Experiential Learning Reflection for Leadership

Winners Walk Tall

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When I was a sophomore at Seton High School, I attended the Hugh O’Brian Youth Leadership Conference where I learned about the importance of leadership through service. I had always considered myself a leader, and I enjoy giving back to my community. Becoming a Winners Walk Tall Character Coach seemed like the perfect way to continue demonstrating what I learned at HOBY. I learned about the program at the UC Service Fair last fall, when I discovered one of my high school mentors was in charge of the program. I immediately signed up to help, as I especially like giving back to people and organizations who have helped contribute to my successes.

In high school, I was the President of the Seton Student Ambassador Program, an on-campus group designed to aid in student recruitment and foster relationships with alumnae. Throughout my senior year, I volunteered 150 hours of service to this program, whether I was assisting at events, sending emails, recruiting volunteers, and helping with event organization. Although it was a considerable amount of time, I have found that if you truly enjoy something, the amount of time spent participating doesn’t matter. This is the approach I like to take to any volunteering position, and I also know that I will reap the rewards when I the see gratitude on people’s faces. Being president of the student ambassador group enabled me to be organized, passionate, and calm, cool, and collected. I used these leadership skills to enhance my performance as a Winners Walk Tall Character Coach.

Last summer, I helped facilitate the Girl Power program at Seton High School for elementary school girls. The program was set up to empower young girls to reach their dreams, stay healthy, learn more about themselves, and meet new friends. I found this camp to be motivational for me, as well. As I was heading into college, I had many dreams and aspirations. While at the camp, the girls made a dream box covered in motivational quotes which would hold pieces of paper with the words of their big goals. I was inspired by this, so I created my own box of dreams and aspirations. During this camp, I used leadership skills of creativity and organization to ensure the camp ran smoothly and was fun for the campers.

In order to prepare myself to be a motivating, inspiring leader for Winners Walk Tall, I read through many leadership texts, including: *The Truth about Leadership* by James Kouzes, *Being the Boss* by Linda Hill, and *On What Leaders Really Do* by John Ketter. I wanted to be sure I was not only striving to be the best leader I could be, but also become a role model for the kids to look to and model their lives after. In *Being the Boss*, there were three main leadership theories that the book focused on: Managing yourself, managing your network, and managing your team. It’s important to be able to have a boss / friend balance in order to create trust amongst co-workers. Being able to network and keep options open for yourself and others is also a key skill. Communicating clearly and setting SMART goals for teams are also key attributes of being a leader. Not only did these leadership theories affect my presence in the classroom, I will also use them as I progress in my career in the business world. In *On What Leaders Do*, the author discusses choosing the best strategies for change and the importance of power, dependence and effective management. It’s important for leaders to be able to assess a situation and understand what their co-workers are experiencing to be able to effectively change a poor situation for the better. In order to show their power, leaders must have the respect and trust of workers. The workers also have to be able to see that their leaders are experts on the specified area, and be able to approach the leader with questions and concerns. When I read through *The Truth about Leadership*, I found that three theories really stood out to me: challenge is the crucible for greatness, you either lead by example or you don’t lead at all, and leadership is an affair of the heart. While all the books had concise messages to inspire leaders, the three theories in *The Truth about Leadership* were most relevant to my experience as a Winners Walk Tall Character Coach, and truly defined the experience.

In *The Truth about Leadership*, one section is devoted to overcoming challenges to achieve greatness. In the book, Randy Pausch’s last lecture was referenced. His key message was about the brick walls we all encounter on the journey of life. Pausch’s last lecture is one of the most inspiring TED talks I have ever seen, as he was courageous and didn’t let his obstacles keep him from living the best life he could. We all have to struggle with the brick walls, but they let us prove how badly we want something. The book states, “Whether the challenge is large or small, leaders must take charge of change” (95). The brick walls test our commitment to the team, project, or goals. My commitment to the Winners Walk Tall Program was frequently tested along the way. Sometimes I was too tired and had to prepare for classes and exams. Other times, I was frustrated with the lack of organization at the school. However, when it came down to it, I was doing the program for the kids. It was also important to keep this mentality when the students were a bit rambunctious and unfocused. I had to remember that I was there to teach them about succeeding in life, and that I needed to remain calm and collected and try a new way of teaching the subject. I took charge of the situation and overcome the challenges to change my course in order to succeed.

