

Artifact: Leadership Breakfast

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While at Roberts Wesleyan College, I held a twice per year Leadership Breakfast to pull together leaders in the community to share their experiences around a central topic. The Breakfast gave the community a chance to gather, network, and advance their leadership skills by hearing from experts and peers in the field. Because of the pandemic, my March 2020 Leadership Breakfast was cancelled as the NYS Governor restricted the size of public gatherings. Not content to cancel an event that had the potential of helping so many people, my team and I were able to pivot to an online forum in November of 2020, bringing valuable information on the role of risk in leadership and illustrating DEL Outcomes 5 and 6.

Contributing to the Theory and Practice of Leadership within Higher Education

DEL Outcome 5 states, “Assess existing research and practices and design, conduct and interpret research to contribute to the theory and practice of leadership within one’s discipline and in interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, or transdisciplinary contexts” (DEL Learning Guide, 2020, p. 36). For the Leadership Breakfast series, I have had to curate leadership topics that would not only be of interest to local community, business, and organizational leaders but also would progress the conversation rather than restate what we already know. To do this, I often pull together very different leaders into a panel around a key topic from my leadership interests and research as I did for this particular breakfast.

As I began to prepare for the March 2020 Breakfast in November of 2019, I could not let go of the idea of risk in leadership. To me, risk and innovation are not just a good idea but are required for leadership. In fact, Bywater (2019) noted that risk propensity is one of the top characteristics that keep a leader in his or her role. Additionally, Sudrajat (2015) tied entrepreneurial mindset – “creativity, motivation, and propensity to take risks” – to the competitive advantages of the firm, similar to Beck & Wiersma’s (2013) findings on how the dynamic managerial capabilities of the leader can impact an organization.

As I mulled the topic of risk and as I continued to research it for the DEL, I had a conversation with a local non-profit leader as part of DEL 720, Leadership in Context. Though I initially interviewed Sankar to hear more of his leadership story, I learned that risk was essential to his success at bringing the organization from a struggling \$17M operating budget to an organization of six separate companies and over \$300M operating budget. Sankar’s story is one of risk – risk in coming to the United States, risk in taking the helm of a struggling organization, and risk in how he grew, including adding managed care and operating a spice business to serve many of our disabled residents in Monroe County.

After talking with Sankar, the CEO of one of Rochester’s largest non-profits, I assembled a panel that also included an executive vice president of Kodak who was responsible for bringing 400 speed film to market to compete with Fuji and the president of a small seminary who had moved across the country to take the lead right after the seminary downsized and sold their physical campus. After interviewing each of the other presenters and assessing and assembling my readings and research along with the content of our interviews into a good mix of where the speakers had similar and different answers to start the panel, we were set to hold our breakfast on March 20, 2020, with over a hundred registrants.

Of course, none of us expected the COVID-19 pandemic to hit. We received official word from the NYS Governor that all in-person events over 50 people (and then a day or two later over 10 people) were no longer permitted. We dutifully cancelled the event, quarantined and worked from home for several months, and then decided to pivot to an online format, which we had never done before. But the topic was simply too important to let go, so I pushed my team to think creatively to bring the Breakfast to life. We came up with an online format that felt good to us and highlighted our speakers and their stories of risk and leadership. It was an impressive conversation that flowed and built on each story, even though the presenters had never met each other before. Though their stories and experiences were unique, the principles of risk seamlessly tied them together. We were able to add a networking component to the virtual event for attendees to extend the conversation and learning in breakout groups, and many attendees complimented the event as one of the best they had attended.

Generating and Conserving New Knowledge through Conversation

DEL Outcome 6 states, “Generate and critically evaluates new knowledge, conserves the most important ideas and findings that are a legacy of past and current work and engages in the transformational work of communicating knowledge responsibly to others” (DEL Learning Guide, 2020, p. 37). By curating the panel and moderating the audience questions, I have been able to disseminate leadership knowledge in new ways that co-creates knowledge and leaves a legacy. By allowing for networking and audience participation, the knowledge is conserved and transformative in much the same way Stacey (2012) noted as, “Change can only happen in many, many local interactions” (p. 15).

My leadership model is Conversational Leadership, and a large part of that model includes all the ways in which we interact with each other and with how we progress the conversation of knowledge and experience together. This itself includes a bit of practical judgment or *phronesis*, the “artful synthesis of both knowledge *and* experience” (Madsbjerg, 2017, p. 6). For me, the Leadership Breakfast includes the initial conversations I have with our speakers in our pre-interviews, which help me to better understand the speakers’ experiences and thoughts around our chosen leadership topic, but those interviews are simply a start to the conversation. As I interweave their stories together, thinking of where the concepts – if not the experiences – are similar and different, where they converge and merge, I usually send back a transcript of starter questions with reminders of their stories and answers, so all of the participants can begin to see the pattern of how their experiences interconnect. Finally, on the day of the Breakfast, we add in the participants who add questions to the chat (usually it is through an app that I moderate as we go, but we again had to modify and pivot because of COVID). As I was able to choose and ask participant questions, and as the panelists answered, the conversation became fuller, and we all co-created knowledge and learned from each other.

The Leadership Breakfast series, and this particular switch to an online format, illustrates how collectively, we can tell our stories, how we can generate knowledge, and how we can conserve the best parts of that conversation. Going back to my leadership model, I think about the larger conversations we are part of. Similar to discursive leadership where there is big “D” and little “d” discourse (Fairhurst, 2011, p. 497), conversational leadership includes the larger, or big “C”, conversation that entails the happenings of our culture and organizations and the little “c” conversations that are the day-to-day ways in which we influence. As we interact conversationally and relationally as leaders, we have the opportunity to invoke and create change

in ourselves, in others, in culture, and in the organizations in which we serve. Marshak & Bushe (2018) discussed the generative process in which leaders look for an emergent solution where experimentation and learning a large part of the process. This, for me, is what the collective audience, panelists, and myself are doing at a Leadership Breakfast as we process problems and talk through experiences and learning and is a large part of why the event appeals to me as a way of passing along knowledge to others. I think it is also why it holds so much appeal to participants, as they do not simply sit on one side of the conversation taking information in but also become part of the giving and talking part, helping to create a final product, solution, and continuous learning loop for all of us as a collective.

After our first virtual Leadership Breakfast on Risk, I was able to hold a second virtual event in which I interviewed our County Health Commissioner around his ability to pivot during the height of the COVID crisis. I hope to bring a similar event to engage the business community around leadership in my new role at Champlain College as a way to connect the community and preserve and transform knowledge.

References

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