

THE PURSUIT OF GROWTH: THE ROLE OF
TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN MY PROFESSIONAL
LEADERSHIP STYLE

by

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ABSTRACT

Transformative learning, introduced in 1978 by Jack Mezirow, describes the process in which an individual's thoughts, feelings, and opinions on any given idea are changed from one perspective to another. Mezirow's theory encapsulates the various, and often emotional, journey one experiences throughout their transformation requiring internal and external influences throughout four main theoretical components: experience, critical reflection, reflective discourse, and taking action. This capstone describes a deeply personal account of my transformative learning experience provoked by a disorienting dilemma, contrasted to the eleven phases of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory. Additionally, my participation within the University of Pennsylvania's Executive Coaching and Organizational Consulting Cohort is explored to feature the various ways the cohort fundamentally contributed to my transformative learning experience. This capstone aims to provide the reader with insight into the gravity of influencers on, and appreciation for the emotional impact of, an individual's transformative learning experience.

Keywords: transformative learning theory, leadership, disorienting dilemmas, Jack Mezirow, cohort

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Enrolling in graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania was a decision I did not make with joyous excitement. I was an adult learner who had experienced many highs and lows of what the world had to offer through my service in the United States Army. I found myself feeling bitter that the professional world I was entering did not value my military service in the way that it valued college degrees. Thankfully, I had the full support, encouragement, and gentle push of my loving fiancé and daughter to propel me into what would become one of the most transformative experiences of my adult life. Upon enrolling in the University of Pennsylvania, I was accepted into the eighth cycle of the esteemed Executive Coaching and Organizational Consulting cohort. As a member of the cohort, I took part of a journey that turned my view of leadership, a view I held deeply due to my military experience, on its head. While struggling to find my way amongst new ideas and concepts, I experienced many detours and roundabouts in my journey. I am profoundly grateful for the patience, support, encouragement, wisdom, and grace given to me from Bruce Friedman, a cohort instructor and my capstone advisor, and Linda Pennington, a cohort instructor and my capstone reader. Bruce was the recipient of *many* emails and phone calls where I offered nothing but excuses and misery. Bruce patiently guided me through each exchange, remaining compassionately optimistic and encouraging. Similarly, Linda was the sounding board for many conversations when I was deeply lost and frustrated in my process. Linda's unique ability to tell it to me straight, while remaining incredibly gentle is a skillset I can only hope to possess as I gain life's wisdom. I have no doubt that if Bruce or Linda were not a part of my

experience while at the University of Pennsylvania, I would have had a drastically different and less favorable outcome.

My most profound appreciation, admiration, and gratitude goes to my fiancé, Tom and my daughter, Leia. Through every conceivable emotion and scenario, Tom and Leia have been my *constant* champions. They have seen the best in me, even when I could only see the worst. It is because of their profound love that I have fuel for my journey and a compass to lead the way.

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE	Page
1 CVI Value Table	31
2 The Wilkinsky Normative 9-Step Coaching Process	46

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE	Page
1 Graphic Timeline of My Transformative Learning Experience Contrasted to Mezirow's 11 Phases of Transformative Learning Theory	8
2 LIFO® Strength Feedback Charts	36

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
LIST OF TABLES	vi
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
CHAPTER	
1 Introduction	1
2 Experience	11
3 Critical Reflection	17
4 Reflective Discourse	25
5 Taking Action	51
6 Conclusion	65
REFERENCES	67

TABLE OF CONTENTS CONTINUED

APPENDIX

A	72
B	75
C	76

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

My acceptance into the University of Pennsylvania's Executive Coaching and Organizational Consulting (ECOC) cohort was nothing short of terrifying. Surrounded by field experts in organizational leadership within one of the world's leading academic institutions, I knew I was going to be pushed out of my emotional and cognitive comfort zone. However, one area I was confident in, as a former soldier in the Army, was my leadership style and leadership capabilities. As a student in ECOC, I was not anticipating being launched into an entirely different perspective on what it meant to be a leader. After finishing the first week-long submersive cohort class, DYNM 720- Foundations of Organizational Consulting and Executive Coaching, I realized my deeply engrained and emotionally cherished ideas of leadership would no longer allow me to be successful or have a positive impact as a leader.

As a leader in the Army, success was the combination of many things including skill, grit, determination, and teamwork. I was devoted to the army values, which included leadership attributes such as loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage. I was also a devoted combat medic who worked day in and day out to improve the wellness and health of my fellow soldiers, on and off the battlefield.

The Army values and Hippocratic oath served as my pillars for leadership. They allowed me to be a successful senior combat medic and allowed me to train other junior medics to be successful in their careers as they grew and developed. These pillars served as a framework while training and actually saving lives on the battlefield. Saving lives

was 100% of the mission and my workload. It required very little consideration for the individual; the focus was the mission. My military leadership style quickly became the point of reference to my understanding of leadership as a whole. I took the idea of ‘mission first, mission above all’ with me well after I left the military.

My understanding of leadership had not been challenged until I began participating in the ECOC cohort. From the beginning, I realized that my military leadership style was not going to be well received. By listening to my peers, hearing their interpersonal interactions, and by reading the room, it was apparent that my fellow cohort peers required a slow, methodical, and emotion-centric leader who cared more about politeness and people’s feelings than the job at hand. This new dimension of leadership capped me at my knees. I felt as if I was in another world. A world that was purposefully subpar by putting feelings before mission. I knew then that I was going to have to learn more than books and theories; I was going to have to learn how to survive in this new professional environment.

Learning theorists describe this type of learning as “transformative learning”. Jack Mezirow, a leading transformative learning theorist, defines transformative learning as the

critical self-reflection, which results in the reformulation of a meaning perspective to allow a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative understanding of one’s experience (Mezirow, 1990, p. xvi).

