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COMMENTARY

Enacting leadership: The reciprocal influence between instructor and student

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In Kath et al.'s (2021) article, *Teaching I-O Psychology to Undergraduate Students: Do We Practice What We Preach?* the authors invite faculty to reflect on our teaching practices and leadership behaviors as they pertain to the key tenets of transformational leadership. As educators, we might miss opportunities if we focus on one leadership theory to the exclusion of others. As a faculty member who has taught leadership to graduate and undergraduate students for many years, I am able to draw on the plethora of evidence-based leadership practices and theories that have as much, if not more, relevance to the instructor–student influence process and teaching context. As classroom leaders, we should be mindful that we are most effective when we adapt our styles to meet the unique developmental stages of our students (Meier, 2016).

In this response, I discuss how I "practice what I teach" by describing several assignments that integrate multiple theoretical approaches that relate to and enhance relationship building, shared vision and values, ethical behavior, and authenticity. I will provide the theoretical bases (e.g., relational and contingency theories, authentic and ethical leadership) and research findings, and discuss how I enact the key tenets of these theories. Where possible, I provide my reflections and experiential evidence that these assignments have the intended effect.

Relationship building: Establishing shared values and vision

Regardless of the courses we teach, faculty offer students an early glimpse into their values and vision for the course through the objectives and expectations they include in their syllabi. What may be more difficult and time consuming, but is also crucial, is making a connection and generating interest in the topic, starting on the first day of class. There are myriad methods for increasing engagement while enabling ourselves as instructors to learn more about each student and to create an inclusive environment.

The "selfie" assignment

Research on relational leadership and leader–member exchange (Uhl-Bien, 2011) emphasizes the importance of human social constructions (consideration behaviors, high quality dyadic exchanges) that emanate from the establishment of rich personal connections. Further, noted teaching expert, Wilbert McKeachie (1994), has written extensively on the importance of establishing and maintaining meaningful relationships with our students. He often shared stories of bringing his Polaroid camera to the first class meeting to take pictures of every student. He wanted them to know that he saw them and that they mattered. Building on what De Pree (2004) called "covenantal relationships," forming deep and lasting relationships necessitates revealing personal

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(and sometimes intimate) aspects of our lives to others. Faculty can lead this effort by sharing their background, experiences, values, and leadership challenges with students on the first day of class.

One assignment that has brought forth considerable relational fruit is what I call the "selfie assignment." As the title indicates, this early term task requires students to take a picture of themselves (a legitimate use of their smartphones!) and answer several questions. There are many variations that faculty can use in this assignment. To model the assignment, I introduce on the first day, at the start of class, my values and philosophy of leadership, the types of organizations I have led, and the nature of followers I have influenced (e.g., unionized).

I mention that I, too, want to get to know them on a more personal level; consequently, I encourage them to showcase their creative talents by taking a picture of themselves that reveals their views about the responsibilities of a leader. Below the picture, in addition to writing their name, where they work, and job title (if applicable), they are asked to draft a statement of their *personal* leadership philosophy and explain what they hope to learn in the course that will help them meet challenges in their place of work or in their personal lives (i.e., a mini needs assessment leading to a possible modification of learning goals).

There are multiple ways to use their information. One method is to content analyze their philosophies to identify common themes and shared values. In my analyses, students tend to view leadership as mentoring, developing, serving and caring for followers, and valuing their contributions. I then return to the stated goals in the syllabus to show how the course objectives, theories, and assignments align with their values and expectations for the course. The analysis and communication of findings can take place in the first few class meetings.

To build relationships further and enact individual consideration behaviors, whenever I find an instance of alignment between the values or philosophy the student articulated in the selfie assignment and the values expressed in other assignments (e.g., written papers, oral presentations, essays), I comment positively and enthusiastically on that finding in the feedback I provide. To inspire students through individualized consideration, I also provide the results of research studies that show the effect the student's values are likely to have on others. If there are instances where what they recommend in case analyses, essay response, papers, and so forth runs counter to the values they expressed in their selfie, I gently point that out and invite the student to reflect on this incongruence and revise to align with their espoused values.

