

**To Listen Is To Learn, To Learn Is To Lead:  
A Study of Leadership in Health Care Management**

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**Introduction and Orientation to the Problem**

Leadership has been a much studied, but little understood concept. There is a broad body of literature on what leadership is and why it is important, but little attention has been paid to the thoughts and personal experiences of individuals who find themselves in leadership positions. By looking at the life experiences of individuals in managerial positions, this case will examine leadership from a human, personal perspective. This lens provides a unique vantage point to better understand leadership in context. This framework draws from Carl Roger's (1961; 1983) work on learning. He argues that learning takes place as part of a larger social context. Learning is essentially a value-laden process. Similarly, learning about oneself as a leader, or learning about one's social environment is not an isolated endeavor. All thoughts develop out of the singular and shared experiences one has. Those experiences in turn shade the decisions one makes and the credo one espouses. Tapping into past experiences helps one put into perspective current experiences. The more open a person is to their own experiences, the more successful they will be in navigating through life in general. Leaders often use this process to improve productivity and produce meaningful social change.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to understand the role that learning plays in the practice of leadership.

**Rationale/Significance of Study**

Today's healthcare institutions are more than patient care delivery systems. These facilities have evolved into complex academic and clinical organizations with multiple, sometimes

competing, missions (health care delivery, education, research). Often, organizations under stress due to these conflicting forces are difficult to understand, and even more difficult to lead (Cohen and March, 1976). Given the economic realities of cost-containment, time management, personal goals, and staff politics, mid-level managers are faced with dealing with many interconnecting variables that can seem overwhelming at times. Managers in Respiratory Care departments in acute care/academic health sciences settings are good examples of leaders caught in this world of detail complexity (Flood, 1999). These departments serve the public by providing high technology life support systems to patients in intensive care units. Both the healthcare providers, as well as the management team are continually faced with stress and it takes very dedicated people to provide these vital services. In an effort to balance a variety of competing forces, managers can become overloaded, frustrated, disenchanted, discouraged, and even dissatisfied with their positions (Bolman and Deal, 1984). This ethnographic study will focus on individual managers' personal reflections, interpretations, and feelings about what it is like to be a leader in a complex organization. Their insights will be the foundation for understanding why, when, and how one learns to manage, and how one learns to learn as a leader.

### **Primary Research Questions**

1. How does a mid-level manager in academic health sciences centers understand the purposes and practices of leadership?
2. What role does learning play in his construction of effective leadership?
3. Is leader behavior tied to specific social and/or professional events?
4. How does institutional climate influence leader development and managerial style?
5. What conclusions can be drawn from the leader's personal constructions?

### **Delimitations/Definitions**

#### Delimitations:

This study will provide an in-depth look at the development of leaders in professional health care/academic institutions in the metropolitan New York City/Long Island area. The focus will be on individual leader perceptions, recollections, and developmental constructions. The

study is not looking at broad generalizations, only specific individual interpretations. The institutional data may be different and could impact on the leaders thoughts and evaluative abilities. Each leader may demonstrate unique and candid thoughts and therefore can not be used as a frame of reference for all leaders and all organizations. While the data and conclusions may vary, the anecdotal information may be useful for those seeking to better understand themselves in context to their own unique environment, and can provide valuable mentoring information for future reference.

Definitions:

*Manager* – one who oversees work flow, administrative tasks, and work assignments

*Leader* – one who guides and mentors colleagues

*Academic Health Sciences Center (AHSC)* – a health care institution that has multiple missions, typically patient care, higher education, community and professional service, research

*Clinical Affiliate* – a health care institution that operates independently of an (AHSC) and yet assists in the overall missions, such as education of future health care providers

### **Review of the Literature**

There is a rich body of literature that exists about the nature of leadership. Various studies have concentrated on either the qualities that a leader possesses, or the skills necessary to lead others in the pursuit of realizing an organizational plan. The primary goal of this literature synthesis is to examine the central themes found in the study of leadership and to reexamine those theories in light of today's concerns in academia. Most of the research on leadership theory has concentrated on quantitative data collection. Very few studies have looked at the interpretive aspects of the topic. While it is useful to understand why effective leadership is important, it is equally important to understand how to make sense of experiences in a leadership position. In the final analysis, there is no one best way to manage, nor are there quintessential virtues that make a given individual a "leader. "

What's really of value is the one interpretation of lived experiences. The more individuals understand themselves, and the social world around them, the more effective they will be in accordance with their own unique definitions of success. In addition, the more the

organization's members make sense of their own world, the more effective the organization will be in relationship to its self-constructed collective vision and goals.

