**Brenda Jimenez’s Professional Essay**

Brenda L. Jimenez

School of Business and Leadership, University of Charleston

Brenda Jimenez’s Professional Portfolio

DEL Mentor: Dr. Douglas White

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Leadership is a lifelong journey of informed trial and error and learning. Although executive leaders must understand the magnitude of their responsibility, it is also essential to clearly understand that they are most effective when they have highly competent, talented teams supporting their journey (Davenport & Manville, 2012). As an executive, I understood this reality. Still, through my journey in the DEL program, I have developed a deeper understanding of the different components that make an effective leader and the language and literature that supports many of the behaviors I embrace.

As I began to reflect on my DEL journey as an executive leader, I went back to my application essay to see where my mindset and thoughts about leadership were before embarking on this experience. The essay started with the following quote, *"If you want to improve the organization, you have to improve yourself, and the organization gets pulled up with you" ~ Indra Nooyi.* This sentiment is one that I still believe today. This DEL experience has not only affirmed it but has taught me how to best harness my energy on my personal growth and development to support others in their executive leadership journey of growth and development.

Therefore, I should begin this personal essay by stating that the first and most crucial component is understanding oneself. Understanding one's values and character provide a lens into how you react to ethical issues and challenges and shape how you decide (Tichy & Bennis, 2009). It is also essential to have a level of curiosity to drive the learning and sensemaking of the decision-making process (Horstmeyer, 2020). Self-awareness of your strengths, weaknesses, preferences, style of work, and knowledge informs the leader of their blind spots and where they best can contribute to accomplishing the strategic vision and ultimately leading successfully.

The second component is the ability to practice sensemaking, strategic foresight, and data collection to make the best decisions that will provide the most effective solutions. To exercise these skills effectively, having a good team of advisors and staff that embrace your vision and understand the shared values that drive our work together is necessary. Finally, understanding the complexity of the current challenges allows leaders to look at the small obtainable changes that can have a significant transformational impact (Snowden, 2016).

**Developing a Leader Identity**

As I look at my leader and leadership development process, it is important to note that continuous practice, reflection, and feedback are essential to developing the expertise and mastery expected of me at this point in my career.

As the CEO, the Board of Directors acts as strategic partners, continuously mentoring and advising on executing the organization's vision and strategic goals. "To attain expert performance, individuals must continually monitor their performance and design intentional practice sessions around their open specifically pertinent issues" (Day, 2008, p. 208). Therefore, self-motivation, self-awareness, and self-regulation at this stage of my career are important. It is easy to focus on what is known and not stretch or push your development but to keep up with the fast-paced, constantly changing marketplace, one must continue to learn and have a growth mindset to course correct when needed, develop others and consider new ideas and approaches to the work.

I agree with Day's (2008) assessment that a "salient and developed leader identity may facilitate communicating a vision, motivating, directing, and supporting followers. Leaders who know themselves and think of themselves as leaders will be more confident and consistent in their actions" (p. 184). To do my job effectively and develop a solid team to have community impact, I must be very connected to my leader identity.

**The Leadership Development Plan**

Meeting Dr. Barnett and Dr. White to discuss the leadership assessment took my awareness of myself to new heights, not because I learned something new but because it was a clear picture before me of what I knew to be accurate; furthermore, if I wanted to be an authentic leader and embrace this learning experience, my development plan needed to reflect that. Although I was informed to be a well-balanced leader, two areas stuck out more: my low self-regard and the need to be more optimistic and happier. As someone who is always smiling and relatively upbeat, I had to admit that optimism sometimes was sprinkled with doubt, manifested in the meticulous evaluation of data to make the perfect decision. This reality was connected with my low self-regard because clearly, my hesitation existed in my doubt of self.

As I began to outline a development plan, I realized I had to explore my self-doubt and confidence as I embraced this experience. According to Day (2008), strategic and adaptive competencies are complex because they rely on the mental models or schemas an individual has developed through a body of experiences and collection of knowledge, allowing the individual to identify what are the best approaches, responses, or solutions to the challenge or task set before them. I concluded that trusting my instincts, experiences, team, and data analysis had to be part of my nature, or I would not succeed as an executive leader. As I navigated our executive decision-making class, this became even more salient. Great leaders thought things through but then took accountability for their decisions, good or bad because they had done their best with what they had at the time. This literature shifted my thinking of the process of decisions and trusting myself as I navigate the unexpected.

The second finding in my self-assessment that struck me was revealed in my NEO assessment. The section on my psychosocial assessment concluded the following: "Somatic Complaints: This person may be prone to discount physical problems and minimize the severity of somatic symptoms and medical complaints. In healthcare situations, it may be important to check for problems even when she reports no difficulties." It was challenging to read as I know I do not put myself first, but it is clear that self-care is not a priority at all, even in the face of a healthcare emergency. This finding rang most accurate in the Ethics: Values and Decision-Making course. As we navigated ethical frameworks that connected with our leadership styles and experiences, altruism was a framework that resonated with me. The more I learned about altruism; however, I discovered that at its extreme, leader forgets to care for themselves in their quest to help others and how misguided and ineffective that approach could be.

