Exercising Leadership Project

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<u>Section I: Describe Your Leadership Project</u>

Goal and Initiative

The goal of this project revolves around finding a path forward during a major life transition. After over 19 years with one company, more than double the longest job tenure I have ever experienced, my role was eliminated leaving me to recalibrate my professional aspirations and find new employment. This endeavor will require multiple initiatives to move the process forward. Ensuring a positive frame of mind prevails, to protect both mental and physical aspects of my health, is paramount to the success of this project. Reviewing and assessing professional milestones and experiences to maximize my resume will be vital tasks. Interviewing has never been a strength and it will be necessary for me to practice and take the necessary feedback to improve in this area. Before the elimination of my role the project included key players from my previous team. The scope shifted after the lay-off and it seems prudent to reflect on what that means. There is no longer the opportunity to transform dysfunction which I contributed to in my previous role. Yet, there is still the chance to combine forces with these individuals and share our resources and knowledge around best practices for job hunting and potential employers.

Scope, Role and Background

An important aspect of working in the realm of professional development involves working on oneself. Paying attention to your weaknesses and engaging in a high level of personal and professional development. The corporate world voices this as a critical element and encourages individuals to continuously strive toward this goal. As addressed by Heifetz et al. (2009), "To mobilize stakeholders to engage with change initiative you have to identify their strongest values, and think about how supporting your program would enable your stakeholders to serve those values" (p. 92). In truth, people only focus on core values at critical times. T-

Mobile espoused the position of being dedicated to development by encouraging Individual

Development Plans, internal programs for top performers and those interested in cross-functional

career planning, as well as tuition reimbursement. Unfortunately, multiple obstacles prevented

participation in these programs including priorities in sales metrics, constant change to meet

market demand, and frequent re-organization. Individually I took the initiative and focused on

career development through outside development programs in coaching, talent development, and

occasional seminars from industry vendors on a myriad of topics. What was lacking was the real-

world, workplace application of all the development that I was participating in. With so many

competing priorities and an ever-shrinking labor allocation, there was not only limited time for

practical application but there was also a lack of awareness or concern on the part of senior-level

leadership of what additional possibilities could look like.

Diagnosis and Stakeholder Map

While completing the Stakeholder Map for this activity several dynamics began to

emerge for me. Losing employment is an extreme experience of being on the balcony. Your

dance card is deactivated and there is no longer another avenue to pursue on the floor. Being

relegated to this domain by force is both luxurious and humbling at once. After more than one

month 'off' the job, there has been a great deal of time to reflect, reset, and regenerate. While on

the balcony, clarity arose that the efforts I masqueraded to divert the outcome were neither

strategic nor destined to be ultimately impactful. For over three years the message remained the

same; the team would need to create a better division of labor, branding, and adhere to higher

standards of consulting, all essentially technical. Ultimately not only was our learning and

delivery team almost annihilated but so were other departments in human resources, operations,

marketing, and communications. Performance was not a measurement that decided fate in this

arena. Factors outside our sphere of control decided the fate of thousands of people. This was a balcony not of our making or design. But the balcony is deep, wide, and holds over five thousand people. The magenta gear and other branding have been discarded. During the termination call the initial moment of elation transitioned to a brief panic, 'This has never happened to me once in my entire life', and immediately flowed back to this is a life event I have been waiting for. Life has brought me to balconies before, seeking perspective has required balconies, but this balcony is different. Analyzing my stakeholder map the gap in espoused values stands out. There are both technical and adaptive changes in my map, but I have never solved this before. Leading myself to what I lead others to, emotional intelligence, resiliency, trust, and giving myself grace is new territory for me.

Change Initiative: To transition to a new career.
Adaptive Challenge: Gap in espoused values and behaviors. I know and understand how important it is to use critical thinking skills, highly self-aware but I don't always use my tool box.

