Leadership Examen: A Mycelial Approach to Organizations

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ORGL 600: Foundations of Leadership

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December 14, 2023

Thinking back on my time in this course, I am overwhelmed by everything that I read and discovered. I had my own ideas about what leadership was *to me*, but in the end, my opinions were challenged. The one consistent theme that stands out is that leadership and organizations are interconnected. Wheatley (2006) inspired me by stating, "The quantum world asks us to contemplate other mysteries as well. It reveals the webs of connection that are everywhere, and tantalizes us with a question: How do influence and change occur within a web?" (pp. 40-41). I might not be able to connect with the quantum world but I can connect this theory with my pandemic passion project: growing mushrooms.

Mushrooms were *my* great mystery in 2020 when everyone else was focused on sourdough starter. I became interested in mushrooms when I moved to Portland and I began noticing them on hikes. Foraging helped me learn to pause: you have to really be looking for them or else you'll pass them right by. Mushrooms, I believe, have a magical quality because you will be able to find them growing in the most random places like rotting garbage or dying tree stumps. Mushrooms are the visible part of a large underground fungal network called mycelium, and it consists of what looks like a root system made of fuzzy fibers. Wheatley's web helped me visualize that organizations are like mycelium, where everyone is connected and needs to collaborate to grow and expand. When there is open, honest, and non-defensive communication between the leaders and followers and everyone has shared responsibility, this can ultimately allow even the most decomposed of organizations to thrive if there is a strong network of people within it.

When we first explored dysfunctional leadership I was confident in my knowledge of what not to do. Coming from toxic leadership experiences, it's easy to talk about who had wronged you and how awful something can be. It was re-affirming to learn about concepts in modules one and two such as psuedo-transformational leadership, Machiavellianism, and the political frame of Carey's five frame analysis. I felt vindicated by these ideas, however, as gratifying as it was to learn about this, it was difficult to recall my positive work experiences. A

huge reason why is because I recently left a toxic work environment and deep down, I wanted validation from the texts I was reading and from my peers in the program. I wanted to affirm that there wasn't anything wrong with *me*, there was something inherently wrong with the organization. I was firmly staunch in that I believed that we cannot change unhealthy and toxic work environments. If mycelium can grow in places that are dead and decomposed then why couldn't I thrive? It wasn't until module three when I realized that I *can* generate positive change and share that experience with others. It was time to ask what **I** can do to make an impact and reflect on the leadership experiences that were successful.

One of my most positive and effective leadership experiences I had was when I was working for a catering company in Portland. The management modeled the servant leadership style and I immediately felt aligned with the concept and servant leadership became a pillar for me in the following years. The most important notion of servant leadership is that you are serving *first* and putting others needs before your own. I truly enjoyed this selfless service and being in the hospitality industry, focusing on others was easy for me to do; however, I became totally burnt out. In my research for class, I discovered quite a few articles about why servant leadership is a catalyst for burnout among its leaders. In one of the articles, Lotardo and McLeod (2023) states, "When a leader frames their decisions solely through a lens of trying to be as helpful and supportive to their constituents as possible, it's a recipe for burnout. At worst it breeds entitlement, where employees think the leader's job is to do nothing but make them happy." This affirms the prior feedback I received from one of my mentor's in another role: it wasn't my job to make others happy. There was benefit in this leadership style, but maybe it wasn't for me after all. From this, I have been challenged with realigning myself to a different style and I think the style that speaks to me currently is transformational leadership.

Transformational leadership is heavily focused on the relationship between the leader and the follower and how the leader can inspire and develop the individual to their fullest potential. According to Northouse (2022), "They build trust and foster collaboration with others.

Transformational leaders encourage others and celebrate their accomplishments. In the end, transformational leadership results in people feeling better about themselves and their contributions to the greater common good." (p. 373). Being a follower is just as important as being a leader in this type of relationship. It is *both* the leader *and* the follower contributing to the organization and the community at large.