Mezirow’s initial approach to adult transformative learning detailed a cognitive and rational process, however, through critical review and continued research, Mezirow expanded his theory to recognize that transformative learning is a complicated, personal, and powerfully emotional experience (Merriam & Kim, 2012) (Kitchenham, 2008). In

2016, Chad Hoggan, an Associate Professor at Columbia University, conducted a Transformative Learning Theory meta-analysis, “a quantitative, formal, epidemiological study design used to systematically assess previous research studies to derive conclusions about that body of research” (Haidich, 2010), where he defined transformative learning as the “processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world” (Hoggan, p. 71). Mezirow’s expansion, and Hoggan’s definition serves as important acknowledgements for my personal transformative learning experience, as it was remarkably personal and exceptionally emotional.

The transformative learning that I will explore in this capstone describes the profound impact that the ECOC cohort has had on my understanding of leadership and highlights the importance of transformative learning while in an environment which facilitates growth. I will reflect on the ECOC journey and experiences of interpersonal and academic moments which played a significant role in my transformative learning process. Using a chronological account of my transformative learning experience contrasted to Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory’s 11 stages, the reader will see the tension between my three versions of leadership: pre-cohort, within-cohort, and after the cohort. It should be noted that Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory consisted of 10 phases until 1991 when he expanded the model to include a phase that “reflected the importance of critical self-reflection” (Kitchenham, p.113, 2008). I will explore the incremental progression of my transformative learning experience that included, “a progressive series of transformations in related points of view that culminate in a

transformation in habit of mind” (Mezirow, J., 2000, p.21). The key occurrences which contributed to my progressive series of transformations include:

- The understanding that an individual’s behaviors are a reflection of their role and behavioral preferences in that moment. Behaviors are not a blanket-statement label of an individual as a whole. With this understanding, an individual who is displaying negative behavior can work to modulate their behavior, and the individual who is the recipient of negative behavior can work to become more empathetic.
- When an individual overuses their greatest strength, regardless of how admirable the strength might be, their overuse can become their weakness. For example, exhibiting too much bravery can be seen as uncaring.
- I am permitted to be who I am, as I am. I do not need to change my identity in order to be ‘enough’ or to fit into the world around me. Learning is not synonymous with changing who I am, at my core, as an individual. Learning is a beautiful process of evolving into a wiser version of my core self.

Further, I will share how I applied my transformed style of leadership into my employment, ultimately creating a moment in time where I had to either conform to the leadership style that was required in my place of employment or resign.

It is important to note that I was not aware I was undergoing a transformative learning process while in the cohort. While discussing potential capstone topics and context with my capstone advisor, I was explaining the leadership style conflict I had faced at my place of employment. With a kind and compassionate ear, my advisor

listened to my concerns and offered helpful words of wisdom. It was in this dialogue that I had one of the biggest lightbulb moments of my academic career- I had been transformed. My advisor recommended that I looked into Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory. Because of Mezirow's work, I was able to explore and understand my transformative experience. My transformative learning experience described in this capstone is a retrospective account of my journey.

Below is a high-level overview of my transformative learning experience within each of Mezirow's 11 phases followed by a graphic timeline of my transformative learning experience (see Figure 1).

1. **Disorienting Dilemma-** My disorienting dilemma was experienced over a period of multiple experiences during the first week of ECOC classes. My perceptions of what it meant to be a leader, and what characteristics make a good leader were disrupted.
2. **Self Examination With Feelings of Guilt, Fear, Anger or Shame-** Upon reflecting on my first week within the ECOC cohort, I felt intense emotions of guilt for thinking so mechanically, fear for the change that was lying ahead of me, anger for being required to change at this stage in my life, and shame for needing to change at this stage in my life.
3. **Critical Assessment of Assumptions-** My assumptions of leadership were deeply engrained into how I saw myself as a soldier. Through an assessment of these assumptions, I acknowledged that my previous experience and behaviors that defined leadership were no longer serving me. I would need to be open to new perspectives and instruction.

4. **Recognition That One's Discontent and the Process of Transformation Are Shared-** Knowing that I was part of a team, the ECOOC cohort, all of who's previous members had gone through the process, and who's current members were experiencing similar transformative learning experiences, allowed me to feel like the emotional roller-coaster was manageable.
5. **Exploration of Options for New Roles, Relationships, and Action-** Once I understood that my leadership style needed to change, I had to explore how I could change and what I was going to change.
6. **Planning a New Course of Action-** In planning a course of action, I took *what* I was going to change, and plan it into *how*.
7. **Acquiring Knowledge and Skills for Interpreting One's Plans-** Over the course of several ECOOC classes, I gained knowledge and skills to design my new idea of leadership.
8. **Provisional Trying of New Roles-** To test my new understanding of leadership, I engaged in two internships: one for coaching and one for consulting.
9. **Renegotiation of Relationships and Negotiating New Relationships-** I engaged in critical self-reflection to re-negotiate how I approach my leadership relationships with others.
10. **Building Competence and Self-Confidence in New Roles and Relationships-** Taking the totality of what I had learned and experienced up to this point, I put my new perspective of leadership into action during

my internship and Fellowship with a United States Senator on Capitol Hill.

11. A Reintegration Into One's Life on the Basis of Conditions Dictated

by One's New Perspective- I took new employment in a role where I was a department leader to a team of 50+ employees, and applied my new perspective of leadership.

Figure 1. Graphic Timeline of My Transformative Learning Experience
 Contrasted to Mezirow's 11 Phases of Transformative Learning

