

## DEVELOPMENT OF A PERSONAL LEADERSHIP PHILOSOPHY: An Experiential and Reflective Opportunity in the Graduate Classroom

### Abstract

This application brief describes the implementation of a leadership education experiential and reflective written and presentation exercise to assist graduate and executive-level students to develop, articulate, and present their leadership philosophy to a small group of peers in effort to advance their leadership identity and prepare for an eventual presentation to the workforce. This classroom activity fulfills multiple objectives to: a) to understand the importance of a personal leadership philosophy; b) develop a personal leadership philosophy and advance a leadership identity; and c) prepare and present a personal leadership philosophy to a group of peers.

### Introduction

The study of leadership became a scholarly activity in the early 20th century, and since then multiple practices and approaches have taken hold in the workforce (Northouse, 2016). Today, bookstores are filled with shelves of manuscripts and publications devoted to the art and science of leadership. In the same way, leadership degrees, certificates, and development programs continue to gain traction across the United States. Leadership is a hot commodity, and everyone seems to be asking themselves, 'How can I be a more effective leader?' Even more so, many struggle with how to define and articulate what type of leader they are and their overall leadership identity (Figliuolo, 2011).

The National Intelligence University, a federal, accredited university in the Washington D.C. metro-area, has successfully utilized an experiential exercise since 2013 in their leadership education curriculum that assists its graduate and executive-level students

to develop and openly share a proposed personal leadership philosophy. The authors of this article have utilized this exercise approximately 25 times, and have had great success and real-world feedback from students on its implementation inside the classroom and outside in the workforce. Ultimately, the production and presentation of a leadership philosophy helps students to reflect on their own leadership efficacy and how they can improve as current and future leaders.

### Literature Review

While leadership philosophies are utilized extensively in the business arena, aside from blogs and leadership development websites, there remains limited leadership education scholarship available on how to create, adapt, or utilize a leadership philosophy in the workplace. Yet, as leaders rise through the ranks, a personal leadership philosophy can help navigate the rough waters and assist leaders

to be more proactive versus reactive in the office, as well as help to establish an identity as a leader (Derue & Ashford, 2010). A core philosophy can also ultimately help leaders to establish relationships across an organization (Walker, 2015).

In 2011, Mike Figliuolo published a book *One Piece of Paper* that walks the reader through four aspects of a leadership philosophy: Leading yourself; leading the thinking; leading your people; and leading a balanced life (Figliuolo, 2011). In this sense, Figliuolo touches on the popular leadership education practice of authentic leadership. Authentic leadership emerged in 2008, and is composed of four main components: self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wensing, & Peterson, 2008). With regard to formulating a leadership philosophy, self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, and relational transparency are critical building blocks to establishing one's leadership philosophy.

**Self-Awareness.** A leadership philosophy is written from a personal perspective; as such, self-awareness is imperative for an individual to author a truthful philosophy. Self-awareness includes understanding one's own goals, motivations, strengths, weaknesses, emotions, and morals and values (Northouse, 2016). This awareness is often gained through self-reflection and introspection where the individual asks himself or herself, "Who am I?" (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005, p. 347). Kouzes and Posner (2012) referred to this period of reflection and introspection as an inner journey. This journey enables one to discover what they truly value and believe in, so that in a position of leadership they are able to make tough decisions, act with courage, and choose the best path forward (Kouzes & Posner, 2012).

**Internalized Moral Perspective.** Often associated with self-determination theory, internalized moral

perspective is a self-regulatory process used by individuals to guide them to make decisions using their internal values and morals (Northouse, 2016; Walumbwa et al., 2008). An individual who has a strong internalized moral perspective is more likely to make decisions inline with his or her internalized perspectives, and is less likely to go against their values or morals to stay in step with a group or organizational values if they are opposed. If these values and morals are expressed succinctly in a leadership philosophy and the individual has a strong internalized moral perspective, their subordinates should be able to predict their leadership behavior and decision making (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

**Relational Transparency.** Relational transparency is defined as presenting yourself openly and truthfully to others. As explained by Northouse (2016), relational transparency is self-regulated as individuals are capable of masking their true selves in front of others. Kernis (2003) found that relational transparency is a critical component to authenticity as it requires one to be real, both good and bad, in front of others that they are in close relationships with. While leaders will seldom be open books with their subordinates, they do need to be truthful and genuine, or they risk losing a subordinate's trust. Subsequently, the creation and sharing of a leadership philosophy is equivalent to opening a chapter up for others to read and reflect upon.

