Discussions on Readings

Discussion 1

Defining leadership is clearly a difficult task, as evidenced by the variety of ways the authors of this week’s readings have tried to do it. For me, the best definition has been that a leadership position is a relationship of influence. Whenever a person is in a position to influence others, that person is in a leadership position. The reason I’ve found this definition useful is that it moves the concept of leadership away from the view of the “charismatic leader”, toward leadership that everyone exerts numerous times a day. For the past several years, all students at Concordia Nebraska have had to take a leadership class, and some students (and even a few faculty) have whined about it, wondering why everyone was expected to be a leader. The issue was that they had the “charismatic leader” view, instead of recognizing the leadership opportunities that arise within a family, on a dorm floor, in a student group, or within any career.

Still, it seems to me that my preferred definition is a little too weak, because most of the time we use the term “leader”, we’re thinking of the person in charge, not just anyone who can exert influence. And in this form, leadership is often defined in terms of a contrast. Kotter provides a good example of this in “What Leaders Really Do”. In this article, Kotter contrasts leadership with management; setting a direction with planning and budgeting; aligning people with organizing and staffing. Other authors make similar distinctions. These contrasts help to set the limits of what leadership is and is not.

I find these concrete contrasts helpful at first, but as I apply the behaviors to my institution, the distinctions start to blur and I become confused. My question is this: How far apart are the roles of leaders and managers? I understand the difference between vision-setting and budgeting, but in real situations the difference becomes less well-defined. As an example, a few years ago my institution had as its vision to become recognized as among the leading regional liberal arts universities in its class. This seemed sensible enough, and I was pleased that my Physics Education program fit neatly into that vision, as it was widely recognized as the premier physics education program in the state. So I assumed that the vision meant support for my program. The administration looked at the same vision and used it to propose cutting my program. Somehow, the vision was too far removed from the management to be useful. So defining leadership as a contrast between “leadership behaviors” and “not leadership behaviors” is useful, but in practice, how far apart can leadership and management behaviors really be? How far apart should they be? How “hands-on” can a leader be and still be leading, rather than managing?

I think Nadler and Tushman recognized this issue in Chapter 21, “Beyond the Charismatic Leader”. After exploring the primary leadership tasks of envisioning, energizing and enabling, they point out that the “charismatic” functions of leadership are not sufficient, and that complete leadership also includes what they describe as “instrumental leadership”, which comes closer to management. But I still wonder if there is one definition of leadership describes the difference between leadership and management, or will they always blur together in the end?
Discussion 2

I think anyone can make a vision. What is much more difficult and worthy of leadership is making a vision that people will buy into. The process of developing a vision must include the aspect of getting buy-in, or else it is doomed.

Concordia Nebraska is in the middle of the strategic planning process, and unlike in the past, this time the person in charge has built into the process several points designed to promote widespread buy-in.

The faculty member in charge of the process first put together a few groups to think about the values, the mission and the vision of the university. These statements went through several iterations as they were reviewed by different constituents and revised by the committees. Finally a statement of values, mission and vision were completed and accepted by the Board of Regents. The new vision statement reads: “By 2015 Concordia University, Nebraska will grow and expand its influence to diverse populations by fostering collaboration and adapting to our changing environment while remaining faithful to our mission of excellent Christian education.”

In order to achieve the vision the strategic plan includes four Implementation Areas, areas deemed critical to achieving the vision. Those four areas are: Resources (finances), Nurture (how we deal with the employees of the university), Exchange (the things we do to educate students and provide opportunities for them), and Systems and Norms (the processes we use to do the things we do). I am leading the Systems and Norms area. That involves putting together a team to come up with innovative goals that will help achieve the vision. These goals will be looked at by a larger group (consisting of the President, his cabinet, the strategic planning manager, and the managers of the four areas) and prioritized. Once goals are agreed on, they will be given to the appropriate member of the cabinet and it will be that person’s job to see that the goal is met. The cabinet member reports periodically to the Implementation Area manager, who reports to the Board of Regents. The Regents will decide how well the goal is being met and if more action needs to be taken.

Showing the work in progress to various groups of constituents was an important part of obtaining buy-in. The more innovative step is recruiting faculty and staff to be the Implementation Area teams, who will determine how the institution will actually move toward achieving the vision. This step increases buy-in by first developing a small group of advocates (the area managers) and using them to build a larger group who develop a stake in the vision and in how it is carried out. It also increases widespread buy-in by making it visible that fundamental institutional decisions are being guided by the vision.