### **General Themes in Leadership Literature**

There have been three dominant themes in leadership research: (a) trait theory, (b) behavioral theory, and (c) organizational environment (culture). Trait theory evolved in the early twentieth century in an attempt to analyze specific qualities that were unique to leaders of the day (Bird, 1940; Jenkins, 1947; Stogdill, 1948). This approach to understanding leadership was based on the fact that leaders were somehow intrinsically different from non-leaders. Researchers attempted to devise a universally accepted profile of a leader for others to emulate. Often the measures were psychological in nature and ranged from dominant versus submissive personalities, extraverted versus introverted orientations, physical appearance, and degree of intelligence. Today these descriptors seem rather superficial, but in context of the times they were an early attempt to understand a very complex issue. These theories were also shaded by the notion that leaders were either successful military leaders or astute political figures. While it is true that many great sociopolitical leaders hold certain traits in common, trait theory as a single definer of leadership ability ultimately proved inconsistent at best.

The need for further understanding about leadership led to a behavioral approach to the subject. Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939) attempted to redefine leadership in terms of individual behaviors, rather than just personality traits alone. They developed three styles of leadership: (a) democratic, (b) autocratic, and (c) laissez-faire. The democratic individual was likely to include others in the decision making process. The autocratic person made most of the decisions themselves. The laissez-faire leader did not necessarily have a preference. This methodology did little to explain leadership, or shed light on how best to lead, but it did influence much of the research to follow.

Building on a behaviorist frame of reference, Katz and Kahn (1953) postulated that leadership could be distilled into employee-oriented versus production-oriented behaviors. Their interpretation of leadership categorized the leader as either a people focused manager,

or an outcomes focused manager. In both cases the leader was seen as the decision maker, but their decisions were based on the issue that most concerned them. Contextually, Katz and Kahn were expressing the social concerns of the day. Is it better to improve individual performance or organizational performance? At the time it didn't seem that they were connected, but today their work holds relevance to the extent that these constructs are not mutually exclusive (Senge, 1990). Contingency theories evolved out of a growing frustration that trait and behavioral theories of leadership were inadequate in portraying leader-subordinate interrelationships. Fiedler (1967) argued that both the situation and the leaders orientation to the work group determine overall leadership effectiveness. His work is highly cited in almost literature related to leadership styles. He identifies two major management styles: (a) relationship motivated and (b) task motivated. Each style has its own sphere of effectiveness. Relationship management styles were deemed more effective in times of calm, and task management styles more effective in times of crisis. The choice of management style is determined by the social context in which decisions are made. According to Fiedler, effectiveness is an operational process, and a leader needs to adjust his thinking according to the situation. This work builds on Katz and Kahn's (1953) initial work and it has influenced much current leadership research.

Starting in the 1960's, leadership (and organizational) effectiveness research became more integrative in its outlook (Bennis, 1989; Davis, 1998a, 1998b; Pratch & Jacobowitz, 1997; Senge, 1990; Slater, 1995). Bennis found that erratic personality traits of a leader can negatively impact organizational outcomes. Davis concentrated on examining *locus of control*, that is the ability to understand oneself in a more reflective context. Internal locus of control refers to the concept that success (or failure) is a consequence of one's own abilities. Individuals with external locus of control tend to attribute success or failure to task difficulty, or the influence of others (Frieze, 1976). Davis concludes that effective leaders have a high degree of internal locus of control. Less effective leaders have a high external locus of control. Similarly, Frieze points out that less effective leaders are not particularly self-reflective and rarely accept responsibility for personal or organizational shortcomings.

Updating the trait theories of leadership, (Bennis, 1989) concluded that effective leaders are decisive, organized, efficient, task oriented, good communicators, and proponents of cultural and intellectual diversity, promote a positive organizational culture, and in academic institutions are visionaries who mobilize support around shared beliefs and goals.

Research into leadership effectiveness has been both complex by its very nature, and illusive in its indicators. There is great disagreement about the construct itself, and even more disparity about what is important to investigate. Since there has been little attention paid to developing comprehensive paradigms that fit all situations, researchers have limited their investigations to variables that are quantifiable, if not controllable. Often their focus has been shaped by their own specific assumptions, interests or vantage points (Slater, 1995).

Out of the varied research on leadership four research perspectives have evolved: (a) structural-functionalism, (b) political-conflict, (c) constructivist, (d) critical humanist. Structural-functionalists have continued to look at such measurable behaviors or skills (Andrews & Sonder, 1987; Barnett, 1990; Bridges, 1967; Hallinger & Murphy, 1987; Hoyle, English, & Steffy, 1985) as staff development, allocation of resources, goal setting as indicators of success. Instead of looking at specific traits, however, they have concerned themselves with the consequences of leadership rather than the conditions by which effectiveness is measured. In contrast to precious trait theorists, structural-functionalists see the behaviors as just a list of indicators and have not been interested in the single best traits. This shift in focus illuminates the recognition that there can be no one theory of leadership that fits all potential scenarios.

In contrast, the political-conflict perspective looks not at leadership skills, but views leadership as a playing out of power versus subordination. Many of today's educational diversity issues (e.g. gender, ethnicity) fall into this category of research Several researchers (Kezar, 2000; Larson, 1997; Mabokela, 2002). Kezar and (Cox, 1993) argue that stifling or limiting diversity leads to inefficiency, lack of productivity, and an inability to meet organizational goals. From this distinct frame of reference the more inclusive a leader is, the

more effective their organizations will be. This view incorporates the feminist perspective of (Mabokela 2002).

