Teaching Leadership: A Model for Embedding Effective Leadership Practices in the Academic Classroom

Interim Commandant Palin Berkana-Wycoff, Dr. Donna J Nincic

California Maritime Academy

The education and development of maritime leaders is integral to the mission of all maritime universities. With the increasing complexity of ship systems and the modern maritime environment, it is vital that maritime professionals be educated to the highest standards of teamwork and leadership, rather than focusing exclusively on their training as entry-level mates, engineers and shoreside professionals. While all maritime universities have elements of leadership in their student development, few have fully developed leadership programs within their academic coursework. This paper proposes a set of leadership approaches and techniques that can be employed in the classroom environment and argues that many leadership techniques and strategies can easily be embedded in existing major-specific coursework, and not just courses specifically dedicated to leadership. The techniques and approaches addressed were developed in two courses in the Global Studies and Maritime Affairs major. The key unit of analysis was student project teams, specifically, "leaderless" teams. While the expected salutary effects of the techniques and approaches used were not initially realized, they did demonstrate significant remedial benefits. The findings suggest that adequate development of the leadership capacities and skills discussed cannot be achieved in a single course. A multi-stage arc of leadership development, spanning curricular and co-curricular programming is indicated.

Keywords: Leadership development, classroom instruction, classroom pedagogy, teamwork, group projects

1. Introduction

The education and development of maritime leaders is integral to the mission of all maritime universities. With the increasing complexity of ship systems and the modern maritime environment, it is vital that we educate maritime professionals to the highest standards of teamwork and leadership, rather than focusing solely on the training of entry-level mates, engineers and shoreside professionals. While this need for a greater emphasis on teamwork and leadership is stressed in the 2010 STCW Manila Amendments for all licensed seafarers, we argue that students pursuing "shoreside" business and policy careers also need to be educated to high standards of leadership and teamwork as well.

While all maritime universities have elements of leadership in their student development, few have fully developed leadership programs within their academic coursework. Some universities may offer a course in leadership, and some courses contain natural leadership elements (eg., bridge team management), but most universities lack a broad program of leadership tools and methodologies applicable in multiple classroom environments across diverse academic disciplines. This said, few curricula have room to add more leadership coursework, despite the accepted need to educate our cadets for 21st century leadership challenges. This is a problem we have particularly faced at Cal Maritime, given university mandates to lower our degrees to 120 units[1].

[1] Two of our programs – International Business and Logistics, and Global Studies and Maritime Affairs – are currently at 120 units; all other programs carry higher unit requirements with a mandate from the California State University that we make every effort to lower these even further.

Extracurricular models are sometimes suggested as suitable alternatives to academic program design and leadership; we reject this form of silo thinking (i.e., Student Affairs vs. Academic Affairs) as leading cadets to believe that leadership happens "there" (ie, outside the classroom) and classroom learning happens "here" (in an academic – not "real world" context). We believe that a model and philosophy must be developed so that cadets begin to appreciate that leadership, academic learning, practica, etc., are all part of one and the same whole, and must be developed and approached as such. Only when leadership elements are seen throughout the cadet experience, and are appreciated equally, will our cadets be able to view leadership as an inclusive whole, embodied and embedded in everything they do.

It is not the purpose of this paper at this time to present a comprehensive and fully integrated model and plan for cadet leadership development spanning all areas of cadet activity. Rather, we are proposing a set of leadership approaches and techniques that can be employed in the classroom environment beyond traditional leadership courses; this is an area often neglected by leadership programs at many institutions (including, historically, our own). Furthermore, we argue that many leadership techniques and strategies can easily be embedded in existing major-specific coursework, and not just courses specifically dedicated to leadership.

2. Background and Methodology

In Fall 2012, the authors received a research grant to develop techniques to embed assessable leadership elements into existing coursework. The idea for the grant came out of a long series of conversations between the two authors – one, an Assistant Commandant in the Leadership Development Office with extensive background in teaching Leadership and Organization Development at both the undergraduate and master's level; and the other, a professor in the Global Studies and Maritime Affairs major with considerable content expertise in maritime policy and teaching pedagogies.