Our feedback serves as the developmental and motivational aspect of our roles as instructor and leader of the class. When we combine high levels of individualized consideration with task behaviors, research suggests higher levels of engagement, fewer absences, greater commitment, satisfaction, and trust in the leader will result (Lambert et al., 2012). I have had many occasions whereby a student has visited me during office hours to thank me for the positive feedback and to consult on how to handle a challenging situation at work. I also have noticed that after these office visits, the students tend to be more engaged in the class.

Shared leadership, accountability

Team contracts

As I-O psychologists, we recognize the need to teach students how to work effectively in teams. Navigating group dynamics requires leadership skill. Team contracts serve as an excellent mechanism by which students can develop group norms and expectations and hold each other accountable when a teammate does not abide by the "terms" of their agreed upon objectives. My role in this assignment is to communicate two of my expectations: The group must share in the leadership role, and the team may not fire a member. You can likely envision the students' expressions when you present the latter point. Although some students might feel this is unfair (after all, it takes less effort to fire someone than to coach that person), we can remind them that on the first day of the course, they defined leadership as developing and supporting their

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constituents, not firing them. When students exclaim that some employees are "beyond help" or not worth saving, I use this opportunity to stimulate students intellectually by relaying a salient story from my early days in management in which the application of servant leadership and participative leadership was highly effective in resolving a significant productivity issue with one of my employees. The stories we share are often what students recall the most and are often cited in student evaluations as aspects of my teaching that contributed most to their learning.

Using emotional intelligence and improving relationships through coaching

Role-play activities

As part of teamwork, role-playing exercises serve as an important experiential activity, especially when teaching how to develop others through coaching. Ideas for scenarios that have contextual validity are coaching a social loafer (fictitious) to become more productive in group projects or a scenario in which the social loafer has a valid reason for poor performance (e.g., the person did not receive communications because the team leader used an incorrect email address; the student was hospitalized). The latter case, in particular, assesses the student leader's ability to exhibit empathy—a critical component of social awareness in emotional intelligence—and work with the team member to find a solution that is mutually acceptable.

The team contract serves a useful purpose for this activity, especially when the student is not comfortable counseling a teammate. How can we exhibit leadership in these role plays? As educators, we can first empathize with the discomfort associated with those difficult, yet crucial, conversations. We have had plenty of practice coaching struggling students, so we can seize this opportunity to demonstrate an effective counseling or coaching session that uses, as a basis, the agreed-upon expectations laid out in the team contracts.

Authenticity, humility, participative leadership

Executive coaching by students

For those of us who have held positions in leadership, we have a unique opportunity to lead/teach authentically when we share personal stories, challenges, and even what we might consider failures in our leadership experiences. When we show humility by revealing our vulnerabilities and challenges, students might be feel that it is safe for them to share *their* challenges, (i.e., a form of error-based learning), thus enabling us to explore these critical incidents together. One way I exhibit participative leadership is to share challenges I have experienced when I was a newly promoted and very naïve supervisor. After discussing a particular theory, I tell a story that has relevance to that concept and invite students to serve as my executive coach and participate in the problem-solving process. More specifically, I ask them what they would have done if they were in my shoes. Typically, the stories I choose to tell involve ethical dilemmas or difficult employees, so the students view this as their challenge. Students tend to offer good advice, and we can use this opportunity to thank them for their thoughtful recommendations and, when necessary, encourage them think to about class concepts that are relevant to the advice they have offered.

Contingency theories

Although Kath et al. (2021) selected as a framework one main theory (transformational), I contend that in the context of teaching undergraduate students, contingency theories have as much, if not more relevance to student learning. Effectiveness in teaching "depends" on more than just the disciplinary knowledge of the instructor, the type of assignments, and mode of instruction, to name a few. Considering the individual differences in our students, such as first generation, diversity, and varying socioeconomic backgrounds, each of these variables can affect our effectiveness

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as teachers. Thankfully, leadership researchers offer us a palate of behavioral options from which to choose.

