“Leadership Lessons from the Women’s Leadership Development Program at Nazarbayev University (Kazakhstan)”

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Universities have long been responsible for educating the next generation of leaders in society. The development of leadership practices is crucial to the success of professionals in all arenas, and efforts to develop leadership potential have increased dramatically over the past two decades. Many leadership development programs began as day-long or week-long seminars, but research quickly indicated that “leadership competencies are best developed over time through a program that fosters personalized integration of theory and practice and that conceived of leadership development as a recursive and reflective process” (Connoughton, Lawrence, & Ruben, 2003, p. 46). Because university students are in an environment where they are engaging in long-term learning and development of knowledge, skills, and abilities, they are particularly prepared for significant growth in leadership competence during the course of their tenure at the university.

As a result, leadership development programs, leadership certificates, minors, majors, etc. have been emerging on many university campuses in the past two decades. These programs can be viewed as an effort by the university to be more proactive in their responsibility to develop competent, ethical, adaptable leaders of the next generation.

Research on such programs indicates marked increases in leadership competence and critical thinking skills among participants (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). Significant longitudinal studies are underway on leadership programs at Yale University and the U.S. Military Academy. The findings of these studies will be invaluable to further our understanding of the long-term effects of leadership development programs.

It is important to note that leadership development is conceptualized as interdisciplinary in nature and valuable for students of every major. The vast majority of
university leadership programs span the university, but there are also specific programs in the Sciences, Engineering, and Humanities and Social Sciences at a number of institutions. Studies on various leadership development programs have led to several foundations on which this particular study is based. Connaughton, Lawrence, and Ruben (2003) have synthesized the findings into nine principles for leadership programs. Due to the lack of space, I list the principles, but do not explain them here. First, leadership is complex. Second, leadership is other-oriented. Third, leadership is interactive and dynamic. Fourth, leadership is contextual. Fifth, leadership may be emergent. Sixth, leadership is a science and an art. Seventh, leadership is enacted through communication. Eighth, leadership is increasingly mediated and virtual in nature. Ninth, leadership can be learned and taught.

The Women’s Leadership Development Program at Nazarbayev University (Kazakhstan) was developed upon these principles. The program was started as part of a larger research project studying, in general, the views of leadership among the Kazakhstani population, and, specifically, the views of men and women leaders and leadership. The research project is funded by a Nazarbayev University research grant. As part of the project, a select group of 35 Nazarbayev University female students and staff participated in a 7-month leadership development program, titled the Women’s Leadership Development Program (WLDP), designed to help them understand leadership and explore their own leadership capabilities.

Participants of the Women’s Leadership Development Program engaged in a three-tiered program of learning emphasizing: Leadership Foundations, Leader Self-Knowledge, and Leading Others. The program was experiential—mixing readings, discussions, classroom learning, and active learning, which gave participants the opportunity to practice what they learned. Program participants were introduced to diversified leadership experiences, empowered to develop comprehensive leadership skills, prepared for ethical leadership for
the purpose of promoting positive change, challenged to develop a multi-cultural worldview in terms of intercultural leadership and diversity, and primed for continued development as the future leaders of their society. The program hosted 9 learning sessions, a full weekend learning retreat (classroom & practice/application), and several online discussion boards. In addition to the learning sessions, all participants were required to complete a 15-hour “Leadership Experience Project.” The project required the participant to take a primary leadership role where she was able to apply what she was learning and reflect on the outcomes and experiences. Participants submitted a final project outcome in the form of a paper, journal, or video.

Within the WLDP, an ongoing research study was initiated to examine the development of leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities among female students and staff at Nazarbayev University. As the “flagship” institution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev University has been challenged to develop the next generation of Kazakhstan’s leaders. In his March 1, 2012 visit to the NU campus, Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev said, “high-level intellectuals in all areas will be trained here.” As a university with a mission to train graduates to compete in a global workforce, there is a need for leadership development among students and staff.

Research on leadership development programs has largely been conducted among American or Western European students (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). The ideas of leadership that have been studied are western in nature and founded upon principles valued in western cultures. Limited research has been conducted regarding leadership among students in developing and emerging countries. This study seeks to fill this gap in the literature by examining the leadership development among students and staff at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan who participate in this study.

While the leadership development program provides a catalyst for the development of
competencies, this research study is focused on the view that the participants have about leadership as it is presented in the program. Given that much of the leadership literature has emerged from western studies, this project examines how participants in a Central Asian university respond to and enact these western leadership theories and practices. To better understand how the participants have enacted these leadership theories and practices, the “Leadership Experience Project” report from each participant will be examined. These projects were completed within 2 months following the completion of the learning program. The examination of the projects will look specifically and what theoretical approaches to leadership are mentioned and how these approaches are enacted. In addition to examining the projects, select participants will be interviewed to further examine how they are enacting leadership practices and their reactions to the theories and practices that were presented within the WLDP. These interviews will take place between 4-6 months after the completion of the program. The results from the interviews and the examination of the projects will allow me to better understand how the participants are, or are not, applying the knowledge, skills, and abilities from the program in the immediate and short-term time frames following program completion.

To my knowledge, research of this kind has not been conducted among female university students who are studying in a foreign language (English) in a university that is within an emerging country. The results of this research project will allow us to better understand how western theories and leadership practices are, or are not, accepted and enacted in non-western cultures.
References
