

Professional Essay
Reflections in Leadership Development
DEL 750
Kevin L. Cecil
University of Charleston

The purpose of this essay is to critically reflect on my DEL journey, emerging expertise in executive leadership, and how it has shaped my identity as a scholar-leader.

When I consider my personal leadership journey, I think of it in terms of the leaders and mentors that I have had throughout my personal life and professional career. Leadership consist of many tenets and the people who influence us start doing so during our development. Those who influence us to value character also teach us that it is virtuous to not abandon our principles to please followers (Johnson, 2018). When I think of the one person in my personal life who influenced me the most in this manner I have to discuss my grandfather, Sherman Cunningham. As a child of the depression and veteran of World War Two he had pragmatic approach to life that was based on accountability first and foremost. This was reflected in a work ethic that I have seen few possess and have yet to emulate myself. His advice to me was to always look at the person in the mirror first and evaluate what that individual was doing to face challenges and discern solutions. It is fair to say that his influence has been embedded in my approach to life be it on the personal or professional front.

I joined the military in June of 1996. I had an amazing career that spanned 24 years, took me around the world, and introduced me to a whole new level of focus on professional development. In this essay I will refer to my military experience frequently. I was blessed to start at the lowest enlisted rank and serve until I retired from the highest enlisted rank within the service. The mentors I had in the military who I respected the most advised me to always proactively seek whatever training and education the Air Force had to offer. I took this advice and was able to earn three associates degrees, a bachelors, and a masters in strategic leadership before retiring in June of 2020. I was also the beneficiary of attending multiple leadership and professional development schools throughout my career.

The sum total of my education, training, and experience lead to me developing a leadership philosophy during the latter part of my career. I refer to it as the TEAM Leadership Model. It is made up of the focus areas of training, education, accountability, and management. It also has the foundational focus on communication and commitment as a fifth area of focus. When I was at my last duty assignment I consolidated the model and called it ADC for accountability, development and commitment. That model was essentially a condensing of the TEAM elements. During our early discussions of leadership style and model in the DEL program, I continued with this. During the last few classes though, as I considered all that I had learned and what I hope to do post DEL program, I returned to the TEAM Leadership Model format.

This was for a couple of reasons. The first is that the longer form of the acronym is more representative of the five main elements that exist within organizations. The second is that it serves as a better framework for what I would really like to do which is teach and mentor leadership to others. It has also evolved into the topical areas for the five artifacts that I will present as a part of the portfolio. The model combines the core tenets of what I believe about leadership and has the thread of accountability as the running theme through it all.

The base elements of what my leadership philosophy have been are outlined above. To expand on that slightly I must break out what the elements of my TEAM Leadership Model mean. Essentially, training is the practice of teaching others how to perform task oriented elements of their jobs within an organization. An organization will benefit greatly transferring knowledge via training within the confines of transfer-enhancing strategies (Wisshak et al, 2022) It is separate and distinct from education and I will discuss that a little further along. Training is the element that got lost when I switched to the ADC model. That model was more broad in its

tenets, so I would say more philosophical. The TEAM Model breaks down the four elements into more of a teachable framework. It ties to accountability in that one of the core points is that training is one of the first thing that serves to establish the baseline for tangible expectations.

Education is the flip side of training. Education teaches the “why” behind the way things work within organizations. Education is a part of a clearly defined development pyramid that provides team members with a road map that matches their progression in an organization. Education is foundational to an organization’s strategy building because when conducted properly, it teaches people critical thinking skills. Education is also key to creating a culture of continuous learning. This type of organizational focus is an effort to create an identity project (Bolden et al, 2011) where mission objectives are examined as they relate to the connection team members have to the organization. Critical thinking is also key to sensemaking and is the primary focus of my intended research. Critical thinking skills are also important in the framing and interpretation of narratives, particularly in an environment of constrained leadership. The latter is another element of my intended research.

If I had to choose one element of the TEAM Leadership Model that is most important, it is accountability. One of the key points in that area is my belief that the most successful organizations seek perfection to achieve excellence. Accountability leads to leaders and team members who reject mediocrity both in themselves and within their organization. An organization that is high performing will put its beliefs and values in writing. Katz et al (2020) touch on this concept in their examination of how leaders who are clear and consistent have more effective impacts on members of an organization. I believe this is because accountability drives successful leaders to avoid ambiguity and create the agreed upon values and goals for themselves and their teams. Capturing those beliefs and values in writing provides a framework that all

members can refer to to answer who they are, what is important, and aligns with mission focus. Lastly, accountability means that the inherent credibility of executive leaders must be preserved by setting the highest of standards.