In today's increasingly more geopolitical world, the political-conflict perspective has wide ranging implications for those studying leadership effectiveness. Much of this literature also crosses over to ethnographic scrutiny as well, and helps put the spotlight on the importance of inclusion and role modeling in an ever changing world. (Barbour & Tipping, 1994; Mabokela, 2002) reinforce the need for diversity, and view women as specific change agents that will help nurture inclusion and future leadership development.

From the critical-humanist perspective, leadership is seen as a balancing act centered around personal interrelationships. Drawing on the work of Rogers (1983), the humanist believes that leadership is symbolic. Unlike the structural-functionalists, critical-humanists subscribe to the notion that leaders act not in a vacuum, but in the arena of social change (Bates, 1980). Rogers proposed that learning takes place as part of a larger context, and from the humanist agenda, effective leadership would encourage independence and entrepreneurial decision making. At the heart of this perspective is the idea that no matter what ones status or role in an organization, all ideas are valued, and all individuals should be respected for their uniqueness and value to the institution as a whole. This philosophy holds great promise as institutions search for appropriate ways to deal with change generated by differing groups with differing agendas. Critical-humanists argue that effective leaders are individuals that act as change agents for social needs. When applied to academic institutions, this philosophy influence schools to produce leaders who are visionaries who can influence public policy regarding education, and educational policy making (Duke, 1986; Giroux, 1992). From a constructivist lens, leadership comes about largely as a result of the role that meaning plays out in everyday life. Duke (1986) interprets leadership as a perception that "reflects the structures of meaning of the perceiver and the culture and times in which the perceiver lives." Leadership is thus a subjective phenomenon, not a rational analysis based on quantitative data. Similarly, Slater (1995) observed that leadership is not necessarily any specific behavior, instead leadership is the meaning behind behaviors and communicated through relationships and is based on negotiated understandings and beliefs. While no unified

paradigm of leadership has yet been constructed, various elements of each conceptual framework help fill in the gaps and promote an increased knowledge base to understand how leadership theory makes sense, and ultimately how individuals and organizations can apply that knowledge for growth and development.

### **Conceptual Framework: The Learning Organization**

In recent years more attention is being given to the relationship between leadership and overall organizational health, and less attention focused on specific attributes of one individual labeled *the leader*. Senge's (1990) comprehensive work on organizations draws together many of the theories of leadership into a compendium of institutional and relational applications that can improve overall organizational health and effectiveness.

Senge's (1990) major premise is that organizations need to "learn how to learn," and in doing so they become more productive over time, and are able to adjust to changes that are an inevitable part of organizational life. He outlines five interrelated constructs that he contends can improve both leadership effectiveness and institutional productivity: (a) personal mastery, (b) mental modeling, (c) shared vision development, (d) team learning, and (e) systems thinking. Each of these insights are cross-linked and add to a better understanding of how theory enhances practical application.

Personal mastery, according to Senge (1990), is the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, and of seeing reality objectively. It is a variation on the theme of lifelong learning and represents "a way of being."

Eastern philosophy plays an important role in the third? discipline, mental modeling. In this process one learns to open themselves up to different ways of thinking, and in the process, gain acceptance of change. One must be willing to let go of old assumptions in favor of new, potentially more useful ones. The discipline is more insightful, and less reactionary.

Developing a shared vision is essential to growth and prosperity. Rather than a "vision statement," this process calls for organizations to develop future goals that foster

commitment rather than just compliance. It is this sense of sharing that fosters a common identity, and a common sense of purpose. Accordingly, effective leaders learn to realize that dictating a vision is counterproductive. Effective leaders become the galvanizing force, not by charisma, but through meaningful dialogue. Team learning starts with a suspension of old assumptions that leads to an open dialogue. Senge (1990) contends that team learning should be the fundamental learning unit in any modern organization.

The fifth discipline, system thinking, ties the other disciplines together. Systems thinking refers to the ability to see not only individual actions, but to see them in the context of the whole. System thinking becomes a process by which one learns to understand the interconnectedness of actions and events. This type of learning is very much aligned with the constructivist framework and also tends to tap into the humanist frame as well. It starts with open dialogue and culminates with the sense of team spirit that can only come from integrating all the disciplines together.

In many ways, the concept of the learning organization, attempts to refute the early trait theories that were prevalent in the past. By emphasizing the importance of group thought, and group management practices, Senge (1990) replaces the notion that a leader is one who sets the agenda. Instead he argues that leaders guide the organization through this process of learning, and recognize that the power is not within themselves, but within the ability of the organization to increase productivity through honest and open reflection. It is an insightful process, not a reactionary one. In stark contrast to the political-conflict models, the learning organization puts the power, not within a person, but with the process of learning and adaptation. Control means guidance. Effective leaders are in control, not by controlling others, but by educating others to think reflectively.

