EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: INTRODUCING FACULTY AND STAFF TO A UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

External changes exacerbate the complexity of managing and leading public secondary institutions (Page & Dimsdale, 2002). Considering the many external governance bodies' and their sheer influence in post secondary education, it is not surprising many faculty and staff are unclear about their role in meeting a changing institutional world. As key organizational members, faculty and staff have a growing need to know what governance changes and environmental pressures mean to the university and to them. Additionally, university leadership must encourage the involvement of faculty and staff to facilitate these changes. A Leadership Enhancement and Development Program (LEAD) has been instituted at the University of West Florida. Experiential learning is used as the catalyst introducing participants to its program. Key Words: Experiential Learning, Leadership

INTRODUCTION

There is no ideal or "federal" system of public education and most state systems of higher education are structured to suit specific state needs. External changes exacerbate the complexity of managing and leading public secondary institutions (Page & Dimsdale, 2002). The Governor, state legislature, Board of Regents, each state university, and their university presidents each represent critical, complex, and competing priorities in the governance of state-run public postsecondary education systems.

The post secondary education institutions in our State's University System (SUS) are in need of change. Traditional supporters and patrons, elected and executive officials voice their discomfort with the direction of public higher education at both the federal and state levels. Concerning education, the legislature is not only interested in the gross cost of postsecondary institutions but also what funding priorities are needed to meet their constituents' expected outcomes (Page & Dimsdale, 2002).

Considering the external governance bodies' sheer influence in post secondary education, it is not surprising many faculty and staff are unclear about their role in meeting a changing institutional world. These external changes and needs place additional pressure on university presidents to act now. As key organizational members, faculty and staff have a need to know what governance changes and environmental pressures mean to the university and to them. Additionally, university leadership must encourage the involvement of faculty and staff to facilitate these changes. To address this, the leadership of the University of West Florida (UWF) has stepped forward to create a leadership enhancement and development program (LEAD).

By needing, requiring, and involving a diverse variety of people with different backgrounds, education levels, and job positions in this LEAD program, what is the most effective way to bring this group into an effective team? This paper quickly discusses the LEAD program at UWF and highlights introducing new LEAD members to a yearlong program via experiential and adventure based learning (ABL) approaches. Four content areas make up this paper: 1) a description of the 2003 LEAD program, 2) a condensed literature review of ABL, 3) a review of significant ABL activities conducted with the 2003 LEAD group, and 4) a summary of post-activity reactions to the initial effectiveness of the day long events.

THE UNIVERSITY OF WEST FLORIDA (UWF) LEAD PROGRAM

Organizational Development (OD), a process of planned change, emphasizes the interventions and activities that seek to change the structure, policies, and organizational environment (Page & Dimsdale, 2002). Often OD activities include education as a key element. Traditionally, the development of faculty emphasizes

activities that increase faculty members' knowledge, skills, and techniques and are limited to teaching and continuing education (Baiocco & Dewaters, 1995; Queeney, 1993). As the responsibility for changes in post secondary institutions continues to grow, it must be more widely understood and shared among institutional members now more than ever (Guskin, 1996; Leslie & Fretwell, 1996). Recognizing this, the UWF leadership created a leadership enhancement and development program to assist the university in building critical alliances among faculty, staff, and other professionals as it journeys to integrate the UWF mission performance with the legislatures' vision of the future.

Uninformed about institutional functions, innovations, and processes, faculty and staff may resist or repel needed change. If change is to be accomplished in academic settings, leadership education is a key strategy toward successful change. Educating to better understand the complexity involved in managing the external influences on public institution operations can be aided by developing an internal consistency among an institution's faculty, staff, and key groups (McDade & Lewis, 1994).

