

VCUG2002

LEARNING PORTFOLIO
Stage One

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Course Overview

When it comes to leadership and influence, it seems there is no one way to go about it. If the first five weeks of VCUG2002: Leadership and Influence have taught me anything, it is that there are as many ideas about how to lead and how to influence as there are noted speakers on the topic. In reflecting on the course so far, the fact that leadership is a continually developing concept has been made particularly clear to me. I know that my original perspective on leadership has been extensively widened and challenged and debated, though I do not know where it will be in another eight weeks time. Indeed from the smorgasboard of ideas presented to us by the speakers so far, two key themes have begun to emerge and define my impressions of this course. They are, firstly the importance of where a leader is going and whether or not leadership can be divorced from what we perceive as ‘good’ or ‘bad’; and secondly whether leaders are born, made or molded by their circumstances. Furthermore as the Week Three Learning Summary indicates, there has been another key source of learning for me in this course – my peers. They have challenged and shaped my ideas in every discussion we have had. Finally, my Individual Proposal presents what I personally think is the most realistic and practical way in which we can institute change in the ANU, building on its strengths in order to make the educational experience better for undergraduates.

Learning Themes

These themes emerged at first in Ron Brent's presentation on leadership, a talk that shaped my initial impressions of the course, and were molded by subsequent panels. The former, 'good' leadership direction and universal values, was most strongly influenced by Geoff Mortimore's tutorials on leadership skill building, Allen White's teaching experiences and Michael Platow's presentation on group psychology. The latter, whether or not leaders are born or molded by circumstance, was also enhanced by Michael and Geoff's talks (among others). This journal aims to reflect on both of these themes, and how they have altered my understanding of leadership on both a theoretical and practical level.

'Where is the leader leading?'

– Theme One

Food for thought

One of the most debated topics so far this semester has been whether or not universal moral values exist for leaders. Possibly by virtue of being one of the first people to present, Ron raised some contentious topics, especially the idea of universal moral values. He linked this with the idea of a leader going somewhere 'good', not just for themselves but for society at large. This contrasted with the discussions we had been having with Geoff during the week prior about how to develop leadership skills within ourselves irrespective of morals. Listening to the panels in the subsequent weeks it seemed that on the face of things, most speakers agreed with Ron. For while they applied Geoff's ideas of character traits to make a leader, most of those traits were ones Ron had mentioned in his universal values discussion. For example, as Allen White shared his experiences in teaching he focused on traits such as empathy, being authentic and being humble. He did acknowledge the importance of perseverance, ambition (especially in an organizational context) and communication, which are not subjective in their moral application, however his emphasis was very much on being a leader who was going somewhere *good*. Finally the discussion of in groups and out groups by Michael also challenged me with respect to universal values and how they could assist with creating buy-in among groups of people.

Personal Digestion

This has been a very interesting theme in the course for me from both an academic and a personal perspective. As a student of Asian Studies, I have become very wary of mentioning 'universal moral values' in a non-Western context. Although I personally do believe that an absolute right and wrong exist in some circumstances, many people I respect hold that moral values are dependent on culture, family background and personal world outlook. Even in the context of killing, what is sanctioned as murder in one culture may be acceptable in another (eg contrast the death penalty in the USA and honor killings in some branches of Islam). Perhaps in the context of traits such as those that Allen discussed – humility, empathy and authenticity – it is possible to gain a universal model for good direction in leadership. However the expression of these traits and when they are applied may also be different depending on the culture (empathy being considered weak in some circumstances but key in others). Furthermore what is a good direction for one group of people may not be good for another. In the context of the Australian Carbon Tax, is it possible to consider the leadership in this direction as 'good' because it is going in a direction that benefits the environment, or is it 'bad' because it has the potential to put jobs at risk, and was brought about through deception of the electorate? Is it to be evaluated in light of what people thought at the time, or what was good for them in the long run? Personally I think that 'good' leadership direction is a concept that would require the input of too many stakeholders to be universal, therefore we are possibly better off considering leadership in the light of effectiveness in getting people to follow you. No direction is good for everyone at the one time.