In order for an organization to learn, its members need to put aside many preconceived ideas about the relationship between “the leader” and “the subordinates.” Depending on the concern or issue, roles may change. This conceptualization confronts previous research on the issue of the very nature of organizational structure. In fact, Senge (1990) would contend that there is no one best structure for any given organization. At times the structure could be

hierarchical, but doesn't always have to be that way. What Senge is advocating is the possibility that all roles should be in a state of flux, and that different tasks may necessitate multiple leaders. Individual egos are less important, and addressing meaningful change is the primary institutional goal. The more an institution is able to address long range goals, the more likely it will reach them, regardless of structure. This is contrary to notions that structure is the dominant operational construct.

In attempting to update Senge's (1990) theories about the learning organization, Flood (1999) has expanded the scope of the view of leadership in complex organizations, and has further added to the knowledge base in the learning of leadership. Flood reinforces the concept that empowerment comes from dialogue, in both organizational and personal lives, but he criticizes Senge for concentrating on the "emergent phenomenon" and not offering enough insight into the "emergent process" related to systemic thinking. Flood poses the question – "Who's judgment process is relevant?" when evaluating organizational (and leadership) effectiveness.

Flood (1999) enhances one's thinking about leadership by including spiritualistic concepts, such as reductionism and Zen in his discussion. Reductionism draws upon the relationship between technology and modern ways of thinking. He argues that technology has the potential to enhance organizational life, but often simply obscures the wholistic view and in addition, sense of purpose. Technology itself becomes the view, instead of serving to improve the human condition. Oppositionally, Zen spiritual thinking offers a way to understand the world by understanding one's self.

Both reductionism and Zen are interesting ways of looking at leadership because they add a different perspective on organizational behavior. Leaders need to promote technology as an improvement tool and should not use it to obscure human needs. Likewise, leaders need to promote individual and organizational health and well being, and ultimately can assist people in being more wholistic in thought, but still conscious of their own organizational importance. What is clear to this point in the debate over leadership is that today's modern world is becoming so complex that it is difficult to utilize "one best way" to deal with

multiple layers of social behavior. No one view is best, and no one way to respond to social problems is going to offer “the perfect solution.” Leaders and subordinates need to recognize that there are multiple viewpoints about any given issue. What Flood proposes is a “four-window” approach to problem solving. In this paradigm efficiency/reliability, effectiveness, meaningfulness, and fairness are the lenses for viewing solutions. A central premise is that each view needs to be considered, and organizational members need to share their views and perceptions of life. Exploring these action consequences can enhance understanding and add to one’s appreciation for the inherent complexity of the consequences of various approaches to conflict management, vision realization, and the potential pros and cons of decision making. Flood’s approach shows great promise as a way of researching leader/subordinate relations. The four windows offer a panoramic view that is much more useful than one view alone. The four-window model adapted for systems thinking includes looking at process, structure, meaning, and knowledge-power. Flood defines this as prismatic thinking. It adds rules and procedures, cognitive processes, individual meaningfulness, and power dynamics and ethics into the decision process. The art and science of management thus becomes a process of scenario building within the social nature of the organization (Flood, 1999).

### **Implications of Leadership Theory for Higher Education Administration**

The research into leadership effectiveness is a broad topic, with many disparate viewpoints. There seems to be no one correct or most effective way to lead, nor does there seem to be a consensus on what attributes or constructs are most important to study (Bennis, 1989; Gardiner, 1990). Educational institutions, unlike most business and industrial organizations, have multiple goals, and a wide variety of missions (Cohen & March, 1986). This makes the task of applying the literature difficult at best. In addition, institutions of higher education must satisfy the needs of many constituent groups (e.g. students, parents, faculty, administrators, trustees, benefactors).

Complicating educational administration is the ever increasing scarcity of financial resources necessary to carry on the business of education. Pfeffer (1977) argues that ultimately academic decisions are made based on economic realities and political concerns, and that resource allocation is the arbiter of what a leader can accomplish. Senge (1990) would

counter that all institutions face these problems, and that those who are effective in dealing with the realities of life, will be the most successful in coming up with realistic strategies that counteract the obstacles. Senge further believes that the “creative tension” between the vision and the reality creates growth and the more an individual (and an organization) recognizes and utilizes this tension, the better condition they will be in to address rapidly changing needs.

Diversity, increased globalization, outcomes assessment, accountability, and a growing international perspective have all contributed to a rapidly changing educational system. Some researchers (Bensimon, 1989; Bensimon & Neumann, 1993; Kezar, 2000; Roesner, 1990) argue that there is no universal definition of leadership; its meaning or definition is impacted by context. Quantitative leadership studies and methodologies need to be revisited. If one subscribes to the theory that leadership is socially constructed, then research into the cultural nature of leadership will continue to grow in importance.

