Build a Leadership Greenhouse and Root Young Leaders in Learning Experiences

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Over the years, the question of how to effectively use technology to facilitate student learning has dramatically changed. Although the benefits of e-Learning are numerous, recent employment surveys indicate that many employers think recent college graduates lack basic people and leadership skills. This paper suggests that when it comes to developing soft skills there is no substitute for learning by doing. A leadership class designed for graduating seniors will be discussed in terms of class activities selected to develop skills commonly associated with leadership. Student feedback suggested that they felt more confident about competing in today's competitive job market.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of technology on education is evident for anyone who is teaching. Technology, an integral part of e-Learning and online learning, makes it easier to reach more students, provide enhanced learning opportunities, and communicate in multiple ways with students. Unfortunately, recent employment surveys have shown that today's college graduates do not have the soft skills required to be successful in today's competitive business environment (Alssid, 2014). This leads to the question of whether all learning formats are equal when it comes to developing leadership skills. Thomas (2008) suggested that leaders learn to lead from experience, a concept supported by leadership pioneers like Warren Bennis, Edgar Schein, Chris Argyris, Donald Schon, and Morgan McCall who provided greater understanding of experience-based leadership development. A leadership class organized around the premise of learning by doing is the basis of this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Student Readiness Gap

A number of surveys have asked employers about the importance of leadership in organizations today. The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) Leader Insights Survey (2012) found 90 percent of the respondents thought leadership development should be part of every student's educational experience (Van Velsor & Wright, 2012). CCL also discovered the competency that survey respondents wanted most, the ability to communicate effectively, aligned with their primary concern that many students were unable to communicate face to face (Van Velsor & Wright, 2012). The Job Outlook survey conducted by

the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) found 78 percent of the respondents chose leadership as the skill they looked for on a candidate's resume, which was followed by written communication skills (Gray & Koncz, 2014). All of these surveys show concern among professionals regarding the lack of good communication skills when interviewing job candidates.

So what are the most desired skills? A survey conducted by CareerBuilder asked respondents for their top five most desired skills and found the list included good people skills (a firm handshake and making eye contact), oral and written communication skills, and leadership skills (Elliott, 2015; Grasz, 2015). The CareerBuilder survey reinforced the importance of several skills associated with leadership, especially oral and written communication.

Another survey focused on the confidence employers had in student capabilities. Only 28 percent of the employers, surveyed by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU), thought students had high abilities in the area of oral communication skills and only 27 percent of these employers thought recent college graduates had the written communication skills (correct grammar, spelling, language usage) needed to succeed in the workplace (Elliott, 2015; Jaschik, 2015). A recent Gallup poll had similar results, finding only 11 percent of business leaders strongly agreed that graduates had the necessary skills to succeed in the workplace (Alssid, 2014). It is obvious that employers have low expectations regarding the communication skills of college graduates and their ability to succeed in the workplace.

When discussing communication, most of us think of oral and written skills. Deutschendorf (2014) suggested that listening skills are just as essential to leadership as speaking, although listening skills are virtually ignored. His basic tips for improving listening skills include learning to be fully engaged and letting the speaker know you remember a key point by referring to it in a question (Deutschendorf, 2014). These tips seem obvious but many students find giving their full attention to a speaker challenging especially if they are concerned about missing cell phone messages.

Recent surveys have found that many employers think colleges need to consider increasing real-life learning experiences. Grasz (2015) noted that 46 percent of employers, who participated in the CareerBuilder survey, believed that colleges did not put enough emphasis on real-world learning by including relevant experiences in classwork. This percentage was even higher in a recent Gallup poll where 88 percent of the business leaders surveyed thought higher-education institutions needed to include more learning activities that mimic real-world scenarios rather than testing students on abstract principles (Alssid, 2014). Carriger (2013) suggested that developing leadership potential benefitted from mentoring, leadership coaching and learn-by-doing opportunities, which seem to have both theoretical and practical support. Van Velsor and Wright (2012) agree that the lack of developmental experiences, such as coaching, and mentoring, leave young employees ill-equipped to lead in a very challenging business environment. The absence of developmental opportunities is partially placed on an educational system that is overly focused on academic test results even though organizations in all sectors want leaders who can communicate effectively in person (Van Velsor & Wright, 2012). Based on these survey results, designing classes that promote the development of skills employers want and graduates need to be successful in the workplace seems to be a win/win strategy. The following leadership class was built around one such strategy, learning by doing.

