

## **TED Talks and Leadership Education: Ideas Worth Sharing**

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### **Abstract**

TED Talks are short videos of experts talking about a variety of topics. This paper outlines six TED Talks that connect with the leadership literature and topics commonly taught with an explanation of how they enhance teaching about a corresponding leadership topic. The researcher shares how introducing TED talks related to leadership can stimulate critical thinking about leadership while keeping the class interesting.

### **Introduction**

As a leadership educator, I have three primary objectives: teach leadership content well (theories, concepts, practices), challenge my students in their critical thinking, and keep it interesting. At this point in my career, I have found that the latter two objectives can be more difficult than the content piece.

While I do not remember how I discovered TED Talks, I began watching them a couple of years ago for my own personal development and interest. TED Talks are short videos, typically less than 20 minutes, of experts talking about a variety of topics, anywhere from activism and adventure to writing and youth. I enjoy learning about new things and have found these videos to be stimulating, enlightening, and engaging. (They are also a good way to pass the time while on the elliptical machine.)

“TED is a nonprofit devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks. TED began in 1984 as a conference where Technology, Entertainment and Design converged, and today covers almost all topics — from science to business to global issues — in more than 100 languages. In the fall of 2012, TED Talks celebrated its one billionth video view. As TED Talks continue to be watched around the world, with an average of 17 new page views a second. TEDx's science guidelines clearly state that science and health information shared from the stage must be supported by peer-reviewed research” (TED, n.d.)

While I have used video in the classroom (mostly YouTube) for years, I decided to replace many of my YouTube videos with TED Talks. I have found that while YouTube is a rich source of information to explain and enhance leadership concepts, TED Talks offer something more. The reason for this is because many TED Talks offer much of the latest research that is counterintuitive to what we “know” or has speakers who are offering a paradigm shift in the various ways we understand the world. Unlike YouTube, TED Talks are something that many of my students are talking about as a media they have newly discovered, which in their mind makes

them seem more current or hip. For these reasons, TED Talks meet my objective (or challenge) to stimulate critical thinking about leadership topics and keep it interesting.

Using video in various formats, including YouTube, allows us to illustrate a concept or principle while making class content more relatable to students. Berk (2009) cites more than a dozen studies that support using video or film to support student learning. By the same token, multimedia allows leadership educators to teach leadership theory in new and inventive ways that captures students' attention, provides a catalyst for thoughtful discussion (Graham, Sincoff, Baker, & Ackerman, 2003), and generates dialogue to drive home difficult or complex points (Williams, 2006).

I currently use six TED Talks corresponding with the following leadership topics: leadership skills, path-goal theory, followership, servant leadership, authentic leadership, and the psychodynamic approach to leadership. I use Peter Northouse's (2013) text *Leadership Theories and Practices* as my primary reading and source for course structure.

Stress management is a necessary skill for effective leadership. According to the a report by the Center for Creative Leadership, "80% percent of leaders report that work is a primary source of stress in their lives and that having a leadership role increases the level of stress" (Campbell, Baltes, Martin, & Meddings, 2007, p. 3). While not addressed in the Northouse text, I highlight this skill because students often talk about their levels of stress, inquire about how to manage their stress, and want to know more about what the best practices for stress management as a necessary skill in effective leadership.

The next lesson features path-goal theory. "Path-goal theory is about how leaders motivate subordinates to accomplish designated goals" (Northouse, 2013, p 137). For this reason, I highlight motivation in this TED Talk.

While the Northouse text does not cover followership, (Raffo, 2013) makes a case why we should teach followership as leadership educators. The term "followers" has been attributed with negative qualities, yet followers and the positive and necessary role they play in organizations is crucial. Raffo (2013) maintains that our students will continue to ascribe many of these characteristics to followers unless we teach them otherwise.

We then move on to servant leadership in our TED Talks. According to Northouse (2013), servant leadership is "the only leadership approach that frames the leadership process around the principle of caring for others" (p. 234). It is not heroic, but rather humble in its approach to leadership. This TED Talk highlights the "everyday" aspect of leadership.

Authentic leadership is one of the newer leadership theories (Northouse, 2013) and stems from the positive psychology movement (Avolio, & Gardner, 2005). It is about authenticity and the genuineness of leaders. This TED Talk focuses on happiness, another offspring of positive psychology.

Finally, the psychodynamic approach stresses the importance of self-awareness (Northouse, 2013). This TED Talk reveals the latest technology that can enhance our level of self-awareness.

## Description of the Practice

I teach an upper-division course, Leadership Theories and Practices. While I use Peter Northouse's (2013) *Leadership Theories & Practices* as the course text, the TED Talks discussed as follows can be used in a variety of leadership courses with any readings that cover these topics. In this section, I will include the leadership topic and describe the corresponding TED Talk.

**Skills Approach: Stress Management.** Kelly McGonigal, a Stanford health psychologist, offers a TED Talk, "How to Make Stress Your Friend." She explains that for years she has been teaching people that stress makes you sick. However, research now shows us that it is actually our views on stress that are harmful. If we see stress as negative, it has an adverse affect on our wellbeing. According to McGonigal, "if we change how we think about stress by viewing stress as positive, it can make us healthier. When you change your mind about stress, you can change your body's response to stress" (TED, 2013).

