


2018

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Recommended Citation

Ernst, Howard (2018) "Bridging the Canyon: Coming to Terms with Cross-Cultural Differences in Ethical Leadership," *The International Journal of Ethical Leadership*: Vol. 5, Article 14.
Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/ijel/vol5/iss1/14>

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Bridging the Canyon

Coming to Terms with Cross-Cultural Differences in Ethical Leadership

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Abstract

In the spring of 2017, the Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership at the United States Naval Academy sponsored a training program for a small group of Naval Academy faculty and staff members. The first of its kind program involved a group of fourteen influential members of the Naval Academy community (including civilian professors, varsity coaches, and military leaders). The participants engaged in an intensive outdoor leadership program under the guidance of the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), a well-established organization that teaches leadership through challenging outdoor experiences). The Naval Academy group traveled to the Canyonlands of Utah and spent a week overcoming physical obstacles and engaging in leadership exercises. The result was a clash of leadership styles that resulted in members of the group rethinking their assumptions regarding ethical leadership.

It was our first full day in the Canyonlands of southeastern Utah. It had been planned by our NOLS instructors as a relatively light day of hiking. We were to enter White Canyon between mile markers 81 and 82 off of Route 95 (between Hite Marina and the Natural Bridges National Monument), just below what is known as Atomic Rock. Our plan, which looked easy enough on paper, was a modest drop into the canyon followed by what our NOLS leaders estimated would be a four-hour hike along a marked path, past the beautiful Kachina Bridge and the stunning Native American ruins at Horse Collar Ruin, to our desired campsite just outside of the Natural Bridges Monument area in Deer Canyon.

Ten hours and several formidable obstacles later, we had finally staggered to our campsite in Deer Canyon, or so we thought. One reason that we had hiked longer and pushed ourselves harder than we had intended on day one was that no camping is allowed in the Natural Bridges Monument. So

once we entered that area, we had little choice but to carry on, even if the path was longer and more difficult than our instructors had planned. You can imagine our relief when we dumped our packs and began to settle in and enjoy the last remaining sunlight of the day.

Our relief quickly turned to frustration when, with packs emptied, hiking shoes off, socks drying on rocks, and cooking teams activated, we were informed that someone had found a marker for the Natural Bridges National Monument posted on a large tree a few hundred yards up Deer Canyon from where we had emptied our packs. It appeared that we might have set up camp too early and we were still in the restricted area of the Natural Bridges National Monument. After carefully referencing the maps, we were confident that we were in fact out of the restricted area and concluded that the reason the sign was posted up canyon from us was that it was attached to the only large tree in the area, one of the few truly substantial trees we had seen all day. Nevertheless, the instructions were handed down by our NOLS leaders that we were to repack our bags and move a few hundred yards up-canyon, past the misplaced sign.

It was in this atmosphere of fatigue and frustration that I was to give my “leadership journey.” Each day, three participants were appointed as designated Leaders of the Day. I was one of the three leaders on day one. At the end of the day, there is a period of reflection in which each leadership team provides positive feedback to their leader as well as constructive tips for improving their leadership approaches. Following the team feedback sessions, the fourteen members of the overall expedition meet for the culminating event of the day, in which that day’s designated leaders give talks known as “leadership journeys.”

The leadership journeys are intended as fairly short (eight- to ten-minute) testimonials in which the designated leaders explain some important event or milestones that impacted their journey toward becoming a leader. Most of the leadership journeys are grounded in personal experiences, but they also give insights into the individual’s personal leadership philosophy and their personality. They are often remarkably personal reflections in which participants thoughtfully share private aspects of their lives. But after the long day of hiking, followed by the unpacking, repacking, and unpacking again, I had little time, energy or, frankly, interest in preparing my talk.

But even if I’d had more time and energy, it would have been a daunting task giving a leadership talk to this particular group. Our group consisted of distinguished naval officers, military professors in the Leadership Depart-

ment of the Naval Academy, division one varsity coaches, and accomplished outdoor leadership instructors, as well as a few rag-tag civilian professors. I fall squarely into the last category. My daily leadership decisions typically revolve around deciding if I should work from home or venture onto campus, whether I should have tea or coffee in the morning, whether I should grade papers, update lectures, or give attention to research projects. The life of a college professor is mostly a solitary endeavor, and when decisions need to be made, they are typically low stakes affairs.

Rather than lecture my new friends on the finer points of leadership, I decided to be completely honest with the group. I explained to them my perspective on leadership and in doing so began a five-day discussion that would transform my perspective on leadership styles and institutional cultures. I told them that my talk would be short, as I did not consider myself a “leader.” Not that I am incapable of leading, but that I thought leadership in general is grossly overrated. I explained to the group my belief that people rarely need to be led, but instead should be given the opportunity to make decisions for themselves. That true dignity in life comes from self-determination, and when decisions need to be made that affect a group, a simple vote is almost always smarter, wiser, and more just than decisions made by the best “leaders.” I went on to explain that most self-professed “leaders” that I have met over the years are pompous narcissists who are motivated more by a desire for power and control than a sense of sincere service or love of others.