Theory

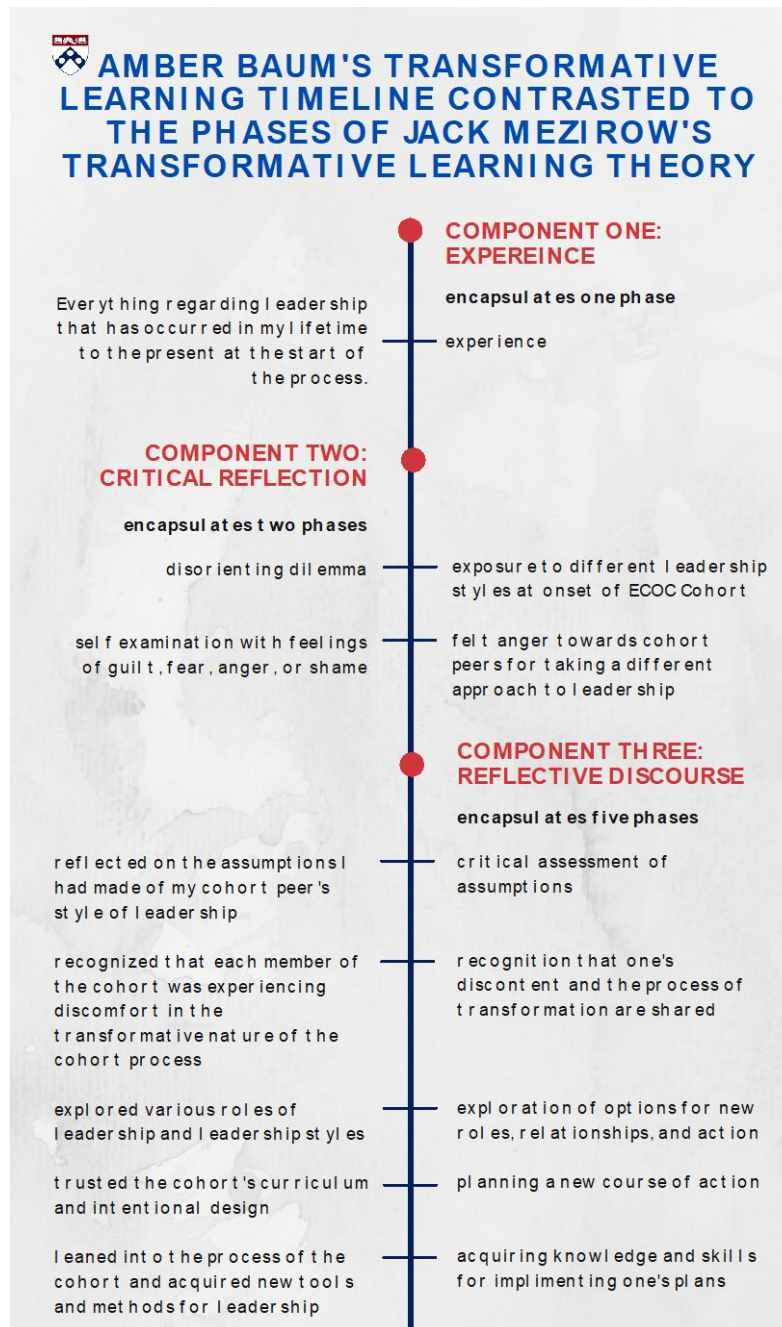
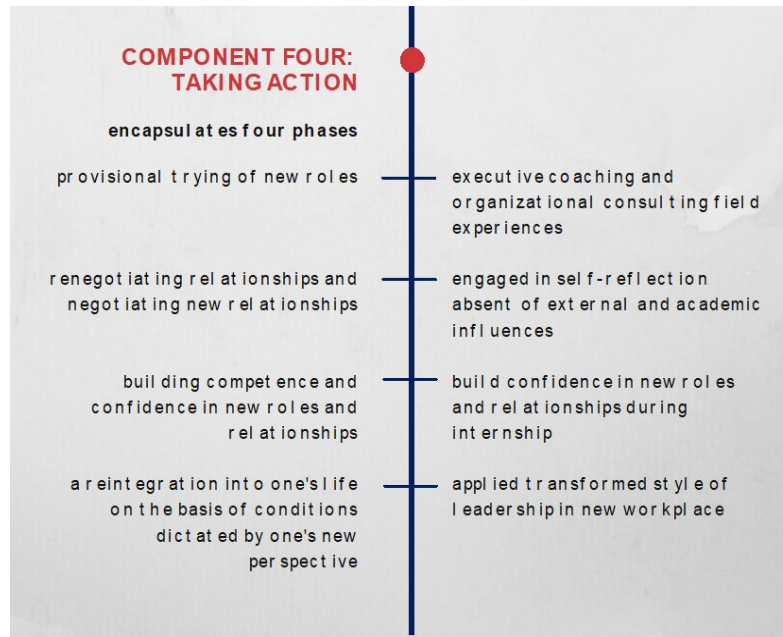


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Figure 1. Continued



Goals of this Capstone

This capstone has four goals:

1. To examine my transformative leaning process within ECOC contrasted with Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory.
2. To illustrate the complex and emotionally challenging critical reflection necessary for transformation.
3. To contrast the differences in leadership style before and after ECOC engagement.
4. To provide a tangible application of my transformed leadership style within my employment.

Structure of this Capstone

In this capstone, I will illustrate how my leadership style was reconstructed using Mezirow's 11 stages of Transformative Learning Theory as a contrast and template of personal exploration. To illustrate my transformative learning experience, I will contrast my transformative learning process within the ECOC cohort with the 11 stages of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, allowing my journey to be shared in a synchronous, chronological manner with Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory. Mezirow further groups his 11 stages of Transformative Learning into four overarching components: experience (phase 0), critical reflection (phases 1-2), reflective discourse (phases 3-7), and taking action (phases 8-11) (Béres & Fook, 2020, p.117-118). This paper will organize each of the four components and my transformative learning experiences in their own respective chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

EXPERIENCE

The first of the four components which sequentially encapsulate Mezirow's 11 steps is experience. Experience is everything that has occurred in our lifetime. Every interaction, memory, scent, conversation, etc. that shape how we experience a moment. One's experience is deeply personal to an individual because that experience is a reflection of a person's reality. When speaking of William James, an American philosopher and psychologist, John Dewey an American philosopher and psychologist said,

'Experience' is what James called a double-barreled word. Like its congeners, life and history, it includes *what* men do and suffer, what they strive for, love, believe and endure, and also how men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine – in short, processes of *experiencing* (Illeris, 2018, p.72).

Experience is the foundational part of transformative learning because experience develops our frames of reference. An individual's frame of reference is their personalized structure of beliefs, ideas, and expectations that provides them "with criteria for judging or evaluating" their world around them; they are the baselines for all new ideas to be compared to (Mezirow, 1997, p. 44). A frame of reference is the way we know things (Illeris, 2018, p.35). Mezirow claimed that "our values and sense-of-self are anchored in our frames of reference. They provide us with a sense of stability, coherence, community, and identity" (Mezirow, 2000, p.18).

