

Tricks and Traps of Teaching Leadership

Abstract

This roundtable discussion builds on one from last year in which we discussed why management educators loved, like, or loathe teaching *leadership*. We pick up where we left off by homing in on the tricks and traps that separate these three types of experiences. That is, we aim to have a more focused conversation around the common problems that occur when teaching leadership and the clever solutions that others have come up with to overcome those hurdles. We will discuss potential improvements to those solutions so everyone can take away ideas for improving their leadership lessons.

Keywords: Leadership, Course Design, Round Table Discussion

Introduction

Whether you love, like, or loath the idea of teaching leadership, most, if not, all management courses and programs include one or more on the topic. This trend suggests two critical assumptions: (1) that we, management educators, truly understand leadership, and (2) that we can convert that understanding into meaningful lessons that will equip our students to become effective and ethical leaders. As much as the students, administrators, and employers impacted would hope these assumptions valid, various experiences have left some of us with more questions than answers about how to teach leadership *well*. The objective of the proposed roundtable discussion, therefore, is for participants to share the traps that have undermined their experiences teaching leadership as well as the tricks they have learned for overcoming those pitfalls to create powerful learning experiences.

Theoretical Foundations

We start with a definition of leadership based on those that appear in most OB and leadership textbooks (e.g, Northouse, 2015): *the process through which an individual influences others to achieve a common good or common goal*. This definition will serve as the theoretical foundation and starting point for our discussion. To be certain, we accept the potentiality that other educators may prefer other definitions of leadership. If raised, we will acknowledge that there may be other valid definitions and remind participants that we have a different focus in this session.

That focus concerns the *practical* challenges of leading leadership classes. As such, we will steer conversation to address the structure and elements of effective leadership courses. To be certain, we are open to discussion of the various models and types of leadership developed by theorists and taught in textbooks. However, we will ask that such references be made in the context of informing course, lesson, and exercise design. We take this position because recent feedback from students tells us that the typical business student is far more interested in learning *how* to become an effective leader and have next to no interest in decontextualized models of leadership. Findings by Rubin, and Dierdorff (2011) suggest that these experiences are not unique.

Teaching Implications

Rubin, and Dierdorff (2011) showed that business curricula tend to be completely out of phase with the priorities of *all* of its major stakeholder groups (i.e., students, employees, faculty, and administrators). Rather than harping on this disconnect and criticizing the

system, we hope that our session will provide participants actionable lessons that will help them make their courses the exception to this ubiquitous and problematic trend. That is, we hope that our session will help participants become more effective leaders of future leaders.

Overall, we anticipate that our session will allow some participants to discuss common problems they experience when teaching leadership and others to share the clever solutions that they have implemented. Whereas last year's discussion was rather general, this time we aim to have participants walk away with specific ideas or improvements to implement in their leadership lessons. Without knowing who will attend and what they will say, however, we find it difficult to anticipate what other teaching implications may result.

If conversation should stall for any reason, we will be prepared to jump start it around our starting point: the definition. That is, we stand ready to open dialogue about the potential of building a course entirely around two themes. Theme one is using the definition of leadership as the centerpiece of the course. This idea comes from a recent teaching experience in which the text used left everyone frustrated, including the instructor who thought he was required to use it. Mid-semester, nevertheless, we shifted focus from the book to merely dissecting the definition in hopes that it would help students be more successful with their term project. Given that results were mixed, he would very much welcome feedback on this approach from other instructors.

Theme two is sharing what leadership students (same course as theme 1) said they would expect in a good course on leadership. Specifically, they said they hoped to learn six things, at most two of which were directly addressed by the course's textbook:

1. "Push us to think outside the box"
2. Identify leadership skills *and* help us evaluate them (i.e., our own and others).
3. Teach us how to apply what we are learning
4. Allow us to practice leading
5. Explain follower-leader compatibility
6. Show patterns of effectiveness

Session Description (60 minutes)

1. 0 – 5 Opening comments: objectives for the session
+ brief recap of last year's session.
2. 5 – 10 Reflection time to think about tricks and traps
3. 15 – 25 Traps experienced by loathers of leadership teaching
4. 25 – 35 Tricks learned by lovers of leadership teaching
5. 35 – 45 Whiteboard session matching solutions to problems
6. 45 – 55 Feedback for making clever tricks even better
7. 55 – 60 Wrap-up and closing comments

References

Northouse, P.G. (2015) *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 7th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing.

Rubin, R.S. & Dierdorff, E.C. (2011) On the Road to Abilene: Time to Manage Agreement About MBA Curricular Relevance. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 10(1), 148-161.