Exploring the Role of Mentorship, Resistance, and Affirmation

A Self-Study of Developing Leaders

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Leadership   Mentorship   5-component Leadership Model

In 2021, our professional paths crossed, reuniting us virtually as we began to share our leadership and mentorship experiences in relation to our current leadership roles. It led us to engage in self-study research to evaluate the reasons behind the lack of formal training when taking on leadership and mentorship roles. Adapting through times of uncertainty and ambiguity, we aim to spotlight how educators in leadership roles can support and be each other's "critical friend." Through a self-study approach, our research highlighted the main challenges we faced and overcame as leaders and mentors during the 2021-2022 academic year. We emphasize the need for a support system to help navigate leadership challenges as being extremely beneficial in becoming effective and ethical leaders.

Context of Study

Learning to be a leader in higher education and K-12 public education is no easy feat (Delaney et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2019; Radd et al., 2021; Wheeler, 2012). In the current educational environment, many in leadership roles feel pressured to make decisions and solve problems from budgetary constraints to retaining the most qualified educators without sufficient time or resources. Our recent experiences in higher education and K-12 education, made us realize that leaders and mentors are often not formally trained to be adaptive to navigate the challenges of the educational environment. We acknowledge the many challenges that leaders face. Discussing these challenges is outside the scope of this paper. Instead, we focus on supporting each other to become better leaders.

Lavina, a recently appointed associate dean, struggled to find her leadership 'voice' needing additional support (mentorship) to balance administrative and professorship responsibilities. Charity, an associate professor and associate dean, debated whether to make a move to a large university with more growth opportunities. As a novice urban educator and second-year doctoral student, Kevin struggled to see himself as a leader and a mentor. We shared the common belief that we could become better leaders through support, self-reflexivity, and studying our own practices. We utilized the self-study approach to examine our leadership practices and evaluated how mentoring helped us support each other as emerging leaders.

In this study, we collectively present the main leadership challenges and vulnerabilities we faced during the 2021-22 academic year. The research question that guided this study was: How can we support and influence each other as

developing leaders and mentors in our current roles? The findings revealed five emergent themes, " Unlearning and Learning," "Self-Awareness," "Power Dynamics," "Affirmation and Resistance," and "Influence of the Perceptions of Others."

Objectives

Taking on new leadership and mentoring roles has been a rewarding and challenging experience. This study explored how we might tap into our leadership capabilities to bring about empowered environments, wherein personal relationships and connections enable us to understand and improve our leadership practice. As leaders, we embraced taking the reins of "learning on the job." Through the challenges, we strived to ensure that our biases and assumptions did not affect how we interacted with our mentors, mentees, and peers- in that we were respectful, fair, and accountable.

We want to stress that the objective of this research was not the capturing of a comprehensive description of leadership, but rather the evaluation of its relational aspects, specifically how one becomes an effective and ethical mentor within situated environments. We asked, 1) How can we support and influence each other as developing leaders and mentors in our current roles? 2) How can we improve our leadership practice 3) How do we make sense of our challenges as emerging leaders?

Theoretical Framework

Leadership Model

Leadership has been defined by scholars in nuanced ways. Burns (1978) argued that transformational leadership is one in which both parties-the leader and the follower challenge each other to "higher levels of motivation and morality" (p. 20). Other researchers assert that leadership is a dynamic (Rost, 1993), a psychological process (Parry, 1997), and a social influence process (Hunt, 1991) wherein leaders and followers interact with each other to achieve a common purpose. McManus, Ward, and Perry (2018) expanded this argument to include the 5-component leadership model. Their conceptual framework recognized that leaders, followers, goals, context, cultural values, and norms make up the leadership process. The authors defined leadership as a "... process by which leaders and followers develop a relationship and work together toward a goal (or goals) within an environmental context shaped by cultural values and norms" (p. 6). They asserted that a re-conceived perspective is necessary to emphasize the contextual, situational, and process nature of leadership, maintaining that leaders provide the energy and vision to guide followers' actions. The necessity to situate leadership research within specific institutional and situational contexts has support in recent literature (Bryman et al, 1996; Biggart and Hamilton, 1987; Alvesson, 1996). Additionally, leadership is bound by circumstance; it cannot exist without exerting some measure of influence. While leaders exert influence in setting an agenda and providing a vision for the future, the successful implementation ultimately depends on the followers to validate the vision and further the goals, provided, it is mutually beneficial to both. These views reflect the intentional nature of influence. Since the influence exerted is purposeful, "Leadership then refers to people who bend the motivations and actions of others to achieving certain goals; it implies taking initiatives and risks" (Cuban, 1988, p. 193).

