

Professional Essay
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Abstract

Beginning with a personal statement about who I am, this article is a check point in my development as an executive leader and a check point for progression as a scholar-practitioner in the field of executive leadership. In the sections ahead, I will stop and reveal specific areas that I formulate my trajectory as I look back and move forward. I will also explore the evolution of experience where the Doctor of Executive Leadership Program (DEL) has influenced my thinking, decision-making, and actions. Furthermore, integrating the DEL program outcomes as a demonstration of competency relating to executive leadership skills. The sequence of content delivery is chronologically arranged within each section for the sake of coherence and understanding. Just as life is emergent, complex, and adaptive, so was the flow to explaining the program outcomes into my personal experiences. A term often used in executive leadership, complexity thinking relies on path dependent observation to make sense of how events happen (Boulton, Allen, Bowman, 2015; Wheatley, 2006). I will use the evolution of personal and professional goals as a framework for critically reflecting on where I have been and for looking at the road ahead. Finally, I will discuss how the progression through the DEL, professional skills, and personal experience became intricately woven to reveal a dissertation focus and areas of future research.

Personal Statement

My name is Jeremy Kyle. I have an honest love and respect for all people. An optimist by nature, I care about the state of our nation, and I care about the people that occupy it. I am here to make an impact where I can for the future of my community and my family. A contractor from Memphis, Tennessee, I'm presently looking for my place to apply my passion in the nonprofit community. The past two decades have been spent honing my business skills in for profit

context, but my passion has developed into a need to help others, as you shall discover within the pages ahead. Growing up in the streets of Memphis, my life hasn't been the smoothest of rides, but it has been a journey of unique experiences and a discovery of genuine gratitude for life and all its beauty. I would not have changed anything along the way because my migration is what brought me here. There were front line leaders all along the way that are responsible for influencing any success I have because without their guidance and support I would certainly be lost in the jungle of chaos and despair. Looking ahead, I am here to carry on the lit torch of leadership that was graciously passed on to me. No matter what I do, my passion is to inspire and motivate people to be the best versions of themselves through authenticity, bravery, and grit.

Why is Executive Leadership Necessary?

Leadership means different things to different people. Some say that leadership is authoritative while others say that leadership is motivational and inspirational. Wherever you fall in your beliefs about leadership, you are closer to correct than you are incorrect. Why? Leadership is demonstrated in all aspects of life; from top management to the skilled laborer; from the board of directors to the person donating a dollar to support their favorite cause; leadership involves action and movement. Traditionally, leadership was contributed to an authoritative hero who manages his or her followers. Today, the meaning of leadership has adapted to fit the times in which we live. For instance, leadership is the nonvocal encouragement that comes from interrelationships, the positive constructs of ethics, use of spirituality, a host of other positive influences, or a combination of any and all. Executive leadership is especially critical because we live in an era of extraordinary opportunities for innovation, creativity, and social contribution, but uncertainty, intense performance pressure, risk, and turbulence also surround us (Badaracco, 2013). It is no longer enough to view the road ahead with blinders

because the peripheral view may contain details can make or break the future of an organization or community. Executive leadership is a means of seeing the “big picture” in a context that has become ever more complicated and challenging, allowing for informed decision-making and the potential for sustainability going forward.

Personal Evolution

1. Mission and Goals (Addressing the Grow Model)

Before beginning the DEL program at the University of Charleston, I began to reflect on who I am as a person and what is meaningful. For me, leadership could not be solely about career advancement because I have a deeply embedded responsibility to give back to my community and contribute in ways that benefit others, so I needed to begin shaping other goals that fit within the scope of what is important allowing me to fuel motivation through authenticity and passion. Duckwoth (2016) explains, “People perform better when they do what interests them, so as a leader it is vital to remain committed to what I believe in and what motivates me.

