

# PERSONAL BEST LEADERSHIP STORIES OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION STUDENTS

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## Abstract

Using Kouzes and Posner's 1987 book, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Get Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations*, as a conceptual framework, this qualitative study looked at the personal best leadership experiences of one hundred beginning Educational Administration students. With permission, the survey developed by Kouzes and Posner was used to analyze the leadership experiences of neophyte leaders who wished to become school administrators. The results found that the personal best examples of those studied were similar in theme to those studied by Kouzes and Posner. The results are discussed in five categories: Seeking Opportunities or Having Opportunities Thrust Upon You, Know Where You and the Organization are Going, Leaders Help Others Be Leaders, Lead in the Trenches, and Laugh it Off and Have Fun.

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Understanding why individuals perceive a particular leadership experience to be their personal best leads to knowledge of how challenges are turned into accomplishments. Analyzing the characteristics, qualities, and the actions displayed during an outstanding leadership experience allows a greater appreciation of leadership. Instead of quantifying the characteristics, qualities, or actions of leadership, this study analyzes leadership through the telling of personal best leadership stories. The purpose of the qualitative research study was to analyze the leadership experiences of beginning students in an Educational Administration preparation program. An understanding of the leadership experiences that students bring with them can be building blocks to developing a comprehensive leadership program of studies.

## The Leadership Challenge

A "personal best" experience is an event (or series of events) that you believe to be your individual standard of excellence. It is your own "record-setting performance," a time when you did your very best. It is something you use to measure yourself by, a time you look upon as your peak performance experience. A useful and simple guide to the selection of your "personal best" is "When I think about this, it makes me smile a lot." (Kouzes & Posner, 1987, p. 304)

In their book, **The Leadership Challenge: How to Get Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations**, Kouzes and Posner (1987) analyzed the personal best leadership experiences of leaders in business. The authors described leadership as encompassing five parts: challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart. Challenging the process involves leaders who are at their best when change is needed. They search for the opportunity to improve the organization with innovative methods. To implement innovative change, leaders experiment and take risks. Mistakes are seen as learning opportunities (Kouzes & Posner, 1987). Leaders are able to inspire a shared vision because they dream of the future and passionately believe in the

possibilities of the future. Followers believe in a vision because of the leader's ability to give life to it through expressiveness, warmth, and friendship (Kouzes & Posner, 1987). Leaders enable others to act through the development of collaborative teams, for they cannot accomplish extraordinary things without partners who have mutual trust and respect. Leaders enable team members to feel strong (Kouzes & Posner, 1987) as they model the way by living the values, philosophies, and the principles they espouse. They are able to guide the organization through a series of small wins that lead to major successes. Their authority is established by the position they hold and credibility is gained through their actions and by practicing what they preach (Kouzes & Posner, 1987). They encourage the heart by finding ways to recognize and celebrate the contributions and accomplishments of individuals and teams. Developing a successful organization is both hard work and fun. Leaders love their organizations and the people who make up the organization (Kouzes and Posner, 1987).

### **Methodology**

One hundred beginning students in Educational Administration were asked to complete the Personal Best Questionnaire. Everyone in the sample was a practicing teacher and was beginning the master's course work necessary to become a principal. Each person was asked to spend time reflecting on his or her various leadership roles. After ensuring they had a clear mental image of their personal best leadership experience, they were asked to complete a detailed questionnaire. The questionnaire is divided into nine parts and includes 37 questions. The leadership experiences were not limited to education. It was up to the individual to determine his or her personal best. Once the questionnaires were completed, the data were coded and analyzed.

### **Results**

Even though Kouzes and Posner studied established business leaders and this study looked at neophyte leaders in education, many of the same patterns and themes can be defined. The individuals in this study were at a point in their lives where they were seeking to become leaders. Some in the sample did not believe they had ever been a leader until the concept of leadership was explained. All teachers are leaders in their classrooms. Many in the sample described their first leadership experience and expressed a great deal of anxiety. A common theme that emerged was that their personal best made them believe in their leadership abilities.

