Leadership Prompt for Peer Leader Honors Experience

My experience as a Peer Leader was definitely one that helped me look at the leadership role in all its different capacities and one that helped me grow both personally and professionally.

My leadership role during this experience was simultaneously what I expected and so much more than that. Coming into it, I expected to have to guide students by telling them about the university and guiding them every step of the way. However, I quickly found out that leadership is much more than holding hands the whole way, but rather encouraging them to grow. My leadership philosophy changed from one of illuminating the way for them, to one of giving them the tools and knowledge to make their own path. I agree with this quote from “Exploring Leadership”, which says that a leader is “any person who actively engages with others to accomplish change”. I learned that leaders aren’t necessarily just a position filler, but one who inspires others to fulfill their potential, and have them step up as an active follower to further the organization.

While I was a Peer Leader, I was also president of Astronomy Club, and that parallel experience also impacted my definition of leadership. In both situations, I had to make lesson plans of sorts, and take an active role in planning outside of the organization. As time went on, I realized that both my students in LC, and the people in Astronomy Club were happier when they got to have a say in the affairs of the organization. In LC, my students were happier when I took their needs into consideration in making lesson plans. Similarly, in Astronomy Club, when I made a Facebook group with polls for Astronomy Club members to voice their opinion, club attendance and participation improved. Realizing that active involvement in both of these arenas made me a better leader improved my facilitation skills.

The goals that I set for myself were to become a better teacher/learning coach, to relate to people better (especially those who were younger than myself), help my students grow and adjust to their first semester of college, and learn how to become a better leader. I do believe that I met all these goals, as I will elaborate on in the next few paragraphs.

Over time, I realized that becoming a better teacher and learning coach meant that I had to do what Robert Greenleaf summarized in his book “Servant Leadership in Education”. He said that standards of education shouldn’t be imposed on others, as voluntary learning is the most effective and enthusiastic learning, and that we should adjust for constant change. Being flexible and adapting to my students’ needs often helped me make the most meaningful lesson plans, rather than just doing what I thought was best for them.

Relating to others better was a gradual process, for even though I am an extrovert, I often feel as though the lenses that I view the world through are drastically different from those of a lot of other people. In accordance with “Exploring Leadership”, I learned that conversational learning and relational leadership, in which the leader of the group opens dialogue often helps connect leaders to followers. So as I listened to their suggestions and comments rather than just lecturing at them, they listened to my suggestions more, helping me become a better connector as well.

Being a better connector also helped me become a better mentor. As I fostered an environment that was open to learning, making mistakes, and sharing knowledge, students felt more comfortable with listening to me and taking my knowledge seriously. As I showed them my own civic responsibility, that is (according to “Exploring Leadership”), “functioning within your organizations in ways that value relationships and act ethically with honor and integrity towards your responsibilities and towards others.” As my students realized that I, in turn, cared about what they had to say, and encouraged their growth, they began to take me as an example and take my advice more seriously.

As part of becoming a better Peer Leader, I also had to undergo training, in which I had to learn how to become a co-worker with other Peer Leaders. Over the previous summer, I was a SOL, so I had some prior experience with working with a team of leaders, but the Peer Leader experience deepened that skillset. As part of our weekly PLC meeting, we had to create a sense of community, with our fellow PLs. In a sense, we created our own LC, and had to collaborate between ourselves in order to become better Peer Leaders and better the LCs that we led. As I both gave and received information, I learned how to be an active listener, and how to give advice from my relevant experiences, while becoming friends with my coworkers as well.

What I’ve learned about myself from this experience is that I can adapt to situations more easily than I realized, and that I can more easily connect to people. What I’ve learned about others is that others will gladly follow a leader who takes their opinion into consideration, and who uplifts rather than dictates. I’ve also learned that these followers will, more often than not, put in their own time and effort into uplifting the organization as well, since the leader has convinced them that it is a cause worthy of their time and effort. I’ve also learned the most effective teaching method is to listen to what the students need and how to implement it well.

The ways I’m using what I learned from this experience in my own life is to better my leadership skills, my communication skills, my teaching skills, and interaction with co-workers. I am becoming more of an active leader, rather than a dictatorial one, in all endeavors. I’ve also learned that the best way to communicate with others is through active listening before sharing experiences. My teaching skills and interactions with co-workers are necessary for my co-op, which is being a Teaching Assistant at UC’s sister university in China, Chong Qing University. They emphasize making relationships with students as well, which requires active listening, and sometimes mentoring. I am also to effectively befriend my coworkers (both American and Chinese) while still maintaining a sense of professionalism.