Also, if I am completely authentic here, I must confess two things: 1) my admission to the DEL was a personal commitment to invest in myself and my love for learning. The decision to follow move forward may sound beautiful on the surface, but it is not without its consequences. With every decision I make, other people are affected, especially family. 2) It has been a learning process personally, and professionally. I have made mistakes along the way and looking back there is certain aspects of my decision making and experience that could have been better.

My entry to the DEL marked the beginning of a new journey that started in my head but eventually reached my heart. For me, the difference in containing concepts solely in my head as opposed to my heart is the difference in understanding the information and applying that

information to lived experience. By learning executive leadership concepts, I have been able to connect personal interest, current research, and a professional trajectory in a compelling way, resulting in confidence and ability to grow toward goals that seemed elusive before the DEL.

Professionally, I would describe myself as proficient in the field of business development, project management, and operations management. I own a business that specialized in renovations and apartment “turns.” Many people understand what a renovation project means, but an apartment “turn” may be a new concept, so I will expand on it a bit. An apartment turn could best be described as every event that takes place when an apartment leaseholder moves out of their residence. The goal of an apartment “turn” is to repair, replace, or restore any aspect of an apartment so that it meets the standards of the client. An apartment turn could be something as significant as a complete renovation or as minor as a restoration project. I am grateful for the time that I have spent in the contracting business, but internally I knew that it was time to look beyond what I have been doing because I was no longer being challenged, it no longer held the same meaning as when I started the business, and I was lacking the social responsibility component that has been pulling at my heart.

My first year, I developed professional and personal aspirations of transitioning into a leadership position that gave me more meaning. Drawing on the leader development framework from Day, Harrison, and Halpin (2012), I began engaging in the practice of reflective contemplation to seek out new and exciting ways to challenge myself while constructing new ways of fueling motivation. Self-awareness is key to my development, and it represents one of the central themes in many models of leadership development and personal growth (Avolio, Hannah, 2008; Stacey, 2012; Uhl-Bien). The concepts of self-awareness link itself intrinsic motivation alluding the clues of what, why and how of who I am. Because I had experience as a

mentee and the experience was so hugely influential in the trajectory of my life, I took an interest in the topic only to find out that it did not fit my interest as much as I thought. More learning and reflection brought on more adaptation. It was a great starting point, but the evolution of my personal growth revealed that the subject of mentoring was not going to fit within the executive leadership framework that I would eventually develop later in the program.

2. Thinking, Beliefs, and Actions

The DEL program affected my mental processes almost immediately. Learning vital components of metacognition theory (Kuhn, Dean, 2004), I became acutely attuned to the practice of becoming aware of and regulate one's intellectual course of action. Another way to describe metacognition is, "Thinking about your thinking." The habit analyzing thought is fundamental because metacognition relates to a leader's emotional intelligence. Furthermore, shaping the way I engage relationships, understanding the emotions of myself and others, and understanding when I am relying on heuristics for decision-making. Also, experience in the DEL has afforded me the ability to reach beyond my thinking processes of a linear thinker to a lateral thinker. Before the DEL, I thought the world operated in black and white, cause and effect, or right and wrong. In other words, I believed there was a "best answer" for every problem. Current research on leadership informs us that linear thinking processes are not adequate for the level of complexity involved in the executive leadership environment (Boulton, Allen, Bowman, 2015; Stacey, 2012; Wheatley, 2006). After all, the world is not predictable and neither are organizational or community challenges.

Another significant change that supports executive leadership concepts is my belief system. Proceeding the DEL program, my belief system became influenced by ideologies far-fetched from scholarly practice. Now I understand my beliefs (and contributions) to be grounded in

critical realism, meaning that I can only offer insights from proven research, my area of expertise, and a personal vantage point. Critical Realist allows for diverse views of reality, but on a different premise. Each person may give us some truth about reality, but none will show the complete picture because the nature of truth is complex (Hiebert, 1999). As in the practice of executive leadership, this is proven to be immensely valuable for me because it is virtually impossible to know every detail that influences outcomes. The sustainability of an organization or community requires active participation from different departments and various levels of involvement.

