Slater Podgorny

Leadership Manifesto

While considering how to start this paper it occurred to me that, for the first time in my life, the next phase of my leadership journey is relatively undefined. Ever since I was a kid, I explored leadership on various sports teams and in classrooms and this continued throughout high school as I maintained leadership roles on those teams and began to participate in Student Council. Then, as I approached college, I knew I was going to participate in the Pioneer Leadership Program and I was sure that would progress my thinking as a leader and my practice of leadership. But now, as I prepare to graduate and I am unsure of where I will go next, my leadership journey also seems to have reached a bit of a cliff hanger. I hope this paper serves as a reminder that leadership is intertwined in nearly every aspect of our everyday lives and no matter where I go I will be able to continue to develop as a leader and a person.

Planning to write this paper encouraged me to reflect on my leadership journey and made me realize how much my definition of leadership has changed between high school, before taking this class, and after taking the class. When I think back on what my definition of leadership was when I graduated high school, it becomes apparent that definition has changed and deepened significantly. In high school my definition conformed to what I think would generally be referred to as the more conventional ideas of leadership or the “technical leadership” that is described in the prompt for this essay. At that time, my understanding of leadership was surface level, leadership meant upholding a significant role in a community or being a figure that others looked up to. While I do not necessarily think that is incorrect, I am now certain that it does not capture the entire essence of leadership. My idea of leadership then was similar to an idea discussed by Rost that “many notions of leadership are simplistic, but the nature of mythology is to reduce complex realities to simple explanations” (Rost, 1991). I do not think I was necessarily reducing complexities in my leadership experience, but rather I was not considering factors beyond simple explanations. At that time, I did not know any better, I rarely considered the intricacies of leadership and thus my definition remained simple. While I think this period of my life was instrumental for establishing my foundation as a leader, I now know that there is much more to leadership than what I initially thought.

The next stage of my leadership journey was prompted by two years of PLP classes that gave me the opportunity to truly consider leadership, explore its complexities, and develop a more intricate definition of the term. Still, I feel as though leadership is such a personal and elaborate concept that it can be very difficult to reduce it to a single definition. Through those first few years of PLP my idea of leadership got deeper and deeper as we discussed Brené Brown’s ideas about vulnerability and explored the requirements of what leadership looks like in a community change setting. As a whole, those first two years of PLP made me realize that there are so many different facets of leadership and in order to be an effective leader, it is absolutely necessary to explore and understand those different levels.

This led me to defining leadership as, “evaluating your environment and the needs of the people or places around you and working to address these issues in a creative and innovative manner.” The definition I came up with is somewhat similar to Rost’s definition that reads “Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real change that reflect their mutual purpose” (Rost, 1991). Both definitions focus on purpose and the relationship between leaders and followers but Rost’s emphasis on action and real change are aspects that I would like to work into my own definition. However, I think both definitions miss on some key points from previous courses such as vulnerability, authenticity, diversity, and inclusion. I think these four factors are where a true, community-based understanding of leadership comes from and where the intricacies of leadership become increasingly significant.

After taking this class, I feel prepared to further amend my definition. The first thing I would like to add to my definition of leadership comes from the ethical leader interview we did with Torrey Udall who is the VP of Finance and Operations at Protect Our Winters. When we asked Torrey how he would define leadership he said, “it is the art of getting people to achieve what must be done, it is not a single science, it’s all about adapting, changing, and being involved” (Udall, 2022). In this definition he was sure to place an extra emphasis on describing leadership as an art and that is something I find really interesting and valuable. I like the idea of leadership being more of an art than science because when leadership is confined to a science it seems like it can be reduced to black versus white or right versus wrong and that is not the reality of leadership. Leadership is such a variable thing that requires different brushstrokes for every application and describing it as an art better encompasses the intricacies and beauty of effective leadership.

Perhaps the most substantial addition I would like to make would be including ethics in my definition in some way or another. In one of our class readings author Joanne Ciulla explores this relationship between leadership and ethics arguing that “ethics is located at the heart of leadership studies and not in an appendage” (Ciulla, 1998). She also mentions, however, that ethics are largely left out of scholarly writings about leadership that “speak with hushed reverence about its importance to leadership” (Ciulla, 1998). Ciulla point is supported by many aspects of our society and while thinking about this point it becomes clear just how disconnected the two are. We often do not think about the ethicality of a leader until an ethical dilemma arises and even then, we seem to evaluate ethics and leadership separately despite the irrefutable connection between the two. Leaving ethics out of the leadership conversation seems irresponsible at best and it has become clear that anytime an individual’s pedigree as a leader is mentioned, their ethical nature should also be brought into conversation.

