

Leadership and Influence Learning Portfolio

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Stage I Learning Portfolio.

Throughout my entire university career I have often been offered a formula, paradigm or something tangible that can be applied. Entering into this course I believed that leadership and influence had a sense of definiteness, as if they were something you could possess. In a short amount of time my ideals have been challenged. Have I mistaken leadership as something you can separate and define? Are leadership and influence nothing on their own?

Leadership and Influence in a Complex World
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Table of Contents

- Learning Portfolio in Context 3
- Purpose vs. Vision..... 3
- The Lens of Time..... 4
- Leadership of Others 5
- Leadership of the Self 6
- Conclusion 7
- Peer Talk Reflections 8
- Individual Proposal 9

Learning Portfolio in Context

The structure of my Learning Portfolio (LP) is inspired by the cross-disciplinary nature of this course. Over the past 5 weeks I have been encouraged to look at leadership and influence (L&I) as if on the periphery of a sphere gazing in from different perspectives (an idea proposed by X, week1). People have their own mind, their own visions and their own way of thinking. The same is true for leadership. L&I cannot be defined as separate, as they are nothing on their own. Indeed, as Dr. Platow emphasised in Week4, we need to set the framework in which to explore L&I before our views can make sense.

In preparing for my tutorial facilitation I was required to do a reading called “The Fifth Discipline”, by P. Senge (1992). This introduced the concept of “creative tension”, which is in essence the gap between our current state and our vision (see Figure1). I have used this concept of tension to set the context in which I will be discussing L&I.

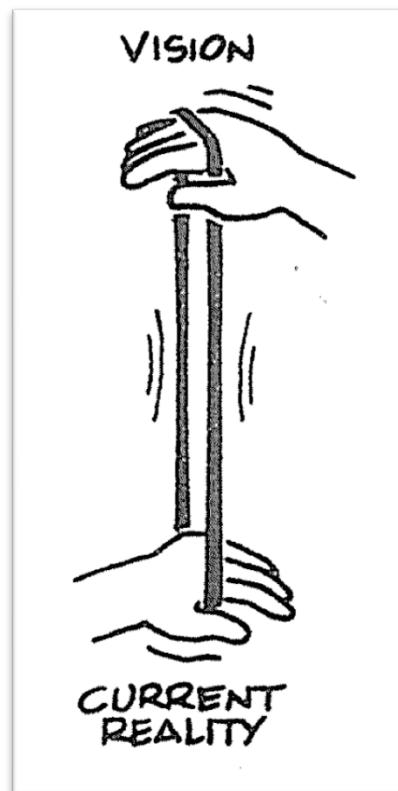


Figure 1: Imagine “creative tension” as the tension in a rubber band when stretched between two points.
Source: Senge,P.M.(1992), *The Fifth Discipline*. London: Random House.

Purpose vs. Vision

In the opening lecture Geoff Mortimore made, what I thought to be at the time, a casual remark: “real leadership is forged in the fire of adversity”. For the past five weeks I have struggled to understand what he meant by this. A week later Ron Brent stated that to be a leader “you need the courage to pursue [your] vision against some sort of opposition or challenge”. A leader’s challenge, in his opinion, is to lead people from their current state *to* somewhere. And that somewhere is the leader’s vision.

I believe it is a natural tendency for humans to seek resolution in the face of tension. This tension ultimately forces us to make a choice: bring reality closer to the vision (the bottom hand towards the top hand), or the vision closer to reality (the top hand towards the bottom hand). Perhaps, Mortimore and Brent are referring to leaders as those who bring reality closer to the vision. Leaders are acutely aware of the gap between vision and current reality, but I don't think vision, like L&I, can be completely defined in isolation.

Vision exists, in my opinion, as a subset of purpose. Purpose is similar to a moral creed. It is abstract by its very nature, yet it provides the framework in which visions are formed. Indeed, like Y said in week2, "without constraints there is no creating".

The Lens of Time

Ross MacDiarmid (current Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Australian Mint) introduced an important notion in his talk in week5; "Timing is really important – you need to know when to introduce vision and values". For me this tied in nicely with the contentious issue of timeframe and framework analysis.

Platow referred to L&I as a process, not a person or a position. Initially, I did not understand the full impact of this statement, and perhaps I still don't. The best way I could rationalise this concept to myself was to employ René Descartes tactic: start from what I do know. Two years ago I studied a mathematics course as a degree requirement. A large proportion of the work was in the study of pathological continuous functions (continuous functions which are differentiable nowhere). The most commonly known pathological function is the Weierstrass function (see Figure 2). The function exhibits self-similarity: at every single point, if we were to "zoom in", it would resemble the global function. (Who needs drugs?!) If the global function is the purpose, each point along the function is a vision. Each vision cannot exist without the purpose (just like each individual point on the Weierstrass function cannot have any meaning without the global function).