Another leadership theory that was relevant to my experience at Winners Walk Tall was you either lead by example, or you don’t lead at all. It is stated in the book that “credibility is the foundation of leadership” (106). I feel that this theory is extremely important in my case, as I am trying to show the students how to be successful in school, a career, and life. I always went to my lessons dressed in a nice shirt and jeans, as I wanted to be casual enough to be relatable, but also professional to establish my role as the leader. It’s often said that actions speak louder than words, and I wanted to be sure that I always demonstrated civility, even when I was disappointed in the students for bad behavior. I wanted to be sure that I came across as a professional, and as someone they could look up to for inspiration on manners, kindness, and the importance of education. I always stressed the importance of college and how they should aspire to attend, taking special consideration in becoming a Bearcat!

When I consider taking up a new activity, I am sure to ask myself if I will be able to give 110%. For me, it’s all or nothing. That’s why I was able to relate to the theory of leadership is an affair of the heart. The book states, “exemplary leaders do not place themselves at the center; they place others there” (138). This is what HOBY would define as servant leadership, something that I value and in which I enjoy participating. My experience with Winners Walk Tall was a great community service activity, but in the end, I was there for the students, as I want them to be productive students and workers. I wanted the students to know that I was there to help them succeed and to answer any questions they had. Showing them compassion, but also disciplining, when needed, to ensure everyone could have the best experience was part of my love for the program and students.

Since this program was brand new to me, I wasn’t sure how I would measure my progress as a character coach. I had never been in a formal teaching role before, but I felt the pressure to give the kids the best experience possible. I wanted to be sure they were learning, so I took it upon myself to create handouts and interactive lessons to keep the students engaged for the 30 minute time period. I had my first test of progress after Christmas break when I didn’t see my students for two weeks. Upon my arrival back at the school, they were excited to see me, and I was so impressed with their ability to recall the lessons we had already covered. What was most important was the fact that every hand shot up when I asked who was a winner. It was very rewarding to feel that my lessons were resonating with the kids.

As this experience was not directly associated with my peers, I had to communicate differently with those I came in contact. For example, when I was communicating with the program director and the contact at Oyler Elementary School, I was more formal and professional with my language style and word choices. I also was sure to keep emails formal when necessary. Obviously, when speaking with my students, I still acted in a professional manner, but I used words that they could understand. I wanted to make sure I was able to communicate to the youngest students, and I was able to keep the mood light. I was also able to communicate messages to the students by using pictures and tangible examples.

While I had a really great experience as a Winners Walk Tall Character Coach, there are some things I would change if I were to participate in the program again. Ideally, the program is supposed to take place during the school day for 15 minute time periods, as the lessons are short and to the point. For the Oyler Elementary program, I had to modify the Winners Walk Tall curriculum to fill a 30 minute period after school. While the 30 minute sessions were appropriate for some lessons, often the time was too long and I was improvising in order to keep the kids focused. Also, having this program during the school day would allow for a teacher to be present in the room, for disciplinary action and examples in the lessons. Having it during the school day would make the students in the program more consistent. This would also make it easier for me, as I would be able to learn about each kid on a more personal level and they would feel more comfortable around me. I have expressed this concern to the woman in charge of the program, explaining my reasoning behind sticking to the plan of the organization and encouraging schools to do the same. I have also recommended that future coaches are prepared to improvise on any topic, just in case.

I have always put the leadership servant theory in practice, but through this experience, I was able to learn the importance of clear communication and the need to be able to read my audience for positive and negative emotions. Through my research, reading through leadership books, and participating in the experience made me realize that seeing is believing in many cases. Until I was willing to sometimes look silly or participate in an activity, the students weren’t either. Going forward, I will work on being more outgoing and being more approachable. I want to create an open environment where people feel like they can be their own person and participate without being told.

The Winners Walk Tall program is great for students in the Cincinnati Public School system and I want to help the program further succeed. I have shared my blog with the organization so they can use it to recruit new coaches, and I have also volunteered to attend campus fairs to talk to potential college students who are interested in becoming character coaches. We are all winners, and the word needs to be shared!