

Personal Leadership Plan

Leadership is a complex topic. Oftentimes it is considered synonymous with an individual instead of thought of as a process. Public administration literature defines leadership as the “process of influencing others to take action toward a common goal” (Paarlberg, 2005). More specifically, leadership involves a series of assessments and goal setting, personal characteristics (traits and skills), individual styles, and behavioral skills.

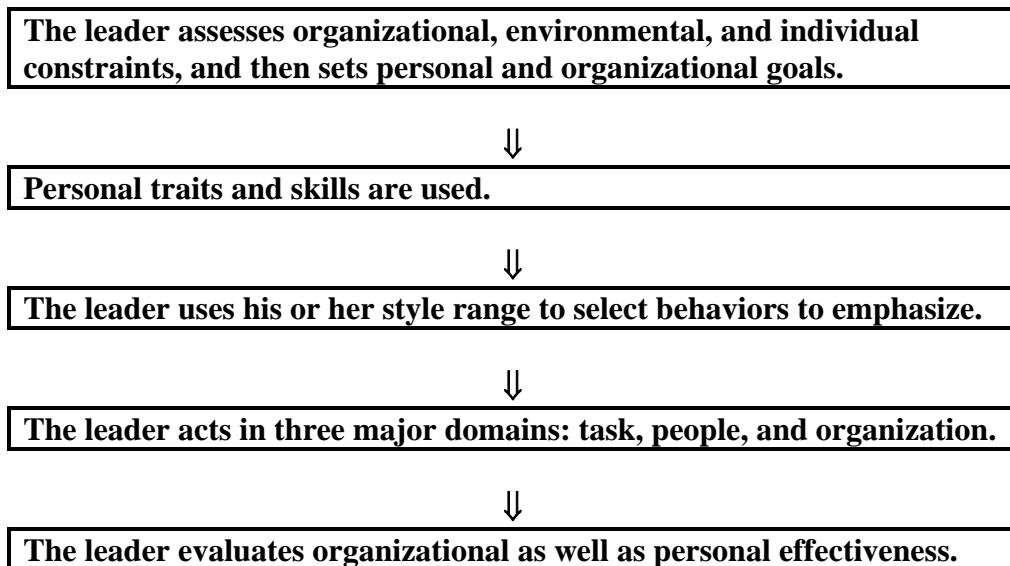
This personal leadership plan will explore my leadership process by examining past and present decision making. More importantly, this leadership plan will utilize an analytical leadership model to illustrate my leadership process. Lastly, my personal leadership plan will provide a framework for how I will achieve and measure my future leadership goals.

I. Past & Present Leadership Decisions

In order to know where you are going, you have to know where you have been. On my bedroom wall hangs a YMCA poster of a young African American girl towering over the city landscape, smiling. Below her is the caption “self-esteem.” That African American girl reminds me of myself. As a child growing up in a predominately white school, I struggled with my self-confidence. I wanted to excel like my white counterparts, but my involvement in classes for students with learning disabilities made me feel academically inferior. Gradually, through hard work, I was able to perform at the same academic level as my classmates by the seventh grade. By high school I was taking accelerated courses and I received college credit for my AP History class. Eventually I went on to college, graduated with a B.A. in History and Sociology, M.A. in History, and obtained a Level I teaching credential.

My personal experience as a student taught me lessons that I wanted to share with others so I joined Teach for America. Teach for America is an organization dedicated to the belief that “one day all children will have the opportunity to obtain an excellent education.” Teach for America provided me with the training to work with children from diverse cultures and ethnicities, different socio-economic backgrounds, and students with disabilities. Subsequently, for the last five years I served in the public sector as a special education teacher at Bret Harte Middle School, a school that serves a culturally diverse student body in Oakland, California. I was also Chair of the Special Education Department at my school.