This is similar, if not sometimes equal, to the well-established practice of constructing stories to establish a leadership identity (Hersted & Frimann, 2016).

**Leadership Education Pedagogy.** Experiential learning in the classroom has been around for quite some time, and according to McCall (2004) learning leadership through experience is often most effective. Essentially this leadership education

exercise ensures that students engage, “in the learning process through discussion, group work, and hands-on participation” (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010, p. 2) that mimics real-world application. Subsequently, this classroom exercise provides a leadership development and reflection opportunity that is critical to maximizing leadership learning (Guthrie & Jones, 2012). Moreover, this provides an intentional experience, followed by a reflection opportunity to enhance and further develop students’ leadership identity and self, that according to Guthrie and Jones (2012) can be difficult to find, but is paramount in leadership education.

## The Leadership Philosophy Assignment

The Leadership Philosophy assignment consists of two parts: a written document and a presentation. This assignment has been successfully incorporated in two different types of graduate leadership and management courses at the National Intelligence University – one to full-time students who meet weekly for ten weeks, and the other to part-time students who meet eight-hours a day for one full week. In both environments, students are assigned readings to help them understand the purpose of a leadership philosophy and self-reflect on who they are as a leader. These readings include: Kouzes and Posner’s (2012) “Leadership Begins with an Inner Journey”, Garner’s (2012) article “Developing an Effective Command Philosophy”, and Chapter One from Figliuolo’s (2011) book *One Piece of Paper*.

To prepare students to formulate their personal leadership philosophy, one classroom instructional session scheduled for approximately 60-75 minutes is devoted to “Developing a Leadership Philosophy” and includes discussion in key areas: the concept of a personal leadership philosophy; ways to codify it; when and how to communicate a leadership philosophy; and lessons learned (or examples).

Each student is then provided time outside of class to write or update their personal leadership philosophy in preparation to present it to a small group. Upon receiving personalized feedback from others in their small group, students are given additional time outside of class to incorporate any changes to their written document prior to turn in.

**Instruction.** To encourage student reflection, we begin the classroom session with a modified scenario from Kouzes and Posner’s (2012) “Leadership Begins with an Inner Journey”: Imagine returning to your office and discovering that you have a new leader; What do you want to know about that person? An instructor can anticipate a wide variety of responses: the leader’s values; what the leader cares about; expectations; leadership style or approach to leadership; what frustrates the leader (i.e., hot buttons); why the individual wants the job; background experience; and changes the leader plans to make to the organization. This classroom discussion can provide insight into themes that might resurface later in the session when discussing what a leadership philosophy is and is not.

Following the scenario discussion, it is helpful to gauge the group’s experience by asking how many students have previously written or shared their leadership philosophy. Since each student has a different degree of leadership experience, and some have never formally led a group, an instructor can increase efficacy by reminding students that developing a leadership philosophy is important even if not in a positional leadership role. As Maxwell (2005) notes “leadership is more disposition than position. With the right attitude and the right skills, you can influence others from wherever you are in an organization” (p. 60). Additionally, the process of developing a leadership philosophy can inspire students to reflect on who they are and who they want to be as a leader.

What is a Leadership Philosophy? Once the scenario discussion is completed, one can pose the question “what is a leadership philosophy?” to invite discussion among students. First defining “leadership”, and then “philosophy”, helps students reflect on the meaning of the concept. While there are many definitions of leadership, in our program we often use Northouse’s (2016) definition of leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 6). Philosophy can be defined as “a set of ideas about how to do something or how to live” (Merriam-Webster online, 2018); however, students might identify with other definitions. When combined, Garner (2012) and others concur with George Ambler’s definition of leadership philosophy: “A set of beliefs, values, and principles that strongly influences how we interpret reality and guide our understanding of influencing humans” (p. 77). Ambler (2012) contends that a person’s philosophy of leadership influences their behavior and reactions to others and surrounding circumstances.

In the classroom we have also found it helpful to contrast this discussion with what a leadership philosophy is not. Often times, when a leader shares a leadership philosophy, the presentation may transition to their vision for the organization. While vision is important for a leader to share, a personal leadership philosophy is different from an organization’s vision, goals, or objectives. It is also not a summary of past positions and accomplishments. That said, an individual might include a story of how an experience influenced them as a leader, or connect their core values to an organization’s values and their leadership approach to achieve an organizational vision.

