

CREATING PROGRAM TRANSFORMATION THROUGH A MANTRA*

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Abstract

Considering the purpose of a mission statement, an educational leadership faculty group started out to develop a mission statement to focus the redesign of their preservice program. The effort to develop the mission statement led, instead, to the development of a mantra. The mantra now serves as a decision-making reference for the program, curricular considerations, as well as student development and has been very beneficial. This article explains the evolution of the mantra as the guide post for this particular program and provides the reader a step-by-step description of how to develop a mantra. Examples of how the mantra has benefited students and faculty in the master's program in educational leadership are provided.



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1 Mission Statements, Branding, Mantras

Operating in schools and universities where mission statements have become commonplace, it is easy to forget the underlying reason to have a mission statement. “A mission statement is a brief description of a company’s fundamental purpose. A mission statement answers the question, ‘Why do we exist?’ The mission statement articulates the company’s purpose both for those in the organization and for the public” (Ward, 2009, *about.com*). According to David (2009), all mission statements “broadly describe an organization’s present capabilities, customer focus, activities, and business makeup” (Glossary). Further, Midgett (2007) suggested, “It takes time and work for your mission and vision statements to become living expressions of the company’s behavior. You must be willing to test your mission and vision statements for their timeliness and consistency of values. When working with colleagues, explain how you arrived at your vision, so they may understand the logic behind your statements and their role and place in the future. You may also include customers, suppliers etc” (¶ 2).

Many organizations have undergone branding initiatives in response to the need to bring visibility in a highly competitive world such as the competition for students in higher education. “At root, a brand is the promise of an experience. Understanding and communicating the validity of that experience to target audiences are parts of the branding process” (Moore, 2004, p. 57). Branding includes those aspects of the organization that sets them apart from others as part of an overall marketing plan.

Researchers have documented the positive role of program focus on developing quality innovative educational leadership programs (Hale & Moorman, 2003; Jackson & Kelley, 2003). Mission statements can provide that focus, but are often long and cannot be used by the employees or customers (Kawasaki, 2004). When many of us went through training in the 1990s on mission statements for schools, we were taught that a mission statement establishes the framework for your school (or district) and that it should drive the decisions that you make. This paper tells the story of one program faculty moving from a mission to a mantra.

2 The Story of One Educational Leadership Program

Our program faculty have all recently left school or district level positions and work as colleagues in an educational leadership master’s program leading to principal licensure. In August, 2007, in response to multiple catalysts (Buskey & Jacobs, 2009), we began having serious conversations about our desire to redesign our program. Given that our state requires all program completers to take the School Leadership Licensure Assessment (SLLA) from the *School Leadership Series* (ETS.org) in order to be licensed, we considered our data for 2006-2007. Our state cut score is 155/200. For the twenty-five (25) completers, our candidates had a 100% pass rate. The mean was 182 and range 171-199. So, we had acceptable evidence that our program was meeting state expectations for licensure. The overriding issue for us was the desire to critically examine our program focus as evidenced in our curriculum and student actions on completion.

By September of 2007, we were talking about how changes in our master’s program could/would articulate with the doctoral program. Our group included five people working in the master’s program, along with two colleagues in the doctoral program in educational leadership. At a critical juncture in our discussions, we were invited to a state meeting of professors of educational leadership to discuss potentials for the redesign required under the newly enacted HB 536 (2007) in our state. Since we were all attending the meeting, we decided to go early and spend the day working together to develop a mission statement for our Master’s in School Administration (MSA) program.

Our university had contracted for a branding study to be done for the university, but the focus was on the primary mission of the university, which is residential undergraduate programs. The expectation in our college and university at the time was still that each program and/or department would have a mission statement, thought there was no effort to enforce those expectations.

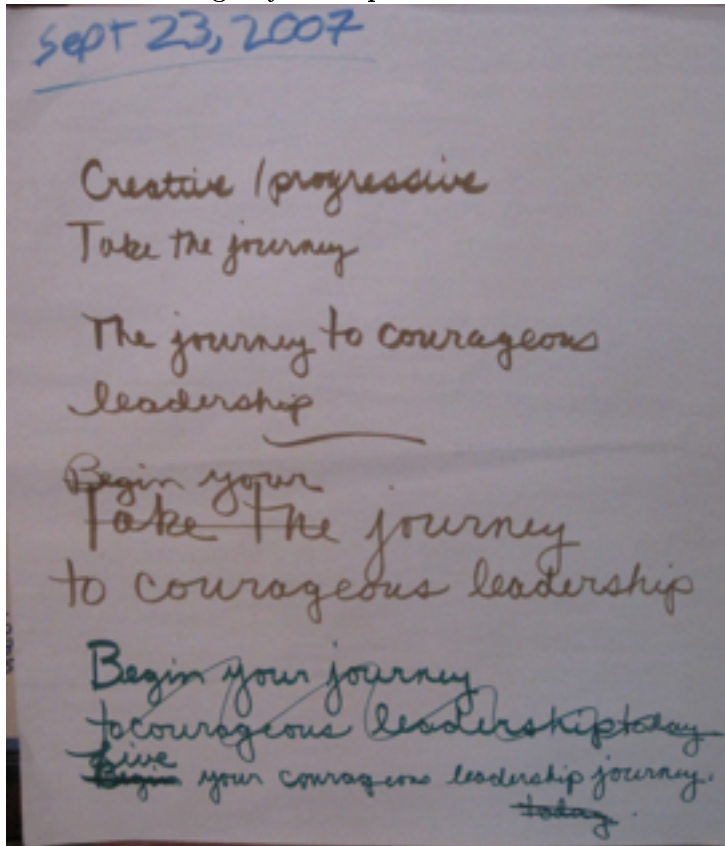
We arrived with sticky notes, chart paper, our laptops, and our own ideas about what is important in developing leaders for our schools. We spent the first hour discussing and writing down our individual ideas about leaders and leadership preparation. We then discussed what a mission statement would mean