Rising from pilot programs like "University 101", a curriculum of broad post secondary education issues discussed in two, one–day workshops for faculty and staff, the concept of LEAD developed. LEAD has become an important part of UWF's culture showing participants to how the university's external and internal system works, exposing them to relevant leadership experiences and "change opportunities" by having face-to-face sessions with the university system's leaders (Page & Dimsdale, 2002). The UWF LEAD program is an annual faculty and staff leadership development program open to all divisions and ranks of the university. Concepts and objectives of the program include: 1) improve job satisfaction through better understanding of the University in the context of its operational environment, 2) enhance employee's leadership skills and performance, 3) increase opportunities for employees from all divisions to learn more as an interactive group about basic leadership problems and solutions, 4) improve employee opportunities for advancement within and outside the University, 5) enable employees as an interactive group to target a University objective for advancement (group project), and 6) provide the opportunity to interface one-on-one with the President, Vice Presidents, and other system leaders (Page & Dimsdale, 2002).

The LEAD curriculum is updated and changed through lessons learned with topics that highlight current and future issues facing the university. Instructional methods generally include a workshop format with presentations by university and external governance leaders covering topics from internal support functions to external influences. Class sessions are scheduled for a full day each month of the academic year. These sessions are conducted on and off campus emphasizing: 1) University mission and roles, 2) external governance, 3) organizational structure and functions, 4) strategic plans and budget, 5) strategies for change in the cultural and political environment, and 6) the

selection of a university-wide project to complete during the academic year. In the past, class projects have included organizing the "Festival on the Green" (FOG) to present UWF and its rich resources to the local community, developing an executive information system, to instituting an University-wide an alternative dispute resolution/collaborative problem solving program. Multiple community service projects, one-on-one meetings with UWF leadership, and an overnight trip to the state capital to see the legislature in action are all included in the LEAD curriculum each year.

HOW DO VARIOUS AND DIVERSE INIDIVIDUALS BECOME A TEAM?

The LEAD program is planned to last one year for each class year. This year's class is known as LEAD 2003. Participants are selected from a university-wide field of applicants. Applicants can self-nominate or be nominated by their supervisors or colleagues to enter this voluntary service activity. Twelve participants were selected out of a field 50 nominees from the university. The class of 2003 includes 4 members who work in academics from three different UWF colleges, a member of the university building maintenance division, a University transportation technician, a University historian, a UWF library technician, and administrative specialists from the registrar, University center, and info-technology offices. This group is rounded out by a food handling specialists and a medical services person. Ages range from the late twenties to early sixties. Yes, a diverse group but they are very similar in the enthusiasm and their positive feelings for UWF. Because of the variety and diversity of people selected, a primary LEAD program function is forming the group and melding it into a united, efficient, and effective working group.

The group meets for the first time at a social hour organized to have "the old LEADers" from previous classes and the new class of 2003 come together to interact and exchange thoughts on the strengths and weaknesses of the LEAD program. The school President, Vice Presidents, and Deans also come to add their thoughts, thanks, and hope that the new team too will become a critical part of the University future. Unfortunately due to several factors, many of the LEAD 2003 class members did not meet the first day or stay the full time. Our first real group meeting actually occurred three days later when we met at a daylong "outward bound", action based learning event. Is the idea of experiential and action based learning an appropriate method to unite total strangers together into an effective work group?

CONCEPT OF EXPERIEENTIAL/ACTION-BASED LEARNING

Historically, Kurt Hahn began the conceptual development of experiential learning in Germany around 1920. His curriculum emphasized noncompetitive physical

activities, social cooperation, and attempted to create a healthy environment for youth to learn habits and develop values in fitness, skill and care, self-discipline, initiative, enterprise, memory, imagination, and compassion (James, 1990). Based on his experiential learning principles, Hahn's methods became world renowned for their distinctive non-competitive educational approaches. Today interest continues in experiential learning with its application by the public and private sector.

In November 1994, the Association for Experiential Education formally defined experiential education, "as a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill, and value from direct experiences" (Luckmann, 1996). Luckmann also notes the term "learner" includes students, clients, trainees, participants, or anyone involved in receiving the process. This definition was left intentionally vague because its authors try to encompass all types of experiential education. From hunting groups learning to work together for the kill to apprentice blacksmiths learning their trade from a master, any learning occurring through direct experience may potentially be referred to as experiential.

