

Year One Reflection

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A Year of Highs and Lows

Through the encouragement and guidance of a trusted mentor in the summer of 2018, I completed a vision collage. Within one year of completing that collage, I was at Residency One in the Doctorate of Executive Leadership (DEL) with the University of Charleston in West Virginia. Little did I know from that picture of a doctoral hat and a keyboard key with the word “education” on my collage what a journey I would be on. Additionally, I had no idea the personal and professional challenges I would face and just how important the grounding and guidance the DEL would provide.

In terms of life events, I experienced some very high highs and some very low lows. These included our Advancement team winning the largest gift in the history of the college, a \$7.5M gift to build a long-awaited Community Engagement Center. This announcement and press conference was personally and professionally affirming as I served as the lead proposal writer for this gift. Following this announcement and accomplishment though came a difficult professional period with my direct supervisor. It was through this period, however, that I learned a tough lesson that it is not my job to protect my reputation; it’s my job to be who I am. By holding my head up and not defending misperceptions, I came out of this time with my dignity and respect intact and with a valuable lesson.

Keeping to the highs and lows theme, I also ended up experiencing an emergency gall bladder surgery followed by a planned ankle surgery followed by the COVID shutdown. Though

the COVID shutdown was challenging on many levels, including on the family level, professionally it afforded me many opportunities. I began to work very long hours as one of my primary responsibilities at work is tracking government changes, of which there were many! Additionally, I was tapped by the President of the College to work on several task forces related to reopening the college safely and efficiently.

Another opportunity during this time was the CARES Act funding, its management, and the additional resources that afforded us the opportunity to apply for several competitive grants funded through the bill. One of these – a true high for me – was winning an NEH CARES grant that saved a faculty member's position and allowed the College to bring out its first Associate's degree in Arts & Culture in a fully online format. The grant was the first federal grant in over 40 years for the College and the first federal grant I have won. Throughout these highs and lows, the DEL was a stabilizing factor and a source of true learning and growth as a student, as a person, and as a professional.

Development as a Scholar

Certainly I grew as a scholar through the various papers and application assignments; however, each of these assignments also spurred growth professionally as I began to apply principles to my work and personal life.

Papers & Applications

I tried to intertwine application assignments with the paper in order to put into practice the scholarly principles I was exploring and learning.

DEL 700 – Intellectual Humility & Inquiry. This paper was really just a jumping off point, but it set me up well to always keep an open mind on what I might learn and to always use my assigned papers as a way to explore not just as a way prove my own foregone conclusions.

DEL 710 – Transformational & Relational Leadership Through Lens of

Conversation. This paper set up ideas of transformational and relational leadership and how I see overlaps and commonalities between the two. Ideas of conversation equaling relationship where we listen, speak, mentor, cast vision, build trust, and more really helped to inform my leadership model. It also continues to inform how I see my day-to-day leadership evolving. The application assignment included the beginnings of my leadership model, which I eventually refined and presented at Residency Two.

DEL 720 – Strategic Foresight & Culture of Agility. While focused on foresight and how we cast vision and look forward, this paper focused on building a culture of people poised to pivot, take advantage of opportunities, and repel threats. Through this study, I learned if your culture is not one that allows for change, none of your vision and planning will come to anything. This class and paper impressed upon me the idea of continual change and was the beginnings of my thoughts on pivoting and a complex world, though I didn't have the language to fully express these thoughts at the time. My application assignment was a presentation of my interview with Sankar Sewnauth, CEO of a large non-profit that primarily focuses on people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Sankar's leadership concepts around people, risk, and personal responsibility eventually led to his speaking on a panel for Leadership Breakfast at the College and also as a speaker for UC's Enlightened Living Days.

DEL 730 – Pragmatism & Organizational Decision Making. This paper was pivotal for me, as I explored ideas of process and how we learn in doing and in action. These theories really built my vision of leadership as an ongoing conversation and as a way to always be in learning mode rather than process and completion mode. This was a key turning point in my own development, and I began to see changes in how I responded to and how I began to think

proactively in my approach to meetings, grants, conversations, and processes at work. This application assignment led to initial thoughts on my personal code of conduct and ethics, which I have refined and included in my DEL portfolio.

DEL 760 – Leadership Development & Retention/Intention. This paper focused on how we invest and develop followers and the value they find in that process. If we invest time, input, and resources into people, they feel valued. This concept is a part of building culture and community but also a brass-tacks learning on how to keep an organization's good people working longer and harder for the organization. Out of this paper and the associated application assignment, I organized and submitted a large grant to help the College implement a formal leadership development program.

DEL 810 – Practical Judgment, Complexity & Organizational Decision Making/Leadership Development. Moving beyond doing something right is such an important concept as a leader. If we are blinded by the right answers, we may never actually make the right decisions! In a complex world, there are only decisions – not answers, and sometimes these decisions move outside of process or lean on intuition and tacit knowledge. Passing along this type of knowledge and decision making is vital for organizations to grow and be filled with people who can push mission forward. This paper helped me to have the language to express much of what I had been feeling and acting as I grew professionally. It helped me understand more about complexity and the idea that leaders are those who are willing to be uncomfortable in the pause of time between the decisions made and the followers understanding of those decisions. The application assignment for this class included an update on the implementation and leadership of the grant process for the formal leadership development program.

