

**Final Essay: Walking an Unknown Path**

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Eyes closed, I lean against the train car's wall, trying to block out the Brown Line's commuter noise and instead conjure an image of myself as a leader. I think of Claire Underwood's character in Netflix's *House of Cards*. Standing in spiked stilettos, her silhouette is sharp and her stare is icy. This was the image of leadership I carried into the first day of class. That was the kind of leader I felt compelled to become: commanding, intimidating, unfeeling. Now, approaching our tenth and final week, I am called to lead in a much different manner. The leader I envision sits barefoot on the floor to engage in messy projects and holds direct eye contact when others are speaking. This new leader sets goals, asks questions, and maintains a daily commitment to inclusivity. Imagining this dynamic, empathetic leader prompts a mental picture of images, similar but not identical, shifting quickly almost like a flip-book. I observe different grounds, rocky steps and grassy dirt. I see one person walking confidently in front of a small group of others. I imagine their shoes. I picture the leader's shoes changing to accommodate the terrain as it shifts and I see a collection of different soles following that leader across the changing path. There it is. This is my vision of leadership.

My photograph captures the everchanging movement I want to see in an effective leader. In a 2001 publication of the Harvard Business Review, John Kotter wrote, "What leaders really do is prepare organizations for change and help them cope as they struggle through it" (p. 85). I want to be a leader who knows how to prepare my team for a journey, but also adjusts when the path takes an unexpected turn. My hope is to meet any future followers where they are, to be willing to take a step in their shoes, and acknowledge the differences in our lives before we came together. I want to respect and honor the perspective of someone who trusts me to lead them so that they know their voice is valued. I do not want to be a lonely leader, rather I want to be surrounded by effective, driven teammates who are excited to contribute to a shared vision.

In my vision, a leader is a successful guide across any unknown territory. Their footprints provide a map for others to follow. Watching their leader's every move, followers then mimic the leader's behavior. Once collective standards and boundaries are established, the group has freedom to expand upon new ideas. Motivated followers can explore along the set path with the safety of knowing in what direction they need to move. Together, all contributors move towards a shared goal, giving and taking responsibility when appropriate. The leader maintains an acute awareness of the path's accessibility, ensuring that everyone has a fair chance to contribute to the team. The followers look for opportunities to improve the path's construction so that more people feel confident about joining the team. A leader recognizes that every contributing teammate is a person experiencing humanity and should be treated in a way that values their personhood before their productivity. In return, the leader earns the trust and respect of their charges. A leader recognizes and emphasizes their followers' stories as well as their own.

My leadership will require intentionality. If I am to be successful, my vision requires a dedicated commitment to bettering the lives of others alongside the betterment of my own life. In practice, this will require me to ask people questions and spend time identifying what each team member values most, much like Captain Abrashoff did aboard the *Benfold*: "I vowed to treat every encounter with every person on the ship as the most important thing in my world at that moment" (2001, p. 4). This practice will reinforce my commitment to their personal and professional development. When there are goals to meet, I will create a blueprint for our efforts, but maintain openness to changing the design. Kotter writes, "Leading an organization to constructive change begins by setting a direction - developing a vision of the future (often the distant future) along with strategies for producing the changes needed to achieve that vision" (2001, p. 86). As changes are identified, I can use the results of my CliftonStrengths Assessment,

specifically my first and second strengths Discipline and Achiever, to ensure the team is meeting small goals along the way. I will enforce accountability by tracking the execution of our progress, again using my strengths for the good of the team. When hiring individuals, I will consciously look for people with strengths that are different from mine. I will spend time creating a system that encourages people to contribute freely, without fear of ridicule or rejection. I want to build relationships with those around me by engaging in individual interactions and taking care to see them both in and out of their professional title.

Part of an honest commitment to the people on my team will be demonstrated in the implementation of accessibility practices. Again, I am reminded of Abrashoff's commitment to the individuals in his care, "Getting to know someone as an individual prevents you from zoning out when they're talking. It forces you to listen. You can't ignore or shut down people you know and respect" (2001, p. 5). Accessibility accommodations require us to recognize that individuals have different needs. However, by including accessible offerings in the organization's most basic structure, our team will see the value of different lived experiences. Logistically, these accommodations might include captions, large print documents, audio interpreters, ASL interpreters, and spatial adaptations for sensory sensitive individuals. As a group, we will have a collective goal to make accessibility adjustments available on demand whenever possible. Our team will not exclude people for their differences but rather, our team will celebrate and retain diversity.

In the quiet spaces between projects and goals, I know there will be questions to hold. As someone who feels an inexplicable need to always be right, I struggle to make peace with questions that cannot be easily answered. However, if I am to take on a leadership role, I acknowledge that not-knowing will be part of the journey. Already, I can identify a plethora of

questions I want to explore: How can I prepare myself for unknown circumstances? How can I prepare others for unseen changes? What don't I know and who might know instead? What motivates you? What motivates me? How do I delegate and share the work? How do I protect my teammates' dignity and make sure we meet our goals? The answers to these questions may change at any given time as members leave and join my future teams. I will have to make a daily commitment to exploring these questions and reassessing their results as circumstances change.

No longer am I picturing a cold, unfeeling, and fictional character as the epitome of leadership. I have replaced this image with a hopeful, driven, and engaged person. I am looking for vibrant examples in unexpected places and finding demonstrations of leadership all around me. My leadership style will be flexible and adaptive. I will be ready to walk down any road alongside my teammates. When we face unknown obstacles, it will be my responsibility to give our group some foundational structure but I will welcome and encourage input from those around me. Individual differences will not hinder people from contributing to our goals. Diversity and inclusion will not only be welcomed, but expected. This is the vision of leadership I intend to carry into all future positions and should I be successful, one day I may be lucky to earn my team members' trust.

## References

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