

Learning as a Leader

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Abstract

The present case study is my experience in the short journey as a novel leader. The thoughts expressed in this case study are my perception. In this study, I expressed my initial reactions and my adaptations. I have also shared my learning experience as a leader from my team members, peer leaders, and my boss. I have also narrated what are the skills a leader has to possess and how it varies from place to place. I have also highlighted the changes I encountered in my physical, mental, and social health in this journey as a leader. This study also consists of some references related to the context of my experience. This case study depicts various transformations in opinion and behavioural traits from a team member to a team leader.

Disclaimer

The present case study is my short journey (7 months) as a novel leader. The thoughts expressed are my perception which may be correct or sometimes it would have been misinterpreted. I am not prescribing or suggesting to follow or act according to my experience. I have no intentions to directly or indirectly hurt or criticise any individual. I have not disclosed any individual's personal or organisational information in this case study.

Introduction

Initially I was interested to write about the leader or personality who inspired me more. Later I realised admiring, observing or criticising a leader is different than experiencing as a leader.

In many case studies, authors write about eminent leaders and their experiences. All eminent leaders would

have started as a novel leader. I would like to share my experience as a novel leader.

I have also shared what are the transformations from a member of the faculty to the head of a faculty.

In my college days, I used to study in the terrace; I admired the take-off of a flight since the airport was near to my house. Later I got an overseas opportunity and travelled in the flight. At That time only, I realised the admiration of flight is more when we observe from far away. But when we are in flight we are not admiring more; our thought process is inclined towards the destiny and travel. The same way I felt when I became a leader.

I use to admire many leaders and even felt disappointed by few leaders. But when I became a leader, I realised the leaders who disappointed me might be correct in their own ways.

Learning as a leader begins...

Let me share my short journey of leadership and what I learnt in that journey. I started my career in a private university in Malaysia in 2008 as a junior lecturer. I progressed to senior lecturer of course; this was an academic enhancement but lesser role as an administrator. I had also been a cohort coordinator, advisor for many student association events. Then I was appointed as the head of department for a faculty. The faculty comprised 3 diploma and 3 degree programmes. I had nearly 16 staffs in my faculty. This position offered me a lot of learning experience and changed my perspective in many aspects.

The moment I was being offered the position, I believe, I was both reluctant and excited. I was still calm based on my previous experience in my life. I felt anything might change at last minute. One should not believe anything until it gets confirmed.

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I was a lecturer and suddenly I became a leader for my peer group. The first few days I received many wishes. I even noticed some of them were disappointed. I was very cheerful. My family also felt happy. My close friends, who were not my colleagues at that time, wished and garlanded me. I remembered two persons in my life at that time, my father who was a role model for hard work and my friend who always guided me that there is a Big Boss above all (Almighty) who recognises our work. That day I felt my work was recognised.

I initially followed the leadership principles which I imbibed from the leaders whom I am admired. I start to realise slowly, leadership is not a readymade concept, it is a tailor made one. We have to design according to our personality, our team, and our environment. I realised all the leaders might be correct in their own ways of justification. Initially, I used to get advice from my peer leaders. Progressively I learned the things.

I realised myself. From outside, people look leadership as a matter of pride, power, and authority. But I started feeling leadership related to responsibility and commitment. It was not very easy to project myself as a leader to the same group among which were my colleagues.

According to an article in Business News daily, it is a difficult transition from a co-worker to a leader and there may be a period of adjustment to earn the respect of the team as an authority figure rather than equal volume employee.

After the end of appreciation or in the midst of appreciation, I started to realise the challenges too. I was not a natural successor leader. I suddenly came up to leadership. I started realising that leadership does not come with position only, it also comes to existence when your staff starts accepting you as a leader. Maudling, Peters, Roberts, Leonard, and Sparkman (2012) highlighted effective leadership is not dramatic or one-time event. It is rather an everyday affair that requires skills such as communication, listening, and empathy.

People accept a leader based on many factors which may vary from time to time, person to person. In my opinion (I may be wrong), they accept the leader who is powerful. I felt that a leader should be a combination of autocracy and democracy. A leader cannot be 100% democratic or solely autocratic. He should be a combination of both.

First lesson I learnt as a leader was that we have to be very conscious about every word we speak. Many people

may feel a more vocal person can influence people, but very soon I started realising that a good leader is one who controls his every word. I remember one of our students shared some feedback about a lecturer. I acted the same day; I called the lecturer and informed him indirectly. The next day I came to know from another lecturer that it was wrongly conveyed. That day I realised how others may perceive the information is equally important as what we intend to communicate.

Until that time, based on my theoretical knowledge, I had believed a good leader should possess good communication skills which refers to vocabulary & grammar. When I became a leader, I realised that for a leader, good communication also refers to how we communicate. That day I realised I have to be strategic and very conscious about the consequences of my communication. Earlier I always criticised why a leader maintained distance from media and why they didn't share things easily with media. After that incident I realised what, how, when, and to whom we communicate is an important factor.

