

Developing Life-Long Learners Through Personal Growth Projects

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“I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.” – Mark Twain

Abstract

Leaders must become life-long learners if they are to remain effective in an environment that is both global and changing at an exponential pace. As Day (1992) noted, personal growth is essential in the leadership development process. In a personal leadership development course, students are required to complete a personal growth project in order to add to their personal leadership development. In this assignment, students choose a project that will stretch their personal comfort zone and allow their strengths to be utilized in a new way. Reflection is a key element of the process in which they tie their experiences with the personal growth project to their values, strengths, and leadership behaviors.

Introduction

The need for leaders to remain current in their field has always been important, but technology has increased the rate of change to blinding speed. In addition, the half-life of knowledge gained in college has shrunk to two to five years for many disciplines (Fischer, 1999). Leaders must become life-long learners if they are to remain effective in an environment that is both global and changing at an exponential pace. Not only must leaders continue their personal development, but it is essential that they create an environment where their followers embrace personal growth as well. As Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, and Smith note, an organization develops with its people (1994).

Leadership development, as defined by Brungardt (1996) and Conger (1992), involves both cognitive and affective assimilation. Ying and Yin (2010) stress colleges and universities should pay as much attention to the non-cognitive (affective) lessons as they do content (cognitive). Accreditations in higher education have begun to look at the integration of affective and cognitive activities in the classroom. Kuh (2001) examined the National Study for Student Engagement and found courses which integrate both affective and cognitive activities. Such courses not only leave a lasting impact on students, the students assimilate course content into their lives at a higher cognitive level.

This paper discusses how Personal Growth Projects (PGP) can be used to teach leadership students of any age how to become more self-directed, gain new skills, and develop a habit of life-long learning. A search of the literature did not reveal any research to date on the use of personal growth projects for this purpose.

Conceptual Framework

Kouzes and Posner state that “The instrument of leadership is the self, and mastery of the art of leadership comes from mastery of the self.” Self-discovery and, eventually, self-confidence are “really awareness of and faith in your own powers. These powers become clear and strong only as you work to identify and develop them” (2007, p. 344).

Fischer describes life-long learning as a mindset and habit that people must acquire. It includes self-directed learning, learning on demand, informal learning, and collaborative and organizational learning (1999). Such self-growth is what Peter Senge calls *Personal Mastery* –

“learning to expand our personal capacity to create the results we most desire, and creating an organizational environment which encourages all its members to develop themselves toward the goals and purposes they choose” (Senge, et al., 1994, p. 6).

Conger (1992) describes four key components and primary approaches to leadership development: (1) personal growth, (2) conceptual understanding, (3) feedback, and (4) skill development. The first approach, personal growth, makes a direct correlation to self-discovery and life-long learning. In personal growth, leaders must participate in activities that stretch their boundaries. Simple activities are not enough to complete the development; one must also reflect on behaviors, personal values, and desires. Allen and Hartman (2008) discuss the infusion of Conger’s components into various leadership development activities. They specifically address individual reflection within personal growth activities as a needed and integral part of the leadership development process.

Background

Personal Leadership Development is a three credit-hour course focusing on self-discovery and personal growth. In addition to learning about themselves as leaders, students are encouraged to develop a habit of personal growth and development through the identification and completion of a personal growth project (PGP). Developing the habit of personal growth helps students keep abreast of new information in their chosen field and gain new skills or abilities that lead to promotions. Life-long learning can also impact the creativity and innovation potential of people. Continuous learning fosters a deeper understanding of self as students pursue authenticity in their lives. The personal growth project (PGP) was developed by Sumer Odom (2005). A similar activity was utilized in an outdoor learning and leadership course. Ms. Odom created the assignment and corresponding rubrics, which each instructor modifies to fit his or her personal and course objectives.

Description of Practice

The primary objective of the personal growth project (PGP) is to foster an attitude of life-long learning among students. By building a mentality of personal growth in themselves, they are more likely to encourage that mentality in their followers. A secondary purpose of the PGP is to encourage students to become self-directed in their learning. Becoming a life-long learner means becoming adept at self-directed and informal learning – a process that is fundamentally different from traditional classroom learning.

