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Competency 4: Visionary Leadership
Leadership in Action: Learning to Lead through Entrepreneurship
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Introduction

This essay is a reflection on my leadership experiences in two contexts: one in the founding and operations of Learning Design Solutions (LearnDS), a student led enterprise that offered low-cost instructional technology services that showed me one model of leadership; and the other in leading an online course redesign project for LearnDS which created unforeseen challenges and taught me valuable lessons on effective situational leadership.

Background

Learning Design Solutions is a student-led enterprise that was established in August 2008 following a meeting of interested graduate students and faculty of the department of Curriculum and Instruction's Instructional Technology program on July 14, 2008. The idea for this venture stemmed from an Advanced Instructional Design Class (CI 603) in which students were exposed to professional level consulting experiences while working with external organizations to meet their instructional needs. For the students, these experiences were invaluable in putting theory into practice and learn what it was like to 'do' instructional technology outside the academic fold such as drawing up contracts and developing professional demeanor and attitudes. From the instructor's (Dr. Correia) reading of the impact of this class, two things came to the forefront: 1. There was a clear and growing demand for good quality but affordable instructional services in the community at large and 2. Student skill sets were high on innovative ideas and instructional design expertise but low on organizational, financial, management and marketing skills. So the idea of forming a student-led enterprise founded, run and managed by the students, providing instructional design services for a reasonable fee to serve the community's needs took germ.

"Edupreneurship"

The result was Learning Design Solutions, founded by four students of Curriculum and Instructional Technology (I being one of them) along with a faculty sponsor with a seed grant from the Iowa State University Pappajohn Entrepreneurial Center and Kauffman Foundation. The overarching goal was to develop a practical, applied knowledge base, skills, attitudes and resources that would make it possible for students to expand their career choices and pursue an entrepreneurial career path upon graduation. The venture drew its theoretical basis from Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and held as its belief Bridges' (1994) proposal that the idea of job security belonged to the past and contemporary workers should follow a different paradigm by viewing their careers as an enterprise (as cited in Correia, 2014). This initiative not only filled a void within the field of higher education by making it more suited for the 21st century workspace but also created new value by bringing together a unique package of resources (student pool of talent) to exploit an opportunity (demand for customized, affordable instructional solutions) (quote modified from Stevenson, Roberts, & Grousbeck as cited in Correia, 2014). We were thus *'edupreneurs'*, - a new breed of entrepreneurs in the field of education (Correia, 2014)

Operations

Learning Design Solutions (LearnDS) operated as an 'embedded enterprise' within Iowa State University's Center for Technology in Learning and Teaching (CTLT) i.e. it was financially independent to an extent but was housed in the CTLT and used its infrastructural backbone for the

fledgling start-up process. Student members provided instructional technology consulting services to departments within Iowa State University and outside for a fee and the revenues so generated went to the CTLT which then processed the payments for project managers, hourly student employees, CTLT Program Assistant for the additional work load and other related expenses to support growth.

However, the responsibility for day-to-day management of the organization and the mammoth task of creating foundational documents (manual of operations), dealing with University procedures to create an account number and identity in the University system as a service center for financial operations, setting guidelines for hiring, firing, membership, hourly rates as well as marketing, planning and dissemination activities was completely handled by the student members.

Organizational Structure

The organizational structure comprised of Partners, who were the original founding members of LearnDS and formed the student leadership and decision-making body along with the faculty sponsors, performing a variety of roles within LearnDS including that of project managers, client liaisons and spokespersons for the organization. Associate Partners were basically 'partners in making' following the quasi- apprenticeship model where new members recruited from the student population were mentored and trained into the organizational culture by more experienced members to continue the enterprise once the former graduate. Since instructional design product development tasks draw from different skill-sets, provision was made for hiring talent (such as graphic designers, web programmers) from all over the university to work on specific projects. These were non-member graduate and undergraduate student hourly employees paid very competitive hourly rates. Any non-member was welcome to become a member of LearnDS if they wanted to, expanding its reach and promoting inter-disciplinary collaborative teams, emulating a modern real-world workspace.

Organizational Culture:

All the above mentioned founding and management tasks were carried out by the student members in a spirit of collaboration and shared responsibility. The organizational culture that we all upheld was non-hierarchical, egalitarian and cooperative with joint decision-making and execution. Conflicts and differences of opinion were natural, and even cultural – at one point membership comprised of students from seven different countries speaking as many languages with as many reasons for joining LearnDS and as many directions they wanted to take it. But, as aptly put by Correia (2014), this inherent 'messiness' was acknowledged and embraced and for most part, members conducted themselves professionally. Differences were voiced and overcome through discussion (sometimes heated), reasoning and compromise keeping the larger well-being of the organization in mind. Tasks that needed to be accomplished were put on the table during meetings and members volunteered to take up all or parts of it as per their availability and were supported in these by the others. For example, when applying for the College of Human Sciences Entrepreneurial Program Initiative Grant in 2009, members volunteered to work on one or more sections of the grant and the entire process was coordinated through Google Docs and meetings. This was a particularly successful instance of collaborative leadership which secured LearnDS a grant of $25,000. Thus, the prevailing culture and work environment in LearnDS was one of cooperation, mutual respect and shared responsibility where members took initiative and did their parts with competence and a sense of commitment.