#### Seeking Opportunities or Having Opportunities Thrust Upon You

While some leaders see a problem and seek a solution, other leaders have the mantle of leadership unwillingly thrust upon them. Whether one jumps at the chance to be a leader or is dragged kicking and screaming, the process of leadership is similar. Leadership is a process that requires hard work, vision, continuous learning, confidence, and teamwork.

Karen, a teacher who opened an alternative school, wrote:

Four years ago, when I started working in my present position, I soon recognized a serious problem in the district. There were too many students failing in school. This translated to a drop-out rate of about twenty-five percent. Attendance was poor and there were far too many discipline problems. After taking about a year to analyze the problem and its related issues, I had the opportunity to apply for the Safe Schools Grant and begin an alternative school to meet the needs of some of these students. That is what I decided to do.

Karen's statement is indicative of many of the personal best stories where the leader saw a problem and developed a solution. Even though Karen willingly sought the leadership position, she expressed a great deal of fear and anxiety. Was she really the person to lead this major change and could she really help those children? She feared disappointing the teachers and children who would be counting on her. Karen sought out learning opportunities that allowed her to obtain the confidence needed to develop an effective plan for carrying out her vision.

Individuals who are just beginning to view themselves as leaders sometimes seek out opportunities to lead and sometimes have the mantle of leadership thrust upon them. Some beginning leaders start a project and become leaders because someone in authority selected them. Often in this case fear and a lack of leadership experiences create hesitancy in accepting the leadership position. However, leaders rise to the occasion.

Since many of the personal best stories were about first time leadership experiences, fear was a common component. Leaders are not paralyzed by fear. Instead they use fear as a self-motivator. Leaders know their weaknesses and, through continuous learning, eliminate weaknesses. Along with the emotion of fear, leaders express excitement. They have fear about whether or not they can lead others, but at the same time they are excited by the possibility of success and accomplishment. Fear is overcome by the heartfelt vision of success and what that would mean to those involved. Leaders are motivated by doing something positive for others rather than by self-aggrandizement.

When describing initial attempts at leadership, often a significant event occurs that convinces the individual they can be a leader. The turning point in becoming a leader can be a simple success or a moment when they can no longer abide an injustice. Whatever the turning point, it gives the individual the confidence needed to become a leader and to seek opportunities to move toward a vision. The fear may stay with the individual throughout the project but it does not cripple the leader. The point at which an individual decides he or she can be a leader is often related to deeply held values and a vision for the organization.

### Know Where You and the Organization Are Going

Commitment was a key word in the personal bests. Leaders strongly believe that a project can be accomplished. They believe that they can lead because the project is important enough to put forth the effort. Leaders are committed to a project because of deeply held values. Personal bests are most often about helping others succeed. In addition to a personal commitment, leaders are willing to put themselves on the line and get the support needed to succeed. Leaders use their deeply held personal values to convince others to support and share the vision.

Jamie, an elementary school teacher who helped restore hope to a school, wrote:

In my opinion, my greatest accomplishments as a leader came through involvement in the lives of my students. I have a sincere love and passion for teaching which I consider to be the noblest of professions. Each day, I enter the classroom with a joy for the art of teaching. I want to make each day the best for each child. I believe that each child can and will succeed, and I will do whatever it takes to make sure each child is successful. I have never felt these feelings so strongly as I did when I taught at Wilson-Johnson School (fondly known as W-K). I taught at W-K School for seventeen years (prior to its closing) where the populace was economically deprived. My students came from dysfunctional homes and had very little self-esteem and pride. I saw the need for "the neighborhood" to regain ownership and respect. I explored every means I could think of to restore pride in the students at W-K.

Jamie's deep passion and commitment to helping the children and the neighborhood exemplifies the values that enable a shared vision. No matter what obstacles came up, Jamie would not be deterred from helping this school and community regain its pride. Jamie's

personal quote was, “Whatever your mind can conceive and believe, and your heart desires, and your soul dreams, you can achieve.” Jamie convinced the students in her classroom, the entire school, and the community to share her vision. She helped them see that the vision was obtainable and enabled them to become leaders.