Qualitative, cultural, and interpretive studies will add more insight into the nature of leadership in the future further modifying older theories of leadership, such as trait theory, behaviorism, power and politics. Kezar (date) believes that past leadership studies were too unitary in scope and application. She argues that there are multiple leadership perspectives on most college campuses, and that leadership models need to be expanded or re-conceptualized in order to accommodate differing perspectives. Kezar further states that more traditional models that are not inclusive, are less likely to be understood, or accepted by groups that have a different life experience than those subjects studied. Her work reinforces the point of view that leadership is both an important area of investigation, and that educational policy will continue to evolve as these multiple perspectives are accommodated.

Like Senge (1990), Larson (1997) believes that team work will be a dominant force in future studies of leadership effectiveness. Larson adds that cooperation is the “magical glue” holding effective organizations together as well as the energizing force that makes the attainment of organizational goals possible. Her concept is consistent with Senge’s contention that team learning and shared vision development lead to long term organizational

(and individual) wellness. While leaders give up some degree of autonomy in decision making, the decisions made are much stronger and viable in changing climates. Academic administrators need to recognize that the title alone does not make one a leader. Senge further adds that disagreements are healthy, as long as they don't become too intrusive on personal thought. Disagreement brings on dialogue, and dialogue stimulates new thoughts, and potentially new actions.

Regardless of the circumstances by which one demonstrates leadership, leaders will always continue to surface. Barron and Henderson (1995) call them "strategic leaders." Whether faculty or administrators, they serve as agents for positive change. Titles aside, individuals who find themselves in leadership roles can have a positive affect on goal attainment, as well as perceived organizational effectiveness (Pounder & Ogawa, 1995). As technology continues to advance, and as new technologies are instituted, different leaders may emerge with unique skills for specific situations (Kearsley & Lynch, 1992). Educational leaders need to recognize that unique skills strengthen the organization's ability to change and grow. All involved in academia should understand such concepts as "the learning organization." While they don't have to subscribe to its tenants, they do have to recognize that leadership is as much a process of growth, maturation, and advocacy as it is a skill or a title.

Future leaders in academia need to be nurtured. Marsh (1992) points out that leadership develops in two stages: efficiency, then integration. This developmental process seems to be the latest avenue for investigation (Davis, 1998a, 1998b; Levin, 1998; Petrie, Lindaur, & Tountasakis, 2000; Teschke, 1995, 1996; Teske & Schneider, 1999). Teske in a study of presidential influence and leadership succession notes that change in an organization is inevitable, and that academic leaders exert influence by history, position, and by knowledge of the institution. While there is a wealth of information about traits, skills and behaviors of individuals in leadership roles, there seems to be a wide gap in how and why leaders make the decisions they make, especially from an interpretive stance. One fertile area for further research is to adapt critical thinking concepts to management decision making.

Critical thinking in education refers to student-directed, active learning that increases awareness of global thinking (Mishoe, 1995; Mishoe & Welch, 2002; Wood, 1998). This same process holds great promise in the individual development of leaders, the team learning of organizations, and the overall effectiveness of those in leadership roles.

### **Need for Future Investigation**

Leadership theory and organizational social relationships have been under scrutiny for decades. The topic itself is broad and very complex. In an effort to manage the wealth of information, researchers have concentrated on either leader traits, organizational dysfunction, or organizations as social units. Both Senge (1990) and Flood (1999) have cogently cited the need for ongoing research. . Both authors have suggested a need for new approaches to data collection and analysis. What seems to be missing in the literature is data related to the lived experience of leaders in complex organizations, especially in academia. This lens has the potential for adding new insight to existing theories about leadership. Central to such investigations should be how leaders understand their own experiences, and ultimately how they feel about their own managerial sense making. Leaders need to ask themselves three basic questions: 1. Who am I?, Who are we from an organizational viewpoint, and 3. Where are we going as an organization? These three issues need to be understood by anyone in a leadership position, and understood in the context of their social world (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Reflective data and analysis has the potential to crystallize thought and add new dimensions to our understandings about individual construction of organizational events. Senge (1990) believes that reflection is important in the development of the learning organization, and has the capacity to help leaders focus on leadership as a learning process. This type of study would be a valuable tool in furthering the study of leadership, and should focus on research questions based on Senge's (1990) and Flood's (1999) foundational works: 1. How do manager's understand the purposes and practices of leadership? 2. What role has learning played in their own construction of effective leadership? 3. What role has shared learning and prism thinking played in team development?

Using Senge's (1990) premise of the learning organization for examining leadership, this study supports the theory that learning promotes growth through dialogue, reflection, and visionary discussion. His major premise is that organizations (and those who lead them) need to develop a sense of reflection about who they are, what they are about. Insightful reflection moves both individuals and organizations as a whole to a new level of consciousness, and helps promote a climate in which a "shared vision" is valued and worked towards. Senge presents three major premises that describe successful organizations: 1. Organizations "learn" only through individuals who learn. People with high levels of "personal mastery" are continually expanding their ability to create the results in life they truly seek. This entails a sense of creativity rather than reactivity. 2. The learning organization moves away from linear thinking and strives to make key decisions based on a shared understanding of interrelationships and patterns of change. 3. Effective leaders are those who can hold onto their vision while still clearly seeing current realities. Senge argues that the "creative tension" between these two forces stimulates growth. One's personal or institutional vision is tempered by "what is" and that tacking back and forth between goals and realities is what learning is all about. Senge believes that honesty in discussing differing perceptions or visions is essential in sharing knowledge and creating meaningful change that can be used to develop "mental" models that work at any time, for any reason. Leadership is thus seen not as a quality, but a state of being.

