LDR 807-12: Transforming Self-Concept for Leader Development

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December 6, 2024

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**"Course Learning Journal"**

With this adult-learning curriculum, this course emphasizes reflection and self-awareness to improve leaders' moral and spiritual growth. Transformative leaders must evaluate themselves using Scripture, Christian tradition, and reason. A good leader puts people first, regardless of differences. This course and institution promote a Christian worldview by helping students detect and mend damaging self-beliefs using biblical principles, making us more compassionate and effective leaders. This class addresses social change and leadership, keeping in the forefront that leaders must look inwardly first. Before thinking about social change projects, we must understand who we are as leaders. The school's scholarship-practitioner training in positive social change research and application is supported. The supportive, customized learning environment lets us, as students, apply faith-integrated research to complex issues and inspire change. The school's diversity, transdisciplinary research, and faith-based leadership generate clever, moral leaders who improve society.

This course's readings and YouTube videos made me think further about the broader aspects of leadership, specifically juvenile justice, and think out of the box. I loved the video featuring Father Adrian van Kaam's work on relinquishment, especially the one where he explains, among other things, how leaders must relinquish status and safety for the greater good. This sentiment rings a bell about my work as a juvenile justice leader, where I am often forced to put the needs and interests of the most vulnerable young people before mine. In practice, for me, this means pushing for change, walking youthful offenders through restorative justice, and sometimes making choices that do not directly deliver personal good but do enable long-term healing and advancement. I was motivated by Father van Kaam to do the same, never to forget the people I serve regardless of how they might feel toward me, to be unselfish in my leadership, and to put practical solutions above individual achievement. I always tell my officers that we are a team, and even though I am the leader, nothing beats us working together to accomplish our goals.

Furthermore, reading about Kohlberg's moral development stretched me to explore the role that moral judgment plays in decision-making for leaders. Kohlberg's three stages- pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional- provide a powerful description of how people justify their actions. As a leader in juvenile justice, I have come to appreciate the moral codes that guide my actions and those of the youth and staff I work with. The post-conventional phase, focusing on social contracts and ethical codes, connects itself with regaining the overarching aims of justice. I am pushed to create an environment in which punishment is not directly the key, but rather compassion and ethics are elevated above just rule enforcement. During this course, I have often reflected on Romans 12:2, when we are told to *"be transformed by the renewing of your mind."* As leaders, we are to constantly be moving in our guidance so that we will not find ourselves conforming to the ways of the world but oriented toward higher purposes of justice and mercy, which Christ has given and continues to give to each of us.

The course materials also helped me see leadership through the realm of moral development. For example, Kohlberg's theory has helped me realize that the development from self-interest to care for others fits the leadership traits I try to possess. Looking back on these revelations, becoming a more successful and sympathetic leader mostly depends on adopting selflessness, giving moral values priority, and knowing the developmental requirements of others. This strategy has enabled me to be the voice in the courtroom for my youth, begging the judicial system to promote more rehabilitation and transformation instead of incarceration and to look at more mentorship programs to help young people negotiate their moral and personal development paths. I am proud to say that one of my kids, whom I advocated in front of the judge, was looking at 25+ years in prison, was given another chance to get his life together, and will be graduating next Saturday from a military-style boot camp. He will also enlist in the Marine Corps after the new year. I am so grateful!!!

As the state's youngest director and a Black woman working in a field where most of the leadership differs on various levels, my work with kids in detention constantly challenges me to use new ideas in useful ways. The theories of moral development I have studied have helped me figure out how to deal with the challenging moral problems I face daily. Most of the time, the same people who make decisions about the laws and policies of the justice system that affect the vulnerable teens and young adults I work with are the same ones who have never worked a day in a prison or jail. This makes it hard to create rules reflecting the real lives of our teens and young adults. This distance can make it hard to promote systemic change, especially when it comes to choices that directly affect the emotional and identity issues that are common among young people in prison. I cannot sit here and cry about unfair things, though, as there is more work needing to be done. At this point, I can count on the knowledge of moral development theories that support making decisions with empathy, fairness, and honesty, which gives me the confidence that my leadership may bring about change.

Helping leaders like me make decisions surrounding justice and inclusivity depends critically on moral development. Working to change laws, policies, and practices, I have seen how ingrained in the experiences of the young people I serve are emotional and identity difficulties. Leaders have to learn about their challenges and build surroundings of spiritual respect to help them flourish. Reflecting on the past twelve years I have served at this facility, I have witnessed how a courteous and spiritually conscious attitude may help the young people under our care develop morally. As a leader, I establish an environment where young people and employees feel appreciated and understood, enabling change. Using this process, I am constantly learning how to strike a balance between empathy and responsibility, thereby enabling actions that help the person and benefit society. In my line of work, I have to have a relationship with God, and when challenges arise, I am constantly reminded of Proverbs 4:7, *"The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. Though it costs all you have, learn."* Despite harsh times, I am motivated to seek moral clarity and knowledge.

When I look at moral development, I ponder these questions: Mental health is vital when dealing with juveniles. When those making decisions have minimal real-world experience in juvenile detention and may not completely understand the emotional and identity challenges of the young people we assist, how can I effectively advocate for changes in laws and policies? Also, given that my staff and I work in an atmosphere where difficult decisions are made daily, what techniques can we utilize to encourage moral development and ethical decision-making among them? My final thought pertains to high-stress circumstances when choices can have life-altering effects…How can we continue to lead with empathy and responsibility while making sure the moral and spiritual requirements of the youth in our custody are fulfilled, especially for these kids who keep returning to detention after being released?

This class has helped me reach various goals by aiding me in my faith, learning more about moral development, and how these things affect me as a leader. I first had to constantly remind myself that the focus was on the inner me as a leader, not my leadership. Concentrating on self-concept made me see the importance of leading with empathy and responsibility, specifically for someone like me who is constantly seeking change in the juvenile justice system. Kohlberg's theory taught me that to be a better and more understanding leader; I cannot focus on myself but instead on those I serve. They should always come first, and I should understand their growth needs. Integrating spirituality into the course material has strengthened my faith in the ability of morality and faith to help the teens in my care and me grow and heal as a leader.

In the spirit of transparency, I almost gave up last week when my computer crashed, and I lost a lot of work on my assignment. I had a strict schedule and had to rush to turn in a new one, but I am glad there are second chances in life. This experience made me realize how important it is to keep going and stay inspired, never losing hope. It makes me more motivated than ever to keep working hard to do great work that shows moral development and ethical decision-making: Do. Not. Quit. I promise to use the skills and knowledge I have gained in this class to push for change and help find good answers to social problems. I am thankful to be a part of a community that values diversity, faith-integrated research, and lifelong learning, just like Omega Graduate School's goal and vision say. The Bible verse *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"* (Philippians 4:13) also helps me.