We utilized McManus et al. (2018) leadership framework as the basis for our study. We begin with the basic premise that all leadership is situational and contextual. Genovese (2016), researcher and author of the "Leadership Toolkit", emphasized:

> For successful leadership, skill is important, but skill is never enough. Even the most skilled individuals face formidable roadblocks. Skill helps determine the extent to which a leader takes advantage of, or is bound by circumstances, but circumstances or the environment set the parameters of what is possible regarding leadership. (p. 22)

We evaluated leadership through situated experiences in our respective academic departments. We argue that mentorship enhances one's leadership skills, supports the development of leadership in another, and provides the space for self-reflection and awareness.

Mentoring

Service is an important skill that helps develop leadership. This is exemplified through behaviors such as mentoring, building teams, and empowering (Kanungo & Mendonca, 1996). Formally and informally, mentoring has been recognized as a valuable tool for leadership development in academia and is key in developing current and future leaders (Crisp & Alvarado-Young, 2018; Dziczkowski, 2013). According to Crow (2012), mentoring is a collaborative professional activity based on reciprocity. It is a "reciprocal, supportive, and creative partnership of equals" (Mott, 2002). That is, both a mentor and mentee engage in the practice of exchanging knowledge and experiences for mutual benefit. Recent literature supports the positive effects experienced by both the mentor and the mentee during mentoring (Ganser, 1997; Gordon & Maxey, 2000; Huling & Resta, 2001). The practice forces mentors to be more reflective about their beliefs, increases their self-esteem, prompts collegial interactions, and builds their leadership capacity (Huling & Resta, 2001). Because of this, mentoring is linked to career advancement (Burke & McKeen, 1997; Higgins, 2001), increased self-confidence, and personal growth (Ehrich et al., 2004).

Furthermore, mentoring has implications for how one views themselves- reflectively and dialogically (Riley & Burke, 1995). Indeed, a core aspect of mentoring is the sharing of subjective experiences experiences with mentees. While mentoring provides benefits and helps against the challenges experienced by mentees, the changing educational landscape makes it relatively problematic for less experienced individuals to find mentors willing to support their professional development long-term. Informal mentoring relationships, however, may be of great value in providing psychosocial support. Using a self-study approach, we evaluated how mentoring made us develop more effective leadership skills.

Methods

Our study draws from LaBoskey's (2004) framework of self-study methodology that characterizes the work as (1) self-initiated and focused, (2) improvement aimed, (3) collaborative/ interactive, (4) reflective data collection, (5) and exemplar-based validation. Our leadership and mentoring skills continually emerged through daily interactions with others in educational settings and dialogical exchanges with one another (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). These experiences served as a basis for evaluating what leadership and mentorship look like in situated contexts.

As stated prior, self-study is a situated inquiry that is both personal and interpersonal. It requires working with a 'critical friend' to collaborate and extend one's understanding of their practice. We were able to do this by being each other's critical friends as: "...trusted colleagues who seek support and validation of their research" (Samaras, 2011, p. 5). According to McNiff and Whitehead (2006), Critical friend is "a term coined by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) to denote a person who will listen to a researcher's account of practice and critique the thinking behind the account" (p. 256). We used 'critical friendship' to understand our leadership and mentorship experiences. As each other's critical friend, we strived to "nurture a community of intellectual and emotional caring" (Pine, 2009, p. 236). We offered feedback, mediated, provoked, and supported new understandings as we evaluated our leadership practices.

In reflecting on our actions through the 5-component leadership model, we served as one another's critical friends (Russell & Schuck, 2004; Samaras, 2011). We delved into our 1) leadership and mentorship experiences, 2) identities, and 3) situated contexts to become better leaders and mentors to bring about positive change (Vaughan & Delong, 2019). As critical friends, three aspects of the framework repeatedly emerged: 1) the improvement aim, 2) the collaborative/interactive nature of this work, and 3) the reflective data collection. At various points, self-reflection provided us with deeper insights into ourselves and an understanding of our personal strengths, vulnerabilities, and limitations and helped clarify and identify sources and means for solving existing and future professional activity problems. This resonates with one of the defining features of self-study research and practice that focus on collaboration with close trusted colleagues (Lighthall, 2004).

