaders and those they lead. As Zhu et al. (2019) demonstrate, humble leadership that acknowledges limitations while valuing team contributions builds resilience and trust within teams. Similarly, Steffens et al. (2018) found that feedback about leadership potential can shape ambition and organizational commitment, underscoring the critical role feedback plays in shaping leadership identity.

Throughout the DEL program, my leadership philosophy has evolved significantly. Course readings, discussions with peers, and practical applications have deepened my understanding of leadership as a multidimensional practice requiring continuous development. The concepts of emotional intelligence and social awareness have become central to my approach. Research confirms that resilience develops through challenges when leaders intentionally cultivate supportive conditions (Djourova et al., 2019). As Vella and Pai (2019) explain, resilience is not a static trait but a dynamic process, and effective leaders create these conditions for growth.

My current leadership philosophy centers on resilience development through feedback and reflection. Failures and setbacks are no longer simply painful experiences to endure but valuable opportunities for growth when approached with a learning mindset. Effective leaders create environments where honest feedback can be shared respectfully, mistakes can be acknowledged openly, and new approaches can be developed collectively. Johnson et al. (2020) argue that psychological safety is essential for feedback to result in growth rather than defensiveness. This insight has become a cornerstone of my leadership approach.

This evolution from a reactive to a reflective leadership philosophy has fundamentally changed how I approach challenges. Rather than seeing obstacles as threats to overcome through

force of will, I now view them as learning opportunities requiring collaborative problem-solving. This shift aligns with Kim's (2020) work on organizational resilience, which emphasizes adaptation and communication as key to overcoming crises.

Focus Areas of Expertise

My journey through the DEL program has allowed me to develop specialized knowledge in two distinct yet interconnected fields: resilience development in leadership through direct feedback and cross-cultural leadership in high-risk environments. These focus areas emerged naturally from my professional experiences and academic interests, reflecting both my past challenges and future aspirations as a leader and scholar-practitioner. Effective leadership development is reinforced when feedback and context-sensitive communication operate together to support learning and adaptability (Winstone & Boud, 2019). As Vella and Pai (2019) explain, resilience is not a static trait but a dynamic quality that develops through challenges when the right supportive conditions exist.

Resilience development through direct feedback became a central focus of my studies after recognizing how feedback—both constructive and destructive—shaped my own leadership journey. The comment that I was "stupid" and incapable of academic success could have ended my educational pursuits, yet it ultimately motivated me to prove this assessment wrong through determined effort and continuous improvement. This personal experience sparked my interest in understanding how feedback, when delivered effectively, can build rather than diminish resilience in leaders. Drawing on Henderson and colleagues' work on effective feedback conditions, I have explored how organizational environments can be structured to promote growth-oriented exchanges that strengthen rather than undermine confidence and capability (Henderson et al., 2019). My thinking about feedback has evolved significantly over time, moving from viewing it

as a primarily corrective tool to seeing it as a developmental mechanism that works best when embedded in relationships of trust and mutual respect. Walsh (2019) highlights that in upward and multisource reviews, trust is the linchpin that determines whether feedback improves leadership effectiveness. As I progressed through the program, I began to recognize that resilience development is not simply about individual toughness but about creating systems and relationships that support growth through challenges, a perspective reinforced by Brendtro's discussion of pathways from pain to resilience (Brendtro, 2019).

My second focus area, cross-cultural leadership in high-risk environments, developed from my international military experiences and current role in executive protection. Working across cultural boundaries in situations where decisions carry significant consequences requires specialized leadership capabilities that extend beyond traditional management skills. The French Foreign Legion and U.S. Army Rangers exposed me to diverse cultural perspectives on leadership, teamwork, and risk management, experiences that were further enriched by academic exploration of cultural differences in leadership expectations and practices. Men, Yue, and Liu (2020) emphasize that leadership communication must adapt to cultural contexts while maintaining core principles of respect and clarity, an insight that has proven invaluable in my current professional role where quick decisions must be made while navigating complex cultural dynamics. My understanding of cross-cultural leadership has deepened through recognizing that effective leadership is not about imposing a single approach across all contexts but about adapting core principles to specific cultural environments while maintaining authentic connection with team members from diverse backgrounds. This focus area connects directly with my dissertation interests, as effective cross-cultural leadership depends heavily on the resilience developed

through meaningful feedback exchanges that acknowledge cultural differences without being limited by them (Zahid, Qinghe, & Sohail, 2021).

These two focus areas integrate naturally through their shared emphasis on communication, relationship-building, and adaptability. Effective feedback across cultural boundaries requires heightened awareness of how communication styles and expectations vary between cultures, while building resilience in cross-cultural teams depends on creating psychologically safe environments where direct feedback can be exchanged without damaging trust. In practice, learning-focused feedback cultures and psychologically safe debriefings help teams translate difficult experiences into growth, even in high-stakes contexts (Kolbe et al., 2020; Winstone & Boud, 2019). Together, these focus areas reflect my commitment to developing leadership approaches that work across diverse contexts while remaining grounded in fundamental principles of human dignity and growth. The current literature in both areas highlights the need for more integrated approaches that acknowledge the complexity of modern leadership environments where cultural boundaries are increasingly fluid and feedback occurs through multiple channels with varying degrees of formality and immediacy, presenting opportunities for both research and practical application as I continue my development as a scholar-practitioner.