#### Ways to Codify Your Philosophy of Leadership.

Writing a leadership philosophy is not an easy task for many students. When examining their values, beliefs, and expectations, students may discover that they have so many that it is difficult to narrow

down what should be included. Additionally, while a person’s core values generally do not change, students who have previously written a leadership philosophy may find that what they choose to emphasize does change. These modifications may be the result of promotion within an office, entering a new organization with a different organizational culture, experiencing a new season of life, or influence from first-hand experiences and lessons learned. As Garner (2012) notes: “Determining one’s personal philosophy is a continuous mental practice, a process of constant self-evaluation and the questioning of personal assumptions, beliefs and values, all of which ultimately will result in how well we manage individuals and situations we encounter” (p. 77).

The instructor can provide students a list of questions to help students reflect and focus their leadership philosophy. Questions can include:

- What significant events have shaped you?
- What are your beliefs about people and outlook on life?
- What core values describe and guide who you are as a leader?
- What traits, characteristics, skills, styles, motivation, goals, etc. do you bring to leadership that makes you effective?
- What is important for your team to be effective?
- What is your preferred communication style?
- How do you like to receive information?
- What are your expectations for yourself and others?
- What is your role in developing others?
- How do you want to be remembered?

The written leadership philosophy document

may also take on different formats (e.g., bullets, paragraph form, etc.) depending on the audience and delivery. As instructors, we try not to define exactly how a student should format their philosophy to allow creativity and personal preference. However, regardless of the format, it is important that students are clear in what they communicate.

When and How to Communicate Your Leadership Philosophy? There is no one right answer related to when and how to share a leadership philosophy. However, an instructor can focus discussion around this question to help students think about how their audience, comfort level with sharing, and environment might influence their personal approach. For example, some individuals may prefer to share one-on-one with team members during their initial performance feedback sessions, while others may prefer to address the entire workforce. Some students may prefer to design a one-page handout version that they can email and post outside their office; others may prefer a paragraph version that they can verbally share.

Instructors can encourage students to think about how they increase the chances of others remembering their leadership philosophy. A scene-setter opening/closing, a personal story, or a quote can help create a memorable leadership philosophy. However, some students may not be comfortable sharing personal information. Word choice also plays a significant role in how others receive and relate to a leadership philosophy, especially when a student intends to share directly with subordinates. Instructors can encourage students to personalize their message by saying “you” and connect personally to their leadership approach rather than saying “leaders should”.

Lessons Learned and Examples. We often ask students who have shared their leadership philosophy in the workforce to offer any lessons

learned; this can be an effective approach for maintaining classroom engagement in the session. Similarly, those who have not shared their leadership philosophy before may have feedback related to what they have heard before in an audience of someone sharing their personal leadership philosophy. Each class may gravitate to certain themes, depending on the group dynamic and experiences; however, the following lessons learned may be helpful for students to consider throughout the process of developing their leadership philosophy:

- the use of buzzwords may come across as insincere if not careful;
- acronyms may not be understood by everyone;
- there are different perspectives on including personal religious beliefs and/or what level of detail;
- the concept of work-life balance has different meanings and may need a caveat for when the job requires something different;
- conveying preferences for situational leadership could come across to some as providing “special treatment”;
- the organizational culture and climate of the audience may impact the tone of what is shared;
- it is important to consider how much personalization is right and when to be implicit or explicit;
- using words such as “I promise to” may need to be caveated since some things are out of a leader’s control; and
- word choice and order matters (e.g., what message do you want to leave the audience with).

Some faculty members also choose to share their

own personal leadership philosophy with the class and may invite those who have already shared one before to offer an example to the group. Personal leadership philosophy examples can also be found on the Internet; for example, the Academy Leadership website (<https://academyleadership.com/LeadershipPhilosophy/>) is a popular website containing examples of leadership philosophy. However, instructors may need to caution students from determining what is "right" from examples, since everyone's leadership philosophy is different.

**Written Document - Guidance and Rubric.** Our course syllabus directs students to type out their personal leadership philosophy (one page preferred; no more than two pages). The format of the written document is the student's choice (e.g., single space, prose style, bullets, etc.). Students are authorized to make changes to their leadership philosophy document based on others' feedback and turn in a final version a few days later or by the following class session. The Leadership Philosophy Paper is typically worth 15pts/15% of their overall course grade and is graded in accordance with the following guidelines:

**Substance (10pts):**

- Clearly articulate who you are as a leader and/or your ideas on leadership.
- Convey specifically what you value and believe in, what you expect of others and what they can expect of you, and how this impacts your actions, decisions, or behavior as a leader.
- Style/Format (5pts):
- Communicate ideas effectively; consider the flow and organization of material; ensure proper sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc.
- The format of the document is your

choice (e.g., prose style, bullets, spacing, etc.); think about what format would be the most useful for presenting your leadership philosophy.