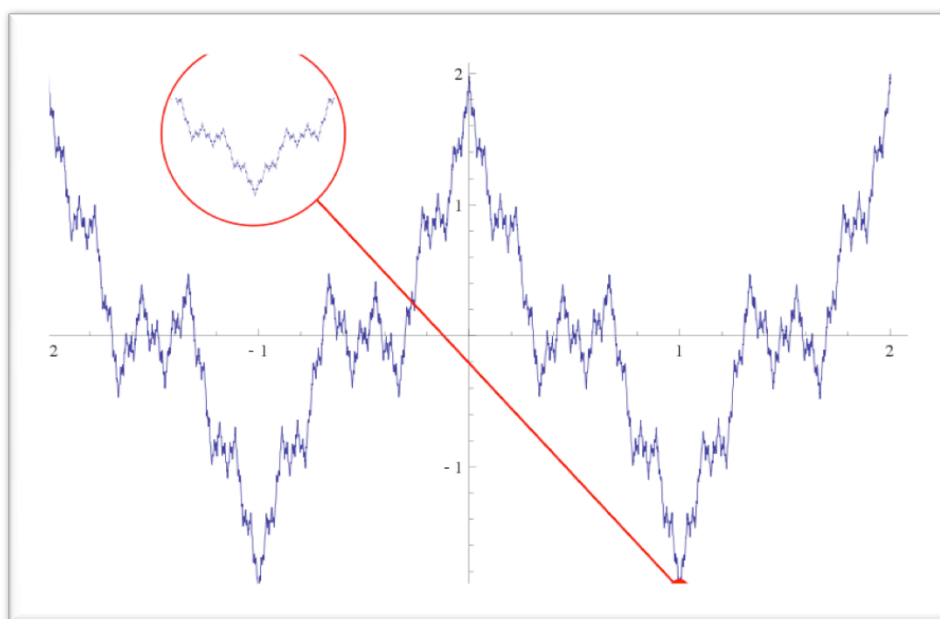


Figure2: Weierstrass function $[-2,2]$. Pathological continuous function.
Source: Wikipedia [23.3.12] *Weierstrass Function*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weierstrass_function.

If I return to the “creative tension” framework I have set up, I can at least understand it in that context. Leaders are in a continual learning zone. They never actually “arrive”. Leadership is a lifelong discipline in itself, conceivably where the journey is the reward. The tension created between real time and vision is perhaps only a subset of the void between real time and purpose. Leadership is a process through time because your purpose draws you further, compelling you to set new visions.

Brent emphasised during his talk in week2 that we must assess a leader more broadly than just on a moment in time. He referred to Hitler as someone who misrepresented effective leadership. If you considered Hitler over his whole timeframe, yes he was a man of great power who led a lot of people, but his fundamental morality and visions were corrupt.

Interestingly, Platow described Hitler as a man who had incredible power and influence, and hence was a great leader, *in real time*. If we could go back to 1919-1945 and analyse Hitler, his leadership involved the creation, co-ordination and control of a shared social identity. Thus making him an effective leader.

Superficially one may conclude that Platow and Brent have conflicting views on what makes an effective leader. I think the conflict lies deeper than this: they are analysing leadership in different frameworks and over different timeframes. Brent also posed the extra constraint that to be a good leader your visions and purpose must reflect strong morality. To Brent, it is that vision, goal or final destination that separates the “good” from the “bad” leaders, assessed (of course) in retrospect.

My concern with this is similar to Lawrence Cram’s observation of Harry Messel. If we start to impose even fundamental values on what is right and wrong, context aside, how do we stop ourselves from converting ideals into expectations?

In line with this, Z put up an interesting post on the Class Discussion Forum. She posed the question, how do we lead when fundamental values are not universal? Although universal morality is a positive idea, it is unrealistic (there is no “in-group” when it comes to morality). I think it is the responsibility of a leader or person of influence to recognise their moral biases and set their visions with the positive and negative impacts pertaining to that bias in mind.

Leadership of Others

You can accomplish anything in life, provided you do not mind who gets the credit. – Harry S. Truman

I am not particularly opposed to working in teams; however, I admit that I can be intensely difficult when a certain team member possesses “strong-man syndrome”. I find it frightening that, in the name of streamlining, there is usually one member who attempts to unilaterally take control. Allan White (week4) offered some advice, which resonated strongly with me: “you need to give people time to act within their own personality style”. Perhaps, instead of trying to understand them, I need to be aware of my *own* personality. Based on White’s discussion I most likely would be classed as an atypical introvert: I take time to plan, gather information and process things, however, I am not afraid to offer my intuition.

I was first introduced to the concept of synergies when studying mergers and acquisitions in the context of finance. The idea appealed to me due to my economic background and bias towards “efficiency”. When growing up I remember being told, “two minds are greater than one”. To be honest, I never really drew the connection between this old saying and synergies, until now.