As a result of growth in thinking and beliefs, my executive leadership actions have evolved as well. Tichy and Bennis (2009) describe judgment as, “The essence of how executive leaders make great decisions.” My decision-making is no longer based on “gut feelings” but rather a framework for executive leadership judgment. Just as my evolution from leader to executive leader has been a process, so is the practice of executive leadership decision-making. Heavy relying on the three critical domains of people, strategy, and crisis, I incorporate this scholarly research and practical application in my current business practice and my movement from the for-profit environment to the nonprofit environment.

The Journey from Leader to Executive Leadership

Rumi, a thirtieth-century poet, accurately explains, “You think because you understand ‘one’ you must also understand ‘two,’ because one and one make two. But you must also understand ‘and’...”

The fundamentals of executive leadership changed me personally, professionally, and intellectually. As the pieces of the executive leadership begin to come together for me so did the

way I viewed events. The world is a complex environment with many different working parts, influences, and relationships. The same is true in organizations, communities, and in my case, the journey from leader to executive leadership. The interconnectedness of contextual influences, opportunities, and challenges result in a degree of unpredictability that creates an obstacle for understanding unless mentally viewed through complexity thinking (Boulton, Allen, Bowman, 2015). I did not know it at the time, but a series of events along with my new-found ability to link scholarly work with the practical application was beginning to emerge, and so complexity thinking was about to be the axiomatic key that unlocked the ability recognize interconnected movement as it happened.

This section is an outline of how the DEL and my interest aligned to influence a program that will change the lives of some my community's most marginalized group of people, convicted drug offenders. The Del began to shape me significantly in the collaborative leadership course. I have always been interested in the problems of drug addiction and the obstacles that surround it because people that I love and my community has been severely affected by drug problems and the consequences of being arrested, but I did not understand how to face such an overwhelming issue. Archer and Cameron (2013) explain, "Executive leadership challenges often affect large-scale environments, which require collaboration across a variety of organizations, institutions, are sectors. Some enigmas are too large for a single entity to address." The application assignment in this course provided me with the idea to take the judicial and social services that we currently have and partner them with businesses in the community to create a diversion program the troubled youth of Memphis, Tennessee. Specifically, first time, non-violent drug offenders will otherwise begin their adult life with a felony conviction that creates barriers to employment, housing, and education. Instead of placing our young people in jail, this program

gives problem drug users highly individualized treatment to address their issues, whether that be social, behavioral, or security based. If they are successful in the program, their charges are modified and provided a shot at living a healthier lifestyle as a responsible member of the community. If they are not successful or if they choose not to participate, the felony charges are applied, and they face the consequences of their decision.

This collaborative initiative demonstrates the “balcony perspective,” which is described as a way to mentally step back from the front lines of leadership issues to gain a holistic understanding of what is going on. Furthermore, giving latitude for competent decision-making. Few tasks strain our abilities more than putting this idea into practice (Heifetz, Linsky, 2008; Wheatley, 2006). The collaborative leadership application initiative begins to integrate new ways of addressing a large-scale social issue, the problems of drug use, incarceration rates, and taxpayer burden by realigning the assets that we currently use for more sensible outcomes. It is evident that the processes of the past are not working because the United States has been fighting drug use with incarceration for the past 100 years with very little success (Gray, 2012; Hari, 2016). By facing these problems through the lens of a social and health issue first and a criminal issue second, we may be able to save some of our youth from a life of recidivism and struggle.