- No research is required for this assignment; however, if you use any quotes ensure you provide the properly cited reference.

**Presentation and Facilitation.** Once written, students are assigned to small groups of four to six students to share their leadership philosophy. Since many students have not developed or shared their leadership philosophy before, small groups offer a less intimidating environment yet allows students to learn from others. Once in the groups, students are asked to first identify the scenario that they envision presenting their leadership philosophy (e.g., with the individuals they currently lead, following a promotion to a new office/organization, etc.). This is important since the intended audience can sometimes impact content and delivery. The first time this exercise was implemented, students were asked to present their leadership philosophy as if they were addressing a new office. This scenario was adjusted to be more flexible and have maximum utility for students upon completion. For example, individuals who were promoted within their office might have a different approach than individuals transitioning into another organization. Additionally, the content and style of delivery might be different if sharing one-on-one, with a small team, or addressing a large organization. Following the scenario explanation, each student has five minutes to present their leadership philosophy. Following each presentation, small group members provide feedback and ask questions (approximately 10 minutes). If time permits, following the completion of the exercise, a large-group discussion helps students reflect on learning points and common feedback themes from the small-group exercise.

There is flexibility in the amount of time required to implement the exercise, which is dependent on the size of each group, time allotted for implementation of the exercise, and availability of faculty facilitators to assist in the implementation of the exercise. In the full-time program at the National Intelligence University, the exercise is usually led by the lead instructor of the course. Students are typically divided into groups of four, and the instructor observes groups simultaneously. This approach takes between 60-90 minutes to complete, depending on how much the instructor encourages discussion. In the week-long class, however, students are divided into three groups of approximately six students in each group. Each group meets in a room with a different faculty facilitator, while the lead instructor floats among the groups. The time allotted to the presentations is 90 minutes in the small groups, and then a short discussion back in the large group to hear their reactions to the exercise. Prior to the presentations, faculty facilitators are provided additional information on their role as a facilitator. Faculty are asked to ensure each student presents their leadership philosophy to the group in the time frame provided, and time is allotted for a brief feedback discussion amongst the group. If the facilitator needs to encourage students in the feedback portion, one or more of the following questions might draw out discussion:

- What is something that you think [the student] did particularly well? Or ask the student what he/she thought went well.
- Were there any parts that could use more clarity or explanation?
- Would you do anything different in the future?
- How comfortable are you with your leadership philosophy?
- What was memorable? [These are just

representative of the type of discussion desired in the feedback portion].

Faculty facilitators are also invited to attend the earlier instruction session on “Developing a Leadership Philosophy” to ensure they understand the classroom culture and dynamics.

## Outcomes & Conclusion

As discussed in the application section, this leadership education assignment involves quite a bit of student self discovery and questioning. As such, during this specific assignment, it is recommended that the instructor(s), once the initial information is presented, move away from being a lecturer and take on a facilitator role in effort to maximize student learning. This practice encourages students to engage with each other and cultivate an environment of shared responsibility, especially during the presentation portion of the leadership philosophy (Doyle, 2011). Additionally, because of this student engagement level, we recommend that instructors present this assignment early in the course to enhance group dynamics and extend the personal learning and discovery that takes place. This also enables instructors to relate back to the leadership philosophy discussions throughout the remainder of the course.

As an instructor, helping students see the “why” behind writing a leadership philosophy is important to motivate them to examine and clarify their views of leadership, their personal leadership identity, how they react to circumstances, and their expectations for self and others. As Garner (2012) states, “[t]he way we see ourselves as leaders guides our actions, our behaviors, and our thoughts. It provides the foundation of how we influence others” (p. 77). Ruggero and Haley (2014) contend that this resulting consistency and predictability can positively impact a leader’s credibility and

trust among followers. Kouzes and Posner (2012) further clarify the purpose of writing a leadership philosophy: "The better you know who you are and what you believe in, the better you are at making sense of the often incomprehensible and conflicting demands you receive daily" (p. 120).

As students learn and reflect on other leadership concepts, instructors can encourage students to continue to refine their leadership philosophy and remind them of the value of doing so. This assignment is directly applicable to students' current and future professional positions as leaders and something they can apply immediately to their job. The leadership philosophy experiential exercise equips students with knowledge and experience to share their leadership philosophy with their teams upon return to their offices or future organizations. This assignment can also help students in their professional development (e.g., job or promotion interviews) by clarifying who they are as a leader. This leadership education graduate-level assignment is an exceptional experiential reflection opportunity that students and faculty can enjoy in the classroom and readily apply in the workplace.

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