As I delved deeper into the literature, I discovered there was a formula to determine altruistic behavior. George R. Price created a mathematical theory of the phenomenon based on Hamilton's theory, Hamilton's Rule. The rule "states that altruism will be favored by selection when rb- c > 0, where c is the fitness cost of the actor, b is the fitness benefit to the recipient, and r is the genetic relatedness between the actor and recipient" (Kurzban et al., 2015, p. 576). This equation allows for a couple of factors to be identified and determined. "It can describe when altruism is favored and any other trait. Both b and c can be positive or negative, so Hamilton's rule also predicts when selfish, spiteful, or mutually beneficial traits will be favored" (Kurzban et al., 2015, p. 576). When examining the equation, one must consider that an important variable is the cost to the actor. This variable was the one that I had not considered, and when you put zero in place of that variable, it eliminated the opportunity to do good for others. I knew I could not live in that reality if I wanted to be an example for other women and women of color in executive leadership. Therefore, I became more intentional in giving myself grace and taking the time for self-care.

For the past two and a half years, I have slowly learned to put myself first to be more effective and authentic in my service to others. I have learned how functional but, at times, ineffective I am when I do not care for my mental and physical health. I have been more intentional about doctor's appointments, taking some time to meet friends, and interrupting my workday by taking a walk or talking to my daughters.

My work focuses primarily on improving the conditions and circumstances creating great struggles for others. It requires heavily developing authentic relationships to understand better where others are coming from and their strategies for solutions. Therefore, I need to learn to be more vulnerable with my team, family, and friends and ask for help and support when needed. Asking for help, grace, and support from unexpected life circumstances is essential to ensuring balance in challenging times.

Finally, as I work as CEO of MENTOR New York during a pandemic, I learned how vital work-life balance is for my staff to staff healthy and continue to perform with excellence. Since we have become a 100% remote organization, I am incredibly conscious of making sure they are taking time off, socializing with colleagues to break the monotony of work, and scheduling week-long staff retreats to review the work while reflecting and deliberating in person the topic of the moment. In turn, my team requires the same of me. They often check if I am taking time off, resting, socializing, and engaging colleagues beyond zoom or email. I believe this has made me more vulnerable by articulating my needs and delegating work others can take on.

**Code of Ethics**

As I mentioned before, altruism shapes my code of ethics and grounds my belief that helping others makes the world a better place. However, altruism does not solve problems; it provides a compass for doing good but does not guide. As I look at the best way to drive community impact, the process of bringing stakeholders together and finding solutions is also something I value. Therefore, I discovered that pragmatism was an ethical process that allowed for the thinking and piloting process needed when testing new approaches and adjusting to the circumstance before you.

To that end, my code of ethics is grounded in respecting others to preserve their dignity as we identify solutions that improve their circumstances—exercising compassion and empathy as I navigate the situation’s complexities and ensuring that I include those most affected by the realities addressed. Therefore, having cultural humility to have a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens in the solution that fosters belonging must be a part of every step of developing and implementing innovations and solutions. Finally, how human and financial resources are managed grounds the work. Operating with a clear understanding and ethical compass of fiduciary responsibility shapes my guiding values and drives the execution.

I have coined my ethical style as pragmatic altruism. Pragmatism is a framework of how I think and practice my value for helping others. However, altruism provides the moral compass to ensure that the solutions implemented are focused on good and does not harm the very individuals I am trying to help. As we look at this ethical style, how the leader thinks, activates ideas and influences others is essential to its success.

**Practices that Drive Habits of the Mind**

One of my favorite articles was presented to me during residency. It has been a common source of literature I cite and turn to when ideating strategies for solutions to complex problems. The Harvard Business Review article The Innovator's DNA is an excellent guide to how innovators make sense of the world around them and grapple with challenges that may only concern a few at the time, but the solutions and innovations created could help many. According to Dyer et al. (2009), there are five discovery skills that innovators are frequently exercising in their approach to the work to disrupt and find innovative solutions to problems. The discovery skills include associating, questioning, observing, experimenting, and networking. I consider these skills are the foundation of the concepts executive leaders use effectively to lead their organizations.

Most of my tenure as CEO has been during the pandemic, as I only experienced about four months of pre-pandemic leadership. Since then, sensemaking and shaping opportunities are skills I have had to refine to ensure we stay relevant and fulfill our mission during those challenging times. One of my strengths in the Strength Finders Builders assessment is that I am an activator who influences those around me. Therefore, scanning, analyzing data, and connecting the dots help with the creative thinking needed to develop a solution to a given challenge. However, I believe those skills can only be amplified if the executive leader's strategic foresight skills are well-developed.

Boulton et al. (2015) describe uncertainty as that which cannot be known, the "unknown unknowns" (p. 214). Organizations need leaders to engage with the world's complexities to stay relevant and live up to their missions and visions. It is no longer reasonable for leaders to focus on past patterns and organizational history. Leaders need to consider the events that disrupt stability and employ the recombination of resources and practices to create emergent practices necessary to be responsive and sustain the organization's services or business constructs.