Experiential Learning Models. Learning through experience is not a new idea, but perhaps one that should be applied more often when teaching and working in today's environments. Dewey (1916) argued years ago that education must be active, involved and that knowledge must be linked to experience. He (1916) suggests that learning from experience can be called an "experiment with the world to find out what it is like—a discovery of the connection of things (p.140)." Since then, many education scholars have taken Dewey's ideas and developed them into models of learning (McEvoy, G., 1997).

There are several prominent learning models that provide insight to the experiential learning process. Kolb describes the process of experiential learning as having four stages occurring in a cycle (Sullivan & Kolb, 1995; Weigand, 1995). This cycle consists of: 1) a concrete experience, which is the basis for 2) observation and reflection, that is then organized or 3) assimilated into a theory, from which new hypotheses or implications lead to 4) active experimentation. This model suggests the experiential learning process may be reversed when compared to traditional training. The participant first experiences a situation, then thinks about and learns from it, followed by integrating the new knowledge into the next situation. In addition, Svinicki (1990) advocates using Kolb's model as an alternative means to stimulate the teacher's thinking on how instruction might be done differently by improving instructional design sequences for all content areas and challenge educators to think more carefully about current methods of instruction.

Joplin (1981) developed a model of experiential learning specifically for outdoor settings. Her model is organized around a central hurricane-like cycle, preceded by focus and followed by debrief, in an atmosphere of support and feedback. The model is comprised of five stages where completing the fifth stage starts the first stage in the next cycle (see Figure 2). The first stage, focus, prepares the student for the hurricane-like or challenging action stage. The action stage puts the responsibility on the student to take action on the problem presented, often placing the student in an unfamiliar environment that may require new skills or the use of new knowledge in a stressful situation. Support and feedback occur throughout the process, challenging the student to act on more information and continue on. In the fifth stage debrief, the facilitator ensures that the learning is recognized, articulated, and evaluated. The debrief helps the student learn from the experience and prepares the focus for the first stage of the next cycle.

Types of Experiential Learning. Over the years both outdoor and indoor courses have been developed for conducting experiential learning programs. By no means are the descriptions and examples here all-inclusive. However, they do summarize the types and respective advantages and disadvantages of each (Hornyak, Anna, & Miller, 1999).

Figure 1
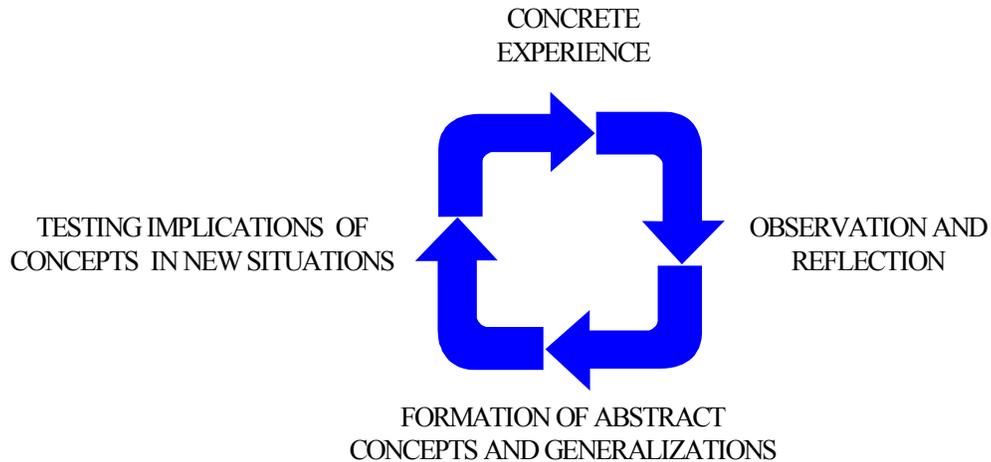Kolb's Model of Experiential Learning (adapted from Weigand, 1995)

CONCRETE
EXPERIENCE

TESTING IMPLICATIONS OF
CONCEPTS IN NEW SITUATIONS

OBSERVATION AND
REFLECTION

FORMATION OF ABSTRACT
CONCEPTS AND GENERALIZATIONS

Figure 2
Joplin's Outdoor Experiential Learning Cycle (adapted from Joplin, 1981, 17)