In the meantime, I had the opportunity to serve as an outside advisor and treasurer to a state-wide group of young people reshaping their life of substance dependence through mentorship, culture, and spirituality. They wanted to construct and implement a weekend long convention that provides education, support, and enjoyment without the use of chemicals. My duties were to manage all the funds brought in from fundraising and help them negotiate the contract for the hotel and vending services. Drawing from the leadership development framework of Day, Harrison, and Haplin (2012) I recognized the need for an integrative

approach to leadership development. Although many of the young people helping to make this convention work possess a common challenge in substance use, they are unique with respects to social, cognitive, developmental, and organizational dimensions. Many of the integrative aspects of leadership development relating to self-awareness and reflective practices are used within substance treatment methods, but considering this project requires leadership skills that move beyond personal behavior to organizational behavior. I determined the organizational need as a high priority based on the actions of the group and a lack of knowledge concerning how this organization might operate smoothly. As I went through this year long project, I demonstrated complete transparency and over communication concerning ethics, thinking processes, decisions, contractual agreements with the intention of influencing leadership principles going forward and establishing a process that could be built upon in the future.

My experiences in the DEL intertwined with my experiences as a volunteer and my passions. Therefore, this is the moment that everything came into focus for the road ahead. I made an executive decision to seize the opportunity to restructure my current business practice to help those in need. Executive leadership uses history to see where we have been and where we are going, and so I used the method of adaptability to strategically align my business model to include a social responsibility dimension. I accomplished this by offering a partnership with local non-profits to provide skills training and employment to first-time, non-violent, drug offenders. My thinking back in the collaborative leadership course served as a roadmap for what would later become a reality. Again, using core components from the DEL program, I became able to use a historical sequence of events to highlight emerging opportunities and challenges that invoke change and adaptation (Boulton, Allen, Bowman, 2015; Heifetz, Linsky, 2008; Wheatley, 2006).

Concerned about the practicality of such a program, I developed a concern about the implementation and logistics to carry it out. Through secondary research, I reviewed the major themes and framework presented from recent studies of risk management inside collaborative partnerships. What I found was that issues in collaborative relationships tend to arise in the gray areas of responsibility, building relationships between organizations, and being presently attentive to the mission. Traditionally risk management frameworks practiced acts of avoidance or shifting the risk to one organization that is better qualified to handle it, but this approach is not successful in the context of large-scale social issues. After much consideration about the plans of collaborating with local nonprofit businesses to provide first-time, non-violent, drug offenders an opportunity for employment and skills training, it was determined that risk management is critical in this context. Not just for the businesses or their reputations, but for the implementation of a program that strives to create lasting opportunities. Current risk management research inside collaborative relationships identify that risks multiply at the boundaries between parts of the system (Archer, Cameron, 2013), so I singled in on the relationship-based model (Walker, Lloyd-Walker, 2016) of collaborative partnerships. In the relationship-based model of risk, the ambiguity of responsibility between organizational partnerships is no longer observed at as “someone else’s problem.” Instead, this model of consensus decision-making is tied to a no-blame culture; one that focuses on “adaptive learning,” transparency, mutual dependency, and accountability. If the collaborative initiative were to undertake the challenging issue of reintegrating people back into society post-conviction, then it would require an approach to risk management that makes the ambiguity a high priority.

There comes a time when leadership must emerge, and sometimes that requires progress over peace. Drug use and abuse is such a controversial topic in the United States that it drives the

herding instinct. Why? The subject of substance abuse and mass incarceration is a problem that is charged with emotion. On one hand, we can see the devastating effects that drug use can do to our society, but on the contrary, it's not too hard to discern that people do not set out to be a problem drug user. The United States has proceeded with a judicial intervention that has revealed very little success from any vantage point and so it is time for re-evaluating the design.

Executive leadership involves critically evaluating the research and mechanisms of the past so that we may conserve the most important ideas and constructively build new programs through creative action. Now that we can understand the consequences of looking at drug use as a criminal issue, we face what Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal (2017) call, "A Failure of Nerve" in leadership. In other words, executive leadership is about making the timely decisions to seize opportunities and challenge the status quo when necessary. A failure in nerve among leadership promotes the regression of society into a counterrevolutionary state when difficulties are not faced. Large-scale issues do not change over night, so as an informed local business owner I can start in my community, offer my services, and step up to help those in need. For the benefit of humanitarian progress and the sustainability of a healthy community, providing employment and skills training to a marginalized group of people provides a harm reduction approach that will help repair some of the social and cultural damage caused by arresting so many of our youth. With the right information, the right people, and the skills of an executive leader, I possess the formula to begin the process, possibly setting in motion a positive change of events that alter not only the lives of the people gaining employment, but their families as well.