LEADERSHIP: LEARNING BY DOING

The Applied Leadership course was designed to reinforce the skills that business recruiters and managers feel recent graduates are lacking. This three-credit course includes short lectures on leadership topics, guest speakers, and a variety of activities outlined below. The Applied Leadership course is an elective for advanced students, who represent a variety of business majors. Over the last four years, this course has had between 20 and 27 students enrolled each semester. Classes are almost equally balanced between men and women who represent a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

Positive First Impressions

Class activities are built around developing skills in areas that managers consider critical and none is more important than being comfortable meeting someone new and making a good first impression. The foundational skill of networking is practiced in the following activities.

The Elevator Pitch

The second day of class requires students to give an elevator pitch. In this exercise, students have to explain what makes them unique in two minutes. Since many students tend to see themselves as being similar to everyone else, they are asked to think about their college experiences like internships, involvement in student organizations, volunteer work, part-time or full-time jobs, and study abroad trips. Students can also include personal experiences, which clearly show that each of them have unique backgrounds and skillsets that many employers would value. Even though students see the value of having an elevator pitch, they are surprised how hard it is to be confident, have clear talking points, and make eye contact. This early class exercise promotes bonding and empathy as students watch each other struggle to develop a good elevator pitch.

Each semester several students from this class attend a two-day job fair at another university where they practice using their elevator pitch. These students motivate others when they share the positive feedback they got from recruiters and how confident they feel about doing it again.

Networking Lunch

To reinforce their networking skills, students are required to make arrangements to take a businessperson or professional to lunch or coffee. Although students offer to pay, the vast majority of the time their guest picks up the bill. This assignment also requires students to send a handwritten thank you note to their businessperson after they meet. Students are expected to invite someone who has a career they are interested in, works in an industry they want to know more about (for example oil and gas or healthcare), or is a community leader they admire. This assignment does not allow students to select a family member or friend. Since this assignment requires being prepared to ask questions, the first guest speaker each semester is a freelance writer. She shares tips on how to prepare good interview questions, the value of researching their guest, and the importance of staying connected with people you meet professionally.

The contacts that students make from the networking lunch have led to internships, job offers, mentoring opportunities, and company visits. Each semester two or three students are offered one of these opportunities, which tends to reinforce the power of networking.

Being a Greeter

A different student greeter meets each of our guest speakers at the college of business entrance, which requires doing a little research beforehand so they know what their speaker looks like. A greeter is expected to learn something about their guest speaker's background, develop a few talking points, provide a bottle of water, and talk with them for 5 to 10 minutes before class starts. Although only ten students can take advantage of this extra credit assignment, many students do not volunteer to be a greeter until they see other students do it first. The students who take advantage of this opportunity always say it was easier than they expected.

Effective Listening

Effective listening is practiced when one of our ten community leaders speak for about 45 minutes and then answers class questions for another 30 minutes. Students who ask guest speakers a question are reinforcing the skills they used during their networking lunch. Community leaders who speak to the class are comprised of both men and women who represent a variety of organizations and backgrounds. For example, speakers represent both for-profit and nonprofit organizations; entrepreneurs who started a black-box theatre and a social media business; elected city officials like the mayor; military leaders including a lieutenant colonel and an intelligence specialist; and education professionals including a high

school principal, a university president and a university provost. Each guest speaker receives a thank you card signed by each student who shares one thing they learned from that speaker's presentation. Receiving this personalized thank you card is one of the things guest speakers like the most because they are rarely used in our high-tech world. When we have a speaker, students are reminded to turn their cell phones off.

The Art of Business Writing

In today's business world, managers expect clear, concise written communication. The following activities practice both professional writing and constructive feedback.

Writing Weekly Journals

During the course of the semester, students write ten journals, one to two pages long, that discuss the previous week's activities. They are expected to be free of grammar, spelling, and formatting errors. In addition, the student journals have to be well written and organized. Although these journals provide practice for honing writing skills, their journals also provides a summary of what they learned about leadership throughout the semester. In the beginning most students think this assignment is busywork but by the end of the semestert students are surprised by how much they learned and glad they have a record for future reference. Graded journals are returned the same week they are submitted so students can correct their mistakes before the next journal is due.

Writing a Leader Paper

The leader paper reinforces all of the skills students used when writing their weekly journals. This assignment requires students to select a leader who is deceased and read a book about their life. Students have to condense what they read into a relatively short five-page paper that is well organized and correctly formatted. Condensing large amounts of material into short reports or clear executive summaries is a skill most managers appreciate. The second half of this assignment requires a class presentation about their leader's life.

Giving Constructive Feedback

Throughout the semester the class gives written and oral feedback on all student presentations. The end-of-semester leader presentations require every student to provide written feedback that is clear and constructive for each presenter. The objective of giving presenters feedback is to reinforce what they did well and what could be improved. Overall, students agree that the class feedback is accurate and helpful. The ability to give constructive feedback is another communication skill valued by managers.