to us and to our students. We were enthusiastic about the possibility of redesigning our program based on a clear and shared mission. We set about identifying the common ideas from what we had generated individually, so that we could use those concepts in developing our mission statement. Over the next hour we identified some common key descriptors: ethical, moral, leader, life-long learner, sharer, open-minded, creative, personal responsibility, on a journey, courageous, progressive, caring, serving, continuous, action, risk taking, integrated, etc.

We used our common ideas to craft a mission statement we were sure would define us as a special group. We read our mission and then sat in silence. “The purpose of our program is to help others develop leadership capacity that will ensure successful learning environments for each student.” We were genuinely dismayed. Our mission statement, the result of so much effort and collaboration, sounded like every other educational mission statement we had ever read.

After a break, one of our colleagues said, “I recently watched a video by Guy Kawasaki on developing mantras. Maybe what we need is a mantra, not a mission statement.” So after pulling up the video, we all stood around a laptop and watched as Mr. Kawasaki explained the difference in mission and vision statements and why a mantra provided a clearer and more focused way of thinking about your organization. He defines a mantra as “three or four words that explain why your product, service, or company should exist” (Kawasaki video, 2004).

After watching the video, we looked at our words on the board and literally within 3 minutes we developed a mantra (see exhibit 1). We stepped back and were really all shocked at how quickly it evolved. Or so it seemed. We knew, of course, that we had been discussing our beliefs about leadership and leadership preparation for school principals. We had already spent close to two hours working through a process with which we were all familiar. What we were not ready for was the power and excitement that the development of this mantra provided. We decided to “sleep on it” and revisit the mantra the next day after the state meeting (although most of us wanted to work together rather than attend the meeting)! The development of the mantra and its implications for guiding us on this journey of redesign provided interesting discussions on our ride back from the state meeting. People played around with the words. They discussed whether we could really use the mantra in a meaningful way. Some wondered if this was just another “thing” that we took time to do and would ultimately end up on the “wall” or on a shelf. Time would tell.

Exhibit 1: Moving key concepts from a mission statement to a mantra

We revisited the mantra several times over the next couple of weeks deciding on a final version and defining exactly what each word of “Live your leadership journey courageously” meant for us (See exhibit 2). Almost three years down the road, we have come to understand what this mantra has done for us as we used it to drive the ReVisioning of our program (Buskey & Jorissen, 2008). We have taught it to our students. Perhaps more significantly, we have tried to live it ourselves.

Exhibit 2: Mantra and descriptive language for each word of mantra



In addition to our own use of the mantra, our students draw upon it as most of them are challenged to be full time educators and part-time master’s students at the same time.

3 The Mantra Makes a Difference

The mantra makes a difference in our program. Courses in the program incorporate all elements of the mantra regularly and by design (see Table 1). In essence, the mantra is alive within the program. This liveliness is not lost on students as the following reflections from our students show.

Operationalizing the Mantra Within the Master’s Program

Keyword	Meaning	How Imbedded in Courses
Live	Program and work experiences go hand in hand. Students learn to be better teachers and leaders, and to build better personal relationships.	Assignments focus on doing things in schools
<i>continued on next page</i>		

Your	Students are responsible for making sure that lessons are practical and for providing program feedback. Professors are responsible for making learning relevant and challenging to each student.	Students get practical learning they can use immediately in their schools. Students have multiple opportunities to provide feedback about the program in multiple forms. Professors create assignments that are open-ended and flexible.
Leadership	Leadership is about caring, serving, and inspiring others.	Students consistently reflect on how they handle situations. They work to become better listeners and to empower others. Professors work to care for, inspire, and serve the needs of students
Journey	Growth is a lifelong process. It began before students entered the program and will continue afterwards.	A program rubric includes an aspirational level of performance. Faculty emphasize that it is a level to aspire to and will take learning beyond the program. Professors provide large amounts of formative feedback.
Courageously	Good intentions are nothing without action. Our students will act.	Professors consistently work with individual students to address school problems. A program-long change project requires students to make a significant change in their school.