All throughout this experience, I never forgot the little African American girl who lacked self-esteem and confidence. I asked myself, what enabled me to succeed? What drove my decision-making? What kind of leader was I? To answer these questions, we will study an analytical leadership model created by James S. Bowman, Jonathan P. West, Evan M. Berman, and Montgomery Van Wart in the book *The Professional Edge: Competencies in Public Service*. The authors argue that effective leadership contains the following cycle:



(Van Wart, 90)

Assessing Organizational, Environmental, and Individual Constraints, and Setting Personal and Organizational Goals

“Leaders need information to act effectively, so logically, leader assessment and evaluation is top priority” (VanWart 33). When I became a teacher in Oakland, I had to assess major organizational factors such as task skills and role clarity for my students. First, I assessed role clarity: Did my students understand what was expected of them? Creating an environment where students felt confident to work towards their academic goals was a challenging and complex process. To do so, I treated my students fairly but not the same. I believe that there are certain standards to which all students should be held. For example, all students should be held to a standard of behavior which demands that they treat their teacher and fellow student with respect. Within the classroom, I believe that all students should be held to high standards, such as regular attendance, completion of assignments, and participation in classroom activities. Secondly, I had to determine my students’ task skills. After determining my students’ strengths and areas of weaknesses, I developed instruction that addressed the diversity of learning styles present in my classroom. I was able to determine if my students understood the curriculum by utilizing a diversity of instructional activities, such as portfolios, instructional games, and student presentations and discussions

Personal Traits and Skills

The traits and skills of a leader are important, but they are not the sole determination of an effective leader. "Leadership varies too much by individual and situational circumstances to build a theory around personal characteristics alone" (VanWart 94). After completing a Leadership Trait Questionnaire (See Attachment A), I found that I answered strongly on being articulate and persistent. This is not surprising because I enjoy participating in class, presenting information to large groups and, as a teacher, I loved teaching new things to my students. As a

teacher I understood that students with learning disabilities learn things differently and needed concepts to be explained differently. This required that I have excellent communication skills in the classroom. My persistence came from my childhood experiences that taught me to never give up on the idea that I could do well in school. My persistence also carried through into my teaching. As a teacher, I had many roles and responsibilities. A teacher has to act as a liaison between school and family. We are also role models who, through direct instruction, persistence, and the modeling of appropriate behavior, help students obtain the skills necessary to succeed in the world.

Furthermore, studies have found that certain traits and skills enhance a leader's performance. Traits considered important to leadership include personal traits, motivational traits, value traits, and general aptitudes. The personal trait that has enabled me to succeed the most has been my resilience, resilience as defined by the following question: "does the individual avoid letting discouragement of failures, setbacks, or even hard work affect their attitude?" (Van Wart 96). The failure and setbacks that I suffered as a young African American female in special education classes taught me to never give up. I believed that I could get out of special education and excel academically in regular education classes. This took hard work, determination, and willingness to go in after school to get extra help in subjects that were difficult for me. My resilience carried through as a leader in Oakland Public Schools. My greatest success in the classroom was helping students with learning disabilities feel confident and resilient. My students understood that their ability to succeed came from their own efforts and inner strength. For example, many of my students had reading difficulties and were ashamed of reading out loud in class. By the end of the year, I had all of my students reading out loud and making progress in their reading development.

Motivational traits are also an important component of leadership. The desire to achieve is paramount. "Does the leader have a strong need for achievement? Is this need balanced by a strong awareness of others' need for recognition and achievement as well?" (Van Wart 96). I believe that self-esteem is one of the most valuable legacies we can give our children. I utilized a combination of resources to help children learn and feel confident in fulfilling their potential. As a teacher I motivated my students to learn because knowledge is power. When you have knowledge, you have the ability to critically assess your surroundings and make decisions.

Lastly, researchers have found that emotional maturity is one of the most important traits because it allows the leader to balance interest and put everything into perspective in order to see the big picture. Working with a diverse population of students who are considered socio-economically disadvantaged and have learning disabilities was a challenge. The hardships that my students faced in their personal life affected their ability to learn. Consequently, I strived to put the setbacks that occurred in my classroom or in my students' lives into perspective and did not let them prevent me from providing them with the best possible education.

Skills are extremely important to a leader's effectiveness. After completing Skills Inventory 4.4 (See Attachment B) I learned that my technical, human, and conceptual skills are almost evenly balanced. As a teacher, my human and conceptual skills were the most important to me. I enjoyed working with students and creating an environment that made students feel confident to do their work to meet their academic goals. Also, as Chair of the Special Education Department, I enjoyed the challenge of arranging my staff, instructional assistants, and student schedules.

