Personal Leadership Conundrum
Matthew Eriksen
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The Personal Leadership Conundrum leadership development project is a semester-long, personal leadership inquiry that provides students with a self-directed learning opportunity. The guiding framework for this leadership inquiry is a personal leadership conundrum developed by students based on their experience. Students engage in problem-based learning and reflect on their experience to develop a clear understanding of their conundrum and how they might resolve it in practice. The exercise provides a structure through which students can become lifelong learners. In addition to the students’ personal development, through interviews conducted by the students with leaders, the project creates a community of inquiry into leadership within the institution and/or field that it is employed.

**Keywords:** leadership; leadership development; problem-based learning; self-reflection; inquiry; self-directed learning

Practical activity deals with individualized and unique situations which are never exactly duplicable and about which, accordingly, no complete assurance is possible.

—Dewey (1929, p. 3)

**Background and General Description of Exercise**

This exercise was developed for a Leadership and Organizational Development course taught at a U.S. military academy. Students enrolled in this course are undergraduate students in their second-class (junior) year. Each section of the course has, on average, 20 students enrolled. Because this is an individual-centered project that does not depend on in-class interaction.
for its successful completion, the number of students in a course does not affect the quality of the students’ performance.

During the summer before their second-class year, these students engage in their first formal leadership position at the Academy and will continue to occupy various leadership positions up to and beyond graduation. For example, most second-class cadets enrolled in the course were the cadre responsible for indoctrinating incoming cadets into the military. Over the 7 weeks of this indoctrination program, incoming cadets receive training from the cadre in all three realms of Academy life: military, academic, and physical. Also, during the previous two summers, these cadets engaged in operational activities in the role of a follower in the service into which they will become commissioned officers on graduation. These experiences provide cadets with a basis from which to develop a meaningful Personal Leadership Conundrum.

The Personal Leadership Conundrum project is the culminating learning experience of a Leadership and Organizational Development course. It is a semester-long (15-week) project that culminates in a final paper that incorporates student learning that occurred throughout the semester. Through engagement in this assignment, students create meaningful leadership knowledge that is applicable to their day-to-day leadership practice. The guiding framework for this paper is a personal leadership conundrum (i.e., puzzle, paradox, or question for which there is no self-evident answer) into which each student will inquire (see the appendix for a list of examples of students’ Personal Leadership Conundrums). The term conundrum was chosen because leadership challenges never have a simple, clear, obvious, or singular solution (Bennis, 2003; Heifetz, 1994). One must struggle through the flux, ambiguity (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Pfeiffer, 1977), and contingency (Davis & Luthans, 1979; Utecht & Heier, 1976) of leadership, never knowing if one has taken the most effective course of action.

The learning required for students to meaningfully address their chosen conundrum takes place through required research and interviews on their conundrum, as well as learning that occurs through completing additional course assignments and engaging in class discussions. Additional course assignments include creating a leadership development plan, a mid-semester update of this plan, and an after-action review for their present leadership position within the corps of cadets. Students also engage in self-reflection exercises, read articles and a textbook, present an article or textbook chapter to the class and facilitate the class discussion on the contents of the chapter and/or article, and prepare four questions with answers for each of the articles presented in class.

The Personal Leadership Conundrum provides students with a self-directed learning opportunity that enhances students’ ability to work through future leadership challenges. The self-directed learning opportunities include the
formulation of a conundrum, inquiry, problem identification, problem solving, identifying relevant resources to create an understanding of the conundrum, exposure to multiple points of view, and organizing, analyzing, and evaluating information to create a knowledge framework that will allow the student to work through his or her conundrum when he or she encounters it in the future.