Application of Learning to Intellectual Community and Professional Practice

The theoretical knowledge and practical insights gained through the DEL program have profoundly influenced my professional practice and contributions to the intellectual community of leadership studies. In my current role in executive protection, I regularly apply concepts of emotional intelligence and social awareness to navigate high-stakes situations where quick decisions must be made while maintaining relationships of trust with both clients and team members. The ability to read emotional cues, understand unstated concerns, and communicate

effectively under pressure has proven invaluable in environments where security depends as much on relationship management as on tactical expertise. For example, when leading protection teams in unfamiliar cultural environments, I've applied Carmeli et al.'s (2009) principles of high-quality relationships to create psychological safety among team members while maintaining vigilance toward external threats, creating a balance that would have been difficult to achieve before my doctoral studies deepened my understanding of these dynamics. (Johnson et al., 2020)

The concepts of resilience and adaptation have been particularly relevant to my professional practice, especially in situations requiring leadership from any position regardless of formal authority. Walker's (2020) framework for understanding resilience as not merely enduring challenges but adapting and growing through them has transformed how I approach unexpected obstacles, whether they involve security threats, team conflicts, or logistical complications. Rather than viewing such challenges as problems to be eliminated, I now recognize them as opportunities for demonstrating adaptability and building team confidence through successful navigation of difficult circumstances. This perspective has enabled me to remain calm and focused in situations where others might become overwhelmed, a quality that inspires confidence in both team members and clients who depend on steady leadership in uncertain situations. Despite being relatively new in my current organization, I've been able to contribute valuable perspectives based on both my practical experience and academic knowledge, demonstrating that leadership influence comes from expertise and relationship-building rather than merely position or tenure. The DEL program has equipped me to articulate complex ideas more clearly and persuasively, addressing the communication challenges that previously limited my professional advancement and allowing me to influence organizational practices even without formal authority to mandate changes. (Kim, 2020)

Beyond my immediate professional environment, I've begun contributing to the broader intellectual community through participating in leadership forums, mentoring emerging leaders, and preparing to share research findings from my dissertation work. The DEL program has positioned me to bridge the gap between academic theory and practical application, translating research insights into actionable approaches that address real-world leadership challenges. By sharing my unique perspective on resilience development through direct feedback, particularly in cross-cultural and high-risk environments, I've been able to contribute to discussions that often lack input from those with experience in these specialized contexts. This contribution extends beyond formal presentations to include one-on-one mentoring relationships where I help developing leaders recognize how theoretical concepts apply to their specific challenges, creating a multiplier effect as these individuals in turn influence their own organizations. As Wilkinson and Rennaker (2022) note in their work on servant leadership and resilience, leaders who invest in others' development create ripple effects that extend far beyond their immediate sphere of influence, a principle that guides my approach to both formal and informal knowledge sharing within the leadership community. (Patterson & Jackson, 2022)

Scholar-Leader Identity

My identity as a scholar-practitioner has evolved dramatically throughout the DEL program, transforming from someone who primarily identified as a practitioner with academic interests to an integrated professional who sees scholarship and practice as mutually reinforcing dimensions of leadership development. This evolution reflects a growing understanding of how theoretical knowledge enhances practical effectiveness while practical experience grounds theoretical exploration in real-world complexity. The scholar-practitioner model has provided a framework for bridging what previously seemed like separate worlds, allowing me to draw on

research insights when facing leadership challenges while also using practical experiences to identify meaningful research questions that address genuine needs in the field of executive leadership, as emphasized by Wasserman and Kram (2009).

The integration of my multilingual background, military experience, and academic training has created a distinctive professional identity that brings unique value to both scholarly discussions and practical leadership situations. My ability to move between languages (Spanish, French, English, and some Portuguese and Italian) mirrors my capacity to translate between theoretical concepts and practical applications, finding connections that might be missed by those operating exclusively in either the academic or practical domain. As Quebec Fuentes and Jimerson (2020) discuss in their research on leadership content knowledge, effective leaders must not only possess specialized knowledge but also understand how to apply it appropriately in specific contexts, adapting general principles to particular situations. This ability to contextualize knowledge has become central to how I understand my role as a scholar-practitioner, recognizing that neither abstract theory nor concrete experience alone is sufficient for addressing the complex challenges facing contemporary leaders. My military background, particularly in special operations environments where adaptability and precision are equally valued, has reinforced this balanced approach to knowledge application, training me to assess situations quickly while still considering multiple perspectives before taking action. The combination of operational experience in high-stakes environments with rigorous academic analysis has developed my capacity to maintain both tactical awareness and strategic perspective, a combination that Barry and McManigle (2021) identify as essential for leadership development in complex organizations where immediate pressures must be balanced against long-term objectives (Wilkinson & Rennaker, 2022).