Leadership Styles

Leaders bring their individual style to situations as "a dominant pattern of behaving in a position" (Van Wart 89). Based upon Style Questionnaire 4.3 (See Attachment A) I found that

my style is moderately high in task oriented behavior and in the low range for relationship oriented behavior. This means that my leadership style gravitates towards being directive, clarifying roles, delegating, problem solving, monitoring, and planning operations. Relationship oriented leaders typically consult with subordinates, display concern for followers' needs, and encourage team building and conflict resolution. Once again, the results were not surprising because as a person I have a tendency to be very self-confident, direct, and feel that there is a better way of doing things. Moreover, as a teacher I found being task-oriented a more appropriate style in the classroom because research has found that students need direct and explicit instruction to learn. That said, I was always concerned about creating an environment where students felt their opinions were respected.

Leader Behaviors

"It is through behavior that goals are fulfilled" (Van Wart 105). Leaders act in three major domains: task, people, and organization. My primary roles as a teacher was task oriented because I had to monitor and assess my students' achievement. I was also people oriented because I had to motivate my students to learn and manage conflict in the classroom. As Department Chair of Special Education, I focused on organizational competencies by making decisions for my department, organizing and chairing department meetings, and consulting with counselors and psychologists to arrange appropriate student programs.

Leaders Evaluation of Organization and Self

Before the leadership cycle starts again, the last stage is Leader Evaluation. A leader should evaluate the organization and herself. A leader should determine the effectiveness of organizational goals. As a teacher, one of my goals for my students was for them to meet the academic standards set forth by the State of California. I evaluated this goal by having my

students demonstrate mastery of the standards through a diversity of projects and assignments that fostered active and creative participation in the learning process.

Another important stage in leadership development is self-evaluation. "Do they need to redeploy their own energies based on their evaluations? Should they change their style in particular situations or perhaps in general to meet evolving conditions?" (Van Wart 110). At the end of each year of teaching I always did an evaluation of myself to decide what I needed to improve on to become a more effective teacher. The most difficult lesson I learned was after my first year of teaching. I struggled with classroom management and my students displayed aggressive and negative behaviors that I found hard to deal with and disrupted the learning environment. In my second year of teaching, I worked hard to establish rules and routines that fostered a safe learning environment. At the beginning of my second year, I asked the students to help develop the rules that would govern our classroom. After agreeing upon those rules, I had the student, their parents, and myself sign this contract. I found the contract extremely successful because it fostered mutual respect and made the students active participants in the learning process and classroom culture.

II. Future Leadership Decisions

Now that I have a clearer picture of where I have been, I can decide where I am going. My personal philosophy is that our country needs citizens who understand that our well-being is tied to the well-being of our neighbors, community, and country. It is this belief that has led me to apply to San Francisco State University's Master of Public Administration program. The goal of this program is to "prepare people for responsible positions in the public sector." I seek a degree in Public Administration to explore two career path options. My first wish is to obtain an administrative/leadership position in a governmental agency that promotes social welfare and helps the community. My second wish is to obtain an administrative/leadership position in higher

education because of my commitment to education. At this point I am not certain which career path I will choose, but I understand the importance of continuing my leadership process in order to achieve these goals. I will need to set goals and create benchmarks to measure these goals, have mentors and allies, develop resources, and strengthen my skills.

Goals Benchmarks

Van Wart argues, “explicit goals are critical for leaders because they set conscious standards and seek accomplishments that would be unlikely to occur without conscious effort” (Van Wart 79). In order to achieve my future leadership goals, I will need to set specific goals that are measurable and have timelines. Consequently, I have developed one personal goal and one follower-development goal that I will enable me to achieve my leadership plan.

Personal Goal: By June 2007, I will have won the Presidential Management Fellowship as measured by completion of SFSU's Public Administration program, nomination by SFSU based upon my excellent academic record and leadership ability, and completion of the PMF application.

Reason for Goal: Presidential Management Fellowship is a program that gives individuals an opportunity to work in a governmental agency, attend seminars, discussion groups, and receive career counseling. The PMF program is intended for graduate students who must be nominated by their school if they demonstrate the following: 1) breadth and quality of accomplishment, 2) capacity for leadership, and 3) a commitment to excellence in the leadership and management of public policies and programs.

Benchmark to measure goal: Finishing all the requirements for the PA program in order to graduate by June 2007. Obtaining a nomination from SFSU based upon my excellent academic record and leadership ability. Completion of the PMF application.

Constraints to achieving the goal: I need to graduate from the PA program by June 2007 in order to apply for the PMF. This will be difficult because I will be working full-time and may not be able to take a full-time class schedule and complete the program in two years.