DEL 740 – Path Dependency & Organizational Change. This paper focused not just on what path dependency is but on how organizations can break the patterns and be free to change as needed. It starts to get at the idea of thriving rather than either failing or simply surviving. Ambidexterity, taking risks, installing new leadership, and other shake ups are often necessary and should be seen as good rather than mourned. This paper helped me understand much of the context of higher education and the tension between wanting to be innovative and growing and wanting to honor the traditions and identity of the past. I think it helped form a basis for my ideas toward my dissertation as well. The associated application assignment for this program focused on my work to implement a federal grants strategy as part of a way to help the College thrive.

Leadership Theory

When I started the DEL program, I was very interested in transformational leadership, as it was one of the most prominent styles I had experienced I, through a close mentor. Over the last year, however, I have become more and more interested in relational leadership and how we influence people in our day-to-day conversations (Stacey, 2012, p. 15). I can see more clearly the impact and influence that we can have at every level of an organization by creating the culture we want and influencing decisions simply by the conversations we have as we spread and swap ideas.

This led me to considering discursive leadership theory, which was difficult at first to understand but gained my attention over the last year. The idea of the conversation as a larger concept in an organization or society interests me, as it is the background for how we function and interact with each other in the smaller, individual conversations. It is in these smaller, day-

to-day conversations where we can have the most impact, even as we drive toward and contribute to the larger conversation as leaders and stakeholders.

Power is also very interesting to me, and I remember talking about political power in one of our early classes. Many people think power is a dirty word, but we all experience it and use it, especially as leaders. I've learned two very important lessons this year on power. One, I learned not to give my power away. At a certain point I realized I was asking for permission and getting buy in on decisions I had the right to make. I'm not sure if this is a gender trait of female leaders or not, but I realized I needed to use the power I had and not give away my decision-making capabilities to others. And two, I learned that collaboration can be a type of power. Leveraging others' ideas and strengths rather than coercing is a deeply strong use of power and one I had not previously considered. These may seem like opposing ideas; however, I see them as two sides of the same coin. It takes a true leader to balance when to utilize power and make decisions and when to collaborate and utilize the power of the collective group.

As I think through all of these theories and ideas, I realize my perspective would be best situated in complexity. It was through taking the complexity this course where I found the language for what I have been thinking and trying to express as I have learned and grown over the last year. The world is complex and ever changing. It is recombinant, as Badaracco (2013) explained, and the old ways of thinking and making decisions simply do not work anymore. I love the ideas of path dependency and breaking free of that dependency through large or small reverberations (a big shock or many small conversations, say); I love the idea that we can make decisions and then revise them as we receive new information; I love that conversation can change minds, directions, organizations, and societies. I love that we can do this in process, that we learn as we go, that it takes all of us to make the changes.

These thoughts reinforce and refine my model of leadership. In conversational leadership I have found a model that incorporates the change found in a complex world, the relationships and discussions that change people and, in turn, organizations, and that allows for the learning and action I see in a pragmatic worldview.

Development as a Leader

One of the most significant yet unexpected areas of growth was as a professional. Over the last year, I have worked hard to grow as an individual and to apply my lessons in the workplace, and as a result, not only do I see myself differently as a leader but others do as well.

Self-Assessment

I targeted Emotional Expression, Empathy, and Flexibility for development this year, and I believe I have grown in all three areas. First, in terms of emotional expression, I started early on with being willing to identify with words what emotion I was feeling and being intentionally vulnerable with people in expressing that emotion. Where before the DEL I would rely on anger to cover any emotions I thought were weak, I gradually began to see how expressing the correct emotion – tiredness, hurting, sad – was powerful. As I shared those emotions, I could see conversations turn around as people responded so much differently to me, conversation space opened up, and relationships were built rather than torn down. A few trusted mentors and advisors have helped guide me in this area, and I continue to rely on their feedback as I grow in my ability to identify emotions and express myself clearly, opening up space for others in the conversation in the process.

In terms of empathy, I can see good growth. In thinking particularly about my leadership model and grant meetings, I can see how I have turned from being process and goal oriented to incorporating more of a learning stance. As I have done this, I have opened up more space for

others to “get there” with me, to learn, and to express their own ideas. Rather than pushing people to comply or see my vision, I am much more comfortable with and a proponent of seeing them discover truth and growth for themselves. This has helped me understand others better and, in turn, has provided a desire to see them succeed and a desire for them to be happy. I care deeply for people and always have, but this last year has allowed me to let more people into my circle of care than ever before.

Flexibility is difficult, but in the complexity class it dawned on me that leaders need to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. As we wait for people to “get there”, it can be uncomfortable to see them going in a direction we don’t like or to wait for them to come around (or not) to our vision. It is uncomfortable to follow someone else’s lead when you think your way is right. I learned this year to follow the person in charge even if I disagree. During the pandemic, I had people come to me in incredulity about this decision or that from administration. I think they thought I would dig in my heels and commiserate with them. Instead, I reminded them there are no right answers, only answers and pivots. And that the people in charge have every right to make the decisions, and it is difficult enough without all the naysaying, so it is our job to follow and support. This is true growth for me.