FEEDBACK - FEEDBACK - FEEDBACK

DEBRIEF

CHALLENGING

ACTION

FOCUS
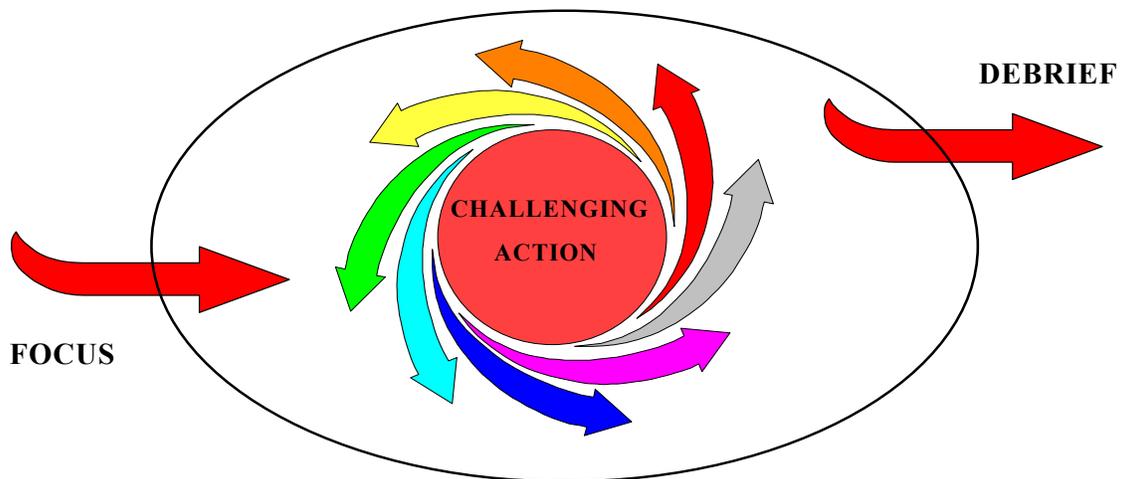
SUPPORT - SUPPORT - SUPPORT

Note: Original depiction of the model shows the hurricane effect as entering from the left, going towards the middle, slowly spiraling outward, and then moving to the next cycle to the right.

Outdoor Courses.   Wilderness courses, commonly referred to as adventure courses, have participants live and interact outdoors, usually in unique locations such as Adventure Unlimited where the LEAD 2003 group studied. Outdoor course activities can include many things in a natural setting. However, most outdoor courses are man-made and fall into one of two categories, high ropes and low ropes. The LEAD group used a low ropes course for their training. Low ropes courses are characterized by limited physical risk and used primarily for improving overall functioning of a group or team (Wagner, Baldwin, and Roland, 1991).

According to Clements, Wagner, and Roland (1995), high and low outdoor courses are particularly useful to promote team building; improving interpersonal relations, cohesiveness, trust, and homogeneity of groups.   The advantages for using outdoor courses are: 1) the physical aspects promote active engagement in learning, 2) participants experience real emotions, 3) novel situations help break old patterns of thinking, 4) promoting experimentation with problem-solving, and 5) boosting

group awareness and trust. Disadvantages include high expense, difficulty in transferring the learning back to the work environment, participants concern about safety or discrimination, liability risks, and possible ineffectiveness in addressing individual behaviors.

Indoor Courses. Indoor courses are growing in popularity for several reasons. The advantages of indoor courses include: 1) anyone can participate and are nondiscriminatory by not typically requiring physical exertion, 2) can be accomplished anywhere and in any weather, 3) learning transfers more easily to the workplace because the activities are commonly derived from real world problems, 4) the programs are relatively inexpensive, and 5) learning tends to be based on real emotions. The disadvantages concern simulated versus real situations, a less engaging environment, and participants are less likely to reveal behavioral norms and break out of traditional roles. These courses are best suited for addressing individual behaviors and specific work behaviors. Paper and pencil exercises, role-playing, simulations, group projects, and T-groups are classic examples of indoor exercises (Clements et al., 1995). However the future of indoor courses may begin to combine many high ropes course features with the advantages of all-weather training by placing rope ladders and rope bridges in the rafters of a gymnasium to get a similar experience as would be gained on an outdoor course.