Secondly, I realised that I should not show my dissatisfaction about a staff in front of others. I remember one day I went to the staff room, enquired about some previous task, and expressed my unhappiness towards the same to my staff. That day I realised that the correct way is to call the staff in person and inform their mistakes. I started to incorporate that in my behaviour. As a young leader, I had a prejudice that my senior colleagues (leaders) may not accept me. I had a great acceptance from senior leaders. After I myself became a leader, my admiration on the leaders increased. I was able to reason out their actions and reactions. I started learning from them a lot. I started to believe that good leadership skills will not be developed only by theoretical knowledge, it will be developed by real experience when you are in a driver's seat.

Before that, I used to believe the JD (job description) of a leader is to assign and follow up the work. I felt it would be easy. Later I realised the leader, sometimes or many times, should complete the deficit work. If one person in a team is not completing the task, the leader has to fill the gap.

Some of my staff said that I was strict while others said I was too lenient. I was confused. I informed my boss and asked him whether I should be strict or lenient. My boss did not give me any direct answer. My colleagues also criticised me. That time in early days of my leadership, I

felt why my boss was not advising me how to act. Later I understood my boss wanted me to understand, analyse, and act accordingly.

I learned a lot from my boss. He is really my inspiration. He is very vocal when he talks about general topics. When discussing about the professional things, he is very keen and precise in whatever he delivers. He uses to listen to the issues and gives a solution for the core component in that. I remembered one time when I was discussing some issues with him, he said, "When we talk more, some issues may come". That time I realised we should talk to the team members precisely and only what is needed. He also gave me one advice regarding allocation of work, "Consolidate the work and assign to the staff." That time I realised how to assign the tasks. I admired his optimism and patience. Whole-heartedly I will say I would not have survived as a novel leader without his guidance.

Many leaders around me are source of my inspiration. The best part is that heads of all the other faculty never interfered with my faculty-related matters. They gave a lot of respect and accepted me. In my team there were some positive factors. They were also one of the main reasons for my survival as a novel leader.

I had another experience through which I learnt that many people observe the small mistakes and negatives of the leader which they themselves had done in the past or had been doing at present. That day I decided, as a leader, I should reduce or avoid mistakes and correct all negatives. This should be at the top priority rather than focusing on innovations. Adding to the above statement, I felt the first priority has to be given to maintain the routine procedure; once it is achieved, focus can be given for innovations.

During one instance, when I was in a discussion with one of my team members, he gave his views verbally. I requested him to email me his views. When I checked the email, the content was not as same as discussed verbally. That day I felt that major requests, feedbacks, and views should be in black and white. I knew some of my team members were unhappy with this. But as a leader, we should always generate evidence for all the actions.

Many people may feel, as a rule of thumb, a person with good experience as a leader will be a good leader. My opinion is that a good leader can also be a good team member because he can understand the team and leader much better.

Many times I felt there is less respect for my words among the team members, but later I felt that in academic administration it is preferable to have a leader with highest qualification. Experience should be one step above the peer group or else the leader should be empowered. The word power according to me means that the leader should have authority to either positively or negatively reinforce the team member. If the leader only acts as a channel of this process, few people would tend to liaise with the core person of the reinforcement. In a survey conducted by Jessica *et al.* it has been identified that lack of support/respect among peer group contributes stress to the leaders.

In terms of physical health, being a leader I like to adapt a better posture, physique, and physical appearance. I felt few changes in my mental health. Initially I was overwhelmed with positivity and high level of self-esteem. Later I noticed I tended to develop subconscious stress. The word subconscious stress refers to subconsciously preoccupied with work, thinking and planning about the task. This sometime disturbed my sleep. Once my wife asked me something. Apparently I heard it, but rather than replying to it, I conversed different topic about the work. She got angry. I used to spend more time with my daughter when I was a lecturer. After I took over the administrative position, though I physically spend adequate time with her, mentally I was preoccupied with my work and issues. But I later identified this and started to recreate myself with my family.

One more change I noticed in my health; I seldom became over-eater. When I came to my home, some time with stress or preoccupied, I didn't realise or focus on how much I ate. I started overeating. Once, I was a bit stressed; that day I went to bed after having my dinner. After an hour I suddenly realised that I had finished all the food (including my wife's share). I apologised to her. From that day, I became conscious about my food intake. Eventually I reduced overeating. I realised that eating had become one of my stress relieving factors. Luckily I understood that in time and progressively rectified it. In a survey by Jessica *et al.*, it has been reported by the leaders that their leadership role contributed to higher level of personal stress and 79% leaders in the study believed that they were benefitted by a coach to help them manage stress.