Students are responsible for directing their own learning in their PGP. They must find sources of information on their chosen topic. These resources may be people that they know with skill in their project area, coaches, formal lessons or classes, books and how-to manuals, or selected Internet sites. Identification of these resources is a critical part of their project proposal.

On the first day of class, students are asked to brainstorm a list of five things that they would like to learn if they had time. They are given until the next class to reflect on their list. During the second class, the Personal Growth Project is explained to them in greater detail. They are asked to choose one of the things that they would like to learn and prepare a one-page proposal detailing the project they plan to complete and why they chose that project. Students must describe how this project will be new and challenging to them, identify the resources they will

use to learn to how to do their project, and how they will document their personal growth. Part of their documentation must be a learning log or diary where they reflect on the learning process. The focus of the PGP is not necessarily on completing the project, but on the learning process.

The instructor provides feedback to each student, pointing them to resources for learning about their project and describing additional ways that they can document their learning. Some projects are rejected because they lack a learning component (e.g. tandem skydiving, bungee jumping), are too difficult to document the student's growth, or cannot be completed in the time allotted. Once their proposals are approved, students are free to begin working on their project. Students must spend a minimum of six clock hours on their project; however, most spend far more than the minimum time.

Students are required to submit a mid-semester progress report that describes their work on the project thus far. They also identify any barriers that have impeded their work and how they plan to overcome those barriers.

The students' final project report consists of their learning log, documentation of completion of the project, and a one-page reflection paper that answers the following questions:

- What have I learned about myself through this experience?
- How can I integrate what I've learned into my life?
- What did this project teach me about values congruence?
- How does this experience help me become a more authentic leader?
- How has this experience help me be a better leader?

Results to Date

The Personal Growth Project has been used for six semesters and is very popular with most students. They enjoyed the autonomy of choosing their project, but readily made the connection to how their lives were made better because of the learning process. Students learned that leaders must make time for self-improvement and this has to be a conscious decision on the leader's part.

Students also discovered that they must incorporate much of the course content into the completion of their growth project. Students see the importance of the concepts taught in the lesson on achieving a balanced life as they try to find the time to devote to the completion of their project. Some students learn how to prioritize their activities while others find a way to integrate their project into their current schedule. Many students practice using their strengths (as identified by the Strengths Quest assessment) to complete their project while others discover their creative abilities.

Following is a sampling of Personal Growth Projects completed to date:

- Learning to cook (average of 5 meals)
- Obtaining certification in an area of interest (First Aid, CPR, Certified Handgun License)
- Reading to increase spirituality, establish better relationships
- Training to complete a marathon, triathlon, 5K or 10K run (must have never done these events)

- Learning a craft: crochet, painting, writing poetry/songs
- Learning a new hobby: golf, cycling, play an instrument, horseback riding, rock climbing
- Learning new skills: woodworking, home remodeling, basic construction, basic plumbing

Conclusions

While a formal assessment has not been conducted, anecdotal evidence suggests that engaging students in a personal growth project has a positive impact on them. Students' final reflection papers indicate that some level of personal growth did occur and they are able to articulate how that growth impacted them personally and as a leader. One student described the impact of her project this way, "The project challenged my personal assumptions about my limits. It pushed me to overcome the mental models of my strengths." Another student made this self-observation, "As I completed my personal growth project, I realized my leadership behaviors were more masculine than feminine, which I am. It (the project) made me think about how I lead." These anecdotal statements show the assimilation of class content into the project and their leadership development. As noted by Kuh (2001) this is a benefit of having an activity which is focused on affective as well as cognitive development.

Follow-up conversations with students indicate that many of them continue using their new knowledge or skill well after the semester is over. For some, their project has turned into a hobby that they continue practice with passion. Other students embraced the concept of personal growth and have chosen new projects, demonstrating life-long learning even though they are no longer in the *Personal Leadership Development* class. A formal assessment of the impact of the personal growth project is planned for the end of the Spring 2010 semester.

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