Examining what Ron said on universal values through the lens of in groups and out groups from our psychology presentation, I wonder if his perspective on universal values was shaped by the fact that his leadership positions had all been within the one culture. He was willing to acknowledge the differences of opinion he had found with respect to politics (potentially his main experience of in groups and out groups), but felt confident that underlying these disputes was a theme of absolute values. Indeed it seems that by creating an idea of universal moral values it is possible for a leader to create a very large in-group to lead. The only trouble that would arise is when you were called upon to give the list of such values, for then you would completely alienate all those who did not believe in what you put forward! Therefore I think

universal values fit best with an understanding of who it is we are appealing to as leaders. I am not sure that we could get everyone to agree on a list of universal rights and wrongs (the response to the UN Charter from some countries being a prime example of an attempt to do this), however we need to find the values of those who we are leading, and lead them responsibly in a direction which lines up with their collective beliefs.

‘Wait, what do I have to do again?’

– Theme Two

Food for thought

I entered the course with a particular idea of what it meant to be a leader, and with plenty of examples of successful leadership that I wanted to learn to emulate. My previous leadership positions in student societies had been strongly influenced by a focus on *learning* leadership through doing, and so it was interesting to hear the theoretical perspective on what makes a leader. Geoff’s tutorials and techniques were familiar territory, especially with respect to leadership cycles and building personal skills to enhance your ability to lead. Other presentations from Allen, Ron, Lawrence Cram and Keith Houghton in discussing learning through experience were also easy to fit with my existing framework of understanding. However these ideas were completely shaken by Michael’s presentation on in groups and out groups. They sat in complete opposition to my previous training, for though I had learnt about creating organizational culture; I had not considered that it was something that had to be *worked within* as opposed to molded. I had always known it was important to lead people somewhere, but as embarrassing as it is to admit, I guess I never realized I had to go and collect them first!

Personal Digestion

Now that it has been pointed out to me, the idea of in and out groups in creating effective leadership seems blindingly obvious. All the teamwork exercises I did with AIESEC ANU in order to create a functioning executive board, all the committee bonding time we spent eating and drinking in order to create an effective team – we were trying to create an ‘in-group’! Indeed now I can understand the reasons for the

success of one of the most effective student leaders I have worked with – the Director of ANU Asia Pacific Week 2011. He would talk to the team continuously about the idea of ‘us’. He talked about ‘us’ as if we were special and only we could do the task together, and made himself the most committed one of ‘us’ possible through his group management, words and commitment. Learning about in groups and out groups therefore helped me to understand exactly why that team was so functional and committed to our leader, and how I can emulate that success myself!

However upon reflection I began to wonder – to what extent can the attributes of in and out groups be created? Is it possible to create an in group out of what you *want* people to perceive themselves as and to believe in, or do you need to work with what you have, creating the initial buy in through identification and then building to the ideal value set? Also, in light of what was shared by Louisa Osborne, representing ANU XSA, what happens when you create buy-in for people through such in group visions, and the idea that your group members of what they have bought into is different to where you are leading? In attempting to find answers to these questions I found Geoff’s discussion on the importance of communication very helpful. It reminded me of the fact that creating a group and a vision is not the only aspect of leadership. Irrespective of how much people perceive your jokes as funny, when the time for commitment arrives it is important to make sure that you have all bought into the one vision through effective communication and management. Ross McDiarmid’s chart of a leadership life cycle was also useful here, as it reminded me of the importance of remaining committed to your ideas in order to lead effectively. Through in groups we are given influence, but it is through communication of our ideas and growing in our personal skills that we are able to become completely effective leaders.

Final Reflection

These themes represent the key ideas I have found in the presentations so far, and I am sure they are very different to those mentioned by my classmates. The wide variety of ideas presented in this course ensures that we must make up our own minds about what leadership and influence are, and how to apply them in our personal context. Leadership does not exist in a vacuum; a leader in business or education cannot ignore psychological aspects of leadership, nor can any psychological studies of leadership be determined without reference to the business or education scenarios in which they take place. I think requiring such selection of ideas this is good practical training for leadership roles in the future, for a leader is not told the correct answer to a problem – they are given information and must make their own decision (Ron's choice with respect to the lesbian art exhibition is a prime example). In contrast to other courses where there is usually a right or wrong answer, here we are given the opportunity to find out the solution for ourselves. I hope that as the course progresses I am able to continue to learn more and take away more individual pointers for my own leadership style, in order to become a more effective leader and influencer.

Week Three Learning Summary

One of the great things about interdisciplinary courses is the people you meet. In this course I have been exposed to a wide variety of opinions, experiences and perspectives on any given topic, and learnt a lot from listening to my peer group. The presentations on leaders that we admire during the tutorial on the Thursday of Week Three were no exception – revealing the rich variety of backgrounds, values and perspectives we all share on leadership, as well as our personal presentation styles.