McGonigal further explains that we recover more quickly from stress when we seek support. She says "our stress response has a built-in mechanism for stress resilience, and that mechanism is human connection." McGonigal provides a paradigm shift in the way we view stress. She no longer demonizes stress but teaches stress resilience by emphasizing that stress can be a positive in our lives and that having a positive attitude about stress and seeking social support is key (TED, 2013). McGonigal's TED Talk can be found at [http://www.ted.com/talks/kelly\\_mcgonigal\\_how\\_to\\_make\\_stress\\_your\\_friend](http://www.ted.com/talks/kelly_mcgonigal_how_to_make_stress_your_friend).

**Path-Goal Theory: Motivation.** In his TED Talk entitled "The Puzzle of Motivation," Daniel Pink, bestselling author of *Drive*, explains the science of motivation, particularly the dynamics of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. He explains that businesses are primarily built around the assumption that we are primarily motivated by extrinsic motivators. Pink presents the long history of research that shows that extrinsic motivators are not effective which is counterintuitive for many of us because we have worked in systems that operate out of this 20<sup>th</sup> century notions of motivation. He says that "for 21st century tasks, that mechanistic, reward-and-punishment approach doesn't work, often doesn't work, and often does harm." Pink makes the case that "there is a mismatch between what science knows and what business does" (TED, 2009).

Pink argues for a new approach to motivation – one that emphasizes intrinsic rewards. He claims that "autonomy, mastery, and purpose are the building blocks of a new way of doing things." Pink challenges us to rid ourselves of the 20<sup>th</sup> century view of motivation because we can change the world by aligning business practices with what science tells us about motivation (TED, 2009). Pink's TED Talk can be found at [http://www.ted.com/talks/dan\\_pink\\_on\\_motivation](http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_pink_on_motivation).

**Followership: Leadership is Over Glorified.** Entrepreneur Derek Sivers offers a humorous view on followership in his short TED Talk “How to Start a Movement.” He highlights that leaders should embrace followers as equals, new followers emulate followers, and that followers make a movement. Most importantly, he emphasizes that leadership is over glorified. Sivers explains that “If you really care about starting a movement, have the courage to follow and show others how to follow.” Meanwhile, a dose of whimsy makes this TED Talk fun as a shirtless dancing guy along with his dancing followers cleverly illustrate Sivers’ points (TED, 2010a). Sivers’ TED Talk can be found at [http://www.ted.com/talks/derek\\_sivers\\_how\\_to\\_start\\_a\\_movement](http://www.ted.com/talks/derek_sivers_how_to_start_a_movement).

**Servant Leadership: Everyday Leadership.** Drew Dudley, former Leadership Development coordinator at the University of Toronto, Scarborough and founder of Nuance Leadership Development Services, shares an “ah ha” leadership moment as a student leader in his TED Talk, “Everyday Leadership.” He claims that we have “made leadership into something bigger than us. We have made into something beyond us. We’ve made it about changing the world.” By sharing a heartwarming story as a student leader, Dudley explains that we should begin taking credit for the small things that we do that impact others’ lives. He challenges us to think of catalyst moments where we, in seemingly insignificant everyday moments, can be powerful. Dudley also asks us to think of those people in our lives who made a huge impact, although they may not know it (TED, 2010b)

In this TED Talk, we are challenged to redefine leadership. Dudley says that if you change “one person’s understanding of what they’re capable of, one person’s understanding of how much people care about them, one person’s understanding of how powerful an agent for change they can be in this world” then you will change the way we understand leadership (TED, 2010b). Dudley’s TED Talk can be found at [http://www.ted.com/talks/drew\\_dudley\\_everyday\\_leadership](http://www.ted.com/talks/drew_dudley_everyday_leadership).

**Authentic Leadership: A Positive Approach.** “Shawn Achor is the winner of over a dozen distinguished teaching awards at Harvard University, where he delivered lectures on positive psychology in the most popular class at Harvard.” In his TED Talk, “The Happy Secret to Better Work,” Achor shares the science of happiness and how it can revolutionize the workplace (TED, 2011b).

Achor explains that our happiness is not about our external circumstances, but about our internal world or how we perceive it. In other words, our reality is shaped by our perceptions. He says it is “the lens through which your brain views the world that shapes your reality. And if we can change the lens, not only can we change your happiness, we can change every single educational and business outcome at the same time” (TED, 2011b).

Achor argues that if we change the way we perceive happiness and success, then we can change the way we affect reality. Rather than thinking that if we are more successful we will be happier, we should understand that our happiness in the present defines our success because our brains perform better in positive states. Achor closes by sharing strategies to make our brain more positive (TED, 2011b). Achor’s TED Talk can be found at [http://www.ted.com/talks/shawn\\_achor\\_the\\_happy\\_secret\\_to\\_better\\_work](http://www.ted.com/talks/shawn_achor_the_happy_secret_to_better_work).

