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Authentic Leadership in Volunteer Based Teams: A Research Essay and Reflection of My Leadership Experience in LEAD 326

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Cover Page Footnote

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There are many different styles and theories of leadership. As a student at Boise State University in the Leadership Certificate program, it has been my focus to study these theories and apply them to real life situations. Some theories work well while others may not be as practical, depending on the situation. In preparing for the leadership projects I participated in this semester, I found the Authentic Leadership Theory to be very effective and relatable to the type of positions I was in, as a leader.

Defining Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership can be defined in several different ways. Simply put, the word authentic is synonymous with genuine and true. It can be described from many perspectives as well. Northouse (2016) indicates that authentic leadership can be viewed from an interpersonal, intrapersonal, and developmental perspective. Interpersonally, we study the theory in relation to the connection between the leader and follower. Intrapersonally, we look more specifically within and relate our own self concepts to being authentic. From a developmental aspect, we can directly link the theories to real life practice and realize that by applying the ideas, one can improve as an authentic leader (Northouse 2016 p.196). These different perspectives are the ways that I personally looked at my leadership skills and was able to apply the knowledge to tangible projects.

Literary Theories Research and Analysis

From a practical side, I found Bill's George's approach to authentic leadership to be a great way to understand the characteristics.

Specifically, authentic leaders demonstrate five basic characteristics: (1) They understand their purpose, (2) they have strong values about the right thing to do, (3) they establish trusting relationships with others, (4) they demonstrate self-discipline and act on their values, and (5) they are passionate about their mission (i.e., act from the their heart) (Northouse 2016/2003 p.197).

These five characteristics were what I pondered as I was preparing for my leadership projects in the community. They speak to the idea that in order to be authentic, one must know thy self. This took some self-reflection, on my part, in order to truly understand my own values and ethics. It then calls for standing up for those ethics in my daily workings with others, even going so far as to show true passion for what I believe. I believe this was important when it came to volunteering at a nonprofit and getting followers to share the same values.

Another viewpoint of authentic leadership comes from several articles written by Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones. They came up with three elements to being authentic in their article, "Be Yourself More-With Skill". Those elements are "consistency between word and deed, coherence in role performance, and comfort with self" (2007). When leading a team, the followers look and make decisions about the leader. Many of those designs come down to how authentic the leader is. Does he do what he say he will do? Is what he expects of others the same for himself. Coffee and Jones reaffirmed this idea in another article titled, "Managing Authenticity". They said, "...It's not enough to practice what you preach. To get them to follow you, you also have to get them to relate to you (2005)." Goffee and Jones take the idea of being

yourself to a different standard. They establish the need to understand and stand up for your passions and goals but they also believe that we play roles depending on who we are working with. We are still ourselves but we utilize different skills in different situations. We draw on what the followers' needs and use that information to inspire them. This was the "coherence of role performance" they were talking about (Goffee 2007). While we play these different roles, our underlying values should be consistent. The last aspect of this is the need to be comfortable with oneself. It very easy to get lost in the complexity of this and bend to easier solutions or values. I believe this comes from uncertainty of self but if one can understand their own values and be confident in the decisions made based on those values, then they will show their authentic nature through their self-comfortability.

Application of Theories and Reflection

This semester, my skills as an authentic leader were defiantly challenged. I had several projects, where I recruited and led different groups in volunteering for the organization, Big Brothers Big Sisters. This organization matches adult volunteers with at risk kids. These adult volunteers act as mentors and role models to the kids. They meet together several times a month and do a wide range of simple activities from going on a walk to going to a movie. This fall, I organized a group, from my work, to create a fishing activity, where we worked with matches to teach them how to fish at a private pond.

There were a lot of logistics involved in this project but I will focus more on the adaptive challenges that relate to my authentic leadership. As I prepared to recruit members of my work team to volunteer, I began by making sure I had a clear understanding of my goals and why I was striving for them in the first place. I wanted to increase the understanding of the organization in order to increase their regular volunteers. This was a need/challenge for them and I wanted to

help them grow so that the kids that have been on a long list to be matched, could finally experience the benefits of BBBS. After I had a understanding of where I was coming from, I needed to develop the approach I wanted to take with my co-workers. I knew several members of my team were amazing fisherman so I drew on their own passions and encouraged them to share those passions with these kids. I got a great response from those team members. They came out to the activity, helped assemble the fishing poles, gave an initial instruction, and then worked one on one with the kids. Other members of the team, who were not as excited about fishing, helped with another project to raise funds for the organization's fund raising drive. I drew on their strengths to host a bake sale and publicize it to the public. We had several meetings for both projects where team member could align their values and goals, see my passion for the projects, and work together to accomplish them. Both projects were a great success. Not only did the kids benefit from the activity; the volunteers benefitted by learning about BBBS and grew stronger as a team at work.

During these projects, my leadership skills were tested in many ways by my team. Because I went into the project comfortable with myself and my values, I was able to project the focus and drive that the other team members eventually emulated. I was able to build strong relationships with my team members, founded on the basis of trust. Overall this was a great experience that I was able to apply the leadership theories and skills to practical real life projects.

This semester has proven to be one of focus on volunteerism. I have participated in more service learning projects this semester than my entire time at BSU. It has been a very rewarding and humbling semester. It was a great feeling to not only learn about organizations, like the Boise Rescue Mission and the Idaho Food Bank, but to be able to do something that made a difference to them. When my team got to walk through the rescue mission, we spent several

hours walking around and talking to people in the shelters who had heart breaking stories of hard times and amazing recoveries, in part from the help of organizations such as the Boise Rescue Mission. I felt great joy in being able to share their messages on our TV show in hopes that others in need can find the same resources and those with the means to can donate their time and money to worthy cause such as BRM. Our last project of presenting options for after high school to Kuna Middle School students brought on another great experience. Standing in front of the kids, I was able to honestly share vital information about colleges and trade schools. Most importantly, they were able to see the real me and how they could relate to my story of life after high school. It brought back memories for me about being in their shoes and how I wish I knew then what I know now. I was able to share that information with them and hopefully inspire them that they can achieve whatever they want to in life.

Conclusion

Through my studies of authentic leadership, I gained a new perspective of ways to be an effective leader. I know that a great leader combines the theories of many different styles of leadership, it should not fall on the shoulders of one theory alone. While I drew from many different theories over the semester, the theories of authentic leadership were more apparent and relatable to my work in these projects, as a leader. Those skills proved to be very effective in my work with these organizations.

References

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