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April 24, 2005

ELI Final Paper

My Personal Leadership Philosophy:

It's Not Over Until the Fat Lady Sings

I did not know what to expect when I received the voicemail from Jared telling me that I was accepted into the Emerging Leader Institute. I didn't even know what to expect when I applied for ELI; I had simply heard about ELI from my English teacher and I thought that it was a good opportunity that I try to get more involved and apply myself to something that I've always naturally been good at: *leadership*. So, where do I start?

I was extremely nervous on the first day of the ELI simply because I knew that it was *not like a regular class* because more abstract thought and reflection would be required of me. As the semester progressed, I actually enjoyed my ELI experience much more because I started meeting more people and I thoroughly enjoyed most of the animated presenters. *Days go by*. I then started engaging myself in my individual leadership project and before I knew it, the semester is coming to a close, and I am sad. I am *sad* because I feel like I could have made more connections with my fellow peers and I also feel like I could have made more of a difference from my individual leadership project. I will touch more upon this later.

Through my ELI experience, I have discovered that being an efficient leader requires a *lifestyle of the heart*. One cannot wake up one morning and decide that they want to be a leader for an hour and then not be a leader for the rest of the day. There is no "leadership switch" that can be turned on and off. *A leader is stable*. That is why a leader

cannot retire as mediocre. For without *passion*, leadership would cease to exist. A true leader, whether constructive or damaging, always stands for something; *WHOLEHEARTEDLY*. (I will refrain from using the “fire in the belly” analogy.) The water is hot or the water is cold; being lukewarm allows for no chance of failure. Where there is no chance for failure, one cannot succeed. *I have learned from my mistakes* more than anything else that I have been taught in life. An effective leader will reflect upon their mistakes and accept failure with open arms because *tasting the bitter* teaches us to *appreciate the sweet*.

I also learned through my individual leadership project that all you have to do is *step outside of the box*; once you're out, the rest is simple. Escaping from one's comfort zones is an indicator of maturity and growth because it is *difficult* to put yourself on the line and act differently than others around you; but it is *worth* it. The most rewarding things in life are always worth *fighting* for. I feel like I could have tried to apply myself more in ELI by taking advantage of every opportunity I was given, but it does not end on Thursday with the closing ceremony. I will learn from my *apathy* and move on to continue to lead others wherever my path may lead me.

Connections, connections, connections. It's all about who you know. I have learned from my ELI experience, as well as my individual leadership project, that leadership requires collaboration as the foundation; and collaboration requires communication as the *prerequisite*. Connections are so poignant to an effective leader

because referencing is the window of opportunity for many. An established credibility is only possible through the connections that are kept strong. I made many connections at the school where I work because of my individual project; these personal relationships with the social workers at Booker T. Washington Academy will blossom and my reputation that I have made for myself at the school will follow me wherever I go.

My personal definition of leadership has changed over the past semester and I have mentioned it many times: *Leadership is a lifestyle of the heart*. A leader's heart is what keeps them going when they are tired or discouraged. A leader's heart is honest and patient. A leader's heart is worn on their shirt sleeve because a true leader is *vulnerable*. I believe the most effective leader is one who encourages others before encouraging themselves; one who makes someone else smile when the *rain is pouring down* and there are troubles in one's own life. A leader is *courageous*. I believe leadership cannot be taught or forced; it must come from within. It is truly *subjective* and it is hard for words to describe the feelings of the heart.

Quantitative verses qualitative. What traits make up the best leader? It is obvious that if you pour in one-half cup of determination, two cups of hard work, one tablespoon of kindness, and one teaspoon of willingness; *you do not have a leader*. I believe that effective leaders come in all shapes and sizes, with different personalities and a *diversity* of motley characters. I believe that the leaders that make a difference in our world are the ones who distinguish the difference between quantity and quality. After all, a leader is not concerned with the number of digits in their paycheck, or the number of paychecks that they receive in one year and **wait**, what about that bonus check for Christmas?

Leaders engage themselves in the *quality* and *character* of each day and the impact that their meaningful work had produced.

Actions speak louder than words. Because a leader cannot be concretely defined and placed into a “black and white” category, it is detrimental that a leader’s actions run parallel with their words. Verbally committing to something is far easier than actually completing the commitment. Personally, this has been one of my internal struggles because I am known to bite off more than I can chew. I must practice what you preach or you will be too busy talking to do any walking. Finishing commitments is important to a leader because it *establishes dependability*. Breaking commitments can damage a leader’s reputation because words have no significance with out any substance.

I have been introduced to many “leaders” in my nineteen years of existence and I have observed that there is a great division between the individuals who are labeled or classified as “leaders” and the individuals who really don’t care about recognition because *recognition is not what leadership is all about*. Before one becomes a leader, they must be a follower because *empathy* for others will go a long way. *Humility* is necessary to a leader’s demeanor because arrogance will turn many followers away. *Pride comes before a fall*. A true leader is willing to step down from their “position” and be open-minded to new ideas from those who are “below” them.

It’s not about me. I went into my individual leadership project with this attitude. I wanted to give back to the children at Booker T. Washington Academy because they have truly touched my heart. The project that I wanted to do originally was not one of the

school's needs and I learned through my experience that leadership is not all about the "leader"; it is about finding a need and doing something about it. I am still working on developing who I am as a leader so that I will have the inner confidence to realize that I am a small fish in a HUGE pond.

Don't forget the small things, but don't sweat the small stuff. The small things are what motivate me as a leader and drive my personality to flourish in its own unique way. "The space between the tears we cry is the laughter keeps us coming back for more." (Dave Matthews Band) The small things in life are often overlooked and taken for granted because many leaders are focused on the "big picture". A simple gesture, like a smile or holding a door open, could make a huge difference in someone's day and a great leader strives to live each small moment as though it is their last.

Even though the small things in life encourage the heart, I have learned through me experiences not the sweat the small stuff because *no one is perfect*. There are always going to obstacles in the way, but a leader must view such obstacles as a challenge to overcome. *If it doesn't kill you, it only makes you stronger*. Sometimes individuals focus so much on petty disturbances that it affects their attitude; a leader's attitude affects performance. *Flexibility* can distinguish one leader from another.

NO quitting allowed! After my semester with ELI, I feel **encouraged** more than anything. I am unfortunately a tad discouraged because I feel like I have not made a huge impact in the community thus far, but with ELI coming to a close, I am excited about my future leadership opportunities and encouraged by the humble hearts of my classmates to *try harder*. "If at first you don't succeed, try try again." The main lesson that I have taken

out of ELI is that leadership is a *process* and that I need to keep on trying to improve my attitude, as well as my actions to make a difference in this bittersweet world. Remember, *it's not over until the fat lady sings!*