The multi-disciplinary nature of this course has exposed me to different opinions, value sets and ways of thinking. It has also reinforced the dependence of good decision-making on well-informed arguments. By moving around the periphery of the sphere of perspective, I have become aware of the interdependence of different disciplines. And leadership, being a discipline in its own right, is no exception. This has led me to realise that the job of a leader is not to make the decision, but to ensure that the best decision is made.

This realisation was reinforced by Brent’s admission that during his time as Commonwealth Ombudsmen at the Film and Sound Archive, he “never had a single original idea about how better to archive”.

In week1 Mortimore introduce several models of leadership. According to Kouzes and Posner (2007) one of the five practices of exemplary leadership is “Enabling Others to Act”. Through enhancing self-determination, facilitating relationships, trust and commitment, leaders are able to harvest ideas from the team and generate strong direction and vision. In my opinion, had Brent been self-serving he would have missed most of those ideas, and never reached his, or the Film and Sound Archive’s, maximum potential.

This brings me back to my framework of tension. For many leaders there is a tension between ambition for personal renown and the success of the team. Although there is no magic bullet in becoming a person of leadership or influence (Platow) the most commonly agreed upon characteristic by *all* people who have spoken thus far in lectures, is humility. It seemed paradoxical at first. A reserved nature can sometimes be mistaken as a weakness. By showing significant humility a leader can realise that success of a team is not built on their own genius, but is drawn from the very best the team has to contribute.

Interestingly, it was not until MacDiarmid’s sobering experience of being unemployed that he was able to learn true humility. Self-effacement is hard to reach when arrogance manifests itself in a lot of different behaviours. However, when you find yourself redundant it is not the time to let yourself become completely demoralised. It is time to ask, who am I?

Leadership of the Self - Relativity

| *Only mediocre people are always at their best.* – Somerset Maugham

Although leadership can be beyond a person or position, in order to be a person of influence, you must have great self-awareness. As Cram said, it is only through a careful balance of introspection and constantly questioning our thinking (our reality) that we can carefully form our visions.

In week2, Geoff asked us to write down six of our strengths. Excitement set in – I was about to add to my list of goals and characteristics on what makes a successful leader. X clearly stated that he did not have any strengths he would like to share with the group. His

problems lay in the question, not the task. Strengths are all relative, and by listing them this would imply that he did not need to improve them. Relative to every benchmark he would be the *strongest*, something he felt he could disprove every time.

This started a domino effect in my thinking. Throughout my entire educational experience, especially at university, I have always had a model, or something tangible to create relativity. Where I ranked academically relative to others, my cultural relativity, my relative experience... and I used these relative measures to create my reality. But this is just the Weierstrass function all over again. Each vision may change, but they do not question reality – which is placed in the rigidity of the function. But what happens when my reality changes? Does my purpose change?

As Geoff pointed out in the Action Learning Cycle (ALC) model, meta reflection on reflection is fundamental to reviewing performance and overcoming motivational resistance. With this in mind, I will not start listing all the qualities a leader should have. I will resist the temptation to go down the ‘trait’ path. Indeed, the difference between good and great leaders is not due to differences in abstract attributes.

Being a self-leader is realising that you cannot be a leader in a vacuum. You have to be leading your purpose. Self-leadership is about self-discovery. It is about reflecting, honing in on your reality and not being afraid to question it. Being a leader is not about being in a disillusioned state. As Cram highlighted, it is not about taking for granted your reality, but constantly testing it. You must be active and malleable *in real time*, not passive.

Conclusion – For Now

| *It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.* – Lewis Carroll.

Keith Houghton (week5) brought about an important concept during my tutorial workshop; a CEO should never stop being qualified for the job. I think this is a particularly important point and one that can be extended to any form of leadership. Where there is a disconnect between the life cycle of the vision and the life cycle of the leader, there is a tension between how they manage their career relative to that of the vision. This is where all the points in my LP above come together.

A true person of L&I has ambition for the vision and purpose above that for themselves. They not only realise the importance of self-discovery, and authenticity (White, Week3), but they also realise the importance of setting up successors for success. As pointed out by Y in Week1, ensuring longevity is a greater testament to your leadership than when the vision crumbles after you leave.

Peer Talk Reflections

This activity presented the opportunity to reflect upon learning processes. I have used the Action Learning Cycle (ALC) introduced by Geoff Mortimer in Week2 to circuitously reflect upon my classmates' talks.

