

Observing and Analyzing Postsecondary Educational Leadership

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Author Note

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### **Leadership Description**

For this assignment, I chose to interview Christy Samarkos who currently serves as the Interim Associate Vice President of Campus Life. Samarkos has just started her role in the Vice Presidents office, and is expected to become the Associate Vice President of Campus Life at the start of November. Samarkos's entire full-time career was done at San Diego State University (SDSU). She formerly served as the Director of Residential Education for five years, the Associate Director of Residential Education for three years, the Assistant Director of Residential Education for two and a half years, the Coordinator of Residential Education for two and a half years, and as a Residence Hall Coordinator for two years. This brings her time at San Diego State University to a total of fifteen years. Her vast experiences with different campus leadership and experience in Residential Education provide her with an enormous amount of institutional knowledge.

Samarkos's background prior to SDSU includes two separate Bachelor degrees and one Master's degree. Contrary to my expectation, she did not receive a Doctorate. This fact, however, did not deter from the breadth of knowledge she had and the impressive skills she's developed with time in her various roles. At a traditional undergraduate age, she enrolled at Concordia College and received a Bachelor's of Arts in Social Work. When she started working shortly after, she realized a need for emphasis in special education in the work she was doing and eventually acquired her second Bachelor's in Emotional Behavioral Disabilities. During this time, she had an advisor that led her to find the field of Student Affairs. Through her advisor, she found her true calling and begun her work for a Master's in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania. During this time, she developed a background in residential education as her three-year program included a work component, which allowed her to serve in a capacity very similar to a

Residential Hall Coordinator at SDSU.

The qualities of Christy Samarkos are well respected and highly regarded by numerous professionals that I've interfaced with since my time at SDSU. In the short three months since I've started my assistantship in Student Life and Leadership, Samarkos's qualities were often described without detail, with phrases such as extraordinary or outstanding. These short descriptions made me curious about what exactly made this postsecondary educational leader so special. Curiosity aside, I had a personal interest in better understanding the structure of Student Affairs at SDSU. I had hoped to develop a better sense of the culture present at the institution as well as the operation of the campus from a different perspective, from a management standpoint instead of a student-front standpoint. Through this assignment, I was able to spend a thorough amount of time with Samarkos. After observing, interacting, and reflecting on these interactions, it became clear that the words "extraordinary" and "outstanding" are frequently used because it is otherwise difficult to describe her. The amount of humanity that co-exists with the strong leadership she provides is difficult to encapsulate.

### **Overview and Summary of Activities and Interactions**

Although I had always heard about Christy Samarkos, I had truthfully never met her until the night before I was supposed to shadow her. It was a somber occasion, at a sorority's candle light vigil, in honor of a sorority sister who had passed away. Amongst a midst of campus leaders, Samarkos stood next to my supervisor. My supervisor, Caryl, immediately made a connection for us, knowing that I would be meeting her for the first time the following morning. Even though it was a brief interaction, Samarkos's warmth was infectious and calming. The approachability she provided was calming, suitable for the occasion. At that moment, it became clear to me that I made the right decision to shadow her. I had much to learn about remaining affable while firm. This perception didn't change very much the next morning, nor did it

through the remainder of the time that I interviewed her. Her caring qualities made her approachable to the division leaders that supervise her and directors that she supervises. While remaining approachable, however, she doesn't lose a firmness that a leader needs. Samarkos is also able to clearly articulate thoughts, vision, and process in an engaging and effective manner, after a process of consolidating feedback from other people. Through this process of leadership, I have found Samarkos identifying areas of need from the people she works with and addressing those needs. In doing so, she is able to remain a warm and caring individual while providing the results that make her an extraordinary leader.

Throughout my time observing Samarkos, the majority of our activities were comprised of meetings that we had with other campus entities. This didn't surprise me too much since I knew Samarkos was responsible for coordinating between the various departments she oversees. I was fortunate enough to witness a student protest, and see the decision making process that she had. In between meetings, Samarkos and I also had the opportunity to debrief specific conversations that had occurred, allowing me to receive unique insight to Samarkos's thought and decision-making process. A specific schedule can be found in Appendix B. Due to nature of some of these meetings, specific content and interactions cannot be revealed in this report. The impactful interactions that Samarkos had however, is clear even without delving into specific context.