Stakeholder Group Or Key Individuals	Relationship to issue	Preferred Outcome	Noblest Value	Loyalties	Potential Losses/Risks
Self	Owner and primary stakeholder	To use the loss of job as a catalyst for change in personal behaviors and professional contributions	Wanting to support my family and contribute to the development of others	Loyalty to being seen as credible and in charge Loyalty to company with 19+ years tenure	Loss of significance and power Risk of a higher rate of unemployment in home state Loss of daily connections with team members Loss of relationship with customers Risk of losing a hard-won financial status
Family	Accustomed to seeing me as in charge	Stability	Belief in me	Loyalty to me Loyalty to their own career paths	Risk – not always giving me important feedback and reflection which could help me Losses – loss of a specific level of income
Former Peers	Processing their own status quo and reflecting aspects back to me	If also impacted finding employment; if not impacted sorting out what remains	Consummate professionals, seeking a path forward.	Mostly loyal to themselves	Loss of team; competing for same roles; not always playing fair Risk of being viewed as incapable of finding new position
Friends	Book club peers, neighbors, peer parents (those I parented alongside)	Predominately want me to find employment with the state of California	Strong foundations in their own paths of wisdom, spirituality, and generosity	Loyal to community building in the macrocosm and raising me up microcosm	Loss of their perception of what I am capable of

Interview Summaries

Not long after my daughter started her position as a paralegal, she shared with me what she wanted in a leader. Frustrated with her manager, she mentioned their passive approach to dealing with a co-worker who was not contributing equally and tainting the document repository with shoddy templates. Several team members had asked the manager to step in and course-correct the individual, but the manager was not willing. This my daughter observed compounded the situation. It created more work for others, impacted how the team viewed their leader, and created risk around the document repository when the individual made changes to documents. Division of labor is a technical challenge, not an adaptive one, but a leader who lacks strategy will find it difficult to keep their team from having negative reactions to this issue.

 A former peer, who was also role-eliminated, commenced his list of ideal leader traits with integrity. Forever a buzzword in all aspects of leadership, it was difficult to resist feeling like a cliché. He furthered the list with the stereotypes of the typical leader attributes: communication, trust, empathy, and ability to drive change. He deepened his perception of leading change by mentioning the role that resiliency plays as well as emotional intelligence.

The differences between my 23-year-old daughter and 45-year-old former peer, both of whom are part of my map, were striking. She is looking for something very specific, to solve a pain point for her team, division of labor which can be seen as both a technical and adaptive challenge, but essentially is closer to technical. When I asked her what she wants in a leader her initial response was someone who takes responsibility. Someone kind enough to tell you the truth and capable of having uncomfortable conversations. My former colleague is looking only at character traits and is driven by his passion points; topics which are the focus of his dissertation. His responses to what he wants in a leader sounded like a textbook. Both have valid points which

are critical to a leader's success. These conversations reinforced beliefs I already held on leadership. When a leader does not take action on pain points it becomes a side conversation, which damages productivity. Change is constant and leading change is both adaptive and technical depending on where you sit in an organization. Additional take-aways were the two different generational responses, one Gen Z and the other Elder Millennial/Gen X cusp as well as the difference of tenure in the workplace.

<u>Section II: Connection to Theory</u>

Connection to Concepts and Theories Studied

In terms of inside and outside initiatives that are impacting this project, I need to keep in mind that the problem is never the problem. Staying curious and looking for opportunities for employment, change, and influencing other stakeholders will be paramount to the success of both my project and securing a new role. Self-perception as a behavior is a hard one to break. Two weeks later it's interesting to reflect on the line above – self-perception as a behavior is a hard one to break. In the article Organizational Distress, Leadership and Communications, Hy Pomerance cites Martin Seligman's work on positive psychology. We can choose how we think, (Pomerance, 2009) "Our habits about thinking need not be forever." During my search for a new job, issues around imposter syndrome have come full front as well as perception versus reality. My habits have included negative talk, self-doubt, and imposter syndrome. These habits stand in direct conflict with values I hold dear as a facilitator and leadership development professional, to give yourself grace, focus on your strengths, and always envision you are already one step up the ladder because that is how you arrive there.

In some ways, I appreciate what Heifetz et al. state is the ability to Value Independent Judgment; "An organization will be better equipped to identify and grapple with adaptive

challenges if its people do not expect the CEO and other senior authorities to always have the answers" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 103). There is no longer a senior authority for me to turn towards and the buck stops with me. How I want to style myself as a leader and what benefit would I bring to an organization are just two of the questions to be mulled over. Taking the quest over to other leadership theories, servant leadership comes to mind.