The management element of the model is focused on tangible aspects of an organization. The management process captures information and creates the documents that serve to establish the core values and all other information that is important to the organization. It can be the metrics that are measured and used to evaluate performance, the written guidance that all refer to for making the mission happen, and multiple other similar products. Management is the process of monitoring for substandard performance and using it to mentor, lead, and make decisions for improvement. In their discussion of strategic thinking Wooten and Horne (2010) state ‘We can forge a strategy without a plan. We cannot plan strategically without a strategy’ (Pg. 127). Using data and metrics helps to develop a plan, set it into motion, and then evaluate if the data reflects that meeting objectives is on the path for success. It also tracks currency in their expected training and education related to their position, expectations, and initiatives. Management is not strategy but rather the process that is used to capture the goals and objectives of an organization.

The fifth and combined element of the TEAM Leadership Model is communication and commitment. Topically, they come together to communicate strategy by leadership that seeks to engage and discover the context within their organization as a part of that process. This process is intended to share clear expectations without projecting ambiguous narratives and create an intensity of purpose for all. Leaders committed to communication are open, direct, and respectful in the way they communicate.

As discussed by Teachy and Bennis (2012) in their case study about the Charlotte-Mecklinburg school system, communication leads to continuous improvement. Specifically, their discussion of that school system highlighted the use of a product created that measured continuous improvement through the lenses of support, pressure, and transparency. While this example is focused on data and metrics, which aligns with the Management element of the Team Leadership Model, it points back to the element of communication and commitment. Having data and metrics is only worthwhile if how it impacts the objectives that team members of the organizations are working towards.

Communication that is delivered with empathy, emotional intelligence and critical thinking ensures that guidance, core values and strategy are cojoined with a focus on mission execution. Leaders who are dedicated to open communication welcome team members who want to stand up and provide unfiltered feedback for the good of the organization. This drives the culture of a team that serves as wingmen to each other and who are willing to give and receive that feedback and transform it into organizational excellence.

I believe that communication and shared values are what drives commitment within an organization. Within the context of the TEAM Leadership Model I have been playing with a formula, $\text{Communication} + \text{Accountability} = \text{Commitment}$. It is something I am going to develop as a part of being able to break down within the teaching or mentoring aspect of the model.

After two years in the DEL program, my leadership philosophy has expanded and I now consider it to be grounded in pragmatic leadership and discursive leadership. The TEAM Leadership Model is a derivative of those two types of leadership but is always open to other perspectives presented by other leadership styles. I say this to profess my belief that no

leadership style or model is all encompassing in terms of explaining what organizations do to be successful.

Organizations can be well served by understanding the dynamics of intended, deliberate, and emergent strategy (Boulton et al, 2015) Intended strategy is the product of building tasks to achieve goals. Organizations deliberately use tasks and shared intent to achieve realized strategy. We understand however, that complexity within organizations is going to create what Boulton et al (2015) refer to as unrealized strategy. The best leaders I have served with were able to utilize tools and approaches as a situation warrants once they have received all of the context and necessary feedback. A continuous feedback loop based on open communication allows for anticipating complex factors that may derail intended strategies. .

My focus on pragmatic leadership aligns with my background in military recruiting and retention where tangible goals were evaluated under the light of continuous metrics. Any organization must define and agree about the reason it exists and define the goals it must meet. Understanding that overarching reason, or mission, without ambiguity provides a path to create strategies that are directly related to those goals. Knowing that emergent factors will create an environment where several different interpretations (Weik, 1995) are competing as the obstacles to overcome reflects the importance of pragmatic based leadership. I believe that leaders must use sensemaking to create strategies that focus on those goals and not get distracted by, or strive to minimize, internal or external influences, particularly in a military context.

To continue with the theme of goals that are pragmatic and underpinned by strategies aimed towards achieving them, we can examine Nonaka & Zhu's (2012) discussion of the activities and consequences involved in strategy. They state that 'Strategy is the art of accomplishing what we want to achieve. It is about situated judgement and collective

justification, skillful persuasion and timely manoeuvre, decisive decision-making and muddling through, amid complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty' (Pg. 70). There are multiple elements of this statement that one could deconstruct but the one I zero in on is the concept of situated judgement. A leader or a team cannot decide how to implement alternative strategies if they do not have the level of communication within their organization to understand the emerging complexity of events.