Rationale for Exercise

The underlying impetus for the development of this project is the belief that for leaders to be effective they must be lifelong learners (Bennis, 2003; Candy, 1991). Direct application of leadership theories to everyday practice or the mindless implementation of operational tactics that have been perceived to be effective in the past will not allow leaders who operate under conditions of complexity, uncertainty, contingency, ambiguity, and flux (Clampitt, DeKoch, & Williams, 2001; Cunliffe, 2002; Stacey, 2001) to be consistently effective. To effectively lead, one must develop the ability to identify problematic situations, frame (Fairhurst, 2005; Goffman, 1974) these situations to formulate a tentative understanding of the situation, and formulate questions to be answered that when answered will allow one to develop practical theories of action (Argyris & Schön, 1974) to work through these problematic situations (Eriksen, 2004). This process and its outcome are contingent on the uniqueness of the leader (Cunliffe, 2001; Shotter, 1993; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2002), as well as the particular characteristics of the situation. In other words, leadership practice is a personal phenomenon that cannot be meaningfully understood without taking into account the uniqueness of the leader (e.g., his or her experiences, personality traits and characteristics, values, mental schema, and even body). Leadership is an embodied experience (Kruks, 2001; Shilling, 2003; Young, 2005) that unfolds within the context of a specific set of relationships. It is a relational activity (Cunliffe, 2001; Shotter, 1993).

John Dewey’s Theory of Knowledge and Inquiry

This exercise was developed based on John Dewey’s philosophy of knowledge, called instrumentalism, and his analysis of effective inquiry. It is based on the belief that successful leaders, or successful lifelong learners, engage in a process of effective inquiry. The structure of this exercise is consistent with Dewey’s analysis of effective inquiry.

Dewey (1908) understood knowledge as having a practical instrumentality in the guidance and control of the interaction between humans and their environment. Thus, Dewey’s concept of knowledge was called instrumentalism.
Instrumentalism assumes that the development of knowledge is an adaptive human response to environing conditions whose purpose is to actively restructure these conditions (Field, 2006). At any point in time, we use the best means at hand to achieve the ends we seek, which in turn become a new set of means to attach to a new set of problems (Jones & Fogelin, 1997). Under this framework, universals or truths are not objects but instruments. Specifically, they are the instruments through which problems are solved and meaning built up (Eriksen, 2001).

Because this exercise is based on an instrumentalism philosophical understanding of knowledge, no one type of knowledge is believed to be superior to others (e.g., conclusions drawn from research based on the scientific method are not considered more valuable than knowledge created from personal experience). In other words, the value of each particular source of knowledge is based solely on its instrumentality. As part of the exercise, students are required to read periodicals and academic journal articles relevant to their conundrum, interview leaders to obtain insights into the conundrum, and reflect on their personal experience (Dewey, 1938; Dugal & Eriksen, 2004; Eriksen, 2001; Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983; Seibert & Daudelin, 2000). From these multiple sources of knowledge, it is each student’s responsibility to create a meaningful understanding and insights into his or her conundrum, draw conclusions about his or her personal leadership development needs, and to create knowledge instrumental to his or her effective leadership practice.

Dewey’s (1910) process of effective inquiry is composed of five phases. Please see Figure 1 to see how the Personal Leadership Conundrum employs the phases of John Dewey’s process of effective inquiry. In the first phase, the inquirer encounters a problematic situation: a situation within which normal activity is disrupted and he or she does not know how to go on. It is a situation within which the inquirer’s “habits” are inadequate to work through the situation to fulfill his or her needs and desires. In the second phase, the problem is identified. This is a crucial step, because exactly what the problem is most often not self-evident. Next, the inquirer must introduce a supposition, theory, or idea that if true would solve the problem. In the fourth step, possible consequences of the proposed solution are elaborated and compared with the consequences of other possible solutions to determine its relative efficacy among the solutions. Finally, the chosen proposed solution to the problem must be tested in practice. If repeatedly successful in practice, this solution becomes a habit that will be used when similar situations are encountered in the future (Jones & Fogelin, 1997). The Personal Leadership Conundrum incorporates parts of the first four steps. When the student encounters his or her conundrum in the future, he or she will engage in the final step of this inquiry process.
Exercise Design and Outcomes

The Personal Leadership Conundrum is a problem-based learning project (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980; Coombs & Elden, 2004; Peterson, 2004). But unlike most problem-based learning (PBL), in which the teacher presents the problem to students, for this assignment, students choose the problem (i.e., conundrum) that they will address. This step increases the responsibility students must take for their learning. Each student’s conundrum is a real-world problem that he or she has formulated based on his or her experience.