Gathering Information

- This was the first and final step to this learning activity, which fits nicely into the ACL framework. I found it interesting that most people appeared to have thought more deeply about who they admired, and why, rather than what they were actually going to say. The diversity of the admired leaders' visions made it apparent that the origins of influence are endless. Despite this, there was a commonality between all speeches; the success of a leader could be measured by their ability to maintain the enduring purpose of their values. Perhaps this was influenced by Ron Brent's talk from the previous week, but I believe it is more likely that the value of a leader's integrity plays an important role in providing the basis for influence. Indeed, pinning down of abstract qualities of a leader became second to the question of *why* we admired our leader. This generally fed back into integrity and commitment to a vision.
- Gathering feedback from my peers, and going back and listening to myself speak is something I have not done before. To be honest I found it both terrifying and exhilarating. It gave me the rare opportunity to look at myself from a third person perspective, allowing me to see the tension between my "inner" and "outer" worlds (as discussed in Week5).

Reflecting

- Fundamental to learning is recognising weaknesses and potential for improvements. Interestingly, the impact of words spoken and the substance of the speech were, to many extents, dependent on the effectiveness of the delivery. When we are required to present in front of our peers, it is evident that the inner narrative can be in conflict with the overall goal of the presentation. The ambivalent nature of the "inner" and "outer" worlds is powerful, and, in my opinion, the most effective speakers were those who were able to overcome (at least in the outer world) the feelings of judgement and categorisation. (Indeed, as Geoff discussed, the antidote to judgement is compassion towards one self in the inner world).
- To overcome this tension many people drew on personal experiences to create a connection with the audience. Engaging an audience, especially one where common ground is scarce, is sometimes difficult. Fundamentals, such as speaking with genuineness and conviction, truly impacted on how the speech was received. Maintaining eye contact, positive body language, using pauses and preserving a relaxed stance, I believe, enhanced the presentations.

Improvements

- Retrospectively, each speech had its own merits, and I found it enlightening that there was no one set way to produce an effective/engaging presentation. Although no amount of preparation can totally prepare you for the feelings of anxiety that comes with addressing an audience, it was apparent that a well formed and practiced talk lent itself to being concise, engaging and of course encouraged eye contact, lack of reliance on notes and generally seemed more relaxed.

Implementing

- The constructive feedback from others provided quality information for formulating ideas into improvements. Self-observation through listening to myself enabled a constructive process of reflection balanced by reinforcing my strengths. I hope to translate what I have learnt into the week13 presentation.

Individual Proposal

One of the main disadvantages of entering into an ANU undergraduate program is the limited options that remain open to students as they progress through their degrees. The restricted opportunity to gain knowledge and understanding across a broader range of disciplines reduces students' ownership and accountability for their own learning.

Background

- In 2008 the University of Melbourne introduced a radical restructuring to the undergraduate curriculum, dubbed the "Melbourne Model". The new system shifted towards a standardized degree structure, akin to elite American universities. The impact of the Model on education offered by the university has been a topic of contention, however, it should be placed in the context of decreased government funding.
- Australia's third largest export is education. ANU must remain competitive in the global education market, and be mindful of its Australian market share.

SMART+ Goal

By 2020, full-time first year undergraduate students must, as a degree requirement, undertake two courses from outside their faculty each semester and at least one VCUG course in a later year.

Goal in Context

The ANU by 2020 plan specifies that the excellence and distinctive character of ANU will be manifest in its "responsive[ness] to student needs and to the requirements of the nation". For the future graduates of ANU to provide government and the community with the highest quality intellectual resources, they must be provided with a firm grasp of the greater picture of education and exposure to different ways of thinking. These degree restructurings aim to engage and involve the student body in peer learning while fostering cross-disciplinary integration and respect. More integration between students of different discipline reduces cultural divides and tension, encouraging collaboration from both sides.

Its introduction would encourage students who have made an informed decision as to whether undergraduate study in their discipline is appropriate and desirable. It will also endorse a higher quality of students entering into the degree in terms of motivation and broader understanding.

Implementation

The proposed SMART+ goal is not to replicate the Melbourne Model template. The model will be a hybrid of the Melbourne Model and the existing course structures in place at ANU. The proposal is a realistic one considering the current chronic government funding shortages and increased global competition faced by ANU. It also coincides with the push for Australian university diversification by the Federal Minister for Education.

The proposal will not require dramatic restructuring of university funding. It aims at increasing the number of full-fee paying students, by attracting a greater international student base (through increase market competitiveness), and greater Federal Government support (e.g. through increasing the maximum amount students can borrow through FEE-HELP).

The Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor will need to consult the university community to determine the strategic aims of the initiative. However, ultimate implementation will require endorsement from the ANU Council to approve the mission. Plans will also need to be revised every 3 years to ensure their currency.

The restructuring will need to be phased in. A rough timeline would include:

- Building on Ian Chubb's report on the virtues of the Melbourne Model.
- Seek Federal Government approval.
- Endorsement from ANU Council.
- Introduce the initiative for students commencing 2018.

Feedback/Considerations:

- Diminished experience/quality by mandating a VCUG course.
- Changing degree requirements (especially for specialised/double degrees).