The leadership demonstrated by the planning leader could be described as both relationship-motivated, and especially participatory (in the terminology of Chemers, chapter 18). The leader was focused on producing a vision, but not on the particular one that resulted. Instead, he was more concerned with promoting buy-in of whatever the eventual vision was. In my opinion this process has been a good example of using leadership to increase institutional participation and buy-in and ultimately to develop a successful vision.
Discussion 3

I’ve been thinking about how to create buy-in for a vision. Kotter suggests that one way to create a sense of urgency for change is by forcing a crisis. But this can be a huge risk. If the crisis is seen as artificial, it can cause the leader to lose credibility. I’ve been at one university where the President tried this strategy to institute a change and the faculty rebelled (going so far as to initiate a vote of no confidence). At CUNE a past president tried this for a curricular matter and eight years later it is still easy to find faculty members who do not accept that part of the curriculum solely because of the way it was imposed. There has to be a better way.

Kotter described a better way in his scenario where a teacher talked to a principal about an initiative and the principal directed the person to two other teachers who had similar ideas. The three together were able to get something done. I like that model of leadership and buy-in – the principal had a vision and helped the teachers to achieve it and achieve their own goals, rather than simply directing others what to do.

This strategy is consistent with what Gardner said in “Leaders and Followers” (chapter 29) that “…the purposes of the group are best served by a relationship in which the leader helps followers to develop their own judgment and enables them to grow and to become better contributors”. This sort of enabling leadership can help to “create something that can survive their own departure”.

In light of last week’s questions about whether good leadership can be judged only on the basis of success, this seems like a better criteria: whether the leader has built something that can outlive that individual.

Discussion 4

I enjoyed Vroom’s article (chapter 54) on decision-making. I was skeptical at first that a flow chart for determining what method to use to make a decision could work, but after applying it a few times to current issues, it came up with reasonable answers. I’m fairly impressed! I’m not going to use it blindly, but it could be a nice resource for one more piece of information when thinking about how to come to a decision.

My real interest was with Harrison’s article (chapter 53) on decision-making. His six steps (setting objectives, searching for alternatives, comparing alternatives, the choice, implementing the decision, and follow-up and control) seem sensible and not surprising. I found especially meaningful his assertion that decision-making is not an act but a process.

What I’m interested in is the last step of the process. When I look at decisions at CUNE, I see ample evidence for the first five steps. But the sixth is a different sort. It requires stepping back, taking time and reflecting on the decision and its impact. It’s assessment. And frankly I rarely see that step taken as a part of the full decision-making process. What I see instead is steps 1-5, and then if a decision isn’t working, the process starts over at step 1 with a new process leading to a new decision. The process of follow-up (or reflection or assessment, whatever word you use) is hard and must be intentional. It’s particularly difficult because the ones doing the assessment usually have an incentive to make the assessment come out looking positive. Coming up with a system of honest assessment that doesn’t inevitably lead to negative consequences is very difficult.
I’m interested if other Concordia’s see a system of follow-up (or assessment, evaluation, reflection, whatever) for decisions. This could be at various levels – academic departments, administrative offices, or institutional. Is there a working system out there for honest, useful reflection and follow-up?

Discussion 5

I appreciated the back-to-back readings on groups this week: Tuckman (chapter 46) discussing the steps groups go through to become more cohesive and functional, then Janis (chapter 47) showing the problems that can come about with a group that is too cohesive. Ultimately, these authors discussed the relational aspects of people working together. Like any relationship, group relationships can be either beneficial or harmful. These readings show the risks to a group not becoming cohesive and functional, and the risks to a group becoming too cohesive and developing groupthink.

It was interesting to these two risks at CUNE today with the same issue – a revision of the general education.

For the past year I have been a member of a committee of thirteen faculty members that has been developing a new general education program for the university. This group has been dysfunctional, failing to achieve any real cohesion or to progress past Tuckman’s second stage. Group members have personal agendas they are reluctant to air openly and are suspicious that others are doing the same. There is very little real discussion of ideas, and the weekly meetings consist mostly of wordsmithing and other non-threatening (and non-productive) activities. As a result, the committee produced a very poorly thought-out, distinctly unimaginative general education proposal.

On the other hand, the faculty at CUNE as a whole is in a cycle where as Janis puts it, the primary motivation is to “maintain self-esteem and emotional equanimity by providing social support to each other”. For a variety of reasons, the faculty as a whole has made “concurrence-seeking” its top priority. As a result it suffers nearly every symptom of groupthink that Janis describes. Predictably then, the faculty approved the general education proposal with near unanimity and little discussion even though, as is now becoming clear, most faculty members had very little understanding of the details of the proposal and are beginning to realize what they’ve done.

The question then is how to avoid both these types of situations – one where a group fails to achieve any cohesion and trust, the other where it values cohesion above results. A leader who demonstrates trust and consensus-building can lead a group to groupthink; a leader who fails to do the same things ends up with a dysfunctional group. There’s a very fine line to be walked. I did find some of Janis’ remedies helpful, though. In particular, I appreciated his advice that a leader should adopt an impartial stance to encourage open inquiry, and his suggestion that leaders hold a “second-chance” meeting to air lingering doubts after reaching a consensus.