One of the biggest reasons I enjoyed managing was because of the relationships I fostered and created, not necessarily solving all of their problems. A transformational leader has to empower the individual to contribute. I resonate with this style and now know to empower instead of shielding the individual to come to their own creative solution. Lotardo and McLeod (2023) suggest asking different types of questions to get them there: "Asking the employee what they need to be successful creates a shared sense of responsibility. The leader is purposefully positioning themselves to have a positive impact on the employee's results, yet they're not taking on sole responsibility for supporting them." The burden of success shouldn't fall on just the leader, the leader needs to empower others to problem-solve. This will give followers just as much stake in the workplace and, in turn, everyone will have a shared responsibility to make the organization successful.

This led me to another epiphany: the importance of followership. I was so used to everything falling on my shoulders that I wasn't cognizant of the critical role of my team. Northouse (2022) summed this concept up perfectly for me, "Followership carries with it a responsibility to consider the morality of one's actions and the rightness or wrongness of the outcomes of what one does as a follower. Followers and leaders work together to achieve common goals, and both share a moral obligation regarding those goals." (pp. 632-633). The leader and follower should work together and collaborate to create the desired outcome and accomplish their shared goals.

These ideas of transformational leadership and followership impact me because it's reframing everything I thought I knew about leadership. I am forced to reflect on my past

leadership and interactions with various teams and admit that my way of leading wasn't always effective. A belief I had coming into the program was that the leader is solely responsible for the success of the organization. I now realize the importance of relying on the team and sharing that responsibility. In my past experiences I have willingly taken this on and that was a detriment to my team's own growth and development as I didn't allow them to reach their full potential. This new way of thinking will enable me to be more open and communicative with people in my life, organization, and community. Instead of shouldering all of the responsibility, I will come with insightful questions, open communication, and a more collaborative attitude in working with people. This will not only empower me, but also those around me to achieve our goals whether they be shared or individual.

Like the leadership and followership concepts, this course also compelled me to look at systems and hierarchies in an alternative way and explore new and innovative possibilities. Unlike the mycelium that's growing beneath our feet, organizations traditionally have had a hierarchy "ladder." I have been contemplating whether or not this structure makes sense. After going through the course content, I am beginning to think of organizations as an entangled web, like mycelium. Mycelium is a network of connective tissue that is constantly communicating, working to make decisions, and negotiating with each other. Mycelium can even grow in rotting and decaying organic matter producing beautiful fungi. This gives me hope that with an interconnected approach, a group of people can work to make extraordinary things happen in a toxic work culture. According to Arevalo and Hathaway (2023), "Whenever two mycelia meet, they communicate to negotiate their relationship, which can range from fusion (to form a reproductive or nonreproductive partnership) to indifference to physical exclusion and even chemical antagonism. Each mated mycelium negotiates the physical dynamics of fusion, and of life in partnership thereafter." Thinking about mycelium and their vast network, as far-fetched as it may be, completely forces me to overlook my own paradox of the leadership/followership relationship. If we stop looking at leaders and followers as separate in an organization and more

interconnected, like partners, we can then collaborate effectively to achieve shared goals and create a thriving work culture.

Moving forward, along with focusing on my relationships with others, I connect with the idea of "everyday leadership" as discussed in a TED talk by Drew Dudley (2010). Drew discusses that leadership can be modeled in little moments that are so brief that we might not even realize that we are impacting someone's life. This takes one of the first lessons I ever learned in life: the golden rule, and applies it to leadership. If you treat others the way you would like to be treated, then you become a role model to inspire others in developing their own sense of morals and values. This means that everyday leadership *is* transformational leadership. These little interactions we may have with someone briefly are extremely important because as Maya Angelou stated, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

Leadership does not have to be a formal title or position; leadership is what we model to others in everyday instances. In order to deepen and grow within the concepts of this course, I have to operate with a high level of integrity and optimism and embody this to everyone I interact with. Working to form new relationships can help me further my understanding and empathy for others. Taking this new self-awareness and being a positive agent for change and good can help others act in a similar way. Ultimately, working *together* towards positive change and sharing the responsibility of leadership will help us become more productive, happy, and successful in organizations and in our everyday lives. Organizational change and innovation can only happen if everyone is open and willing to work together to collaborate. With this kind of partnership between leaders and followers, even the most toxic and decomposing work cultures can turn into a thriving and healthy work environment. If we are able to accomplish this in organizations, much like mycelium, we will be able to produce…*magic*.

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