Leaders we Admire

When people began their presentations I was at first surprised by some of the objects of admiration. Some people discussed leaders I had never heard of, some brought up those I had heard of, but never thought of in that particular way (Warren Buffet being a good example); indeed, some people did not admire anyone in particular. But as each presentation progressed I realized that once I put my preconceptions aside there was a lot to be admired about these people, and a lot to learn from my classmates! Good examples of this would be X's presentation on Lady Gaga, and X's presentation on Arnold Schwarzenegger. I had, prior to Thursday, limited respect for either individual, which came mainly from their personal moral stances and portrayal in the media. It was challenging to hear someone extoll their good points and admirable qualities as leaders without immediately rejecting them outright. Yet I found that when I really listened to what was said I had to acknowledge the talents of both as leaders and icons. I would not say that I now agree with them on a personal level, but I am able to recognize their ability and respect them for it.

Presentation Skills

In terms of presentation styles and skills, I was also able to learn a lot about my own mannerisms and public speaking in general from these talks. I watched one classmate shift from foot to foot while speaking, thought about how distracting it was – and then did exactly the same thing myself! I would not have been aware of it had I not watched others speak. Secondly, it was also good to learn different techniques for public speaking from watching others present. The idea of using a hook or quote to begin the speech intrigued me (I had been struggling with how to begin my talk), as did the signposting of ideas used by some people. The constructive feedback was also

a really positive experience, and gave me plenty of different perspectives on my personal skills and presentation style.

Conclusion

After these talks and the feedback provided I have lots to think about and practice, as both a public speaker and an individual. I am looking forward to learning more and developing my confidence over the semester. Though it seems that one of the greatest sources of my learning in this course will be my peers, and the new perspectives that they bring to each topic and idea.

Individual Proposal

Background

Many undergraduates at the ANU feel disenfranchised with their university experience at some point in their degree. This is because they arrive at the ANU after hearing so much about how it is Australia's number one university, only to realise that they are not the university's primary focus. The ANU was created to be a research-based university, and so postgraduate study and research is a higher priority for funding and excellence. This is reflected in the 2020 Goals (<http://about.anu.edu.au/strategy-reviews/anu2020/overarching-aims>).

Rationale

I think that the best way to combat undergraduate disenfranchisement within the university is to engage them more fully with the key strength of the ANU – namely having the nation's best thinkers and key policy developers on hand. It is important to do this in a way that does not detract from the work of such researchers and promotes interest in such work, yet provides undergraduates with sufficient exposure to their ideas so that they are:

- Engaged with the core purpose of the university
- Feeling valued by the university
- Inspired to achieve academically

Idea

Therefore I propose that teaching and research staff at ANU be offered the option of becoming an Affiliated Academic with a hall or college at the ANU (including non-residential halls). This would leverage off the existing Learning Community (<http://www.anu.edu.au/learningcommunities/>) structure.

How it would work

Affiliated Academics would:

- Be identified as members of that Hall or College
- Be invited to key Hall or College events eg formal dinners
- Speak on a panel once a year in their area of expertise
- Take part in an Academic Networking Night once a year

Halls and Colleges would:

- Identify Affiliated Academics in their internal and external communication with students
- Invite Affiliated Academics to their key events
- Organise and promote panels
- Organise and promote an Academic Networking Night once a year (including press coverage where necessary)

Who does what

Initial communication with academics and creating buy-in in Academic Colleges:

- Vice Chancellor office, assisted by 2012 student academic leaders in residential halls

Running Hall/College Events:

- Student leadership and academic support

General Oversight

- ANU Learning Communities

Timeline

July 2012 – raise with 2012 student academic leaders for expressions of interest to set up program

August 2012 – raise with Deans of Academic Colleges, Deans of Colleges/Halls

September 2012 – initial networking night between Deans and Sub-deans; begin promotions for 2013 program among staff and students

October 2012 – Deans of Colleges raise with staff; take initial expressions of interest

November 2012 – Halls/Colleges communicate plan to 2013 student leadership and academic support

December 2012 – Finalise list of interested staff, divide among Halls/Colleges

January 2013 – Student leadership put together initial plans for events, communicate to Affiliated Academics to secure dates

February 2013 – Commencement dinners, attended by AA's

Key Performance Indicators

- A member of staff from each College would be represented at each residential hall (7 academic colleges, 8 residential halls = 56 staff members involved).
- 50 students at each panel presentation
- 100 students at the networking nights
- Surveyed undergraduate enfranchisement with the university increased