### Leaders Help Others Be Leaders

A common theme that emerged from the personal best experiences was the high quality of people working together. Leaders are not authoritative. They are democratic and develop effective working teams. Leaders give up authority in exchange for shared decision-making and teamwork. Successful organizations have more than one leader. Individuals given the right circumstances and encouragement can become leaders. Leaders turn followers into leaders.

Cathy, a cooperating teacher to a student teacher, wrote:

Melinda [student teacher] was a good teacher, but she wasn't a great teacher and she knew it. She wanted to be a great teacher and I wanted to be able to give her the tools necessary to become one.

Melinda was not a risk taker. She liked to stay within the lines. I began by challenging her to try different things. For example, instead of teaching out of a basal [textbook], I had her teach a unit about something that she chose, something that she found interesting. After she chose a theme, I helped her find resources and keep her projects and lessons age-appropriate. After she got over the initial fear of not having the crutch of a basal to read word-by-word what she was supposed to say, she got excited about her unit. That excitement spilled over into her teaching. When the kids saw how excited she was to teach her lessons, they eagerly anticipated her lessons. By not being tied to that basal crutch, she was given room to actually talk to and get to know the kids, and they began to form a relationship with one another. Melinda's love of children and teaching became apparent and she learned how to create a positive and loving learning climate in her classroom.

Part of Cathy and Melinda's shared vision was for Melinda to be a great teacher. Cathy provided the leadership, direction, and encouragement that Melinda needed to become a great teacher. Melinda is now a great teacher and a leader in her own classroom. Melinda needed Cathy to be a strong leader to help her develop the leadership skills she lacked.

The development of relationships between the leader and the team is a key part of helping others develop leadership skills. In the personal best stories, leaders often describe part of their vision as developing leadership skills in others. Leaders accomplish this through the development of relationships. Leaders develop positive relationships by earning the trust and respect of the team. Team members feel that the leader is an individual that will help them learn to lead others. A feeling of trust lets team members know that failure is accepted as long as it leads to future learning. Organizations continue to grow and succeed when risks and opportunities are taken. Risks will be taken only in an environment where success is celebrated and failure is accepted as one of the steps to success.

Part of developing good working relationships and a key component of allowing others to lead is communication. Leaders do not keep secrets from team members. To become a leader, team members need to know the truth about an organization. The leader cannot be everywhere at the same time and cannot do all the work of the organization.

Leaders communicate the information necessary for team members to become leaders and do the work of the organization. Leaders continue developing their own leadership skills. Often a mentor plays an important role in the development of leadership. Leaders need someone to talk to about their leadership qualities. Fears about becoming a leader can be offset by conversations with mentors. Beginning leaders benefit greatly by having someone

they respect and admire act as a mentor. Talking to experienced leaders eases apprehensions about leadership, success, and abilities.

### Lead in the Trenches

Leaders are active and work hard. Any project worth completing is worth hard work. Leaders do not give directives and sit back and wait for it to happen. Leaders are actively engaged in doing the work that needs to be done. The work that needs to be done might be selling the project to the public or scraping dirty dishes. Leaders are not afraid to let their teams see them doing all types of work. Leaders are part of the team and work with a team. Leaders act like team members and model appropriate teamwork. They view hard work as satisfying.

Susan, a volunteer church youth group leader who challenged the youth to raise \$10,000 for a mission project, wrote:

To further motivate the teens we planned one project a month that would be fun to participate in. We brainstormed together and came up with several good ideas. Since they shared in the decision-making process, they were more enthusiastic about participating in the projects. All of the projects delegated responsibilities to different members in the group or to parent helpers. It was helpful to me and helpful in building leadership skills in them. We all learned the value of cooperation, respect, and faithfulness. To be an example as a leader, I worked every project right beside the teens and their parents. I never asked them to do a job I did not, nor would not do.