As well as leadership conundrums, the Personal Leadership Conundrum assignment represents a structured self-learning model that may be utilized to address any conundrum. In addition to developing practical leadership knowledge, this assignment allows students to develop self-directed learning skills (Norman & Schmidt, 1992). Self-directed learning skills include the ability to (Hiemstra, 2006a)

- question, inquire, and problem solve;
- keep an open mind to multiple points of view;
- scan data and quickly choose relevant resources;
- collect data on performance through self-observation and feedback from others;
• assess one’s present performance using that data;
• translate learning needs into learning goals, plans, and activities;
• set goals to improve present performance;
• observe and model others’ performance to improve;
• make a firm commitment to working on goals; and
• maintain continuous self-motivation.

Through engaging in this assignment, students learn to create meaningful knowledge (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983; Seibert & Daudelin, 2000) rather than memorize abstract theories and facts about leadership that they simply regurgitate back to the teacher for a course grade. Thus, teachers must forgo their roles as knowledge dispensers and adopt the roles of coaches (Coombs & Elden, 2004). Similar to Hackman’s (2002) notion of an effective team leader, the instructor provides a compelling direction, designs an environment within which students can create meaningful knowledge, and adopts the role of a coach (Coombs & Elden, 2004). In the role of a coach, the instructor asks leading and open-ended questions, encourages, helps students reflect on their experiences, challenges their thinking, raises issues that need to be considered, monitors progress, and creates a trusting environment (Wood, 1994).

Each student’s conundrum is based on his or her past experiences. It must be written and answered in the first person. In other words, the student should be “in” his or her conundrum, and the understanding he or she develops about the conundrum should be based on who he or she is. Because leadership is a relationship and an embodied experience, the understanding of and answer to any leadership conundrum is dependent on who is inquiring into the conundrum; who the leader is cannot be separated from his or her conundrum if he or she wants to create a meaningful answer to his or her conundrum. As Robert Greenleaf (1977) stated, “Nothing is meaningful until it is related to the learner’s own experience” (p. 18). Thus, self-knowledge (Jopling, 2000) is paramount to effectively addressing and answering the leadership conundrum.

To increase students’ self-knowledge in preparation for their leadership conundrum, the teacher may have students engage in a number of self-awareness exercises prior to developing their conundrums. For example, students may engage in assignments in which they are asked to identify and define their values and leadership strengths and weaknesses. Students may receive anonymous 360-degree feedback from others in their work and/or learning environment. Learners could also engage in a Felt Experience Exercise (Dugal & Eriksen, 2004).1

Other techniques that facilitate self-reflection include journaling (Hiemstra, 2001; Morrison, 1996; Riley-Doucet & Wilson, 1997) and critical incident techniques (Cope, 2003; Greenwood, 1998).

As well as facilitating each student’s individual learning, the assignment of the Personal Leadership Conundrum project to a group of students creates...
a community of inquiry (Eriksen, 2001, 2004) into leadership. At a minimum, this community consists of all of the students engaging in the project, the instructor, and the leaders that the students interview. As well as inquiring into his or her conundrum, each student must provide one other student with written comments and feedback on the first draft of the other student’s final paper. During interviews, each interviewed leader inquires into the student’s conundrum with the student. As comments from a number of leaders that were interviewed by students reveal, the interviewee’s inquiry into leadership continues even after the interview. As one interviewee stated about his interview experience,

My understanding of leadership issues was clarified through the interaction with the cadets. As I spoke about examples, I was able to see them in a different light. It became clear to me that as I discussed the events more, the better I understood them for what they were and the more I was able to reinforce my decision matrix and final outcomes.

Also, in some cases, as a result of the relationship established during the interview, a mentorship relationship develops between the student and the leader the student interviewed. As another leader stated,

The student that interviewed me has stopped by a number of times since the interview. I think she feels more comfortable talking to me and sees me as a person she can bounce ideas off of. Also, she sees me as someone who can help her make sense of how she is feeling.

On completion of this assignment, students will have developed a clearer understanding of and insights into to their conundrums. They will have developed a practical plan of action that they can employ to attempt to successfully work through their leadership conundrum when they encounter it in the future. Also, on completion of this assignment, the students will be better able to engage in self-directed learning, effectively define a problem when experiencing a problematic situation, develop and articulate an understanding of and solution to their problematic situation, and describe how they will lead through this situation when they experience it in the future. In addition, students are likely to understand that they can create their own knowledge of leadership and are not dependent on “experts” to obtain such knowledge and that this self-created knowledge is more meaningful and practical to their day-to-day lives than abstract leadership theories.