Reflections

Coming away from the coursework of the DEL program and all the experiences along the way revealed some key areas that are affected as a result of this journey. First of all, the

knowledge of my strengths and limitations have served me well. In leadership, I know what I know and what I do not know. Leaders who exercise the willingness to listen, reframe their thinking, and give up old paradigms ground themselves in a more realistic position, giving leaders a better vantage point for understanding and growth (Tichy and Bennis, 2009). I practice executive leadership through confidence and humility, so that my actions support and protect the organization in which I commit solidarity. I have come to see that if I can take care of the people that I am responsible for, they, in turn, will take care of the organization and me.

Also, understanding what it means to be a scholar-practitioner in the field of executive leadership is paramount. A missing piece in the successful transformation of personal growth, the combination of using current research in conjunction with the practical applications of executive leadership practice exemplifies using the intellect of experts and applying the findings in a real-world setting. McClintock (2004) explains the framework for a scholar practitioner in three areas which include grounding practice, theory, experimental knowledge, and ethics. This, along with reflective and reflexive exercise highlights a ritual of integrative appraisal and growth.

Finally, the DEL program helped to shape my cognitive development. All throughout the journey of the DEL has been an opportunity for development through the application of the Day, Harrison, Halpin (2012) framework on an integrative approach to leader development, but some areas related specifically to the cognitive improvement stood out as particularly revealing. For instance, In the past, I would occasionally find myself making decisions based on a “gut” feeling as if some cosmic emotion could make sense of my situation and decipher logic to reveal the best decision for me to make. Through academic learning and metacognitive practice, I now understand that a natural response to complex decision-making is to rely on mental processes

that simplify choices to conserve energy. Heuristics are a mental shortcut that people use when attempting to make a decision. On the surface, heuristics may seem to possess a multitude of benefits for the executive decision-maker, but the human process of problem-solving may be biased at times, allowing for flaws in perception and judgment. The limitations associated with the practical application of heuristics evoke a risk that executive leadership should be aware of before important decisions are concluded. Often, the executive decision makers are leading large organizations that encompass a whole institution of people, so the choices made behind closed doors, and in isolation, can severely impact the lives of many. Shah and Oppenheimer (2008) offer an effort reduction framework on heuristics that is both practical as it is useful exposing a method of using heuristics for the benefit of the organization. Since heuristics are driven by personal bias, it seems that it may have a negative impact, but that is inaccurate. When understood and used through a proven framework, heuristics can be especially useful.

Implications

1. Leadership Model

Drawing heavily from the McIntosh (2001) framework for relational leadership, my model places people at the center of executive leadership. When we think about organizations and institutions, we can assume they take on a life of their own but what we often forget is that without people, there is no organization, institution, or community. The breath of life within any environment is fundamentally made of up of all the individuals that dedicate their time and energy to ensure the sustainability of today and into the future. My model of leadership recognizes that each person has value and with a commitment of solidarity from everyone we have the potential to accomplish great things. Investment into the human spirit will allow me to develop intrinsic motivation, confidence, and leadership pipelines through followers that affect

every department or new person that enters into the organization. Also, with the time and investment into the greatest asset any organization can have, my relational leadership model has the potential to create a positive culture. I understand that people respond to their environment, and so it is of critical importance to develop a context of communication, trust, respect, and collaboration.

Expect the unexpected. My leadership model relies on the challenges and situational circumstances that force us awake creativity, adapt, and grow. It is no longer adequate to expect typical results from a plan of action that was relevant in the past. Context and the challenges that reside in them alter as time moves on, so rituals of the past will not serve us well today. Rather, the practice of executive leadership understands that opportunities and threats are merging and influencing each other to create a unique set of circumstances. What emerges is a context that requires creativity and adaptability. The interconnectivity of influential components shape and shift outcomes that demand a strategy of planning, evaluation, implementation, reflection, and realigning.