As critical friends, we sought to critique and challenge our interpretations of what it means to be an effective leader and mentor. Our data consisted of unstructured written reflections collected between June 2021 and April 2022. It consisted of 1) six reflective journal entries in which we documented our experiences with leadership and mentorship in our current roles and 2) six recorded and transcribed Zoom meetings. We focused on writing primarily as it is inherently

related to reflection. It provided the space to explore questions and thoughts about critical incidents that merged in our work contexts. We analyzed our reflective journals and Zoom transcriptions individually and collectively in search of themes. We brought these reflections to our Zoom meetings to reexamine events through new lenses acquired from sharing different perspectives. We coded our data thematically, revealing five emerging themes: 1) Unlearning and Learning, 2) Self-Awareness, 3) Power Dynamics, 4) Affirmation and Resistance, and 5) Influence of the Perceptions of Others.

Findings

In this study, the main concern that emerged was the situational constraints experienced in collaborative interactions with other leaders. These interactions negatively impacted our abilities and potential for developing leadership skills. It led us to turn inward to one another as critical friends. Together we could unpack and problematize our respective challenges, find support, and talk through approaches and solutions. We began to take on more responsibilities. Ultimately, we became more self-assured and comfortable in our roles.

Five themes emerged from this self-study, all of which suggested that as leaders, we constantly negotiated aspects of our identity during the mentorship process. Our identities were formed and informed through significant interactions with our mentors, other leaders, and each other. These identities were fluid, situated contextually and spatially, as a response to circumstances.

Theme 1: Unlearning and Learning

A major finding of this study was the idea of being open to unlearning mainstream perceptions of leadership. Public perception hinges on leaders understanding their follower's needs and working toward a common goal. However, this is not always the case. Consider Lavina's question:

> I believe that mentorship looks different in relationships. It is different in a teacher-student relationship as opposed to a peer-peer relationship. I see myself being very comfortable in a teacher-student mentorship model, I cannot say the same about peer mentoring or mentoring of junior faculty. It will take some getting used to. I may become a better leader by learning through my experiences and allowing myself the space to negotiate failure (Lavina, Journal 1).

The assertion highlights that those in leadership roles must be reflective and learn through their successes and failures. As evidenced from the above quote, mentoring from Lavina's perspective is relational in nature and changes significantly based on the person being mentored. One aspect of this reflection would be to question the basic framework and assumptions of leadership as Charity did:

> I'm at a place where I must question my boundaries and limits. What is the point at which I'm not willing to compromise my values? There are certain decisions that ethically I cannot stand behind (Charity, Recording 3).

Charity understands that "questioning" is key to evaluating her limitations to compromise, being ethical and self-aware is more valuable than societal notions of leadership.

Theme 2: Self-Awareness

Another important finding drew attention to the mentor-mentee relationship. Mentors provide mentees with various ways of obtaining leadership skills with suggestions and tools for becoming better leaders. Sometimes, however, the relationship between the mentor-mentee may lack adequate direction. Here Kevin stressed, "As a novice teacher and first-year doctoral student, I find myself in constant need of "someone" to remind me to be kind to myself (Kevin, Journal 1). In expecting direction, Kevin is aware of the flaws in the mentor/mentee relationship. He is "kind" to himself, acknowledging that developing and "becoming" a leader takes time and introspection.

Similarly, Lavina maintained that self-awareness is extremely important to develop good leadership skills and the ability to mentor. She clarified:

> *I think it is very important for a leader to mentor and be mentored to be self-aware. While this is a more inwardly focused skill, self-awareness is paramount for leadership. The better I understand myself, the more effective I can become. How can I help others if I cannot find my own voice?" (Lavina, Journal 3).*

The above quotes suggest that the desire to mentor is emergent and fluid, a product of a long-pursued positional strategy. In being self-aware, mentors can experience a whole range of personality traits that highlight their identity and finesse their leadership skills.