**Appropriate Context of Use**

The Personal Leadership Conundrum is most effective when engaged in by students who possess leadership experience, because it is from this
experience that students develop meaningful conundrums. Because most undergraduate students do not possess much leadership experience, this exercise is not best suited for traditional undergraduate leadership education. This project has been successfully employed in both full-time and part-time MBA leadership courses as well as at a U.S. military academy. In addition, it is believed that the Personal Leadership Conundrum project could be meaningfully employed in many other learning environments, such as women’s studies centers, ethnic cultural centers, business leadership development programs, leadership labs such as the American Association of University Women girls’ leadership forum, and student governments that include experiential community-level involvement.

Preparation Needed by Instructor

The instructor should possess an understanding of problem-based learning. If the instructor lacks experience employing problem-based learning in the classroom, it is suggested that the instructor begin by reading the article titled “Introduction to the special issue: Problem-based learning as social inquiry—PBL and management education” by Gary Coombs and Max Elden in the October 2004 issue of the Journal of Management Education. Also, there are numerous introductory articles that can be found on the Internet. After this, the instructor should read through the four parts of the Personal Leadership Conundrum exercise and adapt it to his or her specific teaching context. In addition, the instructor should develop problem-based learning coaching skills that facilitate student learning (Coombs & Elden, 2004).

Preparation Needed by Students

Students are best prepared to successfully complete this project if they are required to engage in self-reflection exercises that increase their self-awareness. The greater students’ self-awareness, the more meaningful will be their engagement in the Personal Leadership Conundrum because they will be able to take into consideration how their personal styles and characteristics affect their proposed resolution to their conundrum. The level and amount of directed self-reflection engaged in by students should be based on their present level of self-awareness—the lower their level of self-awareness, the greater the amount of self-reflection the instructor should require of the students. Also, the instructor should spend time educating students about problem-based learning and the rationale behind it and address any questions or concerns students have about the assignment.
Implementation

To ensure higher quality final papers, the Personal Leadership Conundrum project is broken into four separate assignments that should be spaced out over the semester. Each assignment builds on the previous. Assuming a 15-week semester, students should complete their project proposal by the 4th week of the semester, interviews by the 8th week, rough draft by the 12th week, and final paper at the end of the semester. If these clear milestones are not created, experience indicates the majority of the students will wait until near the end of the semester to begin to work on this exercise. This will not leave them with enough time to meaningfully or effectively complete the project. Also, if they run into any difficulties, there would be no time to make adjustments to their plan of action.

The first assignment, the *Personal Leadership Conundrum Project Proposal*, has several requirements. First, students are required to develop their leadership conundrum and explain why they have chosen this particular conundrum. Second, they must identify an initial list of topics, theories, ideas, and factors that they will inquire into to develop a clear understanding of and insights into their leadership conundrum. Finally, they must create an initial bibliography of at least three academic journal articles, three periodical articles, and two leaders within the industry they wish to enter on graduation that they will interview about their leadership conundrum. The instructor should encourage students to engage in research independently but be available to assist students that are having difficulty locating relevant articles or interviewees. The discipline within which the articles are published should be left open. Business journals and magazines will not necessarily contain the most relevant knowledge to help students develop solutions to their conundrums. The instructor should be open to students employing other texts such as literature or novels in place of or in addition to journal and periodical articles. Authors such as Shakespeare have identified basic understandings of the human condition that may be invaluable to a student’s understanding of his or her conundrum.

The second assignment, *Leadership Conundrum Interviews*, provides students with guidance on how to conduct effective interviews and requires each student to conduct interviews with at least two leaders. Ideally, the leaders will have experienced the conundrum and work within the industry that the student works in or wishes to work in on graduation. The leaders should be selected with the goal that they will provide insights into and possible resolutions of the student’s conundrum. Students will require different levels of assistance in completing this assignment, but the instructor should encourage students to take as much initiative and responsibility for this process as possible. If necessary, the instructor should assist students in developing their interview questions and/or locating appropriate leaders to
interview. These interviews have the side benefit of the possibility of establishing relationships between the instructor’s organization and the organizations for which the interviewed leaders work. Students are required to submit a summary of these interviews, describe how these interviews affected their understanding of their conundrum, and send thank you letters to their interviewees.