Ethics are at the core of my leadership model, and it is required for the sustainability of a relational approach. I believe the morality of the social construct known as communitarianism (Etzioni, 1993), but only in the sense that thinking, behavior, and actions should not harm the collective group. My perspective on ethics is based on assertiveness and rationality, meaning that no one individual should give up their fundamental rights but they should also not be inclined to take away the rights of another. Character, integrity, and values promote the position of executive leader while fostering trust and respect. To effectively connect with the people that make up my context, vulnerability is key to making yourself engaging. And finally, empathy allows me to understand the emotions of the people that depend on me. My decisions and actions

should not only be driven by outcomes alone but as an executive leader, I should understand how my decisions and actions affect others.

Dissertation

Like many of the implications resulting from the DEL program, my dissertation focus has evolved a well. At this stage of development, I want to understand the lived experiences of the executive leadership relating to African-Americans who are first-time, non-violent, drug offenders. The purpose of this study is to unearth and discover key areas of interest relating to how drug use and a first-time arrest affect the life's trajectory of the individual. Also, I would like to understand the unintended consequences on family and community. Looking back on the DEL journey, my personal, professional, and intellectual experience have intertwined into a dissertation focus that draws from all three areas. Intense research and talking with experts in related fields helped me create a line of reasoning that is evident in a historical literature review. The means of which the United States has dealt with the problem of drug use has failed because we have viewed the challenge of drug use through the lens of a criminality, but we as a nation may be better served to address drug use as a social and health issue (Gray, 2012; Hari, 2016; Hart, 2013). When people are arrested and convicted, no matter the degree of time served behind bars, a life sentence of disenfranchisement and social stigma is evident and ongoing. Statistically, African-American males face more prison time even though the degree of drug use is mostly equal among all races (Alexander, West, 2012).

Areas of Focus Within the Executive Leadership Field

My first area of focus is executive leadership in the nonprofit field. A consistent goal and theme throughout my journey of the DEL has been and continues to be applying my skills in the

non-profit context as an executive leader. I believe this nation gets its more than its fair share of individualism, capitalism, and competition. I want to spend my time and efforts giving as much as I am receiving. If I can leave a legacy of humanitarian concern, responsibility, and initiative toward making this world a better place for my children and grandchild then I feel that I would have served my purpose. I also believe that large-scale issues like that of mass incarceration and drug use need executive leadership because we have tried facing these problems for decades with little results. This brings me to my second area, which is collaborative leadership. My dissertation focus has informed my thinking enough to understand that complex issues like that of drug use and mass incarceration will require participation across a variety of fields. No single organization can confront matters that are outside the scope of their services, particularly when the challenges range across cultural and social dimensions. By aligning a joint mission through collaboration, the potential to become useful as an executive leader is substantially increased, therefore, advancing practices, policies, and funding for the greater good.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Doctor of Executive Leadership Program has provided me a unique opportunity to apply what I have learned in the classroom to my professional experience. I came to the DEL with a preconceived notion that understood leadership for the modern times, but I had much to learn. Throughout the DEL process, I learned to sense and shape opportunities and manage threats in my professional context while capitalizing on them promptly. The coursework informed me of current research and practices that inspired me to realign my current assets and engage in transformational work that promotes growth and sustainability in the community.

My goal has been to make a difference in my community, and I am confident that with the new knowledge provided through the DEL program, I now can apply an ethical version of relational

leadership that the world needs. Collaboration, complexity thinking, and adaptability foster key areas of executive leadership that are applicable in the professional fields that interest me the most. As I conclude this checkpoint of looking back and going forward, I am satisfied that I exercised great judgment for time well spent in the past that will pave the way for a brighter future.

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