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2. A Look Through the Lens of Our Perspective: Bringing Into Focus a Deeper Understanding of Culture, Self, and Leadership
3. Practice Session
4. This interactive session designed to sharpen participants' awareness brings into focus a deeper understanding of how culture impacts the personal values and judgments which inform and potentially hamper leadership capacity. Participants construct a physical lens representing their current frame of reference to increase self-awareness and generate development of new goals.
5. Jen Brothers, Clinical Education Specialist with the Batten Leadership Institute, teaches, facilitates experiential learning through group processing, and works individually with students to identify and take apart personal obstacles to leadership development. Jen received her B.A. in Communications and Spanish from James Madison University and her M.A. Ed. in Counselor Education from Virginia Tech.

Jill Hufnagel, Assistant Director of the Batten Leadership Institute and licensed professional counselor, holds a Ph.D. in English and Women's Studies & an M.A., Ed.S. in Community Counseling. Jill is energized by the immediacy of group process and the opportunity to encourage participants to grapple with vulnerability. Her current research focuses on the ways we give and receive meaningful, critical feedback.

6. Yes, please print this proposal in the conference proceedings, if accepted.
7. No, please do not consider this proposal for a poster session.
8. No, we are not able to serve as reviewers.
9. Yes, we will serve as facilitators for our session at the conference.

Introduction

“Reality is a variable we see through the eyes of our culture.”
--Alex Katz

Leading from our core, with congruent authenticity, requires introspection and adaptability. Effective leadership begins with courageous self-dialogue rooted in a willingness to focus our attention inward and explore our values and judgments. As family and culture shape our attitudes and beliefs, we develop a unique lens through which we view and interact with the world—a lens which predisposes us to judgment. Through a framing discussion followed by the construction of a personal, physical lens, participants bring into focus areas where vision is hampered, blurred, or even blinded. Attention to this lens creates a deeper self awareness and movement toward improved empathy with others, thereby strengthening our leadership capacity. Learner objectives include: understanding the attitudes and beliefs participants carry with them across all settings and relationships and examining their default expectations—of themselves, of others, and of the world in general.

Background

According to Edgar Schein, “Culture is the deepest, often unconscious part of a group, and is, therefore, less tangible and less visible than other parts” (2004). In this interactive session designed to sharpen personal awareness of the lens defining our worldview, we unearth the underlying assumptions within our culture (Schein, 2004) and pair these with our personal VABES (values, attitudes, beliefs, and expectations) (Clawson, 2009) to increase our ability to see beyond our own personal experience and find connection with the experience of others. How are our VABES influenced by our past or present?

Undergirded by a belief that true leadership begins with self-awareness and pointing to such works as Manfred Kets de Vries and Konstantin Korotov’s *Coach and Couch: The Psychology of Making Better Leaders* and the Harvard Negotiation Project’s *Difficult Conversations*, the proposed practice paper begins with an understanding of the vital need for leaders to know themselves—a key to strong, resilient, adaptive leadership. To that end, this practice works from a core belief: without meaningful self-revealing intrapersonal and interpersonal work, potential leaders are sorely and fundamentally disadvantaged. At every level of leadership training centered on self-awareness, the work of participants grows from the inside out. As Drucker capitulates, the first commandment of leadership is: “Leader, Know Thyself” (2005). This commandment informs every facet of this intrapersonally-based approach to leadership training.

Description of the Practice

According to Clawson and the thousands of professionals with whom he has worked, 95% of our VABES are unthinking, knee-jerk pieces of how we experience and respond to the world. This exercise brings to consciousness the values and judgments lying beneath the surface of our everyday awareness. We begin the practice with a discussion of VABES and then invite participants to examine their own personal VABES. Next, participants are asked to consider the VABES that influence them in their leadership capacity, both intrapersonally and interpersonally. In preparation for the experiential component of this exercise, participants are

also encouraged to consider feedback they have received concerning how others experience them as leaders and team members.