In our conversations we came to realize that, working together as a team in a series of pilot-courses, our two areas of expertise – leadership process and discipline-specific content – could create an enriched learning environment for our cadets. Not only would they be learning the "information and analysis" necessary to their degrees, they would learn ***how*** to develop and present this information as future maritime professionals. Envisioned as an "arc of development" within each major at Cal Maritime, the cadets would learn and practice increasingly higher levels of leadership competencies in the classroom as they progressed through their degrees.

At nearly the same time (Spring 2013), Cal Maritime began an extensive undertaking to rework its entire leadership development program on campus. A Leadership Development Task Force (LDTF) was established comprised of faculty, cadets, and leadership and student affairs professionals. The LDTF and grant objectives dovetailed nicely, since both focused on a progressive approach to leadership development. Specifically, the mandate to the LDTF was as follows:

- Fourth Class (Freshmen): A year of programming aimed at developing self-discipline and freshman success;
- Third Class (Sophomores): A year of programming aimed at developing accountability for self and one other person;
- Second Class (Juniors): A year of programming aimed at developing diverse-group leadership competencies;

- First Class (Seniors): A year of programming aimed at developing life skills necessary to thrive as a new graduate

The grant was implemented in Spring 2013 with the above general student development goals in mind. We determined that the key unit of analysis would be ***student project teams***, with the leadership element occurring at two levels – 1) support for the individual student within the team, and 2) support for the team as a whole.

2.1 Design of Student Teams

We developed our techniques in two courses in the Global Studies and Maritime Affairs major: 1) *Comparative Maritime Policies*, a sophomore-level course, and 2) *Maritime Security*, an advanced junior-level course. Dr. Nincic agreed to devote one week in each class to leadership and group dynamics, taught by Mr. Berkana-Wycoff; and Mr. Berkana-Wycoff agreed to work with the student project teams and attend classes on the days of student presentations.

Students in each class were formed into teams of four students each with the responsibility of delivering a 60-minute in-depth presentation on a topic relevant to the content of their course, plus a 15-minute question and answer session. For example, students in *Comparative Maritime Policies* might deliver a presentation on different fisheries management regimes within the European Union; students in *Maritime Security* might do their presentation on the role of human error in maritime accidents, or on the global response to maritime piracy. Students were given some latitude by the professor as to the topic selected, within parameters that ensured the topic was integral to the course.

We specifically chose to use student presentation teams as our unit of analysis for two reasons; 1) they present clear leadership opportunities as they are typically formed by three or more individuals, and 2) student group projects occur in multiple courses on campus, across all disciplines. In this manner, any useful findings we would discover would – hopefully – be easily transferrable to students and courses in different majors.

Furthermore, we wanted to work with student presentation teams since we knew from experience that students had a tendency to dislike group work for many of the following reasons:

- Most students in groups feel like they're the only one who does "all the work,"
- It's difficult to impossible to get everyone to meet at the same time
- People aren't reliable, someone always fails to come through
- Someone tries to take over
- Conflict inevitably arises
- It's hard to trust others and their work

These issues, and others, often arise from the method used to form student project groups. Conventionally, either students are allowed to form their own groups (usually their friends) or instructors determine the groups (sometimes randomly, or based on specific criteria such as grade point average, for example). The first method leverages natural affinities but often fails to be fully inclusive of social outliers or to achieve a balance of aptitudes, skills, and points of view. The latter method relies too heavily on chance or instructor omniscience and typically leaves students feeling disempowered from the outset, due to their disenfranchisement from the decision-making process.

To address these legitimate concerns, we "co-designed" the teams *with the cadets* around the following parameters:

- Personal preference of presentation topic (primary delineator)
- Personal interest in topic
- Personal expertise relevant to topic
- Personal learning goals related to topic
- Personal career goals related to topic

and the following design criteria:

- Each topic must have a presentation team
- The teams created must represent the "best possible" teams attainable from the class population.
- No team is officially constituted until all teams are approved.