My experience of leadership was shaped while serving in the military, providing me a frame of reference that was deeply and emotionally woven into the fabric of who I was and where I felt a sense of belonging.

While in the Army, I experienced a spectrum of encounters and relationships which shaped my leadership frame of reference. As a leader in the Army, soldiers are taught by their mentors and leaders that they

should make a daily commitment to do the right things, develop the right foundational leadership traits, and understand today's complex, expeditionary environment... the traits we seek in today's Army leaders include agility, adaptability, flexibility, mental and physical resilience, competence, and most importantly character... Character is often demonstrated in how closely our actions, decisions, and relationships adhere to Army ethics and values. Competence is developed over time through rigorous practice, professional learning, and a commitment to excelling in every aspect of our duties. It is vital that Army leaders have both character and competence (Ferrell, 20016, paras. 6-7).

It is regrettable that my first leader, while in the Army, who made a significant impact in my understanding of bad leadership was my Drill Sergeant in basic training. My Drill Sergeant was a toxic and dangerous leader. Drill Sergeants act odiously and play the role of 'bad cop' while they are methodically 'breaking down' their new recruits, in order to shed their old habits and re-build them into agile war time soldiers. This much of my experience with my Drill Sergeant I understand and accept. However, this is not the part of my experience that made a significant impact to my understanding of leadership. It was immediately noticeable that upon arrival at basic training, my Drill Sergeant took an unhealthy interest in me. Multiple times a day, every day, he would stalk, publicly humiliate, and physically violate me. As the weeks went by, his behaviors grew increasingly invasive. I felt helpless; I had no way of communicating with the outside world. We were not allowed to use the pay phone, at any time, during boot camp and cell phones had not yet been widely accessible or permitted. Every day I would write home to my parents telling them how scared I was. I never received return letters (I later discovered that my outbound mail was never sent, and my inbound mail was never

distributed). Less than a week from my graduation, I was raped. After a dramatic series of events, my Drill Sergeant was imprisoned, and I was allowed to remain in the military. This experience showed me, a young and naive 17-year-old, the preeminent and enormous power that a leader can possess, and the devastating effects if that leader chooses to abuse their position. In itself, my rape was a disorienting dilemma where, after proceeding through the various phases of transformational learning, I gained the wisdom and bravery to become a more impactful leader for many soldiers along the timespan of my military career.

Thankfully, my leadership experiences after boot camp were drastically different. Throughout my time in the Army, I encountered several leaders who invested into my personal betterment and professional success. On the other end of the spectrum of my experience with leaders, was my direct supervisor while stationed in Alaska. She set the high bar for leadership and is who I attempted to emulate every day thereafter. Although I was confident in my capabilities as a medic, I was scared of the unknown- the conditions I would inevitably face and be required to perform my duties while in combat. During our training courses to go to Iraq, I had expressed to her how scared I was to perform my job while under the expected circumstances- noise, chaos, desert weather conditions, etc. Everything I had done in my job up to that point was done in a hospital setting. I was afraid that my surroundings would get the best of me, and I would be useless when I was exposed to the hostilities of combat. My supervisor made it her mission to prepare me for the road ahead. Every day, my supervisor introduced a challenge I had to overcome. One day, in an orchestrated effort, my supervisor came into my office, surprised me from behind, threw a pillowcase over my head, and made me fight off four of my peers. In

another exercise, my supervisor took me to a trampoline park, and made me give IV's, and take vials of blood, while there were adults jumping all around me, bouncing myself and my gear everywhere. My supervisor took my equipment and buried it in a mound in a nearby quarry. She brought a gas-powered leaf blower and blew the dust around me as I had to fish out my gear and conduct a medical evacuation procedure on my peer. My supervisor listened to each of my concerns that day in her office and made sure that every exercise she put me through thereafter addressed my fears. Because of her dedication to my success, our team was able to provide exceptional medical care to each patient we encountered and navigate the emotional demands of our positions with strength and grace.

My criteria for judging and evaluating leadership was developed throughout various engagements with numerous peers over six years of military service. Because of my experience in boot camp, and the subsequent transformational learning regarding the power of a leader's impact on a student, I had a frame of reference for what the worst example of leadership looked and felt like. And because of my supervisor's investment into my success, I had a frame of reference for what the best example of leadership looked and felt like. I kept these experiences with me every day as I grew as a soldier who eventually was tasked to lead soldiers of my own.

Moving from the rank of E4, Specialist, to E5, Sergeant, is a milestone promotion. It takes a soldier from a follower and turns them into a leader. This transition is noted in additional schooling requirements, the assumption of additional responsibilities, and can even be seen in the quality of housing a soldier is granted. Upon being promoted from E4 to E5, I was eager to contribute more to my team and lead more junior medics along their

careers. Out of the 1.3 million soldiers in the Army, only 1% of them are leaders (Castillo, 2020 p.4). As evidenced by many publications such as (but not limited to) Military.com, Army News Service, the Washington Post, Modern War Institute, and the New York Times Magazine, females in the military face gender shaming, sexism, humiliation, and biases throughout their time of service that their male peers do not (Cox, 2009) (Kimmons, 2020) (McGregor, 2019) (Ables, 2020) (Katzenberg, 2019). As a female leader, I experienced the same gender-based challenges as many women before me. From the first moment I reported to my unit, I fought like hell to be seen as an equal amongst my male peers. As the only female in an all-male unit, I was seen as “weak”, “in-the-way”, as a “distraction”, and as a “liability” (Baum, 2020). It took working longer hours, contributing more efforts, and enduring “extreme scrutiny” to become accepted as an equal member as a team and be trusted as a female leader of men (Baum, 2020). Having overcome the challenges and deeply engrained biases against Army female leaders, my confidence in my leadership capabilities was high.