Facilitators then provide a variety of craft and recycled materials, including various paper, scissors, and glue, and ask participants to construct a physical representation of their personal lens. Using a spectrum of prompts--what does your lens look like? how does it feel? how much does it weigh? what color is it? what shape is it?-- participants are encouraged to think outside the box or not, according to their personal preference. The process is free flowing, limited only by time constraints, and results in a variety of final products. Facilitators listen in on the process, taking mental note of participants' responses, and trust participants to gain significant insight about how they interpret and interact with people and systems.

Facilitators reserve a significant portion of time to process with participants as they describe their lens to the group. Why did they choose the materials they chose? Why the shape? Where are their blind spots? What did they discover about themselves along the way? After processing the experience, participants are invited to develop a goal stemming from this new awareness.

Results to Date

Increased awareness of the lens we bring to everything we do enables us to work purposefully and deliberately with our lens. The goal of this workshop is not to erase or lose our lens, but to know it for what it is—a magnifier with interpretative, subjective capacity and tendencies.

The impact of looking inward is often, in itself, incredibly powerful. Participants frequently remark on the novelty of such a fundamental exercise and the force of bringing to light what is deeply embedded and therefore difficult to access. During the construction process participants express a range of reactions to even getting started. Some jump in; others hold back and ask for more direction; still others seek feedback from their peers as they engage in construction. To date, interpretations have run the gamut from bifocals to monocles, from kaleidoscope to telescope and beyond.

The exercise has both internal and external value. By pausing to reflect inwardly, participants have the opportunity to unearth the deeply embedded framework through which they view and respond to the world. At the same time participants glimpse the vastly different perspectives of others. Self-reports during this workshop and in subsequent writings reflect increased self-awareness and a lasting impact on personal change goals.

One participant wrote: *“I learned how to understand and acknowledge my cultural lens in such a way that I am better able to display empathy toward those around me. By understanding how my unique experiences shaped my worldly outlook, I am in a position to understand why people view the world in a different way than I do.”*

Analyzing her new understanding of culture and its impact on her lens, another participant wrote: *“I used to think that culture meant different countries, foreign languages and ethnic food. Now I realize that culture is something that goes much deeper, and it affects me in my everyday life. Culture is something that affects how we see ourselves and others, as well as how we view the world. Reality varies according to our cultures, which is why culture plays such*

a big role in our lives. By understanding our cultural lens, we are able to grasp a better understanding of who we are and what we value.”

Yet another participant found meaning in how she approached the exercise: *“My favorite activity was creating our lens. This included crafting from scraps an object that represented how we see the world. I am an optimist; therefore, I subconsciously created my ideal lens, instead of my current lens...[this] taught me how to embrace the blind spots in my lens and to simply come to the realization that blind spots are nearly impossible to eliminate, but we can try to reduce them.”*

Recommendations/Implications

While participants are crafting their lens, the process is largely intrapersonal. They seek to identify and represent key facets of how they view and respond to the world. How participants explain themselves internally and externally is a powerful piece of the process, and one that requires a willingness to make sense of individual culture within a larger system. Naming that system as intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, societal, even universal adds to the possible layers of using this workshop across arenas of inquiry and understanding. At the same time, participants are invited to be vulnerable with others and through that process to develop a deeper understanding of the lens of others, an understanding that has the distinct power to impact fundamentally their approach to leadership.

Conclusions

A practice that tends to work with participants regardless of demographic factors, this approach is helpful both in terms of individual leadership development as well as with groups and teams working to better understand one another and to function well as a whole. It serves as a natural jumping off point for personal goal development and may be used to understand and develop participants’ capacities to give and receive meaningful, constructive critical feedback. This purposeful dip into making more explicit our experience of the world and our reactions to it has the power to permeate several levels of participants’ lives—and to deepen participants’ ability to lead through conflict in healthy, resilient, thoughtful ways. This approach may be used on its own or as one of several workshops in an adaptive leadership training series within an intrapersonal framework.

References

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