The formal observation began with a cup of coffee, prior to our first meeting of the first day. We then attended a Student Union Rates meeting with staff from the Associated Students and Student Life and Leadership. In this meeting, discussion that revolved around events taking place in the Union took place. After that meeting, we parted ways as she had a confidential meeting with President Elliot Hirschman. We were able to regroup for a campus pride kick-off meeting involving the Office of Housing Administration, the Associate Vice President of

Administration, and representative from the Division of Business and Financial Affairs. This meeting involved conversations on beautifying the campus and initiatives to make the university more attractive.

The second day of observations involved a slew of meetings. Our first meeting of the day was on housing, which included both components of housing, the Residential Education Office and Office of Housing Administration, as well as an officer from Business and Financial Affairs. After this meeting, we had some down time. Samarkos started providing context on our next meeting, the Women's Center meeting. A few minutes in, however, we were interrupted by staff in the Vice President's office telling us that we had to rush to the President's office due to a protest. We were informed that the students were rattling the doors. At this point we promptly rushed to the President's office. We observed quietly from the side before hearing that they were then heading to the Vice President's office—Samarkos's office. We worked our way back, staying in a side of the office while the front desk staff interacted with the protesters. Samarkos later explained that unless there is a need to interact with the students, contact should be avoided. The remainder of the day was quiet in comparison. Two more meetings took place, one on the topic of the Women's Center, and another on the Student Grievance Process, both of which contain information that is private. In between these meetings Samarkos spoke at a Careers in Student Affairs Month meeting, and we were able to debrief over lunch. During this debrief, I was able to learn more about the decision-making processes that she utilizes.

Although the overall observation schedule can seem mundane and quiet, it is through sitting in these meetings and observing the interactions that a certain element of richness emerges. What is seemingly a schedule full of meetings, the became an opportunity to witness the creation of a new campus center, establishment of a new position, decision making in policy, and program planning. While they were all called meetings, each meeting was unique and useful

to see a bigger picture. This palate of events became the foundation of what painted a picture that becomes the qualities of Christy Samarkos. Due to the uniqueness of each meeting, Samarkos's various roles not only gave insight to the culture of Student Affairs at San Diego State University, but also provided useful acumen on the leadership style and particular frame that is applicable to Samarkos.

### **Application of Leadership**

Applying a certain frame to leadership can be a difficult and daunting task. In everyday life, there are a variety of behaviors driven both intrinsically and extrinsically. Intrinsic motivations form a personal need, which may be developed from a person's upbringing, background, or experiences that informs their method of leading and managing. These intrinsic motivations guide one's view, and make up their preconceptions. On the other hand, extrinsic motivations can be created due to organizational culture or positional requirements. Extrinsic motivations change over time with a shift in culture or as the role of one's position changes. In the case of Christy Samarkos, a newly appointed interim organizational leader with a background in counseling, finding a single leadership style becomes difficult as it becomes necessary to first find ways to navigate her various behaviors. The four frames of leadership proposed by Bolman and Deal (2008), structural, human resources, political, and structural are utilized in an attempt to navigate practices and a process of elimination is utilized to eliminate less salient leadership styles.

Through observing Samarkos, she only exhibits a few qualities of the structural, political and symbolic leader. Samarkos rarely navigated situations through understanding concepts revolving the structural frame such as position or roles. She rarely referred to individual positions and their respective roles in the decision making process. In our two days together, she often regarded the staff she directed as "the people who I work with." Although subtle, this

small gesture in referencing her staff reduces a separation of power and levels. This made the application of the political frame difficult, as competition and power were not the emphasis. Furthermore, instead of creating a vertical structure of leadership, this gesture then emphasizes that the staff all work together. She rarely utilized symbols as a method of communication and did not seek to inspire her staff. Instead, she frequently asked questions and listened to their opinions. This reduced the likelihood of the symbolic frame of navigation as being her leadership practice.