### **Methodological Framework**

Using Guba and Lincoln's (1989), and Denzin and Lincoln's (1998) understanding of constructivism/radical humanism, this study examines leadership from the personal perspectives of one healthcare manager. His stories illuminate how and why he developed into a leader, and more importantly how his experiences have helped shape the career decisions he has made. Accordingly, knowledge about leadership comes from the lived day to day reflections of the manager himself. Constructivists-humanists tend to look at the meaning (context) in which decisions are made. Denzin and Lincoln specifically point to the fact that traditional quantitative research is often stripped of its relevance when the context is not taken into consideration. They point out that human behavior, unlike physical objects,

cannot be understood without reference to the meanings and purposes attached by human actors to their activities. Since this study is about the personal and professional experiences of a team leader, this framework mirror images the research intent, as well as the nature of the data collected. It also gives us the structural foundation to better understand the behavior exhibited by the manager, and the decision making process that has become a part of his unique leadership style.

### **Methods**

Merriam (2001) suggests that interpretive research is based on the lived experience of others. This philosophical stance is in alignment with the constructivist/radical humanism conceptual framework previously mentioned. The methodology used in this study consisted of a one hour interview devoted to uncovering the manager's interpretations about leadership in general, and specifically about his/her personal reflections about leading, and "learning" in their own institutions. The interview was semi-structured and combined a mixture of structured and open-ended questions focusing on the interviewee's: (a) understanding about the nature of leadership, (b) concept of learning in an organization, and (c) recollections about various leadership experiences that have led them to their belief systems. The research will involve gathering data from departmental managers and will be followed up by departmental meeting observations. This dual look at management in action provides a rich and concentrated view of life in a healthcare setting.

### **Introduction to the Case Study**

This interpretive case study follows the thoughts and perceptions of one person's perspective on leadership. The narrative is based on his perceptions constructed from his personal experiences in health care management. The respondent (Stephen Smith) has had 27 years experience in the field of Respiratory Care. He is the Associate Director of the Respiratory Care Department of the University Hospital/Health Sciences Center of the University at Stony Brook located on Long Island, New York. Mr. Smith holds a Master of Public Administration degree from Long Island University, and is currently serving as a member of the State of New York's Department of Education Professional License Board. The

institution itself is a 504 bed tertiary care center that specializes in critical (intensive) care for Suffolk County and the surrounding tri-state area.

This case study reveals that Mr. Smith believes strongly that leadership, and leading an organization are both related to growth and maturation. His experiences in his career, and in his personal life have taught him that listening to people has been the single most valuable tool in his professional development. He strongly believes that through listening to others, one can evaluate, synthesize and act appropriately towards the surrounding world. This case underscores the message that good leaders learn from others, they learn through past mistakes, and they impart a sense of leadership to others by setting an example as one who is there to listen. Leaders are very much human and can succumb to the frailties that everyone else exhibits. Leadership is a participatory trial and error process.

Leadership is essential to productivity as health care practitioners search to develop ways to meet the demands of delivering services that are innovative, consistently high in quality, and cost effective all at the same time.

### **Case Study Analysis**

#### *Initial Professional Development*

As is true of a lot of managers in health care, Steve Smith has had a variety of career paths that have led him to his current position:

I've been practicing respiratory care, I guess about 26 years now, close to 27 years.

I started out as an on the job trainee, and I got very interested in respiratory care. I went back to school, got my degree, and along the way I got interested in management, and operating the department. My interest in management was to increase the standards and scope of practice for respiratory care practitioners. When I first got involved, we were sort of on the periphery of critical care medicine, and one of my goals was to become much more actively involved, and to become a part of the critical care team. I think that much of this has come to pass today, and the profession has become a very active part of the health care team. It has been a long process that has involved many managers and practitioners working together to

produce the result. A lot of mistakes have been made, but a lot of gains have also been made as well.

Senge (1990) frames vision building as a central theme in his definition of the “learning organization.” He states that it provides the focus and energy for learning.” He further argues “that when people share a vision, they are connected, bound together by a common aspiration.” Smith’s recollections support Senge’s premise. In recalling a recent departmental initiative to develop care plans for both neonatal ventilation and transport teams, Steve discussed that the initial plans were scrapped because neither the physicians nor the nurse administrators were in favor of the proposal:

I was able to develop those plans because the clinical nurses felt very comfortable with the protocols and the more they shared and felt passionate about the protocols, the faster the protocols were implemented. Once initial clinical trials documented patient care improvements, the senior administrators took note and approved their further development. As time went on, and as personnel changed, the plans came to fruition, and proved very successful. The protocols were institute because many people shared the goal of improving patient care.

