

# **Practice What You Preach: Using an Experiential Learning Approach to Teach Leadership**

**Mark D. Fulford**  
**University of Central Missouri**

*In many college courses or corporate professional development seminars on leadership, the emphasis is on leadership theories and the chosen method for content delivery is lecture. In this manuscript, two main arguments are put forth: 1) the emphasis should be on leadership skills; and 2) participants should be responsible for their own learning as well as that of one another. A leadership course developed and delivered which focuses on making participants better leaders by emphasizing leadership skills and using team-based learning as the principle delivery method is described.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In too many leadership courses offered on campuses (or corporate professional development seminars offered in various venues) worldwide, the emphasis is on passive learning with participants listening to someone lecture to them on leadership theories. While familiarizing oneself with these theories may serve to inform course participants, it does little toward making each a better leader. For example: assume in a lecture that participants are told that most effective leaders are visionary and inspirational; Does this mean that the participants themselves will become more forward-looking and better able to motivate others as a result? Of course not. So, what have participants truly “learned”?

### **Learning Theory**

Bloom’s Taxonomy (1956) and subsequent revisions are considered to be the seminal works regarding the various “levels” of learning. In the cognitive domain, from the lowest order process to the most complex, the levels are: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The first level involves the acquisition of knowledge; the ability to recall information acquired. The second level involves comprehension of the information acquired; the ability to explain what it means. The third level involves the ability to apply the knowledge acquired; to solve problems in new contexts using the knowledge acquired. The next three levels involve critical thinking and go beyond the scope of this discussion.

In his Theory of Andragogy, Knowles (1984) outlined four assumptions about adult learners: (1) adults tend to be more self-directed; (2) adults possess personal histories which defines their identities and serve as a resource of experiential learning upon which new learnings can be applied; (3) motivation in adults is directed to more socially relevant learning; and (4) adult learners have interest in immediate application for problem-solving. It is this last statement that connects to level 3 of Bloom’s Taxonomy. In a related vein, adult education must be seen as life-enhancing (Boggs, 1981). Several situations which Boggs predicts adults will not perceive as life-enhancing include those where: 1) the learner is provided

with answers rather than arriving at them independently; 2) the learner is not challenged to exceed previous personal performance standards; and 3) the learner accumulates information without contextual relevance and interpretive or reflective skill building.

### **Delivery Method**

Once we are clear on the type of learning objectives we have set (i.e., at what level of Bloom's Taxonomy we are aiming), we must then explore the various methods used to deliver the information and facilitate the learning process. So, if we assume our objective is for learners to come away with the ability to apply what they have learned, we must identify the delivery method necessary to accomplish this objective.

Regardless of whether you look at the type (depth) of learning taking place or the methods used to most effectively facilitate the learning process, adult learning theory clearly indicates that we learn the most by doing. This has been borne out by research conducted at the National Training Laboratory in Bethel, Maine which indicates that there is 75% retention of information that is acquired through "experience" versus only 5% retention of information acquired via lecture. In order to accomplish this objective in a leadership "learning" context, each participant needs to be given the tools used by exemplary leaders and opportunities to practice and use them (i.e., experience them). The purpose of this paper is to introduce readers to a leadership skills course developed using a Team-Based Learning (TBL) approach to offer such opportunities.

## **COURSE DEVELOPMENT**

A colleague and I were tasked with the creation of a new leadership course for our management majors. During the course development process, we had to come to terms with our respective biases, assumptions, and experiences. We ultimately agreed on two basic assumptions: 1) everyone will find him/herself in a situation where they have to lead others; and 2) everyone can become a better leader (i.e., improve their leadership skills). Therefore, the main objective of the course became: **make each participant a better leader**. We identified three major participant outcomes: 1) understand what makes a leader effective; 2) be able to identify effective leadership behaviors in others; and 3) have significantly improved leadership skills. While we reviewed many "traditional" leadership texts, we found most of them emphasized leadership theory, as opposed to leadership skills. One resource, Kouzes and Posner's (2007) *The Leadership Challenge*, met most of our needs. The authors conducted extensive research and identified "five practices of exemplary leadership": Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge The Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart. While one does not have to master each of the five in order to be considered a leader, the better one gets at any or all, the more effective leader one will become. We then had to choose a delivery method that would allow participants opportunities to practice and hone their skills in each of these five areas.