After leaving the Army, the experience (frames of reference) stuck with me, and never let me down. Throughout each new job, team, and challenge, my leadership experience in the military afforded me the ability to manage and supervise numerous civilian workforce teams with great results.

Upon arriving at the University of Pennsylvania to engage in my first ECOC class, I was confident in my leadership style. I believed that if I could successfully navigate the demands of leading a team of Combat Medics into battle, I could master my leadership experience and engagements within the ECOC cohort. It was not long into the

first hour with my new peers, that I realized I was woefully unprepared and unequipped for the road ahead.

CHAPTER THREE

CRITICAL REFLECTION

Disorienting Dilemma

The first week of the ECOC cohort was DYNM 720: Foundations of Organizational Consulting and Executive Coaching, or as I bittersweetly call it, “hell week.” The week consisted of one 6+ hour dinner, and six sequential days of 9-16-hour class days. Each day, students were expected to fully engage in “meaningful participation” activities (Russo, 2018, p.4-5). At the end of DYNM 720, I found myself questioning what it meant to be a leader, and what characteristics make a good leader.

The first session of DYNM 720 was held at a dinner at Inn at Penn, where the instructors and cohort members came together to meet one another and set the tone for the road ahead. I approached the dinner with excitement and eager anticipation. As a tough, proud, and confident leader, I greatly looked forward to earning my master’s degree alongside other industry leaders from around the world. After my time in the Army, I looked forward to once again being a part of a team and was hopeful to be seen as a functional leader within the team, someone who “help[ed] the team operate more effectively” (Levi, 2017, p.210).

After dinner, we quickly dove into the goals of the evening to set the groundwork for our upcoming year together. The instructors made it very clear to the cohort members that we were now a part of an honored team and legacy of leaders within the Organizational Dynamics department at Penn. We were told to trust the team, trust the process, and trust the journey.

After their briefing, the instructors tasked our cohort with developing our group's forming questions (questions that created dialogue around the discovery of working toward the same goals) and creating ten promises to each other as we proceeded forward as an academic cohort (See Appendix A). Within moments of our task, I realized I was part of a team that I did not understand and had little in common with. The ideas and inputs (acts of leadership) were centered around and catered to the feelings and emotions of how we would feel within our team. I felt overwhelmed in the sea of sensitivity that swelled around me and was perplexed by the lack of attention to efficiency and effectiveness, along with the outwardly stated fear of confrontation and fear to upset others. In my experience, nothing good had ever happened when a leader or group of leaders surrounded themselves in a feel-good echo chamber; disagreement and conflict was healthy and needed to be present to learn and grow. I felt like I was in the wrong place, surrounded by the wrong leaders; however, I knew I was in one of the most prestigious academic institutions in the country, surrounded by successful and diverse leadership. This conflict caused me to lose confidence in everything I had known in leadership up to this point- I emotionally shut down. What little participation I engaged in was painstakingly measured and calculated, as to not be labeled a troublemaking outlier or someone who would reinforce a negative stereotype of a crusty Army veteran. I was experiencing the beginnings of what Mezirow defines as a disorienting dilemma, a "life-event crisis" (Mälkki, 2010, abstract) "that problematizes current understandings and frames of reference" (Mezirow, 2000, p.55).

My disorienting dilemma was a result of the DYNM 720 dinner and two additional DYNM 720 encounters. Disorienting dilemmas can be epochal (all at once) ...

or incremental, that is, a gradual recognition over time of a disconnect between our meaning structure and our environment (LULEE, 2009, para. 3). The second occurrence took place during a team activity on day five of seven of hell week. At this point in the week, I had entirely shut down and was closed off from participation; I willfully experienced this activity as an observer. For the activity, each member of the cohort was handed two items from the instructor. The first item was a sheet of paper instruction and rules, and the second was a slip of paper with a number of statements on it. The activity's instructions were:

1. Each member of the group will be given a slip of paper with a number of statements on it each person has different statements the information on these sheets is not to be shown to the other members of the group.
2. The actual task, and how you are to go about it, will become clear once you start to share the information with the other members of the group. You are allowed to use verbal communication only.
3. When the members of your group feel that you have completed the required task, tell the facilitator, and you have your results checked.
4. If your task has only been partly completed, or if you have done more than the task required, the facilitator will tell you that the task is not complete. The facilitator will not tell you what part of the task you have done right, or what you have done wrong. You will need to keep working without any clues until you are sure you have completed the task successfully.
5. These rules must be observed throughout the activity they are essential to the success of the exercise:

- From the moment you begin, you may not ask anyone outside the team for help.
 - You may not show your group members the contents of your written pieces of information.
 - You may not write anything down.
 - You must obey the instructors of the facilitator.
6. You will have 30 minutes to complete the task period
 7. The facilitator will tell you when and how to begin.

As a collective we read the rules and began engaging in the activity. With no assigned leader, no understanding of our goal, and no understanding of what it meant to successfully complete our goal (all purposeful and strategically designed in the exercise) our team quickly devolved into a room full of timid and confused adults. Our activity needed a leader to steer the ship, overseeing the roles, responsibilities, and communications within the activity. To our detriment, for more than 25 minutes, our cohort stood around and acted (through my perspective) from a place of emotion-centric passiveness and agreeableness rather than from a place of mission-focused teamwork. It was my observance from behaviors and dialogue, that members of the cohort were more afraid of making their peers upset by asserting dominance in taking the lead of the project, than of failing the project. Under the time crunch of five minutes left, one of the group members stepped forward and began directing. As soon as they did, the rest of the group was noticeably (through facial expressions, body language, and verbal cues) upset at this individual for coming forward and “ordering people around.”

Standing back as an observer of the exercise, I was overwhelmed. I was angry, frustrated, and baffled over the lack of decisiveness and fear of upsetting others. These were not leaders! My team was more willing to have the exercise take place without argument, than to succeed. I could not believe I was a part of a group of people so weak minded and accepting of defeat.

