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ORGL 620 Leadership Seminar - Gonzaga University

## Introduction

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines leadership as “the office or position of a leader: capacity to lead: the act or an instance of leading.” (n.d) In *The Leadership Challenge*, Kouzes and Posner define leadership not by the act of leading others, but as “an *observable pattern of practices and behaviors, and a definable set of skills and abilities.*” (2017, p. 302) When I first began the Organizational Leadership program in 2020, these were the two definitions that inspired my own definition of leadership: “the ability to guide, influence, and empower others to action”. Revisiting my original philosophy in which I envisioned a metaphor of leadership as a sailing ship allowed me to see how this image influenced my learning and processes over the past several years. I found the metaphor to be just as appropriate, if not even more so, now as I did then.

Here at the culmination of the program, I have re-titled my philosophy as a *redux*. As I bring back my philosophy to revisit its origins and expand upon it, the addition felt appropriate. Merriam-Webster defines *redux* in relation to “things that have been brought back—metaphorically” (n.d.). Historically, however, *redux* is defined much more literally. The word finds its origins in Latin, with the Romans using *redux* as a characterization of the goddess of chance, Fortuna. (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) For the Romans, Fortuna Redux oversaw the return of those who undertook a long journey, a mirror of my own leadership journey and the continual evolution of my leadership philosophy.

## Evolution of a Metaphor

The metaphor for leadership as a vessel has been with me for years. My first experience with leadership as an adult came from my time in the United States Coast Guard. I enlisted

directly after school and my first assignment was at a small boat station where my focus was largely on search and rescue operations. As a new member of the service, leadership was exactly as I expected it to be following 12 years of school, exchanging teachers for uniformed men in a traditional position of power, and who led in a top – down, authoritative style. Classic, stereotypical military, and exactly what I expected when I joined the service. In *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, Northouse perfectly describes the leadership style I experienced in this role as *authoritative leadership*. Authoritative, or traditional, leaders view employees as tools for achieving goals and getting jobs done. Communication is limited to giving instruction about the task at hand, how to complete it, and the priority is achieving success as it relates to success in the organization. (p. 88) Leadership was results driven, underscored by the belief that “efficacy in operations results from arranging conditions of work in such a way that human elements interfere to minimum degree,” (Northouse, 2022, p. 89).

It wasn't until I began to specialize in response and crisis management that I began to see this style of leadership as more of a hinderance than a boon when it came to leading both those whom I encountered during operations outside of my organization and those whom I was charged with leading as I was advanced within the organization. This single mindset of leadership and what it meant to be a leader brought to mind the old adage “When all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail”, and I found that my own personal leadership style was far removed from the traditional concept of authoritarian leadership.

Fortunately for me, I was also exposed to many, many other leaders who inspired me and I began to understand that “leadership” was not a static concept, nor was it just one thing. Instead, I began to envision leadership as a toolbox with many different tools and this metaphor helped me explore many different styles and theories of leadership on a practical level. I

experienced - and likely practiced – both good and bad leadership, but each experience and trial helped me hone my own skills and evolve my own philosophy and style as I learned either from the examples I wished to emulate or those I wished to avoid.

Eventually the metaphor of a “leadership toolbox”, while useful, failed to capture everything I had learned and experienced in my practical growth and application in the military, and I found another metaphor that I felt suited better: That of a sailboat. But why was a sailboat what I eventually settled on?

As a leader, I found that the biggest misstep I could make was trying to separate the different parts of my life into neat boxes, an insight I had after I began prioritizing mentorship as part of my personal leadership style. Very rarely, to the point of almost never, is a person only ‘one thing’, and trying to mentor and lead people from only one aspect of who they were was not the answer I sought. Introspectively, I found that the more I tried to separate myself into boxes – a leader, a military member, a woman, a mother, a wife, a college student, my spiritual and emotional needs, all the different facets of ‘me’ that made up my life – inevitably lead to sacrificing different parts of myself to favor other parts. My job required a great deal from me: crisis response rarely seems to happen during the routine Monday through Friday work week and does not neatly wrap up by the end of the work day. Being ready for the call at 2am, hopping a flight with less than an hours notice or having to work long hours from morning til the evening was routine and expected especially as I began to be known for my skill and accomplishments in the realm of crisis management. However, with every award I received, or crisis managed or averted, I could only see the sacrifices I was making in other areas: not being able to make a healthy dinner at home, leaving before daycare drop off and arriving home long after bedtime, marathon sessions on due dates to complete schoolwork. I felt like a failure in other areas of my

life. Conversely, any time it wasn't my turn to respond, or I had to say no to a deployment, my successes in these other areas were overshadowed by my feelings of professional failure. Anytime I had to prioritize one area of my life over another, I inevitably felt like a failure somewhere.

I knew that this wasn't true, of course, and that many people struggle with the same issues of balancing their professional and personal life. I had even found through mentoring that focusing on the "whole person" rather than just the professional facet was a far more rewarding and productive path for those I worked with. I struggled to apply the same to myself, until one long weekend spent working with a team lifting an exceptionally large sunken sailing vessel from the water. Having never sailed myself, I filled the long hours of the slow process by learning about sailing and sailboats in general.