Part of me finds it a little ironic that we have to specify the term “ethical leadership” because I think that in a perfect world, leadership would be ethical by nature. Unfortunately, as made clear by Ciulla, this is not the case and ethics are an element that have been largely left out of our modern definition of leadership. Going forward I would like to ensure it is always included in my own definition.

However, incorporating ethics into my definition and actually making a point of reflecting upon my actions to ensure I am acting ethically are different things of course. It is easy to say you want to be ethical, it is another thing to actually act ethically and reflect upon those actions and the values involved. Of all the ethical readings we did in this course, I found the *Blind Spots* book to be the most helpful in creating an ethical approach because of the emphasis it places on reflection and personal growth. While I found the exploration of classical ethical philosophies to be interesting and I feel as though they can provide a foundation for ethical thinking, I do not think they are effective on their own as pathways to an ethical life. As is mentioned in *Blind Spots,* the traditional approaches can be largely ineffective if we are not aware of our own limitations and biases (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011). In other words, our actions may seem perfectly ethical to us but that means almost nothing if we are not constantly evaluating our blind spots and considering what factors we may not be giving fair consideration for some reason or another.

This idea is connected to what the authors refer to as Bounded Ethicalitywhich is the tendency we have to believe that we are more ethical than we actually are and to hold others to higher ethical standards than ourselves (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011). This concept serves as a crucial reminder to ask ourselves if we are giving ourselves preferential treatment when making an ethical decision and if we are, it may be a good time to stop and reflect. This pitfall could likely be avoided by asking yourself the ultimate ethical question: what would your mom think? Such a question is just an example that reflection and consideration can lead to a much more honest and direct answer that addresses the true nature of our ethical decision making.

Another aspect of *Blind Spots* that I feel is crucially important to leadership is our awareness of Prediction Errors. The authors describe Prediction Errors as our tendency to inaccurately predict how we will react when faced with an ethical dilemma (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011). This idea seems similar to the idea of bounded ethicality and represents another limitation to our ethical thinking but if we are made aware of it, we can mitigate the impact of those errors, reduce the scale of those errors, or avoid making the error in the first place. The authors mention that the potential cause of this concept relates to what they call the “want self versus the should self” where the former is the emotional and impulsive side of you that reflects actions and latter is the rational and thoughtful side of you that reflects intentions (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011). I think a thorough understanding of this idea is absolutely crucial to ethical leadership as it represents the fact that when faced with an ethical decision, there is a lot more to consider than the here and now and if we give into our impulsive side we may be giving into unethical behavior.

The authors suggest later on that when you are preparing to make an ethical decision it is important to anticipate the want self so that it does not play as big of a role when you actually have to make the decision (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011). I really like this idea and I am going to make a conscious effort to apply it in my own ethical decision making. While ethical decisions can sometimes be sprung on you with little to no time to prepare, I think that you can still anticipate your want self to a certain degree by taking time when you are not faced with an ethical decision to determine what is important to you and what values are most prevalent at the moment. It is likely that these factors will be consistent through most ethical decisions and will be a stable piece of your want self that you can always predict.

My appreciation for the approach to ethics that *Blind Spots* presents is the aspect of it that encourages you to reflect and dig deeper. It goes beyond traditional philosophies and is a reminder that the most significant part of ethics is you and thus you should constantly be reflecting and evaluating yourself. These readings as a whole have encouraged me to realize that taking the time to think about and really consider my own ethical decision making is absolutely worth the time and if I do not do so I may be giving into ethical blind spots that are preventing me from acting ethically in the first place.