Discursive leadership provides the vehicle to continually evaluate where the focus of the organization is and if it is aimed at the right target. Through strategy, policy, and communication seeking feedback and context that is unfiltered, leaders are more able to evaluate the organization's orientation. Gaining that feedback educates leaders on the complex environments that exist within the organization.

In the case of military executive leadership in recruiting and retention, I have started down the path of constrained leadership and how those concepts may have an entirely different affect. Refai et al (2025) described constraint as external structures that limit agents within organizations due to independent causal influences. Because of the changes in American administrations that govern policy, military leaders are potentially constrained in a unique way in their ability to deliver long term strategy. The rapid shifts in policy impacts organizational focus about how to navigate through political, geopolitical, and societal factors.

Pragmatic and discursive leadership are the two areas I find myself thinking how leadership aligning with the concepts I have learned as I have progressed through the DEL program. One of my foundational beliefs is that accountability is the most important factor in personal and professional success. In order to ensure accountability, successful individuals and organizations must have discourse. Listening through dialogue is described by Fairhurst (2011) as being crucial.

Understanding the context of circumstances is crucial to frame narratives in an ethical manner that points the organization perpetually towards the mission. Leadership that does not seize the narrative will cede that ability to someone else. Pragmatic leadership, in my mind anyway, is the process of ensuring that everyone understands what the goal or mission of the organization is. It must be the baseline for how leadership and team members operate and think about their place within the organization. To ensure that the organization does understand what that means and how to go about being successful, communication via discourse is vital.

As I have progressed through the DEL program and narrowed my focus down to how leaders are constrained in their authority to make pragmatic decisions I find myself thinking about how this may elevate the importance of discursive leadership. What I mean is that an organization that is severely constrained in its ability to implement a pragmatic strategy that will best serve achieving goals must have more in depth discourse about those dynamics. If the leadership of an organization as well as the team members know that their efforts are constrained from the start, there may be a need to guard against discouragement. A question is how do leaders navigate in an environment where the members of an organization understand what they should be doing, but are held back or restrained by external influences.

The secondary aspect of that line of thinking is how do leaders convey those concerns back to the source of the constraint? Particularly in a military environment, the ability and even wisdom of pushing back may not be well received. As constrained leadership is something I have only begun thinking about more recently, I want to dive in and assess the status of that field of study. I have not read enough varying articles or other types of research to determine what the state of play in this research area. I will also need to look at how constrained leadership interacts and cross pollinates with discursive leadership.

My research will focus on how the internal and external factors of political, geopolitical, and societal impact strategies and policies created by military recruiting and retention leadership. The question is how to they use sensemaking to navigate those challenges while being constrained in their authority to create the most pragmatic and mission focuses strategy. There may be a unique aspect of this in that the military is limited due to the nature of how our system is designed. The elements of what makes our system unique also provide the constraining factors that impact recruiting and retention leadership.

From an intellectual perspective, there is a need to examine how constrained leadership may impact achieving national security through pragmatic goals. Securing our nation is a no fail mission so a key question is, at what point does the pragmatic choice trump the political. Practically, I want research the literature to possibly show a gap in the area of constrained leadership study that does not already focus on the unique aspect of the military and political dynamic. Through a process of literature review, interviews, and overlaying changes or events on a timeline to show correlation to those events or changes, the goal is to paint a picture that is clear.

This will probably leave questions that would need to be examined later such as how do you overcome this dynamic? The military has a clear tangible objective that they base all decisions on. Ideally, they would have the final say on what policies negatively impact whether they can accomplish their mission. This is obviously not going to happen due to the nature of our government and political system. I also am very interested in how leaders frame narratives which could narrow part of the study into how they are communicating with other influencers? I will be interested in how research participants perceive the narratives they experienced during their time working in recruiting and retention. Coding their responses into shorthand (Merriam

& Tisdell, 2016) in order to understand how that messaging is being received by stakeholders will be key to my qualitative research.

Ultimately I intend to conduct a study to determine how recruiting and retention leaders are using sensemaking and communication to create strategy in a constrained leadership environment. The concept of constrained leadership overlaps with the factors of political, geopolitical, and societal factors that influence that mission. I intend to interview senior executive leaders, utilize available data that add context to the conversation, and overlay that info on a timeline to help paint the overall picture.

In my present civilian job I have utilized the aspects of discursive leadership to a large degree. I had developed a strong focus as a leader on communication before starting the DEL program but the additional study of topics such as complexity in organizations has expanded that focus area. I more fully appreciate the value of discourse because it is foundational to understanding context and complex factors within an organization. A leader must have that information to make informed and collaborative decisions.