In an article on servant leadership, Larry C. Spears (Spears, 2010) addresses his top ten characteristics of caring leaders. Many of these align with concepts from the work Heifetz et al. present in their seminal work on adaptive leadership. Listening, empathy, persuasion, awareness, and a commitment to the growth of people are all qualities found in both theories. In part five of The Practice of Adaptive Leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009) the authors explore the link between leadership and building community which is also an integral part of servant leadership. Those practicing servant leadership at times go as far as defining the workplace as family, which can bring a negative connotation for anyone who has family trauma in their background.

While exploring additional sources the element of trust was threaded throughout an article from Hy Pomerance (Pomerance, 2009) trust is not only a quality of adaptive leadership but also a component of my journey. Circle of trust, (p. 87) espoused by Pomerance, are similar to the qualities of the offsite or onsite events discussed in chapter 11 of Adaptive Leadership. Other parallels include the importance of planning and preparation for the event including engagement, smaller committee work, and communication. These tasks are not only essential to the success of an offsite, but also allow for explorations in mindfulness.

Connect Theory to Practice

Trust issues are an essential feature of imposter syndrome. I have a lack of trust in my abilities and therefore see myself as less than. I can see myself as capable of getting the job done,

so what prevents the ability to see myself getting the job or being qualified? Is it a lack of time to ponder the question? Is it too much social awareness which can sometimes result in over compensating for others? What needs to be done to build my perception of my leadership capacity and value my judgment? Being part of the master's cohort has helped me to recognize that real-world experience has been beneficial. It has also provided a much-needed structure and focus to this transitional period.

As the oldest member of the cohort, I have more work experience and come from a different generation than most if not all of the other participants. As a Gen Xer, I am very comfortable with being in between the dominant generations and typically take a moderate position on most issues. In contrast, if there is something that I feel passionately about, there will be an extreme shift out of the center. Thus far it has been my intention with this cohort to lead only when needed. It's interesting to ponder this through the lens of Reframing the Group's Default Interpretations (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 119). As my daughter pointed out in her thoughts on a leader, the ability to have difficult conversations is a responsibility. This is not to imply there is a need to have a difficult conversation at this time within the group, but rather I have a responsibility to build solid relationships in case the need arises.

Currently, the dominant needs are to apply for and secure employment. My adaptive change will be critical to this journey. Adaptive Leadership part four guides the reader through See Yourself as a System (Pg. 177). This exercise includes asking questions about forces influencing behavior and choices, defining the role one plays in the larger organization, and exploring what changes need to be made to lead more effectively. Utilizing the systems view as a tool to reframe the context of my values conflict the questions become, what are the complex forces influencing my inability to give myself grace and acknowledge my abilities; what changes

do I need to make to lead myself toward a senior management position? Meditating on these questions provides an opportunity to close the gap and to bring benefit to the purposes I seek to serve (p. 178) for not only the cohort, my daughter, and my former peers who are also searching for employment, but also the authenticity and credibility of my facilitation skills. Loyalties lie with all of these individuals and tasks, but if I am not executing healthily then it is impossible to deliver.

Section III: Practicing Leadership, Process, and Outcomes

As established at the start of this paper, there was a shift in my initial developmental challenge. After looking for a job for over a week the realization that most of the job postings read like technical challenges glossed over with language posing as adaptive work, made finding a job an undesirable outcome. Faced with the possibility of embedding into a new corporate culture, learning new systems, and adjusting to 'this is how we do things here', does not hold any appeal for me. Building relationships, helping individuals grow, and developing teams ignites my focus, but the prospect of dry pedantic tasks does not. One week after my job search started in earnest it ended with aplomb.

Progress Made Toward Goal

My heart took the lead and reminded me of intentions that had been set 18 months ago. During the last round of major reductions in force at T-Mobile, I watched as peers moved on to new endeavors and embraced change. The conclusion at that time was when my time came, I wanted to start my own business. Calculating all the risks, ideally, my tenure would not end until 2025 for financial and professional development reasons. After sifting through the enormous degree of change the role elimination presented, it finally became evident that now was the moment regardless of the calendar year or finances.