The Rude Awakening

This was however an idyllic situation with skilled, motivated and responsible people which made collaborative leadership possible. However, "all teams are not created equal" and these qualities should not be taken for granted in all situational teams nor is collaborative leadership the best style to lead by in all cases. This rude awakening was waiting for me when I assumed leadership of the first major instructional design contract for LearnDS.

Project Background

The project in question was the redesign of an online course for the College of Veterinary Medicine undertaken between the spring and summer of 2010. The current course was on Moodle, an open source Learning Management System, which, at that time, allowed very limited and linear course layout. However, Moodle developers had come up with a new module called flex-pages which allowed course navigation to be like a web page with top menu bars and drop down menus for easy course organization and navigation. Phase I of the project involved programming the flex page module and updating the course along with extensive redesign of its layout, appearance and course organization. Phase II involved design and development of a content player interface and navigation while Phase III was design and development of a chapter with interactive content delivery. As is clear from the project requirements, the three skills we needed for the fulfillment of this contract were instructional design, graphic design and programming. I was to provide the expertise for the first, but the latter two were outside the area of expertise of the members and recruitment from the student body became necessary. Two candidates were recruited to help accomplish the project and thus began the nightmare in which I learned as much about myself as a leader as about human nature and lessons in astuteness to discern tell-tale signs of trouble. Although it's easy to blame employees, in reality it's a failure of leadership for having allowed such a situation to develop. How did this come about? The Situational Leadership model helped me analyze this.

Situational Leadership and the Skill-Will Matrix

The Situational Leadership model suggests a relationship between leadership style and performance readiness of employees (a matrix of their ability and willingness) where effective leadership entails that leaders vary their leadership behavior between delegating, coaching, supporting and directing to match the readiness level of employees to accomplish the task at hand (http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_44.htm). In the present context, the interviews were vital in gauging the performance readiness of the candidates. How did I conduct these?

The Interview

Candidate A (henceforth referred to as A to avoid gender pronouns) was an applicant for the graphic designer position. A had furnished a resume and portfolio before the interview giving me a chance to study it and assess A's skills for doing the job. The portfolio and resume were both very impressive and the interview process was more about describing the job and the Moodle platform and gauging A's willingness to explore it. Candidate A was hired and showed very good progress, promise and initial attitude. Candidate B (henceforth referred to as B) was an applicant for the programmer position. B had not furnished a resume but had claimed to have exposure to several technologies and experience in developing instruction. B had been suggested by another LearnDS member who knew of B's familiarity with Moodle and because of B's self-claimed knowledge of Flash/Java programming. I also had some previous experience of B, which had made

me suspect the veracity of the claims, but I decided to call for an interview anyway. B controlled the interview from the start taking it to B's comfort zones and farther away from mine. Moodle became secondary in the showcased material. With regard to the programming of a content player B suggesting other content and project management systems with ready players that would serve the project better. When asked about flex pages B showed other and 'better' ways of packaging instructional modules in Moodle than flex-pages. It was true that B had some experience with Moodle but there was little to no evidence of programming skill, knowledge of flex-pages nor an understanding, willingness or ability to meet the requirements of the project.

Project Phase

Predictably, the project quickly went downhill. Candidate A was delivering quality deliverables on time while candidate B was far behind target, still fudging and obscuring and visibly confusing me. Gradually, the tone of the meetings started changing to condescension and resistance to my suggestions and the first signs of collusion and undermining of my position appeared when my emails and requests for updates and meetings went unanswered by both for close to 3 weeks. Feeling miserable and facing pressure from the client, I recruited other candidates and the relationship with both ended in an ugly showdown, with time, money and goodwill lost.

Reflection

So why was B hired? What were the other problems in the leadership and management of the project? What could have been done differently? B was hired out of my desperation to get the project underway since the contract clock was ticking. My first mistake was to act on this anxiety despite my misgivings about the hire. Lesson 1: listen to your instincts and don't close the deal with the first candidate you interview. Advertise aggressively if the need is urgent but have at least a small pool of candidates to choose from. Second, I was too conscious during the interview and development process about my limited experience with Moodle or programming and let that get the better of me and gave B the benefit of the doubt. Lesson 2: One doesn't need to have mastery over a subject to detect when someone is prevaricating. But if this is an insecurity, then the answer is to prepare, prepare, prepare! I could also have enlisted an expert's help to make the interview more technical or even involved the client in the recruitment process to gain from his experience in Moodle. My third mistake was to continue in the cooperative leadership style despite knowing that the required skillset was low and indications of a will to follow the project plan seemed low too. The best way to avoid this situation was not to have hired B at all, but having done so, the leadership style should have been telling and directing with defined roles and tasks and close supervision. However, there was clearly a control issue beyond the scope of the skill-will matrix that could have been prevented by keeping a very strict professional distance and making the employee status clear. But that was not how I was used to operating and paid the price.

The Vet Med project was completed successfully with the new recruits and apparently earned LearnDS a referral to an even bigger project with an external client. So all ended well and I am that much wiser for it.

References

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