Susan modeled behavior that she wanted the teens in the youth group to adopt. Her vision included instilling the values of cooperation, respect, and faithfulness in the teens. She showed the teens that no job was too menial for her to do and in turn the teens learned that no job was unimportant. She worked alongside the teens in the trenches and gained respect and trust as a leader. Susan wanted the members of the youth group to learn the benefit of hard work and to help others. Since many of the beginning leaders described their first attempt at leadership or were asked to initiate a program that was not their idea, continuous learning was a key part of leadership. Leaders gather information and become knowledgeable about all parts of a project or organization. They relish learning and are open to new ideas or points of view. Leaders learn by listening to those in the trenches doing the work of the organization. Modeling continuous learning for a team leads to continuous improvement and success.

### Laugh It Off and Have Fun

Leaders take time to acknowledge team members. Appreciation can be as simple as a thank you, flowers, or a note. Appreciation can also be more elaborate including awards, dinners, or newspaper articles. The size of the acknowledgement is not the point. The feeling behind the act is what is important. To be successful, leaders work with good people and are able to make those people understand how much they are valued and appreciated. Even the best team members burn out when they feel undervalued or unappreciated. Leaders know the right way to show their appreciation.

Evelyn, who was acting principal for a week, wrote:

Each day, my announcements were printed on a pretty bordered computer paper. It was not much of a change but teachers don't need much to get excited. Variety is the spice of life and by Friday they looked forward to what my note would look like. I think humor was the winning touch. Things were so bad that all I could do was laugh. I typed silly comments in my morning notes. I am not a clown all the time but I do find humor to be uplifting and useful at times. On the following Monday, I brought pansies to the school nurse to thank her for all the extra help she gave me. At

break time, I had glazed doughnuts for the faculty and aides. We laughed as we told Mr. H. about our harrowing week. I would recommend to a future leader to relax and have fun being the leader. Worry and stress only cause ulcers. There is a way to lead and still have fun by enjoying and celebrating the talents of the people who work with you.

Evelyn understood that she would not have successfully survived the week without the support of her team. She worked with quality people who went the extra mile for her because they knew she cared. One disaster after another fell on the school the week Evelyn was in charge. No one person could have accomplished what Evelyn and her team did. Evelyn knew it was important to say thank you.

Leadership is fun. Working in an organization is fun. Helping others to develop leadership skills is fun. Seeking opportunities is fun. Celebrating achievements is fun. Many aspects of an organization are fun. Needless to say, there are tough times in any organization. It takes hard work to move an organization toward a shared vision and it is not always fun work. However, the people in an organization need to have fun. No one wants to go to a job that is always drudgery. Helping team members have fun and achieve is the mark of an effective leader. Leaders have a sense of humor. They are able to take a step back and laugh at themselves and laugh with team members. As Kouzes and Posner (1987) stated in describing the personal best, "it should bring a smile to your face" (p. 304).

### **Conclusions**

The personal best stories of beginning Educational Administration students included many of the same themes that Kouzes and Posner (1987) found in studying business leaders. The personal best stories of beginning leaders are not as sophisticated as the stories of established business leaders. Once beginning leaders accepted the role of leadership, they actively sought challenges and opportunities to make the vision a reality. Beginning or experienced leaders have a vision of the possibilities and are able to convince others of the rightness of the vision. Beginning leaders realize that leadership means you must have followers and that people willingly follow a leader. Followers are recognized as quality individuals who can be leaders in their own right, given the correct circumstances. Beginning leaders believe that they should be in the trenches working alongside the team. Leaders do not set themselves apart from the team. Beginning leaders found leadership to be both hard work and fun. Their apprehensions are overcome by small wins that lead to larger success. Leaders understand the importance of having a sense of humor and of recognizing the contributions of others.

### **Reference**

Kouzes, J.M., & Posner, B.Z. (1987). **The leadership challenge: How to get extraordinary things done in organizations.** San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.