The third impactful incident during “hell week” that resulted in my disorienting dilemma was the creation of our cohort’s contract. Much like the rest of the activities at this time, I was mentally checked out of any meaningful participation. I did not trust, understand, or even enjoy the people who surrounded me. At this point in the week, I had felt like I had been scammed. I felt like I was sold an idea of leadership, unity, and legacy and received a group of people who had no idea of what it took to be a leader, or what it meant to be a part of a team. I was angry at my instructors for lying about the cohort’s purpose and resentful to my cohort peers for being such weak leaders.

Per the guidance of our instructors, our cohort contract was a document that we were to create and hold as a set of commitments towards one another. The creation of our contract was a task the cohort has been assigned at the beginning of hell week and gradually worked on throughout the week during our lunch breaks. On the sixth day of hell week, we were required to stay after class and work together to finalize the contract. We began working on the contract at 5pm. We did not complete the contract until midnight.

The first four + hours of our evening were spent devolving into a room that could not come to consensus on anything. No two people agreed on the format of the contract, the context of the contract, the purpose of the contract, or the presentation of the contract.

After spending a week together where we were supposed to be coming together as leaders of one team, we all sat in a meeting room more divided than ever.

After sitting in hours of emotional and mental churn, the cohort had a breaking point. A few people walked out, including myself. We did not know if those people who left, including me, were going to return. There were members who cried out of exhaustion and frustration. We were falling apart. I vividly remember sitting in the back of the room, composing an email to the instructors stating that this would be the only cohort class I would take; that I was leaving the cohort. I did not want to be a part of something that was so dysfunctional and so mentally exhausting.

In our moments of complete breakdown, an individual stepped up and took control of the room. They pressed a reset button and instead of having us focus on the contract- something that was tearing us apart- the cohort member had us focus on each of our individual strengths. The cohort member wrote each cohort members' name on a white board and asked each person to name a strength about themselves and asked each cohort member to also name a strength about that person. Name by name, we went down the whiteboard and were reminded about what we had to offer one another versus what was dividing us. From there, we were able to give ourselves roles in the contract creation, and promised each other to stay in in our lanes, and only contribute when it was within our role. I chose the role of developing the contract's presentation. Because I had no faith or trust in my cohort peers, I did not want to disingenuously contribute to the context of the contract. By the end of the night, I decided to put my email to the instructors into my drafts folder, and gamble of the design on the program.

Self Examination with Feelings of Guilt, Fear, Anger, or Shame

Learning theorists such as Jackson, Mälkki, Wenger, and Senge (Illeris, 2018) (Mälkki, 2010) collectively agree that transformational learning is emotionally challenging for an individual describing transformative learning as “an intensely threatening experience” (p.47) for the learner because they are challenging what Senge (1990) defines as an individual’s mental models (the equivalent of Mezirow’s frame of reference) - their “deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures and images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action” (p.8).

In the weeks following my first cohort experience, I was a raw nerve of negative emotions. Roberts (2006) asserts that “Disorienting dilemmas evoke every conceivable emotion in learnings [they] lead to stress and anxiety ... [and] fear” (p. 101-102). I spent multiple hours each day questioning what I had just experienced. Nerstorm (2014) states this time of examination is an “ongoing process of consciously or unconsciously reviewing and evaluating assumptions to clarify the meaning of experiences both individually and collectively” (p. 327). My self-examination was felt in anger and can be broken down into three types of reflection: content, process, and premise.

While examining the content of my experience in DYNM 720, I examined the dilemma for what it was, based on the characteristics of my experience. My disorienting dilemma was: *what does it mean to be a leader, and what characteristics make a good leader?* This dilemma is based on the dramatically conflictual instincts I had as a tried-and-true leader while experiencing various forms of leadership while in DYNM 720.

While examining the process of my experience in DYNM 720 I examined the approaches to my dilemma and what I was going to do with my experience. For weeks

after DYNM 720, I went back and forth between thinking I was going to completely change who I was as a leader, throwing away the entirety of my leadership experiences in order to fit into my new environment, and holding on tightly to what I knew made a good leader in the past and not change at all.

While reflecting on the premise of my experience in DYNM 720, I evaluated the dilemma itself and why it exists, and what purpose it serves in my life. In my disorienting dilemma, I was torn between what I knew to be right and true of leadership, and the different styles of leadership that I had just experienced within my cohort. At this time, I was not able to reconcile the two opposites and find a truth.

CHAPTER FOUR

REFLECTIVE DISCOURSE

Critical Assessment of Assumptions

Mezirow's third phase of transformative learning theory, and the next step within my transformative learning experience, is critical assessment of assumptions. Mezirow breaks down his methods of critical assessment into three distinctive bodies: epistemic, sociocultural, and psychic assumptions, claiming each transformational learning can only fall into one body (Mezirow, 1990, p.9). Epistemic refers to "nature and the use of knowledge", sociocultural "involve[s] taking for granted belief systems that pertain to power and social relationships, especially those currently prevailing and legitimized and enforced by institutions," and psychic refers to "presuppositions generating unwarranted anxiety that impedes taking action" (Mezirow, 1990, p.9-10). My critical assessment of assumptions was sociocultural.

Mezirow's original 10-phase transformative learning theory did not account for the importance of personal reflection. He has been criticized by several scholars (since his theory's inception in 1978) for his lack of attention to the emotional and internal thought processes of transformative learning and placing too much focus on the cognitive and person-to-person interactive perspectives of transformative learning (Mälkki, 2010; Clark & Wilson, 1001; Mezirow, 2009; Taylor, 2000; Newman, 1993; Tennant & Pogson, 1995). In 1994, Mezirow added an 11th step to acknowledge his criticism and account for the need of a non-cognitive phase in the transformative learning process (Mezirow, 1994, p.224). This phase will be addressed in chapter 4.

Similar to the findings of Mezirow's critics, the totality of my experience during my critical assessment of assumptions is not entirely contrastable to Mezirow's cognitive-focused approach. During my time of critical assessment of assumptions, I engaged in deeply emotional and spiritual *internal* dialogue and rationale. I did not seek outward participation in dialogue. This was not because I lack emotional maturity or intelligence, as Mezirow's theory suggests. My reasonings for assessing my assumptions internally is due to my nature/nurture makeup. I am naturally an introvert. I have never been an individual who immediately seeks out others while I am in a heightened emotional state, as I was after having experienced a disorienting dilemma. Instead, I search inward, seeking peace and understanding as to why I am feeling the way I am, and what options I have in dealing with those emotions.