It would be weeks later, after the stress of the canyons had faded, that I would come to fully realize the meaning of my unconventional leadership talk. The short talk was less a testimonial about my leadership journey than a diatribe against coercive authority, blind obedience, and unquestioned patterns of thought. Without knowing it at the time, I was revealing the contours of the academic culture in which I was deeply embedded, one in which the quality of ideas, not results or teamwork, are the measure of the person. It is a culture that is inherently individualistic, with professors working in isolation, perfecting ideas, and questioning established ways of thinking. It is a culture in which the attributes of obedience, duty, and loyalty are derided as obstacles to intellectual progress and individual human development.

It is not so much that this cultural perspective is against conventional thinking and assimilation, as it is in favor of individual expression and democratic ideals. The worldview is based on the simple notion that there is something special that can be found in the heart of each person, a light

of sorts. From this worldview comes the ethic that things that enable that individual light to shine brightly (e.g., inspirational literature, ground-breaking research, effective teaching, etc.) are viewed as good; things that cast shadows over it are bad. From this perspective, obedience, duty, and loyalty constrain the individual and are viewed with skepticism. Individual reflection, thoughtful deliberation, and a relentless questioning of conventional wisdom are believed to strengthen the light and are viewed as good. Moreover, democratic procedures are preferred to authoritarian rule because they are seen as truly respecting the sanctity of the individual and they aggregate the collective light that is in all of us.

In due time, it was pointed out to me that this worldview, this paradigm in which I operated without thinking, was in stark contrast to the military culture of those around me in the canyon. Military leaders within our group made no apologies for the exercise of authority. For them, military rank was not a privilege to be challenged lightly, but an essential component to establishing order and a vital instrument in achieving common goals. For my new military friends, arriving at camp safely, overcoming physical challenges efficiently, and working as a team are the best measures of leadership, not the number of people who could vote or the extent to which the group adheres to abstract ideals.

Those within this pragmatic, results-oriented, military culture have a profound respect for authority. For them, the attainment of leadership positions is solemn business, appropriate for the most capable members of a group. Exercising power over others is reserved for true leaders, great people who have proven themselves through experience and training, and who possess unquestionable character. This culture is founded on the belief that there are distinct groups of people—those who are qualified and ready to lead and those who are better off being led. Or to continue the earlier metaphor, there are those for whom the light shines brighter and who can serve as guides for others to follow.

Of course, the military culture differs from elitist cultures in that it posits that leadership attributes are not preordained, but that they can be developed over time through experience, indoctrination, and training. Nevertheless, like other class-based cultures, the military culture puts its faith in the wisdom of the leader, rather than the demands of the multitude. Through selfless training, careful study, and sincere deliberation, leaders of the highest character are believed to overcome the chains of self-interest and greed and provide inspirational guidance to those entrusted to them.

Unlike most academic pursuits, which tend to be solitary endeavors, the day-to-day work of the military is teamwork, and military culture is built on the idea that effective teams need effective leaders. From this perspective, the goal of true leadership is not to reflect mass opinion, or even to seek it, but to guide the actions of those under the leaders' command. What is best for achieving the mission of the group is always the central focus.

Unlike the academic culture which has little use and grave distrust for obedience, the military culture gives primacy to the civic virtues that promote active followership. Self-control and duty are guiding principles within all military cultures. The differences between the academic and military cultures are most clearly seen in the competing languages of the two cultures. Military leaders are "trainers" and deliver "briefs." Academics are "educators," give "lectures," and lead "discussions." Military cultures rely on periods of "indoctrination," while academic communities seek to liberate students from their "cultural baggage." The cement that binds a group, according to the military tradition, is formed from a combination of inspirational leaders, wise rules that leaders enact, and a competent and loyal followership. The cement that binds academic communities is a persistent and systematic questioning of existing ideas, especially the ideas of those in positions of authority.

Somewhere between the academic and the military cultures that are outlined here lies a third cultural perspective on ethical leadership, the NOLS culture. At the heart of NOLS culture is what they describe as expedition behavior. Not surprisingly, expedition behavior has characteristics of an academic culture (NOLS after all is an outdoor leadership school) and a military culture (NOLS also stresses leadership development through challenging and sometimes dangerous group activities). From the military side, NOLS stresses duty and commitment to the group. But as a school, NOLS also stresses aspects more commonly associated with academic cultures than military cultures, such as being kind and open-hearted.