Principles of the Experiential Process. Although many good models of experiential learning are proposed and several types of learning experiences have been developed, Luckmann's (1996) twelve basic principles can apply to any successful experiential learning process:

1) Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis.
2) Experiences are structured to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for results.
3) Throughout the process, the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning.
4) Learners are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, soulfully, and/or physically.
5) Results of the learning are personal and form the basis for future experience and learning.
6) Relationships are developed and nurtured.
7) The provider and learner may experience success, failure, adventure, risk-taking, and uncertainty.
8) Opportunities are nurtured for learners and providers to explore and examine their own values.
9) The provider's primary roles include setting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting learners, insuring physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the learning process.
10) The provider recognizes and encourages spontaneous opportunities for learning.
11) Providers strive to be aware of their biases, judgments, and pre-conceptions and how they influence the learner.
12) The design of the learning experience includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes, and successes.

These principles reflect how drastically different experiential learning is from the traditional classroom/lecture environment. Experiential learning is non-traditional, actively involves students, encourages independent and critical thinking, promotes interactions and relationships within the class, improves retention 80-90% (Project Adventure, 1998), and focuses students' energies and keeps their interest.

WHAT HAS LEAD 2003 EXPERIENCED & LEARNED?

The LEAD 2003 group met on August 2002 at Adventure's Unlimited in Milton, Florida. Twelve members arrived at 8:00 a.m. to participate in LEAD's team-building event in the rain. One must remember for all intents and purposes, the people involved were virtually total strangers. After this team-building event, LEAD 2003 members were each asked to answer some questions detailing the day's experiences. Captured below are some of their ideas and views to help think about experiential or activity-based learning activities as meaningful vehicles to assist organizational development when the individuals involved hardly know each other and come from different experience bases.

Introductions. Almost immediately that morning, the group was formed into a circle to help learn and memorize LEAD 2003 member's names. As a group, everyone had to individually repeat the names and nicknames of the people there in the order they were standing until all completed this task. This was a wonderful and humorous way to begin and alleviate concerns about who group members were, why were they there, and it reinforced the notion we were all equals as LEAD 2003 members. Introducing team members in this manner allowed each person to relay some of their personality and "allow" people open conversations with anyone in the group.

Hula-hoop. The first activity we performed used a hula-hoop and it was the one activity mentioned as being the most significant for individuals. Standing in a circle, everyone held the hula-hoop by the tips of their index fingers at waist level. The activity's goal was for the group to lower together the hula-hoop down and place it on the ground. Sounds very simple and easy, right? Almost immediately the hula-hoop began to rise to a point above our shoulder level! Group member remembered: 1) "I still can't believe that something so simple was so hard to accomplish. It demonstrates to me all of the important lessons about communication, listening, leadership,

cooperation, compliance, and persistence needed in working together to accomplish a goal." 2) "The hula-hoop was most meaningful! It was exciting watching everyone interact and throw out ideas while trying to accomplish a seemingly simple task. I learned that things are not always as they appear."

Spaceship. The team assumed role assignments to participate in the spaceship situation. People had to get from one end of the planet area to another using four different lengths of planking to "bridge" from one canyon to the next in order to recover "fuel" crystals and get all people to the ship for takeoff. People in the group were assigned the roles of ship captain, navigator, 3 engineers to carry and load fuel crystals, medical doctors to take care of any injured crew, and several influential people from your planet. Obviously, some roles are more important to get the spaceship launched again. The group had 20 minutes plus 10 minutes of earned extra minutes to complete the spaceship task. The team had difficulties and did not complete this task on time plus two members were left behind. Participants commented: 1) "Each of us has some quality or ability that is needed to make the team successful. However, leadership and success might sometimes mean not taking everyone with you and making tough decisions for an aggregate good" and 2) "The spaceship gave me pause for thought. We knew it was only a game, but the thought of leaving 2 folks behind in a real situation would be a last resort for me."