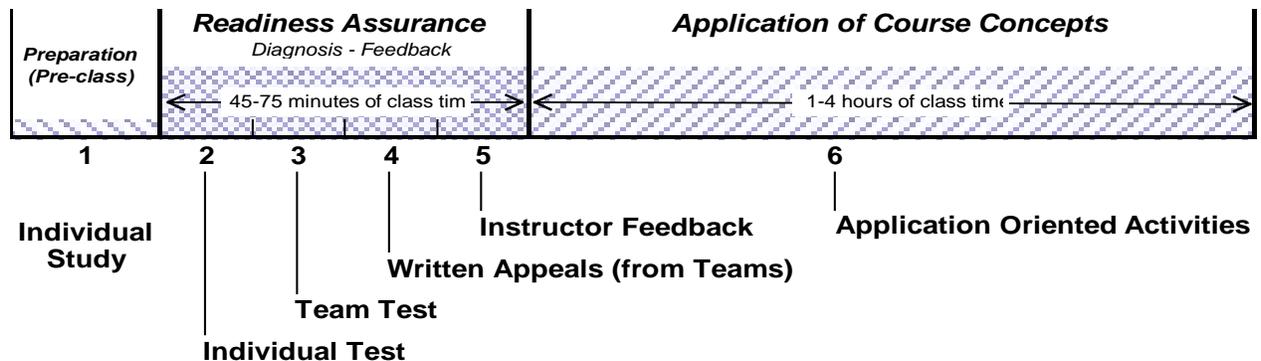
### **Team-Based Learning**

One of the hallmarks of Team-Based Learning (TBL; Michaelsen et al., 2002) is the assumption that individuals learn more from one another than they do on their own. However, TBL is not simply placing participants into small groups; it typically requires changing the entire structure of a course. As Fink (2002) says, "Team-based learning takes small group learning to an even greater level of effectiveness. When the groups are properly formed, remain intact long enough to become cohesive teams, and are repeatedly given challenging tasks with prompt and clear feedback, then students learn the content, they learn how to use the content, they learn about themselves and how to interact with others on major tasks, and they learn how to keep on learning after the course is over". (p. 8).

TBL consists of repeating sequences of 3 phases (see Figure 1). In Phase 1, learners study independently outside of class to master key concepts from their assigned readings (i.e., information acquisition).

## FIGURE 1 Team-Based Learning Instructional Activity Sequence

(Repeated for each major instructional unit, i.e., 5-7 per course)



Phase 2 focuses on ensuring learners' readiness to apply Phase 1 knowledge (i.e., information recall and comprehension). In Phase 2, individual learners first complete a multiple-choice "readiness assessment test" (RAT) and hand in their answer sheets. While the individual answers are being scored, each team then re-takes the RAT using a "scratch-off" answer sheet that provides both immediate feedback and the opportunity to receive partial credit if their initial team answer is not correct. Both tests are graded and count towards the final course grade. At this point, the instructor can further explain any concepts the participants were not able to learn on their own. The advantage of doing so at this time is it allows the instructor to limit "instruction" to those content areas that were problematic for the students (as opposed to covering material already understood and running the risk of losing their attention). Phase 3 focuses on higher-level learning and skill development (i.e., application, analysis and teaching others). The next several sessions include experiential activities for the teams in which they are required to "use" the content (e.g., answer questions, solve problems, acquire a skill, etc.)

In our leadership course, the use of *The Leadership Challenge* fits perfectly, as there are five "modules" (corresponding to each of the "Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership"). At the beginning of each module, students are given a RAT over the assigned reading (there are two chapters per module), followed by the team RAT. For the application activities, each team is assigned one of the "Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership" and must develop and deliver a workshop in which the members of the other teams are participants. This not only allows workshop participants the opportunity to practice that particular leadership skill, but it also allows students to practice and use all five skills in the development and delivery of the workshop. In addition, both the instructor and the workshop participants (members from the other teams) provide feedback to the team that developed and delivered the workshop.

### Course Administration

Earlier, three major participant outcomes were identified: 1) understand what makes a leader effective; 2) be able to identify effective leadership behaviors in others; and 3) have significantly improved leadership skills. We accomplish the first through the assigned readings from the text (self-preparation) and from the class discussion (limited by necessity) that follows the RATs. We accomplish the second in several ways: instructor-led workshop; team workshops; and final assessment. Near the beginning of the term, when the students have just been introduced to the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership (through reading of the Preface, plus Chapters 1, 2, and 13 in the text), the instructor leads class participants through a workshop involving the use of the feature film *Hoosiers*. Teams view the film, then are given a set of five flash cards containing the name of each of the practices of exemplary leadership. One team is given a specific scene from the film and, after sufficient time to discuss, asked to

identify the particular practice of exemplary leadership illustrated in that scene. Then, the other teams are asked to reveal their decisions by the showing of the flash cards each selected. Any discrepancies are discussed. The “point team” is then asked to identify any other scenes from the film it believes illustrate that particular leadership practice. This sequence of events occurs over and over until each team has had an opportunity to be the “point team”. In each subsequent workshop delivered by the teams, one of the requirements is that the workshop contains an activity where the participants have to identify effective leadership behaviors in others (either through the use of videos or role plays). The final assessment involves the use of another feature film, *Flight of the Phoenix*. Participants view the film and then are asked to respond to questions regarding the various characters and scenes in the film and the specific leadership practices that are illustrated. The workshops that each team must develop and deliver allow us to accomplish the third major participant outcome (have significantly improved leadership skills). In the delivery of the workshop (which must contain experiential activities related to the assigned leadership practice), the other members of the class gain hands-on experience and become more skilled at that particular leadership practice. In addition, the members of the team facilitating the workshop hone their skills in all five leadership practices during the workshop development and delivery processes.