Smith had learned that in order to affect change in an organization, one must rally the troops a theme that has been vividly portrayed in such motion pictures as *Spartacus* and *Gladiator*. All three situations demonstrate that common goal development is essential to moving and motivating others and that leaders help people clarify those goals. Senge defines team learning as “the process of aligning and developing the capacity of the team to create the results its members truly desire and it builds on a shared vision process.”

### *Learning to Listen*

When asked to define leadership, Smith replied- “a leader is one who listens to people:” The fact you are willing to listen demonstrates your willingness to appreciate the staff’s value and be attentive to their issues. It doesn’t always mean that you can act on their ideas, but it does show that you are receptive to their concerns or suggestions.

Senge (1990) would define listening as “openness.” He postulates that there are two aspects to openness – participatory and reflective. Participative openness refers to the ability to speak out. Reflective openness refers to the ability to look inwards. Senge believes that unless the two types are integrated, no real openness is being advocated. He states that it is easy to get people to speak out, it is more difficult to be reflective. To Steve Smith listening is the process of allowing people to speak out. But he agrees that it is not easy for people to be reflective about their own behaviors:

Getting people to speak is fairly easy. Getting them to think about their own behaviors is not as easy. This is my most challenging role as an administrator. In thinking back to the establishment of the neonatal protocols, change did not occur until the doctors and nurse administrators were allowed time to reflect and think about the implications of not implementing the protocols. As an administrator, I try not to get frustrated, and I allow time for the process to come together.

Steve (like Senge) believes that listening and openness is a learning process that comes with time and maturation. In reviewing his own personal ability to reflect, Smith stated that:

There have been many times where I’ve made mistakes along the way. In one instance I had to say to a staff member - I made a mistake on this issue or perhaps my approach was wrong. It’s not unusual that I would call people up at home, or sit at work and say you know, I’ve made a mistake, maybe you were right. In fact recently, I had a situation where what I had to say what I did was right, my approach might not have been right. I apologize to that. So I had to take a step back and look at the situation.

This further underscores the importance of reflection as a skill that enhances both personal and organizational growth. The more one is reflective, the more one has the capacity to better understand the total decision making picture in context. Denzin and Lincoln’s (1998) interpretation of radical humanism/constructivism supports Senge’s reflective openness theory and together they form the basis of the subject’s thoughts on listening, openness and a

sense of organizational learning in context with the realities of life. Listening (openness) is the central theme of this case study.

*Learning to Lead – Combining the Elements Together*

While listening is central to successful leadership, it is only one of several key pieces of the learning organization in total. But without this skill, none of the other pieces would fall into place. As was stated earlier, sharing a vision is also important. So too is recognizing the limitations embedded in the environment that the organization exists in. This sense of reality is mirrored in both Senge's learning organization and Denzin and Lincoln's (1998) radical humanist approach to research. Interpretation can not exist outside the reality of context. This theme was continually referred to by Smith in his accounts of working as an administrator. Learning from experience out of necessity implies that with each success or failure, one reflects about the nature of one's decision, and the context in which the decision was made. It's not enough to recognize what works, unless you fully comprehend why, and under what circumstances success (or failure) was achieved. One may have a vision, and that vision may be shared with others, but unless one appreciates the reality surrounding it, it is not a comprehensive view of life as it exists.

Steve Smith has successfully learned to integrate the skill of listening with the skill of vision development that has served him well. He has also recognized the importance of understanding his overall work environment. In discussing the implementation of inline suction catheters as a method of reducing the rate of infections in an intensive care unit he states that:

I knew that everybody needed to be on board. I also knew that the equipment design needed to be evaluated and that situation complicated the data collection. I also knew that the nursing staff were opposed to using the protocol because they thought it might lead to increased microbial infection rates. In order to institute the protocol, I had to first prove its rationality, then I had to listen to their concerns, address their concerns, and develop creative solutions that would allow his staff to implement the protocol.

Steve recognized the importance of developing a shared vision, but he also recognized that the he was working in and made adjustments accordingly. He knew from past experiences that he may not be able to implement the protocol, but he tried anyway. Senge calls this process “creative tension.” Growth in an organization occurs when one focuses on the vision, but understands the realities of life. In this instance Smith was successful because he looked at the protocol in context to the situation. Growth over time occurs because one is reflective, open and willing to listen, and willing to learn.

### *Looking Back and Looking Forward*

This notion of “creative tension” is also useful in analyzing the administrator’s growth as an individual, and as a leader:

I was hired as an educational coordinator, but due to upper administrative changes, as well as staffing problems, I have been asked to take on more and different roles than originally agreed upon. While I’m not very happy about it, I’m trying my best to triage and be creative at the same time. I like the educational part of the profession. I like being the liaison between the department and the school.