Professional Development

Over the last year, I have begun to dig into mentorship from the mentor perspective. There are several people I mentor now, including a few developing leaders at the College and one alumnus who I am mentoring in fundraising, as he has leading his own non-profit as a passion project. My mentees include formal and informal relationships, men and women, people of color and majority culture, and a range of ages and positions. This is an area I would like to

continue focusing, as I can see potential not just in changing people but in changing organizations through those people.

As a leader, I have developed as well. Through the DEL, I have realized that my worldview tends to be pragmatic and is action and learning oriented. Aristotle's ideas of phronesis – the combination of knowledge and experience – has truly captured my attention and plays into how I move and live in this world. Certainly I strive for a level of practical judgment that allows for me to be effective in what I do but also takes into consideration the ways the people involved in my decisions are impacted.

This is a change for me, as prior to the DEL, I was often focused on a more “right is right no matter the impact” way of seeing the world. This last year has molded me into a person who views people as primary. If we do not love people, we have no business leading anything or anyone. This includes advocacy as a large part of my worldview. I feel compelled to speak up, encourage, and lift up others who are in situations of unjustness, and I choose to give my time, expertise, money, and words to those causes I feel in need of support.

Implementation of Leadership

For me, if you only think about things and never implement, you are less than effective as a leader. I believe we need to give ourselves space to think and strategize, and I believe we need to give ourselves the time and tools to implement those strategies. Both are necessary.

Organizational Impact

I currently work in a small, private college that allows for a lot of input. Because I work in grants, I am often either tasked with finding funding for people's projects or am given the freedom to seek funding for something that seems strategic and in alignment with our mission. The following are projects in the latter category.

Formal Leadership Development Program. Out of a CAD, a paper, and two application assignments, I realized the College has a strong informal leadership development game but a very weak if not absent formal development program. I also learned that providing any type of career training and professional development is key to both retention and intention of employees. So I set about researching and found a couple of foundations that might be interested, invited a cross-section of faculty and staff to join me, and developed a plan and a budget to implement a formal leadership development program at the College. While the first foundation declined, we have already submitted the proposal to a second foundation.

Leadership Breakfast Series. This is one of my favorite aspects of my job. The concept is a networking breakfast for mid- to high-level corporate and community leaders to come together and engage in learning around leadership. I have worked on making this series successful since inheriting it in the early days of my career at the College. This year was special, since we had been cancelled due to COVID; however, we were able to figure out how to bring the event to people in a virtual format and are looking forward to a successful and repeatable event.

Federal Grants Strategy. This is something I have been working on throughout this first year in the DEL and have used several concepts I learned to push this strategy forward. The College had not won a federal grant in over 40 years until we won the NEH CARES grant for our AS in Arts & Culture this year. While it was a huge accomplishment and one that I am proud of, it is also a lot of work to make sure people understand how to manage and report on a federal grant. On the larger scale, I have been working on process and policies, and I was able to find an internal ally and begin mapping out ideas for these and for infrastructure study. My goal will be

to assemble key leaders on campus for input into how federal grants might impact their areas in terms of infrastructure in order to give my best recommendations to Cabinet.

Task Forces. Finally, through the COVID pandemic, I was able to increase my service by serving on several re-open task forces in addition to editing and finalizing our required re-opening plan for New York State. Because of my work with government relations, it was part of my job to stay informed on the near-daily and sometimes hourly changes announced by the NYS Governor and the Monroe County Health Department and to advise the President and the other members of the task forces. I was honored to serve on these task forces in order to help our campus return to some semblance of normalcy during COVID.

Community Impact

In terms of the broader community impact, my position afforded me opportunities to serve and influence throughout the community.

Chili Library Foundation Board. This opportunity came my way through the President, as the Board President had asked for a representative from the College to serve. Through this position, I have been able to offer consultation and experience, particularly in grants and fundraising, as the Foundation looks to raise funds for the new Library that is set to open in Spring 2021.

Leadership Breakfast Series. This event not only provides impact within the College but is far-reaching throughout the community. By providing access to high-level speakers and panelists, this event offers insight and professional development to attendees in an affordable and impactful way. The series also offers excellent networking opportunities, and I am proud to help connect people in this way.

Professional Associations. Over the last year, I have continued to participate in various professional associations, including:

- Grant Writers Network – a local monthly meeting of local area grant writers
- ECFRO – an association of corporate and foundation relations officers in higher education, of which I co-founded
- Grants Professionals Association – a national network of grant writers
- GPC – Grants Professional Certification kept active through various activities
- CLASP – membership in online listserv dedicated to federal grants and grant writers
- Leaders are Readers – a College reading group meant to support women leaders

References

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Harvard Business Review Press.

Stacey, R. D. (2012). *Tools and techniques of leadership and management: Meeting the challenge of complexity.* Routledge.