A sailboat, unlike a motorized vessel, relies mostly on the wind to move it along its course. This means that the boat must adjust to account for the wind and waves, sometimes tacking almost parallel to the desired direction, in order to reach the goal. If you have ever seen racing sailboats, sometimes they seem unbalanced to the point of disaster, heaving so hard to port or starboard or with such yaw its astonishing it not only remains upright but also continues to race forward, constantly changing and adjusting to suit the conditions surrounding it. This is the magic of sailing vessels: a balanced sailing boat isn't perfectly even on its keel. It's constantly adjusting and changing, yet always moving forward. My leadership toolbox, I realized, was more of a leadership sailing vessel: Sometimes I spent more time focusing on one facet of myself or my job, and other times I adjusted to account for others. It wasn't a scale, with one thing outweighing another. It wasn't juggling, with each ball at risk of being dropped and failing. It was sailing, where my balance was changing when and how it needed to in order to

continue moving, and my shifting focus didn't make me a *bad* mom, leader, or person – it was just me adjusting to the immediate needs around me in order to continue to move forward.

This served me well as I mentored others, but as I grew into more demanding and influential leadership roles, I again felt my metaphor was too limited. It certainly served a purpose, but my mental sailboat kept growing in size from a catamaran to multihull to a sailing yacht. It wasn't until the Gonzaga Organizational Leadership program that I deliberately revisited my sailing vessel and realized that my sailboat was sinking under the weight of all the metaphors. While my metaphor worked well as an internal guide and for the small teams I had led when I first imagined it, I had to admit that I had outgrown the sailboat without realizing it. Metaphors have always served me well, and I knew I wanted to continue refining my leadership with the use of one, and after some time of over-thinking, I realized that I was focusing on the wrong aspect of the metaphor: I may have outgrown a sailboat, but there are countless types of ships on the water, I just needed to find the right one. And so, my philosophy evolved from a loose metaphor about finding balance on a sailboat to something much more.

### My Leader “Ship” Philosophy

My leadership philosophy became a true leader-“ship”. Like a sailboat, a sailing ship is a vessel that uses sails in order to navigate and move through the ocean. As a metaphor for my leadership philosophy, the different parts and functions of the vessel represent the different values I have built my “leader ship” from over the years.

**The Hull: Integrity** The hull of the vessel is what keeps the ship afloat, just as integrity is the value I build my leadership on. Every other part of the ship depends on the hull being intact, and during a voyage the “integrity of the hull” is often checked to ensure it is secure.

**The Masts: Empowering, Supporting and Engaging Others** The masts on a vessel hold the sails that propel the ship, and the three masts of my leadership are empowering, engaging and supporting others to propel us towards our goals.

**The Wheel: Communication** Just as the wheel sets the course for the ship, communication is a critical part of good leadership because it is how I provide direction.

**The Quarterdeck: Authenticity** Traditionally, the quarterdeck is where leadership gives direction and where navigation takes place: Authenticity matters on the quarterdeck.

**The Rudder and Keel: Adaptivity and Agility** The wheel may tell a ship where to go, but the rudder and keel are the forces navigating the way. Like the rudder provides a way to adapt to the changes in current and wind, I must be able to adapt to the needs of followers and changing goals. The keel allows for a ship to be agile, even in times of crisis.

**The Anchor: Progress, not perfection** An anchor can hold a ship in place or keep a ship safe. The needless pursuit of perfection can drag back progress, but deliberate consideration and intention can keep the vessel safe in deep or troubled waters. Knowing when to lower the anchor or store it is critical to making it to the next port safely.

**The Figurehead: Living my values** The figurehead of a ship tells a story about that ship, acting as its spiritual guidepost. Like a figurehead, living my values tells people about who I am and how I lead.

**The Flag: Morale** The flag of a vessel is a focal point of the ships story, an icon of crew spirit. My own flag encourages others to join me in enthusiastically seeking new adventure!

### Conclusion: A Metaphor Expands

The metaphor of a ship is how I formally began my journey in the Organizational Leadership program, but it is not where I ended it. Since those early classes, I have continued to build upon the idea of my leader “ship”. My leadership toolbox is still on board, evolved now to an entire tool and maintenance room as I continue to learn and apply new techniques. I have charted courses and used values – both my own and the different organizations I have worked with – to move towards goals. Just as a ship requires a crew to work together to make it to the next port safely and on time, I have seen how important it is as a leader to make each crewmember aware of how they contribute to the success of everyone, whether they work on the deck or in the engine room. Light houses, like the inspirational leaders I learn from and look towards for guidance, help show me the way even in the stormiest seas. As my experience and knowledge grows, so too grows my metaphor, expanding and evolving along with me as I continue to grow and learn as a leader. New challenges, places, and teams will all demand different skills. Unlike a scale, a ships balance is not about finding equilibrium, but adapting to the wind and weather. My own leader “ship” is built around this same intention of flexibility and adaptability, for myself, my crew and the organizations and missions we support.



## References

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Figure 1: My Leader “Ship”