Steve has learned that he may not always be successful, and he may not always be doing what he wants to, but over time he has the possibility to grow and implement his vision little by little. He has learned that the difference between his vision and the reality of life in a complex organization produces that “creative tension” that Senge (1990) refers to. He has learned to lead through listening. Listening leads to learning and learning produces both individual and organizational growth and development. He has, in fact, learned to lead.

There have been two people that I would consider leaders. My brother Bill has been influential all my life. Billy has been actively involved in education. He’s a professor at the New York Institute of Technology and he used to be the Assistant Superintendent of Schools in East Islip. Prior to that he was a Principal and President of the teacher’s union. So Bill has come up through the ranks. He has made an impact on me and guided me in a lot of

directions. In addition, My Dad, although he died when I was young, he also had a great impact on me. He was active in union leadership and President of the Christian Brother's Association. So we've always had leadership in our family. In addition, my wife is the Director of Dietary at St. Catherine of Sienna Hospital. They are all avid listeners. They are great listeners, and great thinkers. They analyze and come up with decision making that took a lot of thought. They don't snap at the whip. They don't attack, they sit back and listen, and then make decisions.

Both in his personal life and his professional life Steve Smith has learned from those who listen and his behaviors stem from their guidance. He learned listening from them, and he is promoting this behavior in others. In looking at leadership development in others he states:

I think leadership is a number of things. First of all one has to set a good example. You need to be readily available, you need to be exposed, and you need people to know that you're there and willing to help out and serve in whatever capacity need to be served in. Another thing is that you need to listen. Listening to what people have to say. Not always having the right answer, because you don't. Nobody does. Learning and maturing sort of go together. It's an important part of your development and I think learning and understanding play an important role in how you make decisions in your life. People use to say that I was a hot head. I certainly responded much quicker, and probably not appropriately. But I think that it's all a learning process, a maturing process that you can't teach, it comes with experience. In looking at my own staff's leadership potential, I first look at how long they've been practicing. You also have to look at their ability to look back at their mistakes. It's not unusual that people in leadership positions make mistakes. You have to be willing to admit it.

### **Discussion of Findings/Conclusions**

According to Senge (1990), organizations learn only through individuals who learn. People (leaders) with high levels of "personal mastery" are continually expanding their ability to create the results in life they truly seek. Personal mastery refers to the ability to develop the creative tension, and visionary thoughts that promote innovation and creativity. As was

evident in this case study, a leader recognizes that change does not occur in a vacuum. Change occurs because one listens and learns to adapt over time. Merriam (2001) suggests that interpretive thought and interpretive research is rooted in the lived experiences of others. This philosophical stance underpins both Senge's theories of organizational growth and leadership development, as well as Denzin and Lincoln's (1998) framework for interpretive discussion.

In the case study, Steve Smith has helped fill in the details posed by the initial research questions. His understanding of the purposes and practices of leadership are peppered throughout his anecdotal remarks. He believes that leadership is all about listening. He learned it from his mentors, and he learned it through personal trial and error. His thinking is aligned very much with Senge's (1990) theory of openness. In looking at what role(s) learning plays in an individual's construction of leadership, Smith has demonstrated that without the ability to reflect, one is not a leader. To Smith, reflection is essential to effectiveness. Senge believes that each person's view is a unique perspective on a larger reality. In this regard, Senge, Denzin and Lincoln (1998), Merriam (2001), and Smith are also very similar in thought. Smith has successfully used his unique perspective, to reflect, and change both his institution and his profession. He values shared leadership and like, Senge has been skillful in looking at when it has worked, and when it fails. Finally, Senge's theory of creative tension – the difference between one's vision and one's sense of reality reinforces Smith's ability to implement change. Smith used the energy difference to affect change in several instances highlighted in the case. His vision for his department was realized and his vision for his profession has come to fruition. Each was possible only through a process Senge (1990) calls "the learning organization." That is, an organization comprised of individuals who listen to each other, have respect for each other, and who are willing to be there for each other. In his words, the intelligence quotient (IQ) of the organization is greater than any one individual's alone, and together they can create change that is meaningful to all.

This case study supports and gives firsthand insight into both the conceptual framework and methodological framework and vice versa. By looking at one person's perspective about

leadership, the case has served to highlight that leadership is a personal experience that has shared consequences. It also poses an interesting question for further investigation. Can leadership be taught in a classroom? Steve Smith highlighted his own lived experience that was, and continues to be learned on the job. It would be interesting to compare a leader that has attended school for management training, perhaps even one who has attended Senge's (1990) organizational leadership program.

Steve Smith firmly believes that leadership evolves out of a learned experience. He recalls that:

I've had people come into the department, who right away exhibit characteristics of leadership. They were really very excited and interested in what they were doing and go out and practice, make suggestions, and they are a real asset to the department. Those people you don't have to coax to become leaders. There are others who are afraid to show what they know and it takes time for them to evolve. They too might have the potential to be a good leader, the learning process is a little bit slower. Everyone learns at their own rate.

Carl Rogers (1983) would agree. According to him, everyone needs the "freedom to learn!"

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