But whatever one does, I found these articles to be a cautionary tale about the risks of gaining too little or too much trust and cohesion in a group. How can one develop a trusting, cohesive group that still encourages critical thinking and disagreement?
Discussion 6

The reading by Watkins about choosing a transition strategy hit home with me as I thought about initiatives I've led. In particular, his comment that “Leaders in transition reflexively rely on the skills and strategies that have worked for them in the past … . That’s a mistake.”

I’m leading a team trying to develop goals for the institution that will lead to the university’s new vision being achieved. This is a new sort of process for implementing a strategic plan – instead of the plan being put on the shelf, groups of faculty and staff are in charge of deciding what will be done and making sure that those things are done. Anyway, it is a new process and there’s a fair amount of skepticism that it will work. Watkins would say that it has the hallmarks of a “start-up” and needs a strategy that is innovative and fairly bold out of the box. Unfortunately, I relied on strategies that have worked in the past and set my team to work in ways that almost any other committee has done. After reading this article I realize I should have adjusted my style and done different things right off the bat to get people energized and thinking differently.

What I don’t know is how one adjusts one’s leadership style and the strategies one uses. It’s easy to say from outside that adjustments need to be made, but how does an individual go about using skills and strategies other than the ones that have worked in the past?

Discussion 7

During the readings for this week my thoughts kept going between the content of the papers and the overall theme for the week of finding employees. Tim mentioned this last week, but I thought it was a really good point and wanted to bring it up again. Where is the line between a shared culture of people working toward a common goal, and an inflexible organization with no ability to change?

While reading “Bad Leaders” by Robert Allio and “The Dark Side of Leadership” by Jay Conger, I couldn’t help noticing that the leadership flaws often dealt with leaders who stuck too firmly to their (often flawed) vision, and followers who enabled them. And I thought about our Concordias, especially CUNE, where a very large fraction of our employees (especially at the faculty and administrative levels) are graduates of a Concordia, often CUNE. (As an example, six of the eight full-time faculty in the science department are CUNE graduates.) This has the advantage of preserving the culture and of having committed workers. But it also carries the risk that the institution becomes a slave to tradition, unable to even imagine new ideas, let alone carry them out. And it certainly creates a culture in which the flawed leadership described by Allio and Conger can flourish.

This issue isn’t unique to CUNE or to the CUS; it’s an issue that all successful organizations struggle with. It also has deep implications for the diversity of the campus – diverse populations are underrepresented in the institution’s employees because the university did not serve them in the past, and so those same diverse populations are unlikely to attend as students, limiting the pool from which to draw new, more diverse employees. But the question of how to change this – how many graduates is too many to have on staff? – is one that I struggle with. Because the issue is simultaneously a problem and a feature. Or maybe it isn’t a feature at all, but only seems like one to those of us who came up through the system and like it the way it was when we were students. Maybe filling the staff with people who have a much wider variety of backgrounds will make the institution more dynamic, and we won’t miss the traditional culture as
much as we thought we would. I don’t know the answer, and it’s not something that’s easy to experiment with.

Discussion 8

I struggled with the article on margin. Not because I disagree with the idea of margin in our lives, because I think that’s an extremely valuable concept and I was on board with it before I read the article. No, what gnawed at me as I read it was the idea of stressors today. I am not convinced, despite the article’s attempt to portray today as exceptionally full of stressors, that we’re living in more stressful times than our parents, grandparents or any other generation. Actually, I would suggest that in a great many important ways, our lives today are impacted by fewer serious stressors. For the vast majority of Americans, our lives today contain fewer important, serious threats to our health and well-being. We’ve exchanged fewer serious threats for many more less serious ones.

And yet, I tend to agree with the overall point that margin in our lives is more important today than before. Partly that’s because of choices that we as 21st century Americans have made – we’ve chosen to be online, constantly connected, in continual communication, constantly stimulated. And that choice has the consequence that we have no time to think, recharge and recover.

But I think the bigger issue is that margin is most important in times of change. What is different today than in the past is not that there is more stress today; what is different today is that stressors are changing much more rapidly. If I worked 14-hour shifts in a factory in 1920’s Detroit, I had a lot of stress in my life in terms of threats to my health and my family’s well-being, but things rarely changed and I could at least develop a strategy to deal with the stress. Same if I was a peasant in 14th century France. The actual stress in my life would probably be greater at those times, but they didn’t change and I could develop strategies. Today what is different is the pace of change. We cannot develop effective strategies to deal with change without taking time to do so. And it’s hard to take the time, because things are changing as we speak. It’s much easier to focus on the immediate than the long-term, so we just keep going. Introducing margin in our lives means including a focus on the long-term. So it takes an intentional effort to take resources away from the immediate and use them to work on the long-term. That needs to be much more intentional today than in the past, and so we have much more problem with margin today than we did in the past.

That isn’t meant to take anything away from the idea of margin -- it’s vital to our long-term effectiveness. I just think that making the need for margin center on stress ignores the very real stress on past generations. Understanding the need for margin in terms of change helps to recognize that since we do live in unique times in terms of change, our need for margin is more important than ever.