There is nothing to prove to anyone but myself. I have been the stakeholder most resistant to change. The developmental goal as written during the first weekend residency, *is to create space for differing viewpoints to reflect and find value in diversity of thought,* which belongs to me and my diversity of thought. Friends, family, and members of the cohort have affirmed this decision by reacting in an overwhelmingly positive and supportive manner. Reaction has been mixed from former peers. Those eliminated most recently have been less enthusiastic than those eliminated in previous cuts., but in all fairness are immersed in their own challenges at this time. The peers and managers who are still with the company, though, delivered resounding affirmation. Their narratives tell a different story than the one I have been telling myself.

Process

The setting may have changed significantly but the goal remains applicable to group settings as well. Whether it be with peers, family, or friends my ability to change my limiting thoughts around my capabilities will benefit others as well. From the onset, I named my piece of the mess, which was not allowing others to voice their solutions, and identified the exact behaviors, but failed to completely address the results of those behaviors. The impact went beyond the scope of the interpersonal relationships at work, it also impacted my ability to contribute to the team. My family background of farming and ranching has resulted in tuning which places a strong emphasis on work ethics. The shadow side of this turning creates discord when imposed on colleagues. Articulating my purpose will be paramount to the success of this endeavor. Knowing the difference between what I am ultimately responsible for and what falls under the jurisdiction of someone else, will help tremendously.

One key difference between my former peer's process and mine revolves around the embracing of artificial intelligence to generate cover letters for job applications and instructional

design. My instincts tell me that the heart and soul need to engage to create meaningful content

and context. Each time we address this issue disequilibrium flairs up. The disorientation results

in a physical reaction that is nauseating., climbing onto the balcony requires an oxygen tank. But

it is necessary, if adaptive change is going to take place, you have to make space for others to

express their opinions.

Interaction with Theory, Confidants/Supports, and Check-ins

Seeing myself as a system framed by autonomy, mastery, and purpose the question

becomes what changes need to be implemented for emotional intelligence, resiliency, and trust to

activate in my mindset? Have my strongest values been identified and engaged in this endeavor?

How have my principles and behaviors supported those values? This leadership challenge is far

from over at this time. Mini experiments have been run by collaborating with peers, professional

contacts, and friends on aspects of my business plan. One confidante in my circle completed the

facilitator certification for Immunity to Change back in 2020 through her federal government

agency. Since she has familiarity with the process her insight into my challenge has been

beneficial. Additionally, I was lucky enough to receive peer feedback during one of our class

meetings. One of my cohort peers provided insight-provoking feedback by asking me if it was

possible to treat myself like a client. The most recent conversation touched on values. Despite the

pain of losing intellectual property, there has been some joy in recreating the content. The

problem is not the problem after all. After the merger with Sprint and T-Mobile the C-Suite

partnered with external consultants to develop the Values, Values in Action, Mission, Vision

Statements, and Manifesto for our new combined company. The effort was so complex that a

five- year plan was developed to take us through the concepts and applications. These values

always lacked meaning and substance for me. Now I have the opportunity to develop my own values, mission, and vision statements.

Lessons Learned, Development, and Application

In preparation to conclude this project, I took the time to review notes from my UC Davis coaching program and a few articles from the Harvard Business Review. Reflecting on this research and the conversations mentioned above with a confidant and peer has helped me to identify my core six values as transparency, well-being, personal growth, humility, sustainability, and generosity. Mission, vision, and goal statements remain a work in progress. The quote from Rumi which introduces chapter 18, sums it up perfectly, "Let yourself be silently drawn to the stronger pull of what you love." (Heifetz et al., 2009, Pg. 221) There is no need to rush.

Conversations with peers who are still with the company illustrate the adaptive challenges facing the revised organization. Currently, the trend seems to be for larger corporations to scale back and mid-size companies to scale up their workforce. In both instances, technical and adaptive changes will manifest. As I prepare to launch my own business there will be a vast opportunity to tap into this tumultuous marketplace and offer guidance using the theories and practices we have been exploring in The Practice of Adaptive Leadership. If getting on the balcony is the only thing a leader does in their practice, there will be a benefit. The lesson for me is that getting on the balcony is a daily opportunity, not to create a to-do list, but rather to get in touch with my thoughts and feelings, gaining perspective for applying the will. Bringing consciousness to reframing defaults to change negative behaviors into purposeful movement.

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