Oral Communication

Managers rate good oral communication very highly. Being comfortable speaking to one person or 30 people, for three minutes or 20 minutes is an important skill for anyone who wants to be an effective leader.

Networking Lunch Presentation

Every student gives a three-minute networking lunch presentation to the class. Since this follows the elevator pitch, most students are already becoming more comfortable speaking in front of their classmates. The networking lunch presentation requires students to share who they took to lunch, why they chose that particular individual, the three most important things they learned about leadership, what went well and what did not go well, and if they would do it again (why or why not). The greatest benefit of this assignment is that students start to manage their speaking time since remembering key points they learned firsthand tends to be relatively easy for them.

The Penny Game: Eliminating "ums, ahs, and like"

This is probably the exercise that students both love and hate, but it is always rated as their favorite exercise. Each student is given three pennies before they speak extemporaneously on a random topic for one and a half minutes. Each time they say "um, ah or like," they lose a penny. This is a high-energy exercise that has amazing results. Before the exercise, a short article is posted online with tips on how to avoid saying "um, ah, or like." It does not take long for students to start using these tips in order to keep their pennies. At the end of class, anyone who has at least one penny gets a candy bar, however, every student gets a piece of candy as they leave class for being good sports. Although this exercise tends to be light-hearted, it does not take long before students become very serious about eliminating filler words. Most of them are surprised how much they use "um, ah, or like" without knowing it.

Giving a 20-Minute Picture Driven Presentation

As mentioned previously, part of the leader project assignment requires a presentation on their leader's life. Since these presentations are picture driven, picking a more recent leader increases the probability of more pictures being available that depict each stage of their leader's life. The only constraint, regarding the leader they select, is that they have to be deceased. As a result, both international and local; well-known and obscure leaders are selected for this presentation. Presentation guidelines do not allow reading from notes or PowerPoint slides. Students also have to manage their time, look professional, and avoid standing behind the podium. Some students are naturally gifted speakers but by the end of the semester, the overall improvement in everyone's speaking skills is impressive. Because students witness this improvement, they all seem more confident about their ability to speak well.

LEARNING ABOUT ME

Understanding my Leadership Style

Being clear about their leadership style and thoughtful about how they will work with people professionally is the focus of the following assignments. Being able to talk about their leadership skills has the potential to set a recent graduate apart from other job candidates.

Leader Assessments

Students in the Applied Leadership class complete two Personality Assessments, the 41 Questions Personality Test (41Questions, 2016) and the DISC Personality Test (DISC Personality Test, 2016). An in-depth discussion of how to understand their DISC results (Understanding DISC, 2016) is a helpful resource. Tests are taken before class so their results can be used to form teams with diverse personalities. Each team is asked to think of themselves as a member of a management team whose goal is to organize people in a way that uses their individual strengths and promotes working together effectively. Teams then have to explain to the class how they are organized and why.

When students are asked if their personality assessment fits them, to the surprise of most, they think their results were very accurate and provided valuable insights regarding the challenges associated with working with a variety of personalities.

Watching Leadership Videos

Any leadership video can be used but *The Last Lecture* by Randy Pausch, and the *Five C's of Leadership* with Indra Nooyi (CEO of PepsiCo) are class favorites. Videos are watched in class and then discussed. Since each video provides a very different perspective on leadership, students are challenged to identify the leadership ideas that resonate with them. The point of showing these videos is to help students think about their personal leadership style.

Reading Leadership Articles

During the semester, students read several articles about leadership and leaders. The articles recently used are *The Real Leadership Lessons of Steve Jobs* and *I've Followed Warren Buffett for Decades and*

These 10 Quotes Are What I Keep Coming Back To. The best articles challenge some of the assumptions students have about what makes a leader successful.

Writing a Leadership Philosophy

One of the last class assignments requires students to write their personal leadership philosophy. Each student has to identify the four leadership traits they feel most strongly represent their leadership style and then describe how these traits will affect the way they work with people. For example, a leadership philosophy might include the traits teamwork, trust, compassion, and commitment with seven to eight sentences explaining each. It is interesting to see how clear students are about their leadership style and how unique each one is.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the technological skills of today's college graduates are highly valued by employers. However, based on employer surveys, the skills corporate America has the hardest time finding are soft skills. The premise of this paper is that people skills, required to be successful in today's competitive business environment, benefit from learning by doing classroom experiences that cannot be duplicated online. Employers who interview recent graduates with good communication and people skills, are more likely to add them to their short list of potential new employees. Obviously a one-semester course is only a stepping stone on the path of self-discovery for young leaders, but it can be a spring board for continuous development of soft skills throughout their careers.

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