During my time of internal critical assessment of assumptions, I arrived at my first milestone within my transformation: I was wrong. I was wrong about my cohort peers and I was wrong about leadership. Through introspective assessment, I have come to learn more about myself and truths that challenged my pre-cohort assumptions. These reflections included:

1. Just because I was good at leading soldiers in the Army, does not mean I am a good at leading individuals elsewhere.
2. Just because I knew how to lead soldiers in the Army, does not mean I know how to lead civilians.
3. Army leadership is different than civilian leadership
4. I was no longer a leader leading troops to and through combat- I was not in the Army anymore and needed to put that mindset to bed.

5. No one in my cohort asked to be seen as or held to the standard of a leader.
6. Just because someone did not take the lead, did not make them weak minded. It could mean that an individual believed their greatest contribution to the task at hand would be within a supportive role, equally as important as a lead role.
7. Just because someone did not want to hurt other's feelings, did not make them weak minded or fearful. It could mean that they valued the opinions of others more than their own ego, valued interpersonal harmony, or were taking the time for quiet reflection on the situation before speaking out against their peer. All of which are equally valuable as someone who can promptly express their opinions.
8. I was just as responsible for a lack of leadership during hell week- I willingly chose to sit idly by on the sidelines.
9. Each of the cohort members were likely experiencing their own disorienting dilemmas, creating potential confusion, hesitation, and heightened emotional states in themselves.
10. I was putting too much pressure on the idea of a cohort and on my cohort peers to fill an emotional gap that was created when I left the Army.
11. I unfairly judged my cohort peers, expecting them to be what I wanted instead of accepting them for who they were as they were.

Reaching this milestone was my Gettysburg; it was the turning point in my transformative learning experience. I had eleven lightbulb 'ah-ha' moments (as listed

above) that turned what I knew to be true - what I had just experienced first-hand - on its head. “Mezirow has stated that all steps are not required to experience transformative learning” however, now having experienced the full cycle of Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory, I do not believe a learner can experience true transformation without this crucial step of assessment (Brock, Florescu, & Teran, 2012). After this turning point, I opened myself up to the possibility of change.

Recognition That One’s Discontent and The Process Of Transformation Are Shared

The Covid-19 pandemic has taught us many things as a society, one of them being that sharing the stress of a life-changing event can help make the event more bearable than experiencing the event by one’s self (Wiederhold 2020; Cauberghe et al. 2020; Courtet et al. 2020; Imran et al. 2020). Furthermore, programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, have been successful since its creation in 1935, in part, due to the shared experiences within “peer-support” that members receive while engaged in the program (Boisvert et al., 2008). The fourth phase of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory, the recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared, similarly claims that an individual is more able to process through their transformative process if they feel as if their struggles, emotions, and circumstances are shared amongst their peers who are experiencing the same learning environment.

While I could not have felt more different than my cohort peers, the emotional roller coaster I experienced within my transformational learning process was only tolerable due to the shared mental angst amongst us. After DYNM 720 our next cohort class was DYNM 722, Making Meaning From Experience and Establishing Frameworks.

DYNM 722, challenged each member to use “newly introduced theories and your own experiences and observations” and “apply [ing] them to assess, interpret, and make meaning of behavior at three levels: individual, group, and organizational” (University of Pennsylvania, n.d.). Unlike the (very) text, theoretical, and data driven approaches of DYNM 720, DYNM 722 was centered around a more conversational and thought-provoking approach. This change of approach was exactly what our cohort needed to flush out our emotional thoughts and responses to the cohort experience up to this point.

During the various sidebar and classroom-wide conversations throughout DYNM 722, each of my cohort peers had a space to share their fears, doubts, apprehensions, mistrusts, anxieties, and frustrations related to the cohort experience. Hearing their thoughts and emotions was not only comforting in knowing that I was not alone, but it further solidified my critical assessment of assumptions that I had previously (internally) reflected upon. While this solidification gives credit to Mezirow’s claim that the critical assessment of assumptions is done through effective participation in reflective discourse with others, his theory still lacks the attention to and inclusion of internal emotional processes within the transformational learning experience.

In knowing that my equals in this journey had some of the same feelings of fear, doubt, apprehension, mistrust, anxiety, and frustration that I had, I became open to experiencing the road ahead alongside my cohort peers. Although I still felt like an outsider regarding my past experiences, these shared angsts were the second milestone in my transformative learning experience. They allowed me to find more in common with my cohort peers than what separated us. This sense of commonality was the first time I

felt as though we were a team of leaders and it was the first time I was wholly receptive to the information that was being shared with and taught to me.

Exploration Of Options For New Roles, Relationships, And Action

Benjamin Franklin (1750) once wrote, “there are three things extremely hard: steel, a diamond, and to know one's self” (Franklin, XI Month). As I transitioned into the next phase of my transformational learning experience, I was about to embark on a hard, long, and stormy explorative journey to know the leader I was going to be moving forward.

Throughout DYNM 722, Making Meaning From Experience and Establishing Frameworks, I experienced three key moments that contributed to my exploration of options for new roles, relations, and action.

