

ELI Final Paper

I can honestly say that my brain was fried. As I sat staring at the window on the opposite side of the room, I longed to be anywhere else but there. It was the beginning of the 2006 spring semester; the first or second week. I was sitting in a moderately uncomfortable chair in one of the classes I would have for the next 18 weeks. It was called the Emerging Leader Institute and to be honest I had no idea what to expect from it. Would it be awful, would it be cake, or would it be the best class I ever took? I wasn't sure and it was hard to judge by the instructors teaching the class, Jared Tippets and Angel Lee. I knew that I already had one friend who had dropped the class and I was wondering if I should do the same. Looking back through the weeks and months of studying, lab reports, lattes at Starbuck's, quizzes and tests, I can definitely say that I'm glad I kept the class. It was a thought provoking, self evaluating, soul searching adventure that I believe has expanded my mind and changed my view of leadership and what it means to demonstrate this valuable quality.

Upon the start of the semester, if I had an idea of what a leader was, I can't remember it for the life of me. My idea of leadership has been changed, altered, built up, destroyed and then rekindled once again. After 3 months or so of killing the word my own definition was still a bit shaky. It seems to be one of those words that you can say, repeat over and over, roll around in your brain, and yet it's difficult to describe. Defining a leader can be a bit easier if you take the easy way out. What is a leader? One who leads, but this definition is pathetic and almost sarcastic. Instead, by taking a look at the types of leaders, some sort of a definition for leadership can be created.

Four types of leadership that seem to be very encompassing are taken from the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) in Lander, WY. They are designated leadership, active followership, peer leadership and self leadership. Designated leadership is probably what comes to mind for most people when they ponder the meaning of the word leadership. It involves taking responsibility for the group and guiding the group towards its goal. Most people probably see leaders in this authoritative spotlight. Leaders are the people who take initiative and place the weight of the group on their shoulders. This may not be the most comfortable position but for the designated leader, it's home.

Sitting up there on the designated leader may be another type of leader, one exhibiting active followership. This leadership type falls under the support category, landing this type of leader behind the scenes where they participate and provide input but avoid the front lines. This brings up an interesting paradox. Can a leader, namely one who leads others, lead by following. Moses didn't part the red sea from the back of the crowd did he? Of course not, but an active followership leader need not be front and center to be recognized or valuable. Think of him as an assistant manager, or vice president. He leads all those beneath him, but he is still a follower of the designated leader. Active followership is one of those shaky definitions of leadership that comes to mind second after designated leadership. It's typically not the way in which people envision a leader. None the less, active followership is vital to the success of a group.

A third type of leadership that like active followership is more of a supporting role is peer leadership. Peer leadership involves a group of people working together and supporting one another to accomplish their common goal. In peer leadership, each member sees what needs to be done and does it. This type of leadership may seem to leave room

or create space for “slackers” but one must keep in mind that all members of a group contribute what they can in peer leadership. Each individual’s contribution must be weighed by him/herself, no one else. Overall a group exhibiting peer leadership should operate smoothly and without controversy if the definition is to apply. Being the warring people that we are, peer leadership can be difficult at times.

Self leadership is the fourth and final type of leadership. It might inspire thoughts of conceit or preoccupation with one’s self on the part of the leader in question, but a self leader takes care of him/herself so that he/she can take care of the group. These leaders may be more withdrawn from the group but are still working toward the group’s common goal. These types of leaders seem to be synonymous with “followers”. They don’t lead others or give as much input as do active followership leaders, but keep to themselves on the sidelines. This definition of leadership is almost a way of characterizing a follower. Self leadership seems to be a true supporting role and yet it works in its functionality for describing this type of person or “leader”.

Four types of leaders. This means that everyone has been accounted for. But how can this be? Everyone seems to be a leader in their own way contributing to the group’s success. Of course there are always those onlookers who contribute nothing to the group, but they have their own special classification. Bums, lazies, good for nothings, take your pick. The leadership types covered are important because they describe the role of every member in a group. One member may be guiding the entire group, while another is guiding a select few, and still one more is guiding his own actions to ensure the group’s success. Everyone works for the betterment of the group and therefore everyone is a leader in their own way, piloting the group down the road to success.

Every member/leader in a group contributes something in their own way. This contribution influences the possible outcome of the groups' efforts, and therefore every leader in the group is influential to the groups' success. If every leader influences the group, then couldn't this be a definition for leadership? According to John C. Maxwell, this is the case. "Leadership is influence-nothing more, nothing less." This is his sweet and simple definition of leadership. Its range is far encompassing in that almost anyone working for the betterment of a group can exhibit leadership. This goes along with the four types of leadership previously discussed. They include everyone within a group as does this definition.

Delving a little deeper, how can this definition be applied? One cannot simply approach it as one person performing a simple task that just so happens to alter the events in another's life. Leadership is influence that is planned, desired, with a specific goal or outcome in mind. Those to be influenced were meant to be influenced and as a result their situation makes a turn for the better. Every type of leader can bring about this change in their own way which is why this definition correlates so well with the types of leadership described earlier. It's plain to see how the first three types of leadership influence others within the group but even the lowly self leader influences those around him. This type of leader may first and foremost influence himself, but bear in mind the group is always in the back of his mind.

"Leadership is influence-nothing more, nothing less." Upon reading this definition over and over, skipping over the words, one can't help but wonder if there is more to leadership than just influence. The far reaching effects of a group's members on one another that can spill over to include entire communities hardly seems like "nothing

more”. However, this still falls under the category of influence, it has just flowed beyond its borders. A group of leaders can work wonders with each and every other type of leader. By participating and exhibiting each and every type of leadership, the ultimate goal is more than achievable, and the influence each type of leader has on the other makes that goal possible.

Looking back one might wonder if the sarcastic definition of leadership was all that bad. A leader is one who leads. By simply substituting one word in this definition, a similar definition to that of John C. Maxwell’s can be created. A leader is one who influences. The definition doesn’t sound so sardonic anymore. On the contrary, it sounds very expressive and paints a greater picture in regards to leadership. After all, as discussed earlier, leaders don’t necessarily have to be at the front of the pack to be considered “leaders”. They come in all shapes and sizes but the influence they bring is what sets them apart and makes all the difference.

There I sat again. Only now it was the end of the spring semester of my freshman year. The flowers and trees were in full bloom, the sky was wildcat blue and the temperature outside was in the glorious mid 70’s. Yet there I sat in the final weeks of the Emerging Leader Institute. Did I feel any different upon completing the course? At that time I didn’t, but over the course of the semester I saw a change in myself. I was growing into a young adult. I felt that my experience in dealing with countless different types of people, “leaders”, had grown immensely. I felt that I had the skills and knowledge to be a leader and the confidence to fill that position in the future. I was ready to spread my influence over the groups of people I would hopefully be working with in the future. After all “leadership is influence” is it not?

As I sat waiting to present my individual leadership project to the class, I thought about how I had influenced and been influenced by everyone present. Then my mind expanded to include all those we had influenced as a group and the definition rang louder than ever. "Leadership is influence-nothing more, nothing less." We were all leaders, nothing more and certainly nothing less, but more importantly we had influenced each other to become leaders, and that's really what matters.