Follower –Development Goal: By 2010, in my future organization I will foster a culture of respect, support, and inspiration that will motivate my followers to perform to their highest abilities.

Reason for Goal: Leadership is a process. It's not always about the individual, but "a process of influencing others to take action toward a common goal" (Paarlberg, 2005). I want to make sure that in my personal leadership development I am not only thinking about things that will make me better, but also about how my decisions influence others. As a teacher, I inspired my students to be better. I want to be a leader in the public sector who inspires others to do better.

Benchmark to measure goal: Something that I never considered was allowing the people who work for me to assess my leadership. To meet my goal of fostering a culture of respect, support, and inspiration I will have my employees assess my leadership on a continuous basis.

Constraints to achieving the goal: I can't be afraid of what people may say in their assessments. Moreover, I have to create an environment in which employees feel safe to answer the assessment truthfully without fear of retribution.

Mentors and Allies

Finding mentors who can give me advice on governmental agencies and institutions of higher education is crucial because I am transitioning into a field in which I have no experience. Moreover, "mentors also act as models of success or ideal performance, or behavior" (Van Wart 202). Since entering SFSU's Public Administration program this fall, I have already met two mentors who I respect and admire. First, I interviewed Isaac Williams, a Civil Rights Equal Opportunity Specialist at the Social Security Administration, for my PA 700 class. Mr. Williams' job is to resolve discrimination disputes and try to avoid having them referred to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). After listening to his experience as a conflict mediator, I was immediately struck by the skills he employs in his job. Mr. Williams has to be a good listener, communicator, and sensitive to both sides of the dispute. More importantly, Mr. Williams is helping the Social Security Administration value the diversity of its staff and their rights. As a person of color, I feel our government should value diversity. A job like Mr. Williams appeals to me. Mr. Williams offered to help me secure a career in Social Security if I was interested after I graduate from the Public Administration program.

Secondly, after listening to a panel in my PA 725 class, I met Denise Fox, a human resource manager at SFSU. Ms. Fox offered me great insight into the career paths available at SFSU. Ms. Fox encouraged me to apply for positions at SFSU and explained that, even though she could not guarantee me a job, she could make sure that I got an interview. Ms. Fox also gave me suggestions on things that I should say during the interview and how I should present myself during the interview. Ms. Fox was very positive and encouraging of my career goals. Lastly, I will also need to develop allies and mentors in the Public Administration program at SFSU who can give me career advice as well as, hopefully, support my nomination for the Presidential Management Fellowship.

Resources and Skills Needed

I have already started doing some preliminary research on potential jobs that I would like to have after I graduate from the Public Administration program. In order to achieve my career goals, I will have to develop resources and strengthen some of my skills. For example, I would be very interested in working at SFSU as the Assistant Director for Community Relations. The Assistant Director for Community Relations "builds relationships with constituent groups, assists community leaders in gaining access to SFSU's resources, coordinates the University's response to a wide range of political and social issues, and advises administrators and faculty on strategies to facilitate constructive dialogue with public-sector leaders" (SFSU job announcement, 7/11/05). I already possess some of the skills needed to get this job, which include the ability to work independently, excellent interpersonal/communication skills, and I have a Master's degree, which is required for the job. Skills that I would need to strengthen are my "knowledge of legislative process and research methods and expertise in strategic planning and designing new organizational methods" (SFSU job announcement, 7/11/05). I would also need to develop resources in San Francisco neighborhood and community organizations.

Another career path that I am interested in is working for a government agency that I feel promotes a social agenda, like Social Security, Department of Labor, or the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. After meeting with Mr. Williams, I know that I am interested in the Equal Opportunity Specialist position. After doing some online research I discovered that I will need to develop the requisite skills required for this job, which include knowledge of equal opportunity regulations, personnel policies, and an understanding of how the complaint process for violations works in government agencies.

III. Conclusion

By exploring my past and present decision making using an analytical leadership model, I have learned much about my leadership process. First, my primary focus as a teacher in leadership has demonstrated more task and people oriented behaviors. Secondly, I want to develop my people oriented behaviors by thinking more about my followers. I want my style to be strongly supportive, participative, and inspirational. More importantly, I have laid the foundation for what kind of leader I want to be in the future. I know that I will either follow a career path in government or higher education. In order to achieve these goals, I have set explicit personal and follower goals. I have also made a commitment to developing mentors and allies as well as strengthening my resources and skills in order to achieve my future leadership goals.