The DEL program has significantly enhanced my ability to engage with scholarly literature critically while maintaining sensitivity to practical implications, allowing me to contribute to knowledge creation rather than merely consuming existing research. When examining studies on leadership resilience or feedback effectiveness, I now automatically consider methodological strengths and limitations alongside potential applications, evaluating both the validity of findings and their relevance to specific leadership contexts. This critical engagement extends to my own leadership practices as well, as I've developed habits of reflection that prompt me to question assumptions, consider alternative approaches, and connect actions to underlying theoretical frameworks. Kim (2020) emphasizes that organizational resilience depends on internal communication practices that foster both individual and collective learning, a principle that applies equally to my own development as a scholar-practitioner committed to continuous improvement through reflective practice. The dissertation process has further refined this identity by challenging me to develop rigorous research approaches that maintain academic integrity while addressing practical leadership challenges, particularly in understanding how direct feedback contributes to resilience development in diverse cultural contexts. Through this process, I've come to see myself not just as a consumer of leadership theory or a practitioner of leadership skills, but as an active contributor to an evolving field that requires both scholarly rigor and practical wisdom to address the complex challenges facing contemporary organizations. (Wasserman & Kram, 2009)

Conclusion

My journey through the DEL program has transformed my understanding of leadership and my identity as a scholar-practitioner. When I began this program, I carried the weight of being told I was "stupid" and could never succeed academically. This painful experience, combined with my military background, shaped my initial view of leadership as primarily about survival and reaction. I believed leaders were born, not made, and that pain was simply something to endure rather than a catalyst for growth (Brendtro, 2019).

Through coursework, research, and practical application, the DEL program has reshaped this perspective. I now understand leadership as a continuous learning process requiring both emotional intelligence and scholarly knowledge. My two focus areas—resilience development through direct feedback and cross-cultural leadership in high-risk environments—have become the foundation of my scholarly identity and professional practice. Wasserman and Kram (2009) describe how scholar-practitioners integrate research with practice to address real-world complexity, which mirrors how these areas emerged naturally from my experiences.

The research of Vella and Pai (2019) on resilience as a dynamic quality has been particularly influential, helping me understand that resilience is not simply a trait but a developable capacity that thrives in the right conditions. Similarly, Walker's (2020) framing of resilience as adaptation rather than mere endurance has transformed how I approach obstacles in both personal and professional contexts. As Brendtro (2019) argues, there are pathways from pain to resilience, and I have witnessed this transformation in my own development as I have moved from viewing pain as something to endure to seeing it as an opportunity for growth when properly supported.

The most profound change has been in how I understand and deliver feedback. Drawing from Jug, Jiang, and Bean (2019), I have learned that feedback must be delivered with precision, empathy, and respect to foster resilience rather than defensiveness. Carmeli, Brueller, and Dutton (2009) show that high-quality interpersonal relationships enable psychological safety, and Johnson, Keating, and Molloy (2020) explain how that safety allows feedback to catalyze growth instead of defensiveness.

My experience in the DEL program has also deepened my understanding of cross-cultural leadership. Men, Yue, and Liu (2020) demonstrate how charismatic communication shapes trust and support for change across diverse contexts. Combined with strategies for overcoming communication barriers (Zahid, Qinghe, & Sohail, 2021), these insights have informed approaches to deliver feedback that respect cultural differences while maintaining clarity and purpose, which aligns with findings on multicultural feedback dynamics (Gálvez-López, 2023).

Today, my view of leadership has evolved from seeing it as a position or title to understanding it as a transformative process that empowers others to achieve their potential. I now recognize that effective leadership requires continuous learning, adaptability, and a willingness to engage with feedback—both giving and receiving it. My personal assessments (EQi, NEO, and DISC) have helped me identify strengths to leverage and areas for growth, particularly in emotional self-awareness and stress management. As I move forward, I aim to contribute to the field by developing frameworks that integrate cultural intelligence with emotional resilience, responding to gaps in preparation for receiving and processing challenging feedback across cultural boundaries (Winstone & Boud, 2019).

Leadership, to me now, is about creating conditions where others can thrive, even in adversity. It is about fostering psychological safety that allows for honest feedback and continuous

growth. It is about understanding that resilience is not built despite challenges but because of them when supported by trust, respect, and clarity of purpose. The DEL program has equipped me to embody these principles and to guide others in developing their own resilience through thoughtful, direct feedback—work that aligns with evidence linking leader investment to wider resilience effects (Wilkinson & Rennaker, 2022).

In reflecting on my evolution as a scholar-practitioner, I recognize that my journey is ongoing. The skills and knowledge I have gained through the DEL program have provided me with a solid foundation, but true leadership excellence requires continuous refinement and adaptation. I am committed to this lifelong process of growth, to contributing meaningfully to both the scholarly and practical aspects of executive leadership, and to helping others find their path from pain to resilience.

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