**Psychodynamic Approach: Self-awareness.** In her TED Talk “Know Thyself, With a Brain Scanner,” Ariel Garten shows how looking at our own brain activity gives new meaning to the ancient dictum “know thyself.” She is a psychotherapist, CEO and co-founder of InteraXon, which creates thought controlled computing products and applications, and has also researched at the Krembil Neuroscience Institute studying hippocampal neurogenesis (TED, 2011a).

Today we spend a lot of time thinking about how we can reflect ourselves into the world without enough time spent reflecting about ourselves. Garten shows us a way to humanize technology in our quest for self-awareness. This technology allows us to see our brain waves to know how relaxed or focused we are in a tangible way. She explains how this new technology “opens up vast possibilities for applications that help improve our lives and ourselves. We are trying to create technology that uses the insights to make our work more efficient, our breaks more relaxing and our connections deeper and more fulfilling than ever” (Garten, 2011a).

Garten describes how humanized technology allows us to be “intra-active” and by knowing what is going on inside our brains, we can in turn use this information for increased self-awareness and self-improvement. It can make us more effective in work and play and connect with ourselves in a way that has never been possible until now (TED, 2011a). When we know ourselves better, we can lead more effectively. Garten’s TED Talk can be found at [http://www.ted.com/talks/ariel\\_garten\\_know\\_thyself\\_with\\_a\\_brain\\_scanner](http://www.ted.com/talks/ariel_garten_know_thyself_with_a_brain_scanner).

In summary, I have described six TED talks (see Table 1) we can use as leadership educators to provide additional insights into new ways of thinking about various leadership topics. They were selected not only because their content aligns with course topics, but more importantly because they provide new ways to think about the multi-faceted nuances of leadership.

Table 1.  
*TED Talks Summary*

Leadership Topic	TED Talk Speaker & Title	TED Talk Description/ Leadership Lesson
Leadership Skills: Stress Management	Kelly McGonigal “How to Make Stress Your Friend”	Stress can be positive in our lives and having a positive attitude about seeking support is key for leaders to handle stress effectively.
Path-Goal Theory: Motivation	Daniel Pink “The Puzzle of Motivation”	Leaders must rid themselves of the 20 <sup>th</sup> century view of motivation because intrinsic motivators are what really work.
Followership: Leadership is Over Glorified	Derek Sivers “How to Start a Movement”	Leaders should embrace followers as equals, new followers emulate followers, and followers make a movement.
Servant Leadership: Everyday Leadership	Drew Dudley “Everyday Leadership”	In seemingly everyday moments, we can be powerful leaders.
Authentic Leadership: A Positive Approach	Shawn Achor “The Happy Secret to Better Work”	By understanding the science of happiness, leaders can revolutionize the workplace.
Psychodynamic Approach: Self-awareness	Ariel Garten “Know Thyself, with a Brain Scanner”	Humanizing technology can revolutionize our quest for self-awareness as leaders.

## Conclusion

My students report that they thoroughly enjoy the TED Talks as a part of class activities. The talks are informative, interesting, and often humorous. Many times, I have listened to my students talk about the TED Talks as they walk out of class and there have been times that they sit around after class discussing the talk.

As outlined in the previous section, the connections between the leadership topics and the TED Talks may appear to be fairly obvious as presented. However, this has not always been the case with my students. With TED Talks, they can get so enthralled with the science, a new way of thinking, or the funny stories that they may “forget” how it relates with the day’s leadership topic. Therefore, I have found that I have to be intentional in bringing the TED Talk debriefing

back to the theoretical construct. The connection is there so this is not difficult, however my experience has shown me to always anticipate this to happen and to be necessary.

The best part about these TED Talks are that the content enables a powerful paradigm-shift in the way students think about leadership largely because the information is often counter-intuitive. For example, as a leadership skill, stress management is viewed in a different light because it is presented as positive. High impact motivation focuses on intrinsic rewards, yet students often first think of extrinsic rewards (e.g. money, grades) as their primary motivator. Leadership is presented as over-glorified because of the important role followers play, yet students' mindset is often that leaders are the most important role in leadership. Within the framework of servant leadership, students can see that seemingly insignificant moments can have big impacts. Like motivation, happiness is often associated with our external world, yet it is our perceptions of happiness that can revolutionize the workplace. And finally, technology and brain scans are taking us to another level in self-awareness.

I have also found that many students already watch TED Talks – for fun! They find them interesting and a way to learn about new things in a short format that is easy to access. What makes this terrific is that when their classmates learn this, they want to know more. They are invested in the class TED Talks, but then also inquire about what their classmates are viewing, and then become TED Talk viewers on their own.

In conclusion, TED Talks are a media that allows leadership educators to teach leadership theory in new and inventive way. We can use video as a teaching tool to capture students' attention, provide a catalyst for thoughtful discussion (Graham, Sincoff, Baker, & Ackerman, 2003), and generate dialogue to drive home difficult or complex points (Williams, 2006). TED Talks do all of these things and more. I recommend that leadership educators explore how TED Talks can enhance their teaching. While I have shared six talks, there are no doubt countless more to explore and use in our leadership classrooms. And who knows, maybe our students will even check out some TED Talks that are not related to leadership just for the sake of learning something new.

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