### **Impact on Student Learning**

The author recently concluded a section of the leadership course described herein. On the final assessment, students were asked to use the concepts presented in *The Leadership Challenge* to explain why the instructor chose to emphasize leadership skills (as opposed to leadership theory) and to use a team-based learning approach. Some excerpts from student responses follow:

“With this approach, each leadership skill was learned in a hands-on way. Each team got very good experience by leading the workshops. We had to challenge the normal way of learning and learn by teaching. You learn more by teaching than by just sitting in your chair and listening to a lecture”.

“This approach was chosen because leadership isn’t something you can obtain, or improve upon by learning theories. Leadership is something that is experienced...A lot of the concepts we learned in [the text], we had to actually use in order to develop our workshops”.

“As pointed out by the authors, all of the experiences shared with them were those of someone doing something; not just sitting there telling others what to do. And the authors’ 5 Practices of Exemplary Leadership help magnify that point. The class not only taught about those practices, but put us in situations where we learned how to identify and develop those practices in ourselves and those around us. And by learning how to develop those ideas, we will become better leaders, not necessarily great leaders, but better than we were before”.

“The process in which the class was structured was different than any class I’ve had before and in many ways I learned more and had fun doing it”.

“...and I think through delivering workshops and practicing all of the leadership skills is an excellent way to obtain real change in our normal behavior and form of thinking. In particular, I liked very much to be in this course and follow the instructions from the different teams and practice the leadership skills. I believe that now I can be a better leader than when I start the semester...”. [NOTE: this was written by an International Exchange Student]

“When putting us in teams and giving us a large task of teaching a workshop for 2 ½ hours, we were forced to practice and use all of the concepts in [the text] or our team would fail. Each of us had to Model The Way by acting through the values that we defined as a team. We had to Inspire A Shared Vision by getting the rest of the team on board and ready to go when one of us came up with an idea about the workshop. We had to Challenge the Process by thinking outside the box so that our workshop would be exciting and fun. We had to Enable Others to Act by giving our team members power to give their ideas and help out. And last, we had to Encourage the Heart and congratulate each other throughout the whole process so we all stayed positive and all felt like we succeed in the end and like we all had a part in it. By the way, I LOVED how the course was set up! Don’t change a thing; I learned soooo much”!

## CONCLUSION

Certainly, all of the work on leadership theory over the past 50 or more years has contributed to our further understanding of what behaviors are most likely to be effective under the specific circumstances. Knowing the differences between, for example, transformational and transactional leadership and the circumstances under which each is most effective is all well and good. However, this does not mean that the individual who “knows” this can necessarily become a transformational or transactional leader when the situation calls for it. Leadership is an action. It implies that someone is doing something and that others have chosen to follow. Therefore, I would argue that the emphasis of most leadership courses should shift from “knowledge acquisition” to “skill development”. Instead of focusing on how much leadership information is “learned”, the focus should be on making each participant a better leader at the end of the course compared to when the course began.

As Instructors, most of us know that the lecture method is not very effective for real “learning” to take place. Yet, most of us rely heavily on this method in our courses. Perhaps some of us have introduced “group work” to break the monotony or spice things up a bit. Oftentimes, when not thought through or designed appropriately, these activities are simply a means by which the group members “divide and conquer” and in no way, shape, or form develop as a team. On the other hand, team-based learning transforms groups into teams. The onus for learning is placed on the students. The onus for creating learning opportunities is placed on the instructor as it requires a strategic approach to course development and administration. In this paper, the use of a TBL approach to teach leadership skills is encouraged. I have seen, first-hand, the positive impact it has on student learning. I have also experienced the positive impact it has on the instructor—I am having more fun in the classroom as a result of using this approach.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson L.W. & Krathwohl, D.R. (Eds.) (2001). *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A revision of Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. New York: Longman.
- Bloom B. S. (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain*. New York: David McKay Co Inc.
- Boggs, D.L. (1981). Philosophies at Issue. In Kreitlow, B.W. (ed.) *Examining Controversies in Adult Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Fink, L.D. (2004). Beyond Small Groups: Harnessing the extraordinary power of learning teams. In Michaelsen, Bauman Knight, & Fink (Eds.), *Team-Based Learning: A transformative use of small groups in college teaching*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing LLC.

Knowles, M. (1984). *Andragogy in Action*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kouzes, J.M. & Posner, B.Z. (2007). *The Leadership Challenge*, 4th Edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Michaelsen, L.K., Bauman Knight, A., & Fink, L.D. (2002). *Team-Based Learning: A transformative use of small groups in college teaching*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing LLC.