Theme 3: Power Dynamics

Another important finding was the power dynamics, the existence of hierarchical structures within which we were situated. Consider Charity's appreciation for humility in leaders; she often dismissed others' compliments of her work and felt it is important to avoid self-promotion. Yet this began to change. She explained:

> *I have learned how important it is to pay attention to politics: abstaining from 'playing the game' can equate with surrendering one's truth and power. It can lead to others dictating a false narrative, purposefully manipulating events, or misrepresenting people. Instead, speaking up, ensuring accuracy, and standing in support of others or oneself are important as a leader and necessary at times (Charity, Recording 1).*

Charity's quote is illuminating and shines a spotlight on politics in academia. While on the one hand, it seems like a necessity to "show" one's capabilities, on the other hand, taking up leadership roles may create a binary to which an ethical leader may be opposed. Faced with uncomfortable or difficult choices, some leaders are hesitant to make binary choices that do not honor the complexity of contexts in which they emerge. As a critical friend, Lavina helped Charity look more deeply at why others' compliments made her uncomfortable. Charity began to see that navigating "politics" includes accepting recognition for her efforts.

At a leadership conference with other colleagues, Lavina questioned the influence of power dynamics, her subconscious positioning evidenced by her choice of seating. When a senior colleague asked what she was doing in the corner, Lavina responded:

> *I like to take the back seat and let others be front and center. She looked at me and said, "start thinking otherwise". That shook me to the core. I was having a true paradigm shift. At that moment I realized that I had something to offer something of value, I cannot name it… but I sensed it. At that moment I felt empowered and strong and capable. It is amazing how three little words made such a difference (Lavina, Journal 2).*

Authority and power dynamics are evident in institutions of higher education as well as K-12 schools. It becomes necessary sometimes to confront hierarchical structures. For instance, Kevin approached his principal to express a desire to ensure that all literacy teachers at his school felt comfortable and empowered to implement a culturally responsive curriculum. He reflected on this incident:

> *As a school, we do not do a good job in talking about race nor unpacking our culturally responsive curriculum. I provided him with a few examples. He looked a bit surprised. Based on my interpretation of his facial expression, I could imagine him thinking the following: 'Why is a novice teacher telling me this? How did I not know about this?' (Kevin, Journal 4).*

Kevin caught his principal off guard. Taking a stance as a novice teacher was a risk, but in Kevin's case, it paid off. The principal asked him to present at a faculty meeting about a culturally responsive literacy framework and how it can be used as a way to unpack the curriculum with students.

Theme 4: Affirmation and Resistance

Mentoring practices are often interwoven into academia and can influence one's identity. In some situations, mentors can facilitate and inspire growth, development, and change. Kevin emphasized, "I am so glad that I am being mentored

by you both. Your experiences help me understand and make sense of this situation. I know I will be a better leader because of this experience" (Kevin, Meeting 4). Kevin draws a direct connection between mentorship and leadership. Being mentored validated his identity as a leader. Kevin alluding to a previous circumstance:

> I stepped outside of my comfort zone and fought (resisted) my fear of not being heard or taken seriously by my school principal. I did not only advocate for myself but for colleagues who currently find themselves feeling silenced and voiceless (Kevin, Journal 4).

Kevin overcame his fear and gave voice to those who felt silenced in a similar situation at his school. For Lavina, leadership is also a mindset. It took her a long time to think of herself as a leader. She asserted:

> I thought of myself as a silent invisible person stealthily working in the background. Great things are rarely accomplished by a single person. Another part of sharing the power is that platform, to let other people be heard. Encourage those who wouldn't usually speak up to share. I know there have been many times when I haven't been confident enough to share, without encouragement. And I didn't always get that encouragement, now I try to give to myself and others (Lavina, Journal 5).

The quote above sheds light on the power and influence that leaders can yield to ensure multiple perspectives are heard, especially those who are silenced, marginalized, or overlooked. Affirming those who are marginalized is an important aspect of mentoring. It validates one's leadership identity.

Theme 5: Influence of the perceptions of others

As a leader/mentor, one must communicate one's capabilities, intentions, and goals accurately in any given context. Lack of clarity can cause misunderstandings and conflicts due to others' perceptions and negative emotions about one's abilities. Lavina described this conflict:

> I notice that when I invest myself in a task, that task is now "me." The failure or success of the task reflects on me and my capabilities. When the task fails, I look at it in two ways. One, I am a terrible leader/mentor, and two, what will others think? Maybe I am not good enough for this role. What will my mentor say? Why do others' perceptions matter? And why should it make so much of a difference? (Lavina, Journal 1).

