

This is an essay I wrote about what leadership means to me as part of my internship as a reflection of the summer.

What does leadership mean to me? Leadership is not just one thing. I've realized that leadership is something different to everyone. Being a leader is as important as being a follower. To be a good leader, you must also be a good follower. The roles are interchangeable, and I have seen how that works. This also corresponds with the idea that leadership is not a position but a process. Being a leader does not mean you have to have a title like "boss" or "class president" but have an ability to influence a group to make a change.

When I think about what a good leader looks like, my head is filled with many different people. All of which have a very different style than others. I think of Marsha Johnson, she used her anger by throwing a brick into a window and starting a riot for equality. I also think of my friends who use their voice to get others to speak up through conversation. Some leaders use their actions while others use their voices. Leaders can be quiet while others will scream from the rooftops. Like I said earlier leadership is not one thing or one person. There is no right way to be a leader, but there are some things that have stood out to me. For instance, the ability to create relationships is crucial to being an effective leader. Leadership is all about relationships; without them there are no leaders, no followers and no change.

Another good quality is seeing your group. A good leader will know what you need and how to achieve it. It's important to understand the skills of the group and the type of personalities involved. A leader takes this information and determines where you need help (ex. creative, realistic, energetic, etc...) and figures out how to get that help. This skill shows the role of group leadership, but you must also have good self leadership. You need to know about yourself. What are you good at? What are your passions? How can I use what I have to be a good leader? These are questions you should be asking yourself to practice good self leadership. I now see self leadership as one of the most important parts of being a good leader. If you don't know yourself then how can you help anyone else? A good understanding of yourself not only helps you realize where you need help, but helps you see other people's strong and weak spots. It is very important to practice self leadership.

During the summer internship, I had the pleasure of attending weekly meetings with community leaders. My first meeting was with Liz Hamor. Hearing her story really opened my eyes to what our world is really like. At first, I was amazed at what all she had accomplished. Then it hit me like a hard slap to the face why she did all that. The more I thought about what she said the more I realized it was my turn to step up. Talking to her truly inspired me and showed me that if I want to see change, I need to take initiative. I can't wait and hope somebody else comes in and fixes everything. I need to be the change the world needs. It was hard to swallow the idea that I can't rely on others, but in the end, it helped me grow. For me the meeting with Liz solidified my desire to try to change the environment at my school. I needed that extra push to get me there. She taught me that it wasn't going to be an easy battle, but showed me I can still thrive.

For my second meeting, I met with the amazing Joseph Shepard and was joined by Cassidy. It was really interesting to listen to his ideas about being a good leader. When he said having a motive makes a good leader, it really struck me. To be a good leader, you have to have a “why” for your journey. I’ve seen how this plays out. When people are motivated by money, they aren’t as passionate or able to make others join their cause as easily. Joseph taught me a lot about how to be a good leader. He also helped me believe that my ideas are valid and I, the younger generation, need to continue to speak up. I will use what he has taught to inspire more youth to join in the fight for equality.

Meeting with Nichole Lee from Progeny for my third meeting was incredible. Every time I get the chance to talk with her I learn so much. For me she really helps me with working in a professional non-profit setting. Her different work experiences gives me a better understanding of how I am going to make my groups a better environment. Listening to her talk about organizing events and how to deal with people’s needs at the events was very eye opening. The conversation we had solidified a lot of what I needed to be prepared for at the Pride Pop-Up. From Nichole, I learned the importance of a clear message, how to get to that goal and what to do to achieve it.

My next meeting was with Scott. He opened up a new conversation that we had not really dug into with any of the others, religion. It was very intriguing to hear about his theology regarding acceptance in the church. He helped me tie religion into my work and see how God plays a role in the world we live in. While listening, I got to learn about religious ideas and how I can actually use it to my advantage especially when others use the bible to be hateful. This was an opportunity to expose myself to amazing resources.

My last, and maybe the most exciting, emotional, and interesting meeting was with the inspiring Shana. This might be because it is the freshest in my mind. Her confidence was amazing. The way she knew who she was and what she believed in made me more confident after the first ten minutes with her. The fact that she had accomplished so much in 3-5 years is unbelievable. I could tell she was doing what she had been put here to do. I could see it in her actions, in the way she spoke, and in the way that nothing was going to take away from her identity. Her unapologeticness towards her sexuality really spoke to me. If I am going to be an effective leader, I will not hide who I am to make others comfortable. People need to be uncomfortable and realize that this is who I am and I won’t change. God made me this way for a reason and I refuse to allow anybody to tell me otherwise. Shana told me that I am loved and that I am here to make a change. I am that change and will continue to be that change. She taught me to love myself, be confident, and don’t apologize for your views and who you are.

So what is leadership and what does it mean to me? To me it means the strength to speak up when others are silent. A leader puts the group’s needs before theirs. A leader does not see their role as a position but as a process. A leader can be anyone. A leader can make anything happen but not without help. A leader needs others. That is what leadership means to me.