Based on these criteria, we allowed the students to select their own teams as long as the above conditions were met, or at least optimized, for each of the teams. Once all the students had established themselves into teams based on these criteria, the teams were approved. In both classes, the teams formed quickly and in only one or two cases was instructor intervention necessary to "form" teams (this usually occurred because a student was absent and had to be "placed" in a team still needing additional members).

2.1.1 A note on "leaderless" teams

We especially designed the student teams to be "leaderless" – that is, we did not designate a specific leader for each team, nor did we ask the teams to do so. This was for a number of reasons:

First, it reflects our leadership philosophy at Cal Maritime that all cadets – regardless of class standing – are leaders; this is in contrast to the leadership-followership models in use at many other institutions (and previously used at Cal Maritime). We believe everyone has a leadership role to play in all our interactions, even when we are not formally in charge of a team; we can all be ***a*** leader even if we are not ***the*** leader [1] (we also argue strongly that leadership occurs when we are alone – we refer often to ***leadership of the self*** in how we make decisions and choices when no one else is looking).

Second, despite the explicit leadership and organizational hierarchies that exist on ships and within business organizations, much work in the maritime workforce occurs in environments where there may be no designated leader; or where the gravity of decision consequences or the complexity of decision contexts requires the full contributions of all group members. For example:

- Importance to Safety: Modern "positive safety cultures" expect everyone to share care and concern for hazards; in a similar vein, many maritime accidents occur because the team is not willing to challenge the decisions of the captain, even when they are known to be wrong;
- Environment Complexity: With the modern ship bridge and engine environments containing multiple electronic systems, it is increasingly impossible for one person to have a full grasp of all necessary information in any given moment. In times of acute stress and complexity, often what "saves the day" is a highly competent team member offering up a solution to the "leader." Similarly, in the business and policy environments with financial, logistics, security, trade and political information coming from multiple sources around the world, decisions must increasingly be made by a team of experts, even in a crisis.

2.2 Support for the Individual: Contracting

Once formed, the cadet teams had two process requirements: to create team ***contracts*** and to hold a preparatory meeting with Dr. Nincic and Mr. Berkana-Wycoff prior to their team presentation. The purpose of the team contracts was to create an explicit agreement between team stakeholders about their expectations and plans to work together. The stated objective was to clarify both the working relationship and the expectations of the work. We dedicated one class meeting to instruction and practice for team contracting. Handouts were provided delineating specific components of good contracts, including performance expectations for the team and its members, communication standards, decision-making methods, and corrective action protocols. Our intention was to show the cadets how to be more mindful and proactive in their group interactions in an effort to build capacities at multiple human systems levels: personal, interpersonal, group, and community (whole classroom). The goal was more collectively supported, engaged learning for each cadet.

At the heart of contracting is informed consent, which forms the basis of a legitimate sense of shared ownership in the shared work [2]. It was our assumption that creating clear perceptions of shared ownership would yield more satisfying and effective work from the teams, while supporting the development of each team member's identity as a leader. The contract included shared team expectations about what their goals were for the presentation, how often they would meet to prepare for the presentation, how they would communicate with each other, how work would be apportioned, when and how to intervene when a group member was seen to be falling behind, and when to ask for help from Dr. Nincic and Mr. Berkana-Wycoff.

2.3 Support for the Team: Mandatory Group Presentation Preparation Meetings

Working from prior experience, Dr. Nincic knew that required preparatory meetings with the instructor were necessary, in order to mitigate the tendency of cadets towards delivering last-minute "thrown together" presentations (the painful bane of instructors and students alike who are forced to sit through sub-optimal, ill-rehearsed, and often factually-incorrect deliveries), as well as the pervasive free-rider problem bemoaned by the better students. In the context of our research, these meetings also provided formative assessments of team dynamic and task effectiveness. It was our assumption that, given the explicit contracting each team had previously undertaken, we would observe clear demonstrations in the preparatory meetings of multiple positive behaviors, including: equitable sharing of workload and integration of individual work product into a coherent whole; individual reliability and decreased and better managed team conflict; and, higher quality, more polished draft presentations.