My social health, too, compromised a bit when I became a leader. At my workplace, I did not want to develop a very close friendship with my colleagues. I thought that might make others to perceive that I would favour them. I wanted to be neutral. I did not have any personal friend

in the office. I seldom used to share thoughts with other faculty heads, but over a period of time I tried to reduce that too.

Schoeman suggests that by developing themselves and mastering six dimensions of health (physical, emotional, intellectual, social, vocational, and spiritual), leaders can gain the strength and stamina to overcome tough times but also accomplish more than earlier.

One more thing, which was quite challenging as a new leader, was decision making. Many of the decisions would not satisfy all parties. I tried following Mahabharatha, “For the sake of a family, a member may be sacrificed”. Similarly some of my decisions, I realised, might affect an individual, but for the betterment of the entire faculty it was required to be taken. In the tenure of my journey as a leader, I felt we cannot satisfy everyone. Sometimes we cannot satisfy ourselves. Unlike a lecturer’s job, a leader’s job does not end with office time only. For that, we need adequate planning which will come over period of time. I also realised that my speed, multitasking, and analytical skills improved as a leader.

Another person who really supported me and acted like my executive during weekends, evenings, or sometimes till late night was my wife. She really supported me in this journey. She acted as a channel for my ventilation. Initially I use to ventilate a lot. But later I started empathising that I am over-burdening. Slowly I reduced sharing the office related matters. She was a very strong supporter for all my tasks. She always gave a positive expression when I did the office task at home.

In my journey as a leader, a few people criticised that I was favouring some of my team members. I felt when we positively reinforce the team players, sincere or dedicated staff, it is perceived as favouritism. When we tend to negatively reinforce irregular, less sincere staff, they tend to consider we dislike them. Actually I realised a team can achieve many things not only with highly inspirational leaders but also with a highly motivated, positive team players.

During one of the events, I proposed one member from our team to lead the team and complete the task. I noticed everyone in my team supported each other. I felt very happy to see the team work. That day I realised when we assign a work we should consider the interest of the person. Isa Kaftal suggests that delegating work based on an individual’s strengths will make the leader and group task easier.

In our team I started understanding my team members’ interest and tried to give the ownership of the task as per their areas of interest. The results were good. I wanted to make my team members understand that though some core tasks were not their areas of interest, but still they could contribute to that task since it was their core job. Slowly I learnt to disseminate the work in a better way. I noticed happiness among my team members. I also started developing more listening skills.

In contradiction to the above statement, I had a few bad experiences in assigning the tasks. Some believed it should be as per their consensus while some suggested it should be based on their availability. I understand there is a lot of differences in expectations of every staff. The same member can expect different things at different time. As a leader we have to understand it and implement what is most appropriate. It is quite challenging to satisfy everyone.

On many occasions, my management gave a lot of respect and significance to my position. I felt happy; at the same time, I was thinking I had to keep up to their expectations and I started feeling that I had to be more responsible.

In this journey of 7 months I noticed another factor. Transforming and adapting the skills needed to be a leader of a team is a progressive process. Many times, I felt that I could have handled this situation the other way or I could have used other words. I even felt that my intentions were not properly executed. I realised that though our brain knows how to transform ourselves, it takes some time to implement what is most appropriate. Somerville, Jones, and Casey (2010) said that the capacity to change one’s actions in order to cope with new demands appears to develop progressively in life.

That is why I feel experienced leaders are wiser than unexperienced ones. This is something similar to mother tongue influence. When we practice a new language though our brain knows we are wrong, it takes some time to implement the correct one.

Conclusion

I would like to concise my opinion based on my experience.

1. Leadership qualities are acquired by experience rather than from theoretical knowledge.
2. Our perspective about the leaders and leadership qualities changes when we become a leader.

3. Leadership qualities is a tailor made concept; it should be according to the team, situation, and environment.
4. Team members are generally influenced by leaders who are powerful.
5. A leader has to be a role model. First, he should focus on reducing his mistakes and negative components. Many team members judge their leader through this.
6. Effective leadership communication is what, where, how, and when we communicate. I believe the above principle is followed in this case study also.
7. A leader should communicate precisely and avoid unwanted communication.
8. Leaders should take care of their physical, mental, and social health. They have to implement some good proactive measures to maintain a good health.
9. Family and friends' support is a key factor for good leaders.
10. A leader can be a combination of autocratic and democratic. Of course the democratic component should be higher.
11. In the academic administration in order to gain adequate respect, the leader should possess some factors (age, experience, qualification, credentials) higher than the team members.
12. Adequate number of team players are required for the success of a team.
13. Senior leaders are accepting and supporting young and new leaders.
14. Transforming ourselves into a better leader is a progressive process.

There is a famous Hindi proverb, “*Yatha Raja, Thatha Praja*”, meaning the citizens of a country will follow the king's (leader) path. But, I felt the leader will design the way to act, strategy to follow and principles while his personality is also nurtured by his team members. In a nutshell, the leader influences the team member and vice versa.

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