The third assignment, *First Draft of the Final Paper*, requires students to write the first draft of their final paper. Then a student partner with a similar conundrum will provide constructive feedback to the best of his or her ability that, if implemented by the author, will improve the quality of the paper. Partners should be determined by the instructor based on students’ submission of the *Personal Leadership Conundrum Project Proposal*. This assignment outlines both the requirements of the author and the partner who reviews the first draft of the author’s final paper. This mutual feedback allows students to evaluate and deepen their understanding of their conundrum.

The fourth assignment, *Personal Leadership Conundrum Final Paper*, provides the criteria on which students will write a paper that articulates their present understanding of their leadership conundrum based on their semester-long inquiry. To develop their present understanding of their conundrum, students are required to employ relevant academic theories from their course textbook and assigned readings, knowledge gleaned from at least three academic journal articles and three periodical articles or other texts as mentioned above, insights developed through class discussions, the experience and knowledge of at least two leaders that the students interviewed, and their own experience and self-understanding. Also, students must identify what they will think about, who they will be, what actions they will take, and a heuristic that they will use to work through their conundrum when they encounter their conundrum in the future. These understandings and frameworks for action should be employed as hypotheses to be tested that will be revised based on the outcomes of practice.

**Students’ Response**

Instructors who use this exercise must realize that some students initially experience anxiety over the assignment of this project. The students who may experience the most anxiety are students who have been most successful in traditional learning environments because they have mastered how to do well in lecture-based classrooms but, in general, do not understand how to be successful under this different academic framework (Peterson, 2004). But by the end of the semester, the majority of students mention this project in their end-of-course evaluations as the most valuable and enjoyable learning experience of the course. As one student stated,
I believe that the Leadership Conundrum assignment is possibly the most relevant and useful experience in both Leadership and Organizational Development and Organizational Behavior courses. The Personal Leadership Conundrum is very valuable because it asks you to probe your leadership style and abilities and find areas of weakness. The Personal Leadership Conundrum is valuable because it requires the interviewing of officers or other leadership mentors who have already experienced the same problems or situations. Once the interview is coupled with academic knowledge, an outstanding experiential learning process takes place.

Another student stated,

Picking just one conundrum was difficult. . . . I was able to learn a lot about my conundrum and not only apply it to when I enter [my future career] but to my everyday experiences as a leader. Additionally, by reading and critiquing my partner’s paper, I was able to find out about another conundrum that will also affect me. I find it a success because I have now learned how to research different leadership topics I am interested in. Additionally, I now find it easier to ask my superiors about their experiences so that I can try to learn from them.

Successful self-directed learners are inner-directed and achievement motivated (Hiemstra, 2006a). Also, they possess the following self-directed learning competencies (Hiemstra, 2006b):

- Ability to develop and be in touch with curiosities. Perhaps another way of describing this skill would be “the ability to engage in divergent thinking.”
- Ability to formulate questions, based on personal curiosities, which are answerable through inquiry (in contrast to questions that are answerable by authority or faith).
- Ability to perceive themselves objectively and accept feedback from others about their personal performance nondefensively.
- Ability to diagnose their own learning needs in light of models of competence required for performing life roles.
- Ability to identify human, material, and experiential resources for accomplishing various kinds of learning objectives.
- Ability to identify data required to answer various kinds of questions.
- Ability to locate the most relevant and reliable sources of any required or acquired data.
- Ability to select and use the most efficient means for collecting any required data from various sources.
- Ability to organize, analyze, and evaluate the data so as to get valid answers to questions.
- Ability to design a plan of strategies for making use of appropriate learning resources in answering questions or meeting learning needs.
- Ability to carry out a learning plan systematically and sequentially. This skill is the beginning of the ability to engage in convergent thinking.
- Ability to collect evidence of the accomplishment of learning objectives and have it validated through subsequent performance.
In terms of learning, ultimately, it is the ability and willingness of students to take control and responsibility for their learning that determines any potential for self-direction.