During the course of each preparatory meeting (which was held with the team members, Dr. Nincic and Mr. Berkana-Wycoff), we asked each team to do a walk-through of their presentation. We then addressed with the team members any performance issues the team was having and made preliminary grading assessments, based on the presentations as they currently stood. This feedback constituted expectations for the final presentation; cadets knew that failure to take the feedback into account would result in lower grades. Further, we noted privately whether we held an expectation for high, moderate, or low performance by the team during its actual presentation. This would provide a comparison basis by which to assess whether or not the preparatory meetings made any difference to the final presentation outcome.

3. Relationship to Leadership Theory

We intentionally chose not to present the details of leadership theory to the students in the classes, as they were required maritime policy courses – not leadership courses – in the Global Studies and Maritime Affairs major; as such, the courses needed to be strongly focused on maritime policy. This

said, our work with the students was strongly informed by various elements of leadership theory, specifically drawn from:

- The Social Change Model [3]
- The Leadership Identity Development Model [1]
- The CAS Leadership Development Competencies [4]
- The Student Leadership Practices Inventory (SLPI) [5]

As depicted in Table 1, the overarching theory contextualizing our research was the Social Change Model, developed in 1996 by researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles. All four sources of leadership theory share in common an assertion that, fundamentally, leadership is *relational¸ non-positional, contextual, collaborative*, and *values-based*. Also represented in each theory source is an understanding of leadership development as being multi-systemic and multi-staged. The Social Change Model is explicitly organized into three levels of values, Individual, Group, and Community. While we recognized that all three levels would be active in our work, we specifically focused our attention on the Group level; the values associated with this level being Collaboration, Common Purpose, and Controversy with Civility. Team contracting aligns well with these values.

Social Change Model	Individual Group Community	→	Collaboration Common Purpose Controversy with Civility
Leadership Identity Development Model	**CAS Leadership Development Competencies**		**Student Leadership Practices Inventory**
Awareness Exploration/Engagement Leader Identified Leadership Differentiated Generativity Integration/Synthesis	Foundations of Leadership Personal Development Interpersonal Development Development of Groups, Organizations and Systems		Model the Way Inspire a Shared Vision Challenge the Process Encourage the Heart Enable Others to Act

Table 1 Leadership development theory set

3.1 Process *is* content

According to Cetron and Davies [6], "fully half of what a student learns as a freshman is obsolete by his senior year." It is our belief that, while one can't reasonably predict what all will constitute the *content* of our cadets' future career work, one can be fairly certain that the *processes* will include work and leadership in teams and groups. Thus, developing in students the (process) skills required to learn and work with others more effectively and with greater satisfaction is a critical set of content that serves student engagement, leadership development, and good citizenship.

4. Our Findings

As previously mentioned, we expected the salutary effects of required team contracting to be manifold. Our expectations were largely disconfirmed during the preparatory meetings. In all the ways we have described that group projects *can* go wrong, they *did* go wrong. Most teams demonstrated a lack of preparedness, of integration, and of broadly shared leadership; presentation drafts were clearly thrown together last-minute, presented in discrete stand-alone pieces of individual work, and shepherded by the cadets in each team who were already known to be leaders. Several of the teams struggled with a team member who was uncooperative and unresponsive.

Noteworthy, however, were the enormous remedial benefits afforded by the team contracts, as well as the process used for team formation. In every case where a team struggled with an individual's poor performance, they managed with minimal instructor support to remedy the problem and achieve desired performance levels. In one case, a team that looked destined to fail in its presentation, due to a member's complete lack of collaboration in the several prior weeks of preparation, used its contract to hold the wayward cadet accountable and went on to deliver a high-quality presentation. The aggrieved cadets were pleasantly surprised at the degree of empowerment they felt to correct a team member's behavior; the offending cadet noted how easy it was to defer to the shared agreements and modify his actions.

The preparatory meetings also proved quite beneficial in mitigating evident problem dynamics and task performance issues. We made our observations explicit when it was clear that one member was monopolizing the briefing or stifling the contributions of other team members. We would refer the team to its own contract expectations of performance when it was clear that they were underperforming. While it was not always clear whether this feedback was effective in the moment, in most cases, the final presentations were markedly better than our predictions. The shared ownership that we strived to imbue in the teams through the formation and contracting processes, in the end, repeatedly saved the day.

