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April 25, 2006

What Leadership Is To Me

“Leaders are not born, they are made.” This is the attitude that I came into the Emerging Leadership Institute with. I felt that I knew everything there was to know about leadership and boy was I wrong. Turns out that while I was technically a leader, I was not doing everything I could to further advance myself along the road towards success. I was simply settling for second best rather than stepping outside of my comfort zone and striving for greatness.

Learning to step outside of my comfort zone is something that I picked up on right away in ELI. When we had a speaker come in that made us go around and talk to people we had never even seen before I thought that this class was a joke. However, I quickly realized that taking that leap of faith is important to all leaders. Many times in our careers we are going to face situations that require us to just do something on impulse and stretch far outside of our comfort zone. The trick though is to cross that invisible line enough so eventually we become more and more comfortable in everything that we do.

Leaders have to take chances. This means that if you have something you want to express, it is important to get your message across in an effective manner. Some people could take this as meaning that one must verbally express what is on his/her mind all the time. Through this class I have come to accept that not all leaders are the most charismatic people in the world. Just because a person is a terrific orator does not make them a great leader. A leader is someone who is able to take a group and have them follow his/her lead while working towards a common vision. No where in that statement does it say anything about having to actually verbally tell

them what to do. Some leaders prefer to lead by example rather than telling people what to do. It was this idea that really made me think about my type of leadership style.

I am not sure if it was all the leadership lectures or if it was the fact that I was in a room with 25 other leaders but I learned to take a back seat on a lot of projects because I felt that doing so was the best thing for the group. All the while though I still feel I was acting like a leader. I preferred to pick my spots for speaking up rather than voicing my opinion on every issue. I think that is a tough lesson for a leader to pick up on. If someone is constantly talking out and always telling you what to do I feel that respect is lost for that person and ultimately they will become an ineffective leader down the road. Whereas a leader who knows to take a step back from time to time and let others have their moment in the spot light will come across as much more of an all around team leader rather than one just focused on all the attention.

Building off that last point, not hogging all the credit is another issue a successful leader must deal with. In this day and age so many people want to get their name out there in hopes that one day they will make it to the top. I found out that sometimes the best thing a leader can do is let someone else take over. Just because you are called a leader does not mean you have to go around and be the point man on every project. I have come to find that sometimes it is best to just sit back and watch.

The same holds true when it comes to conducting a meeting. Numerous times this semester a number of us got into shouting matches over silly little details about our group project. If we would have all just sat back and learned to listen to one another things would have gone much more smoothly. The same holds true for formal business meetings. I got some of the best ideas for my individual project this year by simply sitting back and hearing out what the other person had to say. Rather than try to express everything that was on my mind I let them do

the talking and brainstorming while I just listened. I feel that if more leaders would use their ears more than their mouths, a lot more would get accomplished.

Another area I think leaders need to focus on is that of using their resources. So many times I see people taking on more than they can handle or figure that their way is the best and totally ignore others. In order to be successful out in the real world, one must know who he/she can count on and use them when necessary. There is no need for some people to have to carry the brunt of the workload when there is a team already set up for them. A good leader will get the help needed in order to get the task done right. Whether this means asking for help to finish a project or getting a second opinion, using resources can definitely come in handy and I feel is vital for a leader to accomplish any goal.

The next characteristic a leader needs to have in order to be successful is patience. This was a lesson that was touched on in class but was best learned through first hand experience. I found out the hard way that you cannot keep beating people over the heads about meetings and trying to get things accomplished. If a leader wants to see results he/she has to be patient and just know that in the end things will work out. The problem I think a lot of leaders get into is trying to do too much too fast. If they take a step back from time to time if only to catch their breath I believe they will not only be able to regroup on what they are trying to get done but at the same time they are going to look at things from a different perspective that will ultimately help strengthen their arguments that they normally would have overlooked by rushing through something.

The old saying "Walk a mile in someone else's shoes" applies to my next leadership quality. I think that in order for a leader to truly understand his/her project that they need to view their argument or case from the opposite point of view. In my case with my individual project I

thought about what UK Police would say to increased security before I even brought up the topic that way I could have an answer or better yet a solution when the time came for that topic to be discussed. While leaders must be persuasive, they must also be level headed. Biting off more than is manageable or reasonable is not logical and is only setting the stage for failure.

Along the lines of going to meetings, I have found it to be essential that when attending a meeting with someone on a serious issue that a leader should always dress professionally. This means jeans and a t-shirt is a definite no. I would recommend that guys wear a shirt and tie with a pair of nice pants, while ladies should wear business clothes that are not too revealing. It is extremely important to be taken seriously when talking with people that can help your vision along. Dressing to impress them is definitely taking a step in the right direction.

Additionally, I feel it is very important that the language used in all emails, phone conversations and face to face meetings be strictly professional. Mister, misses, please and thank you should always be used whenever possible. Even if the conversation is only for fun or you are each at the same bar one night it is key to treat them with respect and not as if you were old time pals. Some of the best relationships can be built outside of the office. As a result, do not let their opinion of you deteriorate at all by something that is done or said when you are not on the clock.

An aspect of leadership that I never fully appreciated is that of time management. Even with the little projects that leaders get involved with quite often takes up a great deal of time. In order to be truly effective a leader must have terrific time management skills. A factor in time management that is difficult to account for is the schedules of the other individuals that normally accompany a project. Just because a time or date will work the best for you does not mean that it will work out for everyone else involved. Great leaders will find a way to somehow meet in the middle to work towards a goal.

Furthermore, being pulled in a number of different directions on a project also can cause a problem for leaders. Usually leaders try to take on so much that as a project or idea starts to pick up steam they get sucked in over their heads. Leaders have to find a way to balance their time in order to make everyone happy and at the same time being sure no part of the vision gets overlooked. This is a tough trick to get down but is normally best resolved by getting a planner and sticking to it. While it is important to remain flexible, if some sort of order or schedule is not established chaos is bound to happen eventually.

Once the common vision has been accomplished or better yet, even along the way, an act of appreciation or congratulations is always a good idea. Not only to help keep your connections alive for any future projects that might arise but to also let the people know how important they were to the overall goal. Just a simple thank you can go a long way. Big elegant parties do not have to be put on to say thanks. A small “Thanks for everything” can really send a positive message to those who worked on a project with you. This is especially true of those people whom you just met. Leaving a lasting positive impression in a person's head is always something worth striving for.

The last little bit I want to leave you with is that leadership is a constantly evolving process. What once worked for our parents no longer is the best course of action today. Each person needs to find what works best for them and run with it. What is most effective for one person may not be for another. Once you have developed a style that works well with you keep it and then modify it from there. No one can be the judge or the right thing for every single person to do. Be sure to learn from your mistakes, always be willing to adjust when necessary and stay passionate about your vision and you will become a successful leader.