Spider web. Parachute rope was stretched between two trees into a 12-foot by 9-foot "spider web". The group was given approximately a 75-foot length of rope to be passed between the web openings without touching any of the web's parachute rope. Each person had to help holding portions of the 75-foot rope above the ground and way from the "spider web". Some of observations for this activity are: 1) "this activity is valuable because at al times we had to stay focused on the task at hand, if not, we caused the team to lose points towards our common goal" and 2) "I was really proud of our group and the way we thought it out, the great ideas from all the participants, putting them into action, and seeing the very positive result. Being successful is a great feeling."

Balance board. Approximately a 10 foot by 20 foot board was balanced like a seesaw in our activity area. Our task was to get every person on the board while balancing it on its fulcrum. The sides of the board should never touch the ground. The group successfully completed this task and one team member reflected on the experience in a wonderful manner. "I liked the metaphorical value of the balance board. Balance is not something you achieve and then it is done. The nature of life, work, and human relations is constant change requiring that we continually observe, learn, and adjust. When we cannot do that we become ill (physically, emotionally, or spiritually) and are not effective. A little caution, a little courage, a little thought, a little consultation and cooperation got the job done." The balance board was our last task of the day.

POST-ACTIVITY REACTIONS

To a person, LEAD 2003 argues the experiential/ABL experience is an excellent and positive way to begin the trek to valuing and understanding UWF as an academic institution and its total commitment to its students, maintainers, faculty, community, and state of Florida. LEAD 2003 learned and reinforced the notion "as we worked together to accomplish our goals, we were able to 'get out' of ourselves and get to know one another. I thought it was a great way to jump-start a group process. People are at ease in a "game" type setting. It was challenging (but not to hard for anyone)." In this ABL experience, "I had a chance to observe in action and remember that a combination of multiple strategies honoring different abilities and contributions is often more successful than a single idea imposed, clear communication is difficult and even when you think you have achieved it, you must confirm and re-confirm," and lastly "even poor ideas and outcomes that are less successful still teach us." On a personal-level, individuals gained from this experience, "the experience was good for my self confidence and my self-esteem. It helped me get rid of some insecurities that I had about working with others on a team."

One comment about improving the ABL activities was, "I would have an overall review of the activities to remind everyone of the teaching points from each activity. They were reviewed briefly after each activity, but I think it would be even more productive to review and discuss them to enhance the learning experience, so that these principles will 'sink in' and be useful in our future LEAD activities and at work." One issue we did have for the ABL activities was a light rain fell throughout the entire day. This may reflect people in the group wanting to move on to the next task or assignment and providing limited commentary.

FINAL THOUGHTS

It is three weeks since the team-building experiential/ABL activities were completed. Will the lessons learned and the feelings of pride within the group remain strong as time passes? These are the tests LEAD 2003 will have to answer. So far LEAD 2003 has successfully participated in the 2002 United Way Day of Caring being a maintenance crew for two local elementary schools. The team painted walkway areas and manicured decorative bushes around each institution. The initial camaraderie gained in the experiential/ABL team building was on a high level again the team organized and completed needed work tasks. However, the rain fell again on LEAD 2003.

A strong, positive note continues to be the group's aggressiveness to formulate and begin implementing its class project. E-mail traffic is out to LEAD 2003 on a proposed project to plan, organize, and control the procurement and construction of the "UWF Walkway of

International Flags." Last week, the President at his State of the University address explained his desires for an area depicting the 78 countries that our international students come from. Trying to cement our commitment to this, LEAD 2003 also has contacted the President concerning our desires to assist and lead the university in this effort. We are waiting to hear his response and thoughts. This is the earliest Class Project schedule ever proposed by any previous LEAD classes.

So far things look very positive that LEAD 2003 will continue to be enthusiastic and united in their quest to help better and improve the university. Is this a result of the experiential/ABL team building effort done at the beginning of the LEAD program? One must say the team building activities have contributed to its group performance to date. However, LEAD 2003 will be followed closely and analyzed throughout the next year looking for additional ways an academic institution can enhance and develop leadership within a university setting.

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