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My Emergence

“E-L-I”: Three letters signifying three words signifying three months of maturation, education, and friendship. Since elementary school I have tried to expose myself to opportunities that promote these three aspects. I was “one of those” students who signed up for everything and encouraged others to sign up, too. Finding a class that revolved around this work ethic seemed like it had been created specifically for me. E.L.I. quickly fit right into my scheme of interests. I enjoy attending leadership seminars, learning about myself, and finding new ways to approach specific situations. Maybe it is not normal to get excited when seeing a syllabus calls for learning an innovative method of communication; and if that is the case, then I wear an adult small in straight-jackets.

At nine o'clock on September 6th I began my “emergence” with the institute. The icebreakers, carefully organized binders, and sugary desserts immediately reassured my confidence in the expectations I had for the class. Honestly, usually organizations think throwing a pizza pie on the table will satisfy a group of students, but the brains behind E.L.I. knew catering was the way to go.

Perhaps the real silverware, as opposed to black plastic sporks, was to distract the students from the blow of discovering each person would be responsible for planning an individual service project. When I reflected upon the semester-long assignment at hand I felt a bit overwhelmed. The overwhelming feeling may have stemmed from nervousness about such a big project that would affect community

members, and/or excitement simply because I would have the chance to plan a service project.

When I began to brainstorm for my project I thought about the methods I used in high school to plan events. In high school I worked with committees, could always weasel school funding, and had many connections in my community. Here at UK I did not have any of these resources. One resource I did have, however, was the E.L.I. Sessions that provided much information that correlated with the leadership qualities required for designing a community service mission.

Leadership Style

I did not limit the lessons I learned in class to the individual project, in fact, I still think back to specific sessions during my daily life. For instance, one seminar that interested me while participating in it and still interests me today is Rhonda Strouse's session on determining leadership style. Via a questionnaire, graphs and the letters "D-I-S-C", I, along with the other twenty-some students, were told explicitly which type of leadership style our personalities satisfied. I thought my personality might encompass each area (Dominance, Influence, Steadiness, Conscientiousness) however when I calculated my results CONSCIENTIOUSNESS jumped in my face like a child deprived of attention. Ironically, earlier in the semester each student in the class chose a word to describe his/her approach to leadership. The word "diplomatic" seemed fitting to me, and apparently I was on the ball because, according to the questionnaire, the key term to illustrate my level of conscientious leading was "diplomatic".

I have thought a lot about being typed as a conscientious diplomat. For one,

when I make a decision, whether it is what to wear, what to buy, or planning my afternoon I carefully weigh the pros and cons of each situation, all signs of being almost overly conscientious. Additionally, I like to make decisions that will be for the benefit of everyone involved. I prefer not to exclude people or their opinions, sometimes to the point that I exclude myself. While at that moment I think my courteousness is favorable, in hindsight I confirm that I might have been doing others and myself a disservice by minimizing my own thoughts. Yet, in order to avoid confrontation I make an effort not to force my opinions unto my colleagues. While analyzing these aspects now I see the downside to my leadership style, which is encouragement for developing the other three techniques so I can lead in a balanced manner.

My Individual Service Project

As already mentioned, I do not enjoy confrontation. During the course of the semester I avoided confrontation in many situations. One of these situations being my individual project. Initially I wanted to host a Breakfast with Santa for children in the Lexington area. Rachel Zeillmann, my mentor, recommended contacting Maxwell Street Presbyterian's Kids Café. I played a game of phone tag with the coordinator and since I could never reach Kids Café I began to think about other possible service projects. When the opportunity to tutor students in German arose I could not pass it up. I compared Kids Café to German tutoring and contemplated for hours on end which option would best suit my interests. I finally determined that I wanted to work with the Distance Learning program at KET and tutor high school students from rural Kentucky. In addition to the tutoring, a German Culture Day fit into the plan for giving the students a well-rounded German learning experience.

It took me a long time to come to this decision and I knew it would take me an even longer amount of time to express my change of heart to Kids Café. Worry filled my mind with how the director might respond.

Conflict Mediation

Since I did not want any conflict between Kids Café and myself I avoided the entire situation. Ironically, I learned during the Conflict Mediation session of E.L.I. that my “Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode” is that of avoidance. In fact, the definition of an avoider according to the instrument we used to determine this style states that “Avoiding might take the form of diplomatically sidestepping an issue, postponing an issue until a better time, or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation”. Thinking back on what I did to avoid Kids Café: evading phone calls, busying myself with KET German Tutoring, and simply procrastinating calling them, it seems as though I read Thomas and Kilmann’s definition and did everything I could to follow it.

Diversity

While I discovered specific personality traits in the two aforementioned sessions, I also acquired information during the Diversity Session with Winn Stephens and Mimi Haley on general beliefs that dwell in my mind. Although I knew of many stereotypes in the world, America and even at UK, I was not aware of how many I fell victim to believing. Being able to immediately recognize and write down a stereotype about ten or more groups made me feel uneasy. I wanted to complete the activity of coming up with a stereotype for each group, but at the same time admitting that I know these stereotypes embarrassed me. Yet I understand now that identifying a problem such as racial, ethnic, religious and sexual stereotypes is the first of many steps in solving or at

least easing that problem.

Applying the Lessons Learned

While it is nice to know that I gained a lot from E.L.I. it is even better to know that I can and have applied the lessons learned. As previously stated, I had intentions of working with Kids Café but that plan fell to the wayside and I managed to avoid any type of confrontation. However, two months after I began contact with the organization I received a phone call with the request of my assistance during the holiday season. I agreed to help and it dawned on me that the people at Kids Café were not concerned that I could not plan a Breakfast with Santa for them. Instead their concerns focused more on having an adult figure present with the kids, and someone to pile potato chips onto a plate. Here I had spent most of the semester worrying about the organization's disappointment, when I could have easily stated that I could not plan the party but would be willing to help for a few hours each week. Now that I have stated that I do not worry about conflict, I only worry about the children having a positive role model and enough to eat.

I worry that the kids need a positive role model for many of them come in from the street after school cussing and fighting with each other. Before my experience at Kids Café I had never heard elementary school students use language that would make a drill sergeant blush. This aspect coincides with the diversity lesson from E.L.I. My childhood was different from these children's in many ways, in that they have to go to a place like Kids Café to receive a meal and many of them are minorities. These are both things I am not accustomed to. However, I have been able to overcome the desire to stereotype them as I notice that we are not completely different. These children play

games just like I did, and like grilled cheese sandwiches and laugh at silly jokes; all reasons I should accept the diversity between us but also respect the similarities.

ELI=Excellence, Liberality, Involvement

The Emerging Leader Institute has a mission to help leaders reach their greatest potential, and while I feel like I have improved as a leader, I also feel like I have improved as a person. I know how to utilize my strengths, which include respecting others' opinions and the ability to analyze situations, but also to strengthen my weaknesses, which include being too passive and non-confrontational. I am grateful that I had the chance to participate in E.L.I. because my communication skills, interactions in classes and time management positively reflect my experience in the institute. Thank goodness for the class that allows students to express their opinions, experience self-actualization, discuss ethics, watch "Seinfeld", and write rap songs.

"ELI for life!"