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Are Leaders Born or Made?

Last August when I walked into the ELI orientation, I felt really out of place. Everyone in the class seemed to be well established on campus and had already started to leave their mark on the University of Kentucky. All the other students seemed to be headed on the road leading to success equipped with a map to a successful future. I started to doubt if I was even qualified to be in the class. Little did I know at the time, but almost every student I talked to felt the same way as I did. Over the semester we learned important lessons that would help us improve our leadership skills.

Throughout my past, I always thought that people that held leadership positions were naturally talented and possessed innate leadership characteristics. I held the view that not everyone could be a leader; only an elite few were qualified to be leaders. I thought to be a leader you had to be a great orator, hold a fancy title, be charismatic and have many other amazing qualities. As the semester progressed, my view of leadership changed radically with each guest speaker's presentations. By the end of the semester I realized that anyone could be a leader. Leaders inspire and create change in the world around them. They do not have to hold fancy titles or be world-renowned scholars they just have to have the desire to change the world around them.

It was important for me to realize that leadership does not always produce immediate results, but it is a process that involves a lot of hard work. Changing your environment is not something that simply happens instantaneously. Change is not an agent that is always appreciated or well accepted. People are habitual by nature and like what is familiar and

comfortable to them, so change does not come natural. People might struggle with the changes you are trying to implement so it is important to help these people transition. It is also important to respect their feelings about the issue you are changing. You do not want the people to feel like you are attacking the way they do things. It is also important to not get frustrated when you do not see immediate results. Stay passionate about your project and keep working hard toward your goals.

Passion is a necessity when working for a cause or organization. If you do not care about your project it will be hard to get other people involved. This is a major lesson, I learned through completing my project. Passion is contagious. If you are on fire about your project or organization then you can be the spark that ignites the flame in someone else. Before you know it, you can have a whole group of people who are burning with the desire to change the world, or at least a small piece of it, but what do you do with the people once you have them on fire for your cause?

Education is essential. The people you have enlisted need to know what they are trying to change and why it is important. I have found that people work harder when they know why their efforts and contributions matter. That and they know whose lives that they are changing and why this changes needs to take place. It is important to have all the facts straight so you can provide your followers with accurate information or even persuade people who have not bought into your cause yet. Let the people who are not following you yet know why they should care and how their contributions would make a difference.

Although it is your project, you cannot complete it by yourself. It is important to not be afraid to ask for help. Having a large group of people will not only help you complete your project, but It will also make your project better especially if your group is very diverse. Each

person brings different experiences and qualifications to the group. You should seek people whose strong points are different than your own. May you are not so organized, so you should find someone who is organized that can help you out. This diversity will strengthen your organization and provide a broader group résumé and you will be more qualified to tackle your project.

Everyone involved with the project should feel like his or her opinion matters. It does not matter how many people you have working with you if you do not let them voice their opinion and take their suggestions to heart. You cannot effectively complete your project from one viewpoint. It is important to let them know that their opinions and ideas are valued. A leader should create an atmosphere where everyone is comfortable sharing his or her ideas.

When taking a leadership position it is important to be a good role model and set a positive example. You need to be accountable for your actions. Do not do anything that could jeopardize your credibility with your followers. It can take a long time to gain the respect of your peers and followers, but the respect and power they have given you can be lost in a second. So it is important to hold yourself to a high standard. Not only should your life in general be an example, but your actions too. You should not ask people to do something you yourself are not willing to do. You might be instituting a recycling program, but if people see you throwing an aluminum into the trash instead of a recycling bin they will start to question if you are really dedicated to your project.

People cannot say yes if you never ask. I am not sure which presenter told our class that and quite frankly it really does not matter; the important thing the statement challenged me. I am the kind of person, who is not comfortable asking people to help me out especially if I am dealing with a controversial issue. I do not want to offend anyone and I just want everyone to be

happy so approaching people I do not know makes me nervous. I realized one day though, that asking the people I know that are on my side and want to help me really is not going to change anything. It might make a small difference, but great things will start happening when you persuade people who are apposed to your cause. When we find out why people are not already helping with our organization and what they are apposed to we can find ways to persuade them or help them to see our view. Do not be afraid. The worst thing the person can is no, but do you really want to take the chance of missing the opportunity for a person to say yes?

Do not let people talk you into settling. You might hear that people are not ready for change, or this is the way we have always done things around here. It has worked well and we are sticking with it. Just because something works well, does not mean it cannot be done in a more efficient manner or be approved upon. Do not be afraid to challenge the process. If everyone is afraid to challenge the process change would never occur. When challenging the process you should also take calculated risks. I am not promoting risky behavior. I am promoting people to deviate from predictable behavior. Taking a risk does not guarantee success, but neither does predictability. People get bored with standards. They want to see new and fresh ideas. Always make sure to think about the consequence of your risks though.

Many people are driven by competition. Offering incentives is a great way to get people involved in your organization or your cause. I understand that many organizations do not have a lot of money to spend on incentive prizes, these people just need to be creative. Some people are not drive by material prizes, but rather public recognition. Also make sure after completing a project that you thank everyone for his or her efforts. When people feel valued they will be more likely to help you in future endeavors. Thanking them can be as simple as a card or a small gift to show them your appreciation for their help.

Participating in the Emerging Leadership Institute has definitely helped me to develop as a leader. At the beginning of the semester, I was very insecure with the title of student leader. I was not sure I was even qualified to be a leader. I had no idea what I was doing. Taking this class has taught me to find something I am passionate about and to help create necessary change. It does not matter if the change is small or big as long as it is positive. I did not want the responsibility of the title “leader” because I was afraid I would fail. I learned throughout this class the project’s outcome does not define my success. Some projects may fail and that is okay. If a project fails that does not make me a bad leader or an unsuccessful person. It means I need to revise the old project or find a new project and start over. This class provided a wonderful atmosphere. My small group helped me immensely. I quickly became overwhelmed with my project. I had no idea where to go next. My mentors and fellow classmates were quick to offer suggestions and to assist me in any way that they possibly could. I would definitely recommend this class to any student on campus that is curious about leadership or that wants to sharpen their leadership skills.

The Emerging Leadership Institute has changed my prospective on many issues. I have transformed as a leader by applying all of the principles I have learned in the class. I might not be world renowned for my efforts, but some of the best leaders start by serving others. Right now, I am comfortable serving others first and making small changes. I do plan to move on to bigger projects in the near future, though. I might not know exactly where the map of my future will lead me, but I do know that I have been equipped with the skills to help change the world around me.