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Leadership Development Initiative (LDI) Curriculum

Setting up Your Leadership Stories

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In Moore SY, Cameron-Lewis RG, Ferris FD (eds). Leadership Development Initiative Curriculum, 2014. © The Leadership Development Initiative.

ISBN: 978-0-9884318-0-5

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The Leadership Development Initiative gratefully acknowledges the support of:

- International Palliative Care Initiative, Open Society Foundations, New York, NY
- National Cancer Institute Center for Global Health, Bethesda, MD
- The Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Fund, London, United Kingdom
- National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, Alexandria, VA
- Pettus Family Foundation

The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and editors, and does not necessarily represent the official views of any of the funders.

Acknowledgment and appreciation are extended to faculty and staff of the OhioHealth and the Institute for Palliative Medicine at San Diego Hospice (which housed the International Programs and the Leadership Development Initiative from 2009 to 2012). Special thanks to the Mentors, Consultants and the LDI Team who contributed so much to the LDI Curriculum.

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Overview

Throughout history, leaders have written their story. Autobiographies or memoirs of the great leaders in politics, religion and science are common and highly valued by readers. Through their story, leaders display how they modeled the way, inspired a shared vision and challenged the status quo, and successful or not in their efforts, the stories inspire and educate.

Stories often teach leadership skills 'behind-the-scenes' that exemplify tools, strategies, and underlying values philosophies. Often, you may notice they are not speaking for themselves but rather they are speaking to (and for) a larger group. Reciprocity and relationships are crucial functions of leadership.

We have all written about ourselves in college admission essays, job application letters, bio sketches for various functions or organizations, and yet, the invitation to write your own leadership story (2500 words) can be daunting.

When one begins to write a personal leadership story, think about why you are writing it and who your audience might be. Sometimes events or achievements can trigger a story, other times it can be people one worked with (or supervised or led) or networks in one's life.

Writing for oral presentation is different than writing for the page. The reader's eye can skip back to refresh one's memory, but the listener only has one chance to hear.

A guideline approach to writing a leadership story is provided.

Objectives

After this presentation, participants will:

1. Identify examples of personal leadership stories.
2. Express the value and nuances of writing a personal narrative.
3. Begin to write a personal narrative.
4. Describe key differences between oral and written presentations.

Important Teaching Points

- Writing personal stories takes time and reflection.
- Aim for progress, not perfection (give yourself permission to write 'badly').
- Begin with a strong story about a major event (the "hook") and build an overall emotional arc.
- Describe 'negative' events positively (as examples of "diamond in the rough" and evolution).
- Emphasize the collaborative rather than individual achievements; use "we" instead of "I" by a ratio of roughly 5:3.

- Jot down the most vivid ideas first and then gradually answer the journalistic questions of "who, what, where, why, how, and when?"
- Be gentle with emotions and write descriptively with all six senses.
- When writing for the spoken word, write in shorter sentences.
- When delivering an oral excerpt of your leadership story, paint a picture with words and speak with a rate and range to allow images to sink into the audience's mind.
- When delivering an oral story, begin with a strong opening incident and finish with an equally strong personal story -- or lessons learned -- so that the audience is left with something to ponder.

Resources / References

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