Nevertheless, our expectation that the need for such "saves" could be avoided altogether as a result of these processes was not met. Our findings indicate that the cadets were simply not ready to achieve this level of effective self-management. We discovered that greater levels of basic skills and capacities were needed than could be achieved in a single course.

It is worth noting that the syllabi we use in our classrooms are effectively *unilateral contracts* (delineating what we expect of students). These fail, however, to fully capture the learning (one could say, leadership) relationships present in the classroom (e.g., cadet to cadet, cadet to whole class). Teaching cadets to articulate their expectations of themselves and their relationships with the instructor and the class as a whole could go a long ways towards developing shared ownership of learning, particularly if undertaken at the outset of a cadet's tenure at the academy.

Finally, in a summative survey of perceived outcomes and satisfaction, cadet response was mixed. Despite clear evidence of improved performance by presentation teams, roughly 30% of responses from each course indicated a dislike for the added "burden" of work caused by the team formation and contracting processes. This said, however, many cadets in the following semesters went on to ask for similar format and support in their subsequent classes, suggesting that they may not have appreciated the more formal structure of presentation preparation, and perception of extra work in the moment, but appreciated the value to their academic performance with the benefit of time and distance.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions for the Future

It is clear that the modern maritime industry requires more of its workforce than mere technical expertise. Increasingly, *how* we do things (process) matters as much or more than *what* we do and know (content) and represents a necessary new form of "content" expertise. The capacity and skill to bring effective appropriate leadership to all of one's relationships, from personal to whole-system, will be a hallmark of our cadets' future career lives. It is incumbent upon maritime universities and colleges to comprehensively provide this capacity and skill development to their cadets.

It is equally clear from our findings that such development cannot adequately occur within a single course. While our team formation, contracting, and coaching processes proved efficacious, a more longitudinal developmental effort is indicated. An introductory development level appears requisite. Preferably undertaken during the cadet's first year, this should include both training and practice in contracting *and* expectation setting that this skill is critical for academic success and integral to the

curriculum. This is a likely place for co-curricular contribution by our Corps of Cadets leadership development program.

Furthermore, in order to convincingly demonstrate to cadets the value accrued from process-oriented competencies, we believe that requiring an after-action team self-assessment, post-presentation, would do much to support improved perceptions of value and better cement the learning achieved.

Lastly, it should be noted that Dr. Nincic and Mr. Berkana-Wycoff worked as a team in these classes, involving a time commitment on the part of both that will not be feasible to replicate in additional courses throughout all majors at Cal Maritime. We therefore need to streamline the process for ease of implementation by professors and instructors not as well versed in leadership-theory and practices. Additionally, we need to demonstrate clearly the value-added for the instructor (improved student performance in group and team work) before it can gain widespread acceptance in additional courses and majors.

Additional research is needed to determine how a complete developmental arc for leadership within an academic program might be constituted, as well as, what cross-functional co-curricular programs might be designed to better enable cadets to be prepared for and supported in their in-class learning. Equally, further research is indicated to demonstrate the particular applicability of the models chosen to the concept of leadership as experienced in the maritime industry.

References

[1] Komives, S R, Owen, J E, Longerbeam, S D, Mainella, F C and Osteen, L, "Developing a leadership identity: a grounded theory", *Journal of College Student Development*, Vol 46, No 6, (2005), pp. 605-607.

[2] Eisen, S, "Contracting for mutual expectations", In *Consulting competency series*, Sonoma State University, (1998), pp. 1-2.

[3] Higher Education Research Institute, *A social change model of leadership development*, HERI, (1996).

[4] Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, "Student leadership programs", *CAS professional standards for higher education*, 8th ed., CAS, (2012).

[5] Kouzes, J and Posner, B, *Student leadership practices inventory*, 2nd ed., Jossey-Bass, (2005).

[6] Cetron, M J and Davies, O, "Trends shaping tomorrow's world: Forecasts and implications for business, government, and consumers (part two)", *The Futurist*, Vol 42, No 3, (2008). Pp. 35-51.