I have been able to influence the culture of my civilian employer through providing feedback in ways that are supported by using discursive approaches. Because I am also focused on accountability and pragmatic aspects of leadership, I was able to positively influence the company's focus on metrics. Through conversations with my supervisor, a number of tools were developed to track the number of placements per recruiter, days a position was vacant, and average fill rate of vacant positions. The accountability piece is enabled because these metrics are reviewed monthly by the company and used to influence strategy to meet objectives.

My scholar-leader identity has evolved and it is reflected in the way I think about practically every topic I encounter. The concepts behind how to conduct research and how one

goes about doing so have become very real to me as I evaluate new information or actions taken by leaders I observe. I now consider things with the thought of how much research and critical thinking went into what I am being introduced to.

When I review my E-I report from 2020, when I originally started the DEL program, I am struck by a few identified characteristics. One of these falls under the are of the Decision Making Composit where my schores fall in the high midrange to low high range on the scales. To me this reflects one's ability to use critical thinking and I honestly believe that ability has expanded due to the DEL program. I am much more likely to expand recognize my own bias and seek objectivity. I find that I may not have been as dedicated to objectivity as I believed. The DEL program has improved and sharpened my ability to apply techniquet that support continually seeking objectivity before formulating an opinion.

I feel my identity as a scholar leader is continually evolving and being solidified. The study of varying leadership theories and practices have embedded an understanding of various approaches leaders use to be successful. That same area of study also highlights the areas within varying leadership styles that are not great practices. Learning about leadership approaches that have not worked is as valuable as studying what has been successful.

Leaders are responsible for identifying and championing what values an organization needs to follow. From a pragmatic point of view, those values should align with what the mission of the organization is, first and foremost. This approach can establish the positive organizational foundations successful organizations desire.

In my day to day interactions with others I often find myself asking if they understand the difference between the tangible and intangible aspects of a problem. I do this because I want to make sure everyone agrees how things should be done based on what the objective is first.

Once this agreement is in place then a discussion can be had about the factors that need to be addressed to resolve a problem. So the applicable process goes something like this:

1. Does everyone understand how a task should be accomplished?
2. Was there anything unclear about the expectations for how to complete a task or requirement.
3. Have a conversation about why something is a problem and determine if there is a need to modify the expectations or communicate them more clearly, and if there is not, what actions to take.

I believe that my contributions to the field of leadership will be twofold. In relation to recruiting and retention in the military, it will be a reflection on what leaders within that space have experienced coupled with a study of constrained leadership. I also intend to implement my TEAM Leadership Model into a program that I can use as a framework to mentor other leaders within. My journey in the DEL program has increased my appreciation for pragmatic and discursive leadership practices. It has also enhanced my understanding of the best way to go about utilizing those two leadership styles.

Today, I view the act of being a leader beyond the scope of guiding organizations. A leader must continuously seek improvement in themselves and within the organization. There must be clear communication and an open door for constructive feedback. I believe that a leader who focuses on communication will achieve a dedication to commitment and thus a shared accountability across the entire organization.

References

- Johnson, C. E. (2018). *Meeting the ethical challenges of leadership: Casting light or shadow* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Wisshak, S., Barth, D. (2022) *Perceptions of accountability for the transfer of training by*

- leadership trainers*, International Journal of Training and Development.
- Bolden, R., Hawkins, B., Gosling, J., & Taylor, S. (2011). *Exploring leadership: Individual, organizational, and societal perspectives*. Oxford University Press.
- Wooten, S. and Horne, T. (2010) *Strategic Thinking: A Step-by-Step Approach to Strategy and Leadership*, 3rd edition. London, UK: Kogan Page
- Tichy, N. M., & Bennis, W. G. (2007). *Judgment: How winning leaders make great calls*. Portfolio
- Boulton, J., Allen, P. and Bowman, C. (2015) *Embracing complexity: Strategic perspectives for an age of turbulence*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Weick K (1995) *Sense-making in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nonaka, N. and Zhu, Z. (2012). *Pragmatic strategy: Eastern wisdom, global success*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Refai, D., Korsgaard, S., Villares-Varela, M., Williams, N., Al-Dajani, H., & Harima, A. (2025). Entrepreneurial agency in constrained contexts: An introduction and review of the literature. *International Small Business Journal: Researching Entrepreneurship*, 43(5), 457–473. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02662426251319710>
- Fairhurst, G. T. (2011). *The power of framing: Creating the language of leadership*. Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.