Hersey and Blanchard (1977) noted the importance of understanding the experience, maturity, and efficacy levels of individuals, as well as their willingness or motivation to complete a task, and varying our behavioral styles to improve performance and increase self-efficacy and satisfaction. House (1996) and Meier (2016) explained the importance of understanding how followers/students view the complexity or novelty of the task and their own needs, strengths, and limitations. These theories draw out the true essence of faculty leaders—knowing when to ask students for their input (participative style), such as a change in schedule or due dates for assignments; when to delegate tasks and leadership roles to students (e.g., asking a student to serve as another's executive coach); and when to use the supportive style (when students want assurance that their study habits will lead to better exam performance). The directive style is a given, as students may be learning theories that they have not been exposed to in other courses and might have questions about assignments. Recognizing there are as many individual differences as the number of students in our class, we might do well to revisit the "classics," especially those that suggest we should adapt our behaviors to meet the needs of our diverse students.

Ethical leadership and accountability

Although not specified directly in the focal article, what distinguishes transformational leadership from charismatic is the underlying foundation of morality—espousing moral values and serving as an ethical role model with the goal of developing or raising the moral maturity of those we lead (Bass, 1985; Conger, 1999). The first opportunity we have as faculty to convey our moral values is our syllabus and what we cite as consequences for academic dishonesty (Schein, 1990). How we respond to cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic dishonesty communicates to students what is important to us. Simkin and McLeod (2010) demonstrated that one of the strongest factors that influenced students NOT to cheat was the presence of a moral anchor (e.g., an instructor who stands for and models ethical behavior). We, as faculty, must react when we observe unethical behavior in our students, no matter how bureaucratic the reporting process might be at our institutions or how much time and effort it takes to investigate and report these acts. Students take their cues from us, so we must model what we teach.

Transformational leadership, ethics, charisma, and beyond

When modeling leadership values, it is important to think about how we can exhibit transformational leadership behaviors Kath et al. (2021) describe, as well as other motivational forms of influence. The feedback we provide can serve a valuable purpose and is a perfect opportunity to go beyond simply correcting errors in applying and interpreting the theories by also conveying to students one more time how they affected and influenced us as their instructors.

Integrative final essay: providing closure at the end of the course

One of Kath et al.'s (2021) large change suggestions involves creating assignments that require students to integrate and apply what they have learned over the term. One way to do this is to include a long essay in the final exam that gives students a challenging and interesting opportunity to engage with the material and communicate what they have learned. If a class is comprised mainly of students with senior standing (as are mine), by this period in the term they tend to be preoccupied with their upcoming graduation ceremony. Commencement provides a unique context and opportunity to pose questions that serve as a stretch goal while also providing closure (albeit in written format). Two such essays are offered below:

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1. In this course, we've examined organizations that have been led by incredibly talented and ethical leaders. Sadly, they are a rarity in today's large corporations. If you were called on to make a speech at commencement about the styles of leadership, leadership practices, and ethical values that are needed to transform today's organizations, what **theories or concepts** from this course would you include in your speech, and why?
2. Imagine you have been invited to give a keynote address at a conference on student leadership. You decide to talk about the leadership that is needed today. Given what you have learned in this course and your own reflections of leadership, what theories and concepts from the course would you include in your speech and why?

The feedback we provide on a final exam may be the last conversation we will have with our students in the teacher–pupil relationship. Consider the difference we can make in a student's self-esteem and sense of efficacy as a future leader when we point out a particular comment or passage in the essay that moved us. Further, when what they write is directly related to positive outcomes in the leadership literature, we should seize this opportunity to make them aware that, based on the evidence, the odds are they will likely be an effective, ethical leader. Students have emailed well after the course ended to tell me how much those comments meant to them and how they continue to work hard to live up to those positive expectations.

Conclusion

What resonated most with me about this focal article was the appeal to "practice what we preach." In the section on transformational leadership, the authors prompted deep reflection as to how to enact the leadership values and principles I espouse and to evaluate the extent to which my words are aligned with my deeds. Our students learn not only from textbooks and journal articles but also by observation. I have offered several assignments that illustrate the reciprocal influence process between instructor/leader and student/follower. These assignments and my process for providing feedback on them have been effective in bringing about the intended outcomes of student learning, creating positive relationships, and leader development. Further, how we behave in our classrooms, how we frame our feedback, what we are willing to reveal about ourselves, and how we adapt our styles to align with the needs of our students are what students appreciate and what they recall about you and the course once they have graduated.

Throughout the term, I ask students to think about what they would like their leadership legacy to be. Perhaps all of us would do well to reflect on the legacy we are building as leaders in our classroom. If we are lucky, our students will reveal that to us. Perhaps they already have.

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