**Strategic Foresight in Practice**

As Director of Operations and Growth Strategies at MENTOR New York, I lead a robust strategic planning process to develop a forward-thinking 3-year plan. The plan was approved in November 2019, and I became CEO a few weeks later. Our inclusive process considered what all our stakeholders thought about our threats and opportunities, marketplace analysis, and even focus groups of people unfamiliar with our brand. According to Fuerth (2009), strategic foresight requires an environment with conditions that offer the opportunity to listen to foresight, consider actions and different points of view, and a continual well-informed exchange between the producers and consumers (p.21). Engaging the board, the staff, and the executive in strategic foresight is essential in developing forward-thinking strategies. Leaders at all levels of the organization that embrace that type of complex mindset make a significant difference in how organizations respond to change and stay relevant.

Since the plan was forward-thinking and considered some changes the organization needed to make and the shifts with technology and the workforce the market was hinting at, the pandemic became the test to see if we had exercised strategic foresight that responded to an unpredictable and limited marketplace. Our strategic plan provided a road map for virtual engagement and expansion of our services that we believed would be slow changes, as we had to change individuals' perceptions of virtual learning and engagement to inform their work. During the first 18 weeks of the pandemic, MENTOR New York was well on the virtual expansion across the state it had planned to accomplish over three years.

Although we could have never predicted the pandemic, systems thinking, solid judgment, and creating safe-to-fail cultures allowed the board, CEO, and staff to consider making small organizational shifts that disrupted systems to create long-term innovations in their services. This reality positioned MENTOR New York more readily to identify emerging practices and introduce innovations that can help address the "unknown unknowns" that occurred when we least expected. As we end this strategic planning cycle in December of 2023, to my surprise, we have exceeded our three-year plan expectation with a new structure, program innovations, and a healthier financial and program services portfolio.

**Navigating Complexity**

According to Day (2008), strategic and adaptive competencies are complex because they rely on the mental models or schemas an individual has developed through a body of experiences and collection of knowledge, allowing the individual to identify what are the best approaches, responses, or solutions to the challenge or task set before them. Leaders today benefit from understanding complex adaptive systems and how they work. This lens allows them to identify the change needed to make transformative decisions.

The mentoring movement is a complex adaptive system. The MENTOR Affiliate Network drives the complexity of that system as it is made up of different stakeholders, all working together to take mentoring to scale in the United States. The network comprises a neutral network of independent components, sometimes acting as a unified whole to learn from one another's experiences and adapt to the changing environment.

The network has a complex structure between and amongst its members as they work towards a common goal, constantly making adjustments as trends emerge, new practices are established, and young people inform and provide feedback (Edson, 2012). This complexity puts most MENTOR affiliate CEOs, like me, constantly navigating complexities to determine the best approaches to ensure all stakeholders benefit from significant program outcomes and impacts.

This complexity is best observed in the projects I selected to share in the professional portfolio. Two of the projects focus on my executive leadership at the national level with the mentoring moment and my CEO colleagues. The other two projects focus on supporting program executive leaders with leadership development in response to a changing marketplace and the new challenges it presents. The final project focuses on supporting young people as they navigate the loss of opportunities during the pandemic. This project is the one that culminates the impact the mission and vision of our mentoring movement can have. These projects represent the body of work that executive leaders must grapple with when engaged in a complex adaptive system that behaves as a collective enterprise to achieve maximum impact.

**Portfolio Projects Drive My interest in Accelerated Leadership Development**

As I began to explore a possible dissertation topic, there were two projects I designed and developed that piqued my curiosity about the potential variables that were driving the desired outcomes for the individuals engaged in the project and their lived experiences. The Civic Leadership Program and Career Readiness Youth Fellowship Programs attempt to address some of the leadership development gaps present when young people are building social capital in their careers and engaging in civic and philanthropic endeavors. As the baby boomers retire and become less engaged in workplace constructs, a gap in knowledge, leadership, and task migration is beginning to emerge (Hirsch, 2017).

Accelerating leadership development is complex as frameworks can be created, but everyone will respond differently to the variables that provide accelerated experiential learning. However, I am curious if some variables are better drivers of the acceleration of experience and analysis needed to lead effectively. Therefore, my research question will focus on how mentoring and psychological safety impact or influence the acceleration of leadership development in college students in internships or young professionals in their first job.

**Conclusion**

Developing and implementing these five projects during the DEL journey has created the experiential learning needed to make the literature and practices of effective leadership "stick." It has reinforced the development of my leadership identity and made me a more conscientious leader. As I prepared my bio for our 3rd-year residency, I asked my staff how they would describe the gift I bring to the work as an executive leader. Without hesitation, they shared the following that best captures how I approach my leadership style*.* The staff stated, *"Your unique gift is to break complex concepts into simple analogies or metaphors easily understood and allow us to consider how we may address the challenges before us realistically and creatively."* If I can influence others' thinking and activate change, I feel I have accomplished my best work as an executive leader.

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