Table 1

One of our students shared an experience where she had not advocated for a student with a disability in an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting. The resulting placement of the student was not correct in her professional opinion. She had been dismayed at the time, but had done nothing. As she began our program, she reflected on the mantra and realized that she had not been courageous. She was troubled by her inaction. In the next semester, she wrote that she had considered her journey in leadership and had determined to have the committee revisit the IEP. She gathered data, observed the student and requested a new IEP meeting and a new decision was made based on the evidence she presented. Our program candidate was, indeed, courageous and we believe her journey in leadership has benefited from her ability to draw on this one statement. More importantly, her students are also benefitting from these five purposeful words.

Another student shared that he wondered if he was courageous enough to rise to the challenges in his school: poverty, low achievement, and complacent faculty. He explained that his journey was like most teachers who decide to get a master's degree and realize that getting it in school leadership will provide them with an avenue other than the classroom if they choose. He ended by saying, "I know now that I am not just in a series of courses that will get me a degree. I am on a journey and I will be a better teacher, a better leader and a better person for it."

The mantra also makes a difference in how we (faculty) treat each other. We draw ourselves back to it when we are challenged by our work. In response to the challenges of time to meet and follow our own agreed processes, one colleague recently wrote, "We committed to living our leadership journeys courageously. I do want to grow and if I am not being a good citizen please tell me and we can have the discussion. I think I can continue on my journey on my own, but I have been down that road before and I know it is not as

rewarding as traveling together. I also recognize that each of us is at a very different point in life. I do respect that, but I reject the notion that our differences mean we cannot dance together.”

4 Lessons Learned

Research on effective and innovative programs describes the benefits of building programs around specific ideas (Jackson & Kelley, 2002). Leading professional bodies in educational administration espouse the need for a coherent and articulated curriculum (Young, Fuller, Brewer, Carpenter & Mansfield, 2007). In theory, a mission statement helps to provide program focus, however we have found that the mantra is a much more powerful tool.

A good mantra is memorable and therefore always accessible. When faculty are working to find a solution to a situation, none has to say, “Wait, I’ll look up our mission statement.” Everyone knows the mantra. As faculty, in the process of redesigning our program, we considered how the content, processes and products would help our candidates be the best possible school leaders, regardless of the positions they hold. We know that many who enter our program will decide along the way not to become principals, but they are still educators and they will be leaders in our schools and districts. We encourage them to lead from any position they hold and the mantra helps all of us to ensure that we are on common ground.

We have a responsibility to our students and to each other to provide the common core of knowledge, skills and dispositions we agreed upon. Additionally, we all take seriously our obligation to each other to draw upon our mantra when we are challenged in the day-to-day work of our program: teaching, scholarship and service.

5 Developing a Mantra

We sincerely hope that our journey to ReVisioning our preservice preparation program for principals, heavily influenced by our mantra, can provide you a mechanism for examining your program. The simple directions to develop your own mantra are provided at the end of this article (see Appendix 1).

Once you have developed an initial mantra, you will want to examine situations, curriculum and ideas in light of it to make sure it will work for your program. While we encourage you to make your mantra a prominent part of your materials (for example, all of us have it as part of our signatures on our emails; it is the cover of our student handbook), it has to be open for redesign as you use it. If it ceases to be an important consideration for your work and your students’ learning, then revisit it. Because just as we are trying to do, we want you to “Live your leadership journey courageously.”

Appendix 1: Steps to Developing a Mantra

Materials Needed

Chart paper, markers, pens/pencils, sticky notes, laptop with Guy Kawasaki’ video loaded (and depending on size of group you can watch on the laptop or use a projector).

Step 1: Select a meeting place and time that is conducive to group work. The process cannot be rushed. Ample amounts of time (2-5 hours) and food create a conducive atmosphere for developing a good mantra.

Step 2: Identify roles. Select a leader for the session who can help the group stay focused and lead the discussion. Select a time keeper so that you honor time limits. (The group can agree to extend the time, or to move on, or to reconvene).

Step 3: Follow the steps in Table 2 below.

Steps to Creating a Program Mantra

Step	Action 1	Action 2	Result
1. Have participants think of as many words or statements that represent their individual values and/or beliefs about what it means to be a school leader. (Time*: +/- 15 mins.)*Times are approximate depends on group. See note on time keeper role.	Have participants write one idea on each sticky note. Examples: (1) You must be courageous (2) Important to develop trust.	Post all sticky notes on walls (or chart paper).	Have each person walk around and read all the sticky notes.
2. Consider which sticky notes convey similar ideas. (Time: 20-30 mins.)	Cluster the sticky notes together that have similar ideas.	Record the common words/ideas on chart paper.	List of word/ideas that are commonly agreed upon by the group.
3. Consider key concepts in the words/ideas. (Time: 20-30 mins.)	Try to determine one or two words, at most, for each key concept/ideas.	Record the words.	List of words that are agreed upon by group.
4. Kawasaki video- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4q6_ARD6c_g	View video as a group. Discuss my thoughts/ideas from the video.	Review the definition of a mantra.	Agreement on what a mantra is.
5. Use list of words from Step three(3). (Time: 20-30 mins.)	Select words that work together to create a mantra for your program.	Reorganize the words until you find wording that can be agreed upon by group.	Your program MANTRA!

Table 2

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