The next section of this paper refers to my own self-awareness and passions for engaging in the world. As far as self-awareness goes, I think my growth in that area can be best exemplified by comparing my scores on the Leadership Practices Inventory from my freshman year and from this year. The scores from my freshman year were all above 24 and my highest category was enabling action at 28. This year, my lowest score was 16 and enabling action was still my highest score but it fell to 24. I would not attribute this difference to a deterioration in my abilities as a leader but rather the opposite. As I mentioned previously, my understanding of leadership coming out of high school was very shallow and I did not understand the complexities of leadership which likely led me to overestimate my proficiency as a leader. However, I now believe that I have a greater understanding of what it means to be a leader and just how difficult it can be to effectively create a difference and master the practices of modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling action, and encouraging the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2013). As a result, I was little stricter in scoring how well I am able to employ those practices. Additionally, my honesty and awareness this time around exposes clear opportunities for improvement and my enhanced understanding provides methods to make those improvements.

In regard to my passions for engaging in the world, it is hard to pinpoint one exact thing that motivates me to make a difference and be a leader. I think part of my inspiration is rooted in a recognition of real problems that require authentic, effective leadership. Whether it be climate change, systemic racism, or any of the other problems facing my generation today, it is clear that the world needs leaders right now and I hope that I can contribute to that. My hope is that by pursuing my development as a leader I will be able to collaborate with other leaders and stakeholders to tackle some the most daunting issues facing the world today.

While I currently feel prepared to address these issues and jump right in, that is likely due the recency of my leadership studies and that will not always be the case. With that in mind I have established somewhat of a development plan for my future as a leader. I have recently realized that my leadership journey has largely come in two phases: practice and conceptual exploration. Before attending DU my conceptual understanding of leadership was pretty thin but leadership was something I practiced often through sports and school programs. Then, at DU and through PLP, I was immersed in conceptual exploration of leadership, but I became less involved in the actual practice of leadership. I hope to connect these two phases in the next step of my leadership journey.

One of my favorite quotes of all time comes from Charlie Jones and reads “You will be the same person in five years as you are today except for the people you meet and the books you read.” While I think this an excellent strategy for personal development, it may be even better for leadership development. As part of a commitment to lifelong learning and developing as a leader I would like to read at least one book per year that is about leadership or is written by someone that I would consider an authentic leader. In addition, I hope to establish a dialogue with leaders that I know personally about the concepts I have read about and to get their take on leadership that might offer a unique or more personal perspective.

I would also like to be able to apply the concepts I have learned about in PLP and through my continued development to real world problems by pursuing more leadership roles. As a freshman in college, I did not look into many potential leadership positions as I think I may have been a bit burned out from high school and did not feel super comfortable in my new environment. Now, however, I have a renewed passion for leadership that is backed by a variety of leadership studies and exploration that I would like to apply as soon as possible. One of the main issues that is facing the world today that I believe to be one of the most important is climate change and this is where I would like to see my impact as a leader. Over the next few years, I would like to get involved with climate advocacy groups wherever I end up and hopefully work my way up to leadership roles in these groups. I believe this is a concrete step that aligns my passions with my desire to apply what I have learned in PLP and taking such as step will be critical in my development as a leader.

When I was growing up my mom had a little trinket from her years in the Peace Corps. It was a clear piece of plastic about the size of an index card, the Peace Corps emblem stamped to the upper left hand corner and below the logo, inscribed in red was a Ralph Waldo Emerson quote that read: “To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition; To have played and laughed with enthusiasm and sung with exultation; To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived - This is to have succeeded.” It was something that just always seemed to be around. On the windowsill above the kitchen sink, on top of the piano in the living room, tucked away in a file cabinet full of other random objects, it was always there. Even as we moved a few times it always seemed to make its way from house to house and I always loved my chance run-ins with the thing as I felt it prompted reflection and served as a reminder about what it’s all about. To “know that even one life has breathed easier because you have lived” is such powerful phrase and such an important reminder that sometimes life, and leadership for that matter, is not about changing the world every day, but rather just improving the lives of those around us.

# Bibliography

Bazerman, M. H., & Tenbrunsel, A. E. (2011). *Blind spots: why we fail to do what’s right and what to do about it.* Princeton, New Jersey : Princeton University Press.

Ciulla, J. (1998). Leadership Ethics: Mapping the Territory. In J. Ciulla, *Ethics, the Heart of Leadership.* Westport, Connecticut: Quorum Books.

Kouzes, J., & Posner, B. (2013). Leadership Practices Inventory. San Francisco, California: The Leadership Challenge.

Rost, J. (1991). *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century.* Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.

Udall, T. (2022, February 24). Ethical Leader Interview. (K. Patarino, J. Hempleman, & S. Podgorny, Interviewers)