While the process of elimination leads to a human resource frame, the other frames interfered with a direct conclusion. Specifically, the actions of Samarkos occasionally demonstrated influence from another frame. For example, during the student protest, Samarkos chose to not confront the students. She instead chose to stand in a corner and wait for the students to leave, since she wasn't aware of their intentions in protesting, even though she was familiar with the cause. Through their actions it became aware that the intentions were merely concerning visibility and publicity of their upcoming event. In this scenario, she was careful in navigating how she came off to students and developed an action plan, similar to that of a political frame. Furthermore, she directed the front desk staff, people who students would normally interact with, to interact with the protesters, as it was their role or place to do so. Even though she would have had the ability to correspond with the students she chose to act politically and devise a plan of action. This choice, however, was irrelevant in regards to her personal style but was due to the requirements of her new role as an Interim Associate Vice President. As a staff member within the Vice President's Office, she needed to be careful as she now represented the Vice President's Office. It then becomes clear that it was necessary for her to act on some of extrinsically driven behaviors, in this case her role.

Through analyzing and understanding the intention of Samarkos's actions and the process

of elimination above, it becomes clear that Samarkos ultimately operates with the frame of human resources. In our meetings together, Samarkos made decisions and navigated conversations with every participant's needs in mind. She did this though constantly asking questions and making sure that people were on the same page before any decision was made. She even went as far as asking, during the Women's Center meeting, how the participants wanted to discuss the content and participate in the meeting. In doing so, participants received buy-in in the process, and were able to engage in a hands-on manner. When discussing the next steps for the Women's Center, Samarkos focused on the needs of the staff and asked questions that probed on needs for staff levels. Samarkos focused on the needs of the people she worked with as well as those that might be working with her in the future. This marker, amongst many others throughout the observation, point towards a human resources frame of leadership.

### **Discussion**

In observing Christy Samarkos's leadership as the Interim Vice President of Campus Life, I was able to gain a better sense of understanding of the SDSU culture, as well as develop a better understanding of the leadership frames proposed by Bolman and Deal (2008). I originally struggled with the application of leadership frames to our daily practice and this observation process was very helpful in navigating the four frames and applying theory to the practice of leadership. Through observing Samarkos, I was able to think about how her actions aligned with her positional requirements, background, and good qualities of leadership. In doing so, I also gained an awareness of the culture of SDSU's Division of Student Affairs. Through attending various meetings that involved other campus entities like faculty and the Division of Business and Financial Affairs, I was able to understand that Student Affairs is deeply woven into the campus and its operation instead of being another part of campus. It is particularly interesting given the extremely vertical structure of the campus, which was difficult for me to digest at first

given the horizontal structure at UC San Diego where I completely my undergraduate course work.

Aside from learning techniques of surveying meeting participants and finding ways to have difficult conversations with a supervisor, observing Samarkos has taught me that while leadership styles exist, other salient features of a position or role might impact your leadership style. In her words: “even though I’m the same person now, I find that I may have to do things differently to get the same result as before, just because I’m in a different role now.” In the case of Samarkos, even though she remained the same human, her role can impact how she acts and behaves as a leader. Samarkos has taught me that one’s roles have an impact on execution, which is why her role has required her leadership to find influences from the political frame. This has impacted my views of learning leadership and acting as a leader as I now think it is important to also consider how one’s role and institutional culture might impact their respective leadership style.

## References

- Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2008). *Reframing organizations: artistry, choice, and leadership* (4th ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

### Appendix A

The observation was conducted over the course of two days. The itinerary of the observation is listed below. Across the course of two days, some meetings that were confidential or emergency occurred. Any activities that I had observed are listed below.

#### **October 20, 2014**

- 9:30 AM – 10:00 AM Coffee and introductions
- 10:00 AM – 11:00 AM Union rates meeting
- 1:00 PM – 2:00 PM Campus-pride kick-off meeting

#### **October 23, 2014**

- 10:00 AM – 11:00 AM Housing meeting
- 11:00 AM – 11:15 AM Walk back to office preparation for next meeting
- 11:15 AM – 11:37 AM Protest on tuition
- 11:30 AM – 1:00 PM Women's Center meeting
- 1:00 PM – 1:15 PM Careers in Student Affairs Month presentation
- 1:15 PM – 2:00 PM Lunch and interview
- 2:00 PM – 3:30 PM Student grievance process Review
- 3:30 PM – 4:00 PM Debrief and wrap-up

## Appendix B

Because of the dynamic nature of Christy Samarkos, pressing meetings that came up, and the need to spread the observation across two days, the interview wasn't conducted until the second day. The questions that were asked were:

- What is your academic background?

What is your professional background leading up to your current role?

- How do you make decisions?
- How do you deal with ambiguity?
- How do you understand culture?