While perceptions of oneself serve as a mirror that reflects beliefs, actions, and context, they can also signal a disconnect. In Lavina's case, not being able to complete a task resulted in negative perceptions of self that needed some affirmation or validation from the mentor.

However, in a role reversal, when the leader is a follower in a situated context, they too can become conflicted about others' perceptions. Charity's quote spotlights this conflict:

> Outside I tried so hard to keep it together. Yet I could feel my colleague's eye on me and I knew she sensed my shock and disappointment at the events that were unfolding in front of us. Inside, as the shock wore off, I began to feel the full weight of what was happening. We were being pitted against one another. Our eyes locked. I knew that rather than react, we needed to remain focused. My colleague didn't skip a beat: she winked at me and followed my lead. Later we both congratulated each other for refusing to engage in such attempts to divide us as we worked to ensure the quality of our accreditation report remained our top priority (Charity, Journal 1).

Charity underwent a "shock" witnessing power being used to divide people; yet trust, respect, and communication between colleagues ultimately created the context in which we were able to overlook these challenges; acknowledging them together was enough. In turn, it reaffirmed our shared commitment to work collaboratively despite such counter-productive encounters.

Discussion

McManus et al., (2018) leadership model emphasized the impact of relationships between the leader/follower working towards a common goal in a situated context. To combat the host of leadership challenges, peer mentoring emerged as

a viable strategy. We began with the premise that mentoring helps develop better leadership skills- a relationship based on honesty, trust, and emotional support, providing a space for affirmation, understanding, and inquiry.

Our self-study found mentoring relationships to be complex and nuanced as they influenced both the mentor/mentee. Through mentoring each other we learned how to identify/unpack hidden expectations explicitly. We problematized juggling competing demands recognizing the lack of formalized guidance. We (Lavina and Charity) were both in similar career stages. Charity had been an associate dean for four years. In her role, she developed skills and expertise and shared these experiences with her colleagues, and Lavina when needed. We served as each other's critical friend - a purposeful activity that provided both of us the space for self-directed collaborative learning to gain new perspectives and insights and to make sense of the context in which we work. Two decades younger, Kevin, a doctoral student, and novice teacher found meaningful engagement with Lavina and Charity as he navigated his identity as a teacher, learner, and emerging leader. Fostering mentoring relationships was successful despite our varying disciplines, ages, and backgrounds. The interchangeability and fluidity of mentoring relationships validated our identities as emerging leaders. The influence we had on one another emerged in our interactions with each other. We realized the "influence" and continued to puzzle about our ethical responsibilities in these roles. We were cognizant of the hierarchical nature of the mentor-mentee relationship in traditional academia and chose to serve as critical friends instead, believing "...you need another person to continually change your focus, pushing you to look through multiple lenses to find that just right fit for you..." (Costa & Kallick, 1993, p. 49), thus providing an appropriate balance between support and challenge.

In acquiring leadership skills emphasis must be placed on time to nurture oneself through critical friendships. This includes evaluating one's capacity and skills and how best to use them in collaborative/interpersonal relationships, being self-aware, navigating autonomy over priorities and time, and making sense of others' perceptions. Feelings of insecurity or regret are opportunities for introspection. Continually evaluating leadership development through supportive mentoring practices can benefit and validate one's identity.

Conclusion

The experiences of critical friendships, represented by mentoring, became an integral part of our identity as emerging leaders and mentors. This self-study helped us make sense of our challenges and experiences as emerging leaders and mentors. It provided the space to reflect on our experiences through journaling and dialogue as we examined our contexts, their meanings, and the "living contradictions" that emerged between our values and work (Whitehead, 2000). Our leadership skills were further refined and exposed through situated interactions, circumstances, and temporal spaces we occupied. We were aware of the role that influence played in our relationships and the ethical implications it had on our interactions with each other. Working collectively as critical friends we validated and affirmed each other's identity and challenged each other's thinking, responses, and development as emergent leaders.

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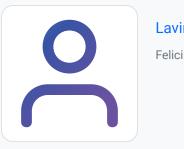McNiff, J., & Whitehead, J. (2006). *All you need to know about action research*. Sage.

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