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Self-awareness and leadership: Developing an individual strategic professional development plan in an MBA leadership course

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an MBA course assignment, the “*Individual Strategic Professional Development Plan*”. The assignment consists of three parts, requiring students to: 1) conduct an industry and job analysis 2) explore, benchmark and develop their leadership skills; and, 3) develop a personal strategic plan for guiding and achieving their leadership capabilities and career goals. As a core competency, leadership is needed by all business and management students. While courses in leadership may offer important theoretical and conceptual guidance for students, our assignment requires students to go further; they must reflect on their own identities (who they are) while considering the necessary and critical routes that must be followed on their paths toward becoming effective organizational leaders. In dynamic and uncertain global and technological environments, students' abilities to strategically map their careers and assess and develop key leadership skills critical to career success are more important than ever. Anecdotally, students in post-class assessments have voiced praise for the assignment, citing it as one of the most important outcomes in their MBA experience.

1. Introduction

Leadership is a foundation course in almost all business programs (undergraduate and MBA) and is also commonly included in degree programs across many other academic disciplines. In addition, many organizations throughout the world offer professional development seminars and executive training sessions on the topic of leadership in order to facilitate the growth and promotability of their employees. Although it is difficult to estimate exactly how many universities and colleges in the U.S. offer courses on leadership, the number of these classes and programs has expanded exponentially since the 1990s (Dugan & Komives, 2007). In 2012, the American Society of Training and Development reported that U.S. businesses spend more than \$170 Billion dollars on leadership-based curriculum, with the majority of those dollars being spent on “Leadership Training” (Myatt, 2012).

Furthermore, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) has included leadership as a required core competency of AACSB accredited business schools (<http://www.aacsb.edu/>). Recently, leaders in management education and business schools worldwide have advanced a “Principle for Responsible Management Education”, which also designates leadership as an essential skill, emphasizing its alignment with, and embodiment of, principle values of the United Nations (Woo, 2009). Leadership courses are important components of all business program curricula, whether emphasis is on management, finance, accounting, marketing, or another functional area. Regardless of the major, graduating business students will eventually be placed in situations where their success will be dependent on their application of leadership skills and their ability to manage people and resources effectively.

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Most leadership classes in Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs include leadership theories, concepts of leadership and management, and to varying degrees, student learning of some managerial skills; however, many of these classes do not provide the needed focus on the development of essential skills, such as self-reflection and self-awareness (Hobson, Strupeck, Griffin, Szostek, & Rominger, 2014). Prior research has generally supported a positive relationship between ‘knowing thyself and self-awareness’ and overall leadership success (Ashley & Reiter-Palmon, 2012; Goleman, 2004). Van Velsor, Taylor, and Leslie (1993), in a review of causes for leaders' derailments, reported four primary areas of leadership failure: (a) interpersonal relationship problems, (b) not meeting objectives, (c) team leadership breakdowns, and (d) inability to adapt to transitions and changes. Self-awareness is related to all four of these areas, but seems particularly applicable to an individual's ability to adapt to change. This is directly related to the issue of self and leadership gaps (standard model of scientifically developed leadership competencies and derailment factors) which are also part of possessing the necessary soft-skills for success in the workplace. In addition, self-awareness and the ability to assess oneself are basic tenets of possessing high emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998). Furthermore, the importance of knowing oneself through introspection is as old as ancient Greece, where the inscription on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi states: “Know Thyself” (γνῶθι σεαυτὸν) (The Oracle at Delphi, 2017).

Many graduate students, throughout their MBA programs, do not truly go through needed quantitative and qualitative assessments to evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses in preparation for their current and desired future professional positions. (Decker, Durand, Ayadi, Whittington, & Kirkman, 2014). While MBA students often learn to conduct a strategic analysis and assess a company's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT), they do not typically conduct this same type of introspective assessment on themselves.

The deep economic recession of 2008 and 2009 resulted in substantial increases in unemployment and job loss in the U.S. and Europe. Although the stock market has improved and unemployment is down (in the U.S.), there remains a growing sense of despair among businesses, political leaders, and policy makers that this economic crisis may have effects well into the future (Elliott, 2011; Eurostat, 2016; Financial Forecast Center, 2016). These job losses and uncertainty in the future, as well as the reality of competing in a global, technological world, has forced many individuals to seek new employment and/or reevaluate their career options. The market for jobs in this post-recession economy, especially good jobs, is increasingly becoming more competitive. Individuals with undergraduate business degrees are returning to graduate business schools to get their MBA's, and many Millennials who are unable to find jobs after their undergraduate business education continue right away to pursue MBA degrees, without having any management and/or leadership experience in their brief work histories (Muchmore, 2009). In addition, although many students in MBA programs are currently working professionals, they often do not have clear career objectives, nor clearly defined plans for their future career goals. Such plans should take into account trends and changes in the work environment and should incorporate strategies for personal leadership skill development.

Knowing one's own leadership strengths and weaknesses, as well as strategically understanding the path to follow to achieve one's future professional goals, are essential to not only the short-term success of graduate business students, but also to their long-term career success in business. Equally important is understanding current and future trends in the market for a particular industry of professional interest. In many cases, MBA students have not conducted an objective analysis to assess and analyze the markets and environments they are pursuing for their career position. Having such a plan may be more important now than ever given the ever-changing dynamic business environment.

The assignments described in this paper come from an MBA Leadership course in an AACSB-accredited college of business in a mid-size, public, university in the southeastern United States. For more than ten years, students from this course have completed an ‘individual strategic professional development plan’ as part of the course requirements. Facets of this plan have also been incorporated as one of the stated assurance of learning (AOL) objectives for the college's AACSB accreditation. This assignment goes further than the normative approach to leadership education, and it is felt that it can impact students' personal and professional lives over a longer period of time beyond the confines of one semester or one's degree program.

Multiple schools and institutions, both within the business field and outside, require their students and/or employees to complete self-assessments and to develop professional development plans (Baughman, Brumm, & Mickelson, 2012; Addams & Allfred, 2013; Drew & Kloppe, 2014; Lopez, de Saa Perez, Rodriguez, and Almeida, 2015; and; Gerken, Beausaert, & Segers, 2016). In addition, some schools have dedicated courses where students create such plans through integrative tools, such as Eportfolio (Graves & Epstein, 2013; Kalata & Abate, 2013; Peeters & Vaidya, 2016; and; Vouchilas & George, 2016). The assignment described in this paper is consistent with these trends. However, its potential to add to the management education literature is based on four factors: 1) the comprehensiveness of the assignment; 2) its integrated and sequential approach over the progression of a semester; 3) the specific theoretical leadership focus of the assignment (it is the essential part of the MBA leadership course); and 4) its application to students' real-world career-goals.

The key objective of this teaching manuscript is to offer faculty teaching leadership, or similar themed courses, a planned exercise and assignment that require students to assess and reflect on their current strengths and weaknesses in leadership-related skills. Through this work, students will also develop a plan for leadership skill development, identify opportunities for leadership skill as applied to relevant management practice, and consider the industry and post-degree occupation that they hope to pursue upon graduation. This paper provides an overview of the issues related to: leadership education; the concepts of increasing self-awareness and emotional intelligence; self-directed learning; and the development of a core set of vital leadership competencies, all intended to prepare students for the dynamic job market of today and the future. In addition, the assignment gives students a model for creating a strategic professional development plan that can serve as not only a guide for successful completion of the MBA program, but also for future planned career success. The paper offers a detailed overview of the assignment and its potential benefits, along with practical classroom recommendations.

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