

Reflecting on Educational Leadership

Course Learning Fall 2014

John Weng

San Diego State University

Author Note

John Weng is a first year Masters student in the Post Secondary Educational Leadership Program with a specialization in Student Affairs.

### Reflecting on Educational Leadership

This course has helped me see leadership and change in a new frame. When I originally started the course, I went into it with the assumption that it was going to be a breeze, especially given that I already had a definition of leadership – the social change model of leadership. Little did I realize that through it I would discover the multiple ways of framing and understanding leadership in different perspectives. What particularly helped augment this learning process was the Observing and Analyzing Postsecondary Educational Leadership assignment, where I shadowed San Diego State University (SDSU) Associate Vice President of Campus Life Christy Samarkos and completed an assignment analyzing her leadership style. Through the process of observing, debriefing, analyzing, and reflecting, this assignment became one of the most powerful assignments for the course and helped me identify how leadership theories can be put into practice, understand various leadership styles, make sense of my own leadership styles, and improve my communication and writing skills in the process (PLO 2, PLO 3, PLO 4, PLO 7, PLO 8).

A particularly powerful element of this assignment was in the process of observing and shadowing a leader in the postsecondary educational setting. This process helped me in navigating and processing the campus operation that differed dramatically from my undergraduate institution. At UC San Diego, where I attained my bachelor's degree, the Division of Student Affairs operated with a horizontal and flat structure, where communication across division and unit required little coordination and effort. It was uncommon for things to “come from the top” and oftentimes, information reached everyone who had a hand in a project or situation. At SDSU, however, this was not the case. The Division of Student Affairs operated with an extremely vertical structure where supervisors controlled information flow. I had originally deemed this process inefficient, as it required everyone's supervisors to be involved in

situations, and assumed that information would get lost in middle management. During the protest that I observed, however, I witnessed the power of having such strong structure and support. Specifically, when I was able to witness the protest, I saw how the entire Division came together within a matter of five minutes to respond and debrief. I then realized that my original impression was wrong. It was especially helpful to have the opportunity to debrief these experiences with Samarkos and understand her train of thought as she navigated the situation. Through this process, the assignment really helped me with my professional goal of understanding and navigating the politics of various student affairs institutions.

This process has also allowed for me to gain a better understanding of how leadership theories can be implemented – either in the work place or simply in analysis. Even though the course alone has taught us the Bolman and Deal (2008) frames of leadership, understanding a theory alone is not useful to the practice of student affairs. Through observing and analyzing the leadership of Samarkos, however, I was able to understand how different theories play out in the workplace. In this case, it was originally really difficult for me to identify with the predominant frame under which Samarkos operated. It was through this process that I really had to develop a better grasp of the various elements of each leadership frame. I also became more aware of the various factors that come into play when one serves in a leadership capacity in the postsecondary educational setting. In doing so, it became clear that leadership is a complicated process in which one will always need to operate with each of the frames in mind, at the same time, I realized that, even then, it was still possible to have a dominant frame of leadership. In addition, depending on the role in which one serves, different levels of the frames of leadership might be necessary. In Samarkos' case, it was necessary for her to employ a higher level of the political frame, while her predominant frame was of the human resource frame. This process of evaluation allowed me to gain a better grasp on the multiple frames of leadership in an active manner.

In attempting to understand how leadership theories are implemented in Samarkos, I also started to evaluate and make sense of my own leadership. As a new student affairs professional at SDSU, I have often become so involved with my professional persona that I lose sight of myself as a person at times. I become so worried about making sure that I am being “professional” that I lose “personableness”. While observing Samarkos, I was able to see that it was possible to maintain a characteristic of humanness, even as an Associate Vice President. I further noticed that a lot of her success was due to the strong relationships she had developed as a professional. When people spoke of her, they said good things; when she spoke, everyone in the room listened. This made me further reflect on myself and realize how naïve I was in my self-consciousness and that of how others perceived me. I found that I was so concerned with maintaining a professional demeanor that I had created barriers between myself and my peers. Through this project, I realized that being a leader doesn’t mean I have to lose my personality or myself in the process. I didn’t have to set up walls that prevented me from forming relationships as many times, as those relationships could help me with my professional life as well.

Ultimately, these experiences culminated in my learning that it is possible to establish boundaries and have a personal life while being extremely successful in student affairs. As graduate students, we are often told that we need to establish boundaries and to set aside time for ourselves as individuals. While I took these statements to heart, I never knew how applicable they were. I always received conflicting messages that it was important to prioritize work and that a career in student affairs involved crazy schedules that conflicted with one’s personal life. It wasn’t until I spoke to Samarkos that I realized this balance was actually possible. Because of the positive relationships she’s established and a strong work ethic, Samarkos is able to delegate tasks during times when she needs to be away from work. She is able to step away from work when needed and spend time with her family. She reminded me that its important to take time

for myself, even if it means saying no sometimes.

Through this experience of observing Samarkos, I developed a strong sense of leadership both in theory and in practice. I became acutely aware of the multifaceted elements of leadership in practice, which is a powerful experience for an aspiring professional. Even though leadership is frequently an elusive topic in higher education and a term used loosely, it comes together in this course through projects like this, where theory and practice are bridged. I think it would be beneficial, in future terms, to continue this project. It could also be beneficial to include elements of discussion in the course and allow for discourse on deconstructing leaders' leadership styles and frames. That being said, I believe that this project definitely impacted me in understanding leadership and growing in the field as well.

References

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