Suggestions

Based on their preferences, instructors should adapt or reduce the requirements of this project to suit their specific learning objectives and teaching context. For example, if students already possess effective self-directed learning skills, the specificity of the requirements might be reduced. As written, the Personal Leadership Conundrum requirements are for a novice self-directed learner. If this exercise is employed as an organizational learning or development activity in a nonacademic organization, organizational members can interview more senior leaders within their organization or within their industry. If students do not possess effective research or interviewing skills, training or an assignment should be undertaken to develop these skills. If requested, most schools’ librarians will offer a class on how to conduct effective research. Students must possess effective interviewing skills to ensure that they obtain meaningful knowledge from their interviews and do not waste the time of the interviewees.

The instructor may want students to share with or present their results to the class. This opportunity would increase student learning, especially if a discussion is generated from the presentations. In addition to requiring an additional commitment of class time, a drawback to presenting conundrums publicly is that students may not pursue the leadership conundrum that is most meaningful because they do not want to share it with their classmates because of its personal nature.

Because most students are unfamiliar with problem-based learning, to eliminate students’ anxiety with respect to grading, the instructor should provide students with a grading rubric for each of the four assignments that make up the Personal Leadership Conundrum and take class time to review and answer any questions that students have concerning how they will be evaluated on each assignment.

Conclusion

This assignment allows the student to create meaningful leadership knowledge that is applicable to their day-to-day leadership practice. It moves students’ learning from the abstract and theoretical realm of most leadership textbooks and courses into the flow and flux of everyday leadership practice. It acknowledges that leadership is an embodied experience that is ultimately about successfully working through conundrums. Leadership is about change and, thus, requires learning. But to be effectively employed to
improve leadership practice, this learning cannot be in the form of abstract generalizations removed from the complexity, flux, and contingency of the actual act of leading. Meaningful and effective leadership knowledge must be specific to a leader and the context within which he or she leads. The Personal Leadership Conundrum provides a systematic process through which students can create such knowledge.

This is a labor-intensive process for the instructor, who must coach students and provide feedback on and grade the individual assignments. But being able to read these conundrums provides the instructor with invaluable knowledge about what the instructor’s students see as their greatest leadership challenges and how his or her students and their interviewees make sense of and address them. Thus, the instructor is provided with a realistic glimpse into the practice of leadership.

**Appendix**

**Examples of Personal Leadership Conundrums**

“How do I lead subordinates in my division to accomplish a given task that I myself do not truly believe in?”

“How do I lead people on a patrol boat and develop a close friendship while still ensuring professionalism and command?”

“How can I demonstrate a sense of compassion and genuine concern for others while maintaining the level of control and authority needed to be an effective leader?”

“How do I maintain a high level of discipline and firmness that a leader needs to be respected and not go overboard, becoming an ‘iron maiden’?”

“How will I be able to effectively lead enlisted personnel that are older and much more experienced than I?”

“How do I maintain my cheerful and feminine personality when I am expected to be tough and disciplined in order to be a respected officer?”

“How do I effectively and efficiently handle conflict, if I am nonconfrontational by nature?”

“When I graduate and report to my cutter, the crew will hold stereotypes about me, and I will hold stereotypes of the crew. How can I effectively manage both the crew’s and my own stereotypes to be a successful leader?”

“How do I manage my time appropriately among my personal and career goals?”

“I am a regional team leader of a multicompany organization whose members I have no direct control over and that are highly paid. How do I effectively lead a team that I have no direct authority over and the typical motivators of money and recognition no longer work?”

“How can I effectively influence people in any position within my organization?”

“How can I achieve a successful work-life balance now, which will continue to develop as part of my lifestyle, while I strive to be an effective leader?”

“How do I learn to stand by my decisions?”

“How can I become the leader of a team and inspire it to achieve its best without being its established leader from the start?”
Note

1. The Felt Experience Exercise is a form of cooperative learning in which students are placed into dyads. Through written reflection on his or her experience and dialogue with his or her partner about their experiences, a student’s self-understanding and understanding of his or her partner emerge through each student’s awareness of his or her differences in relation to his or her partner.

References


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