Expedition behavior reflects the complexity of NOLS. Like a military organization, NOLS participants overcome a series of physically demanding activities or obstacles (what NOLS collectively refers to as "expeditions" and what a military organization might describe as "operations"). To effectively complete these challenges requires team work, a concern for others, and authentic leadership. In other words, NOLS expeditions require a solid footing in military culture. But unlike the military, the expedition is a means to an end for NOLS participants (a powerful educational tool

designed for improving leadership attributes). Stated differently, the military develops leaders to carry out operations and to serve a cause greater than the individual, while NOLS uses expeditions to develop individual leadership attributes. As such, it goes beyond the military culture and takes on additional cultural imperatives.

As was evident throughout the Naval Academy's NOLS expedition, our three cultures had very different group decision-making styles. Those embedded in military culture were most comfortable with the directive and consultative decision-making styles. This occurs when the leader decides and then informs the group or when the leader decides after hearing recommendations from the group. The academics, in contrast, generally viewed consensus as the ideal, but were happy to go with a direct vote if necessary. The NOLS instructors allowed circumstances to determine the decision-making approach. For relatively mundane decisions (e.g., what should be eaten for dinner, should we take time to explore a Native American ruin, is it time for a break), the NOLS instructors were happy to let the group explore their preferred decision-making approaches and to build their leadership muscles. But for big issues, issues that involved safety or that could damage the NOLS reputation, these decisions were made by the NOLS instructors, though they might make efforts to create a modicum of democratic inputs.

These cultural differences revealed themselves during several points throughout the expedition. As mentioned earlier, at the end of day one, the NOLS instructors made the directive decision to move camp after finding the National Monument boundary marker. No long discussions or vote needed. After receiving word from the NOLS instructors, our military friends packed up and moved on without so much as a grumble. At least one academic, yours truly, was slow to move from the preferred location because of a misplaced sign. The maps clearly indicated we were outside of the park boundary and, even if we were not, the current location provided better escape options in the event of flooding. Moreover, I was tired. The lack of meaningful discussion and participant input was a cause of friction for me, but much less so for those within the team-oriented, rule-bound, military culture.

Another cultural conflict was revealed on the second full day of hiking in the canyon. As on the first day, we had hiked much longer and faced challenges that were more physically demanding than anticipated. After another ten-hour hike, this time up Deer Canyon, my leadership group reached a water obstacle that we knew could take a few hours for the entire

group to overcome. My group's designated leader for the day, a very capable former Naval Officer who is still very much embedded in Navy culture, gave the order to set up camp, wisely leaving the challenge for the next day.

With our leader investigating the obstacle, our group turned around and looked for the first suitable place to set up camp. Faced with steep canyon walls and no safe place to retreat in the unlikely case that the canyons should flood during the night, we ended up back-tracking a few hundred yards before running into the other leadership teams. Within a few minutes, all three leadership groups were together on the trail (including our NOLS instructors and my group's leader for the day). Some wanted to set up camp where we met (as it was relatively close to the obstacle we would traverse the next morning). My group leader in particular was dismayed that we had already back-tracked more than necessary. Others remembered a comfortable camping spot just a few hundred yards farther back down the canyon and wanted to go back to that site.

With no pressing safety issues at stake or NOLS values in question, the NOLS staff sat back and allowed us to make the decision. But first we had to decide how to make the decision. The easiest method would have been to have the three designated leaders for the day quickly huddle, discuss the situation, and decide where to camp. But undoubtedly, the main point of my previous night's leadership talk was still echoing in the heads of some of my colleagues, and someone suggested that we take a vote. It was wisely decided to have a quick period of discussion before voting, but voting would be the preferred method.

The first person to speak was the designated leader of my group. Though generally a very popular member of our community, his primary argument for staying in the current location focused on his personal need to address bodily functions, but undoubtedly also related to the fact that we had already moved away from the location where he first gave the order to set up camp. Another member of the military community made the argument for backtracking even farther down the canyon, assuring the group that he scouted out an excellent camp location just four minutes down the canyon. We now faced a situation in which two leading members of the military community publicly disagreed, and one of the designated leaders of the day would have their preference overridden by a vote.

We voted to move four minutes down the path and had a relatively restful night, but the experience was quite revealing. Had the person on the losing side of the argument, who was already frustrated with the current situation,

been less accepting, had the disagreement turned personal, had the vote dragged on for much longer, things could have ended much differently. Moreover, had the stakes been higher (for example, in an actual military setting), the voting approach could have been disastrous. The incident, and several other key group decision-making events throughout the expedition, left me questioning the essence of my leadership journey. Maybe, just maybe, no one decision-making approach is preferable in all situations. Maybe context, circumstance, and cultural norms should be taken into account when choosing a group decision-making approach. Perhaps we should vote on it!