The first moment was an exploration of a new role. This occurred during our cohort Core Values Index™ (CVI) assessment. The CVI is an assessment that “creates an accurate picture of each person’s core values ... describe[ing] how each person aligns with the corresponding core values” (Bergey, 2018a). See appendix B for the Core Values Index™ Key and appendix C for my results. The CVI has four values: builder, merchant, banker, and innovator (Bergey, 2018b). The following table summarizes the CVI’s four values:

Table 1. CVI Value Table

(Bergey, 2018b)

	Builder	Merchant	Banker	Innovator
Core Value	Power	Love	Knowledge	Wisdom
Supportive Value	Faith	Truth	Justice	Compassion
Contributions to Team	Action Results	Relationships Vision	Conservation Information	Assessments Solution
Conflict Strategy	Intimidation	Manipulation	Aloof Judgement	Interrogation
Learning Style	Decide and Do	Talk and Listen	Read and Analyze	Assess and Solve

My CVI results sent me to the bathroom sobbing. When looking at the graph representing my results, I was nearly equal in each value. According to the instructor, my near-equal CVI results reflected that I “did not know who [I was]” (P. Bergey, personal communication, October 13, 2018). My results reflected that I did not have a preferred style in which to operate. This was very emotional for me because my results were a confirmation of what I was already feeling: I was lost. I did not know who I was at this point in my cohort experience. It should be noted that I took the CVI assessment on October 5, 2018- after DYNM 720, before DYNM 722. I came into the cohort *so* sure of myself. It shook me that that it took mere weeks to unravel what I had built over the last fifteen years. When assessing the results of my peers, they each knew where they would show up in their CVI; their results were not surprising to them. Instead of looking across the table and seeing weak leaders, as I did in DYNM 720, I was now looking across the table and seeing leaders who I greatly envied. After gathering my thoughts in the bathroom, I came back into class dedicated to exploring the various roles (and their impact on others) within the CVI’s core values and explore how I could implement them into a new way of leadership.

The second key moment in 722 that contributed to the exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action phase in my transformational learning experience was during a 1:1 coaching session that was conducted by the instructor. Up to this coaching session, I had held my instructor in very high regard. The instructor was compassionate, empathetic, and showed our class a gentle personality. I was very drawn to their personality because I was in a place of heightened insecurity. When the instructor asked for volunteers to be a part of a 1:1 coaching session in front of the class, I happily volunteered. I was stuck on my past and wanted to move forward; I was hoping the coaching session would provide me with insight into how to take that first step forward. We began speaking about how the challenges of my past were creating roadblocks in my present. When discussing what roadblocks I was facing, I described how the events of my past - widowhood, war, and cancer - were causing me to hold tightly onto the way I approached the roads ahead of me, but that those roads were no longer serving me. I was stuck, but knew I wanted to change my mindset to looking forward towards opportunities, not backwards at survival. After making my points as to how I got stuck and how being stuck was a dis-service to me, I said, "I just don't know what to do" to which the instructor replied, "you really gotta get over it" (P. Bergey, personal communication, November 10, 2018). To this day, the instructor's reply is the first and most unfortunate memory I have of my ECOC experience. I was dumbfounded that someone who I once considered to be emotionally safe, had instantaneously become someone who I perceived to be callous and annoyed. It was not their place to tell me to 'get over' something so deeply emotional and personal. In coaching, it is important to "encourage your client to explore [their] strengths and weaknesses and to consider

whether there are areas where [they] might benefit from support” (Wildflower & Brennan, 2011, p.145). My instructor neither encouraged me nor supported me. I shut down and the session quickly ended. This second key moment moved me to explore new options for leader roles, and their impact on others.

In my third and final key moment that contributed to the exploration of options for new roles, relations, and action within DYNM 722, I opened my ears, and closed my mouth. Our main project for this class was to create an executive summary for a coaching and/or consulting theory and/or framework of our choice. This assignment included two deliverables, a one-page executive summary handout for the members of the cohort, and a formal presentation on each theory/framework. The purpose of the executive summary was to give each member of the cohort a tool to use along their coaching and consulting journeys. I fondly remember these presentations as the first time I witnessed each of my cohort peers as natural leaders- in their elements and proud to share the theory/framework that was important to them. The topics were:

1. Personal Brand: You Are In Charge Of Your Brand; An Effective Tool For Coaching and Personal Development
2. Coaching Leaders of Today For A Sustainable Tomorrow
3. Choice Theory
4. Positive Psychology and Coaching
5. Psychometric Assessment
6. Mindfulness in Coaching
7. Ladder of Inference
8. Bowen’s Family Systems Theory

9. Energy Leadership

10. Action Inquiry Theory

As I listened to my cohort peers deliver their presentations, I was humbled. I was being given gifts of knowledge that I would have otherwise never known and would have just a few weeks prior written off as useless. Yet there I was, being shown new ways of leadership - each of them being just as important as the next - that had nothing to do with op tempo (op-tempo: operational tempo is a common part of military vernacular meaning how quickly and aggressively an individual performs), efficiency, or regulation. My cohort peers' presentations provided me with the exploration of nine more options for action.

In DYNM 720, Foundations of Organizational Consulting and Executive Coaching, our cohort participated in Life Orientations assessment. LIFO® is a "performance improvement methodology" that uses "behavioral styles" to identify an individual's "strengths and creates awareness of potential 'blind-spots'" (How lifo produces results, 2016). LIFO® was the first behavior assessment I had ever taken. When our cohort was learning the fundamentals of LIFO® during the first full day of class in DYNM 720, I thought it was fun and interesting to see how I presented within their framework. At that point in my cohort experience, I did not understand LIFO®'s full protentional or how it would help me become 'better'. It was not until I was further along my transformational learning journey, within the phase of exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action, that I came to fully understand the power of LIFO®.

Following 722, while continuing to explore options for new roles, relationships, and action, I circled back to my LIFO® paperwork and studied it for several days. LIFO®

quickly became the glue that made all of the pieces (during my exploration) stick together. While in DYNM 720, I had approached LIFO® from the wrong perspective; I was using it to view *myself* through the lens of a behavior assessment. After circling back to LIFO®, I realized that LIFO® was my way to connect with and understand *others*.

LIFO®'s assessment provides the participants the tools to better “understand ourselves and to talk to each other and understand the mutual impact of our differences or similarities” (The LIFO SURVEY, 2015). This was important for my transformational learning process because it taught me to empathize and understand others who were different from me. Before LIFO®, I observed others whose leadership styles I could not relate to with anger because they did not embody the more superior characteristics of leadership as I thought I did because of my military experience. After LIFO®, I was able to understand that my understanding of leadership was not superior to another's, it was different, and that we all materialized characteristics of leadership on various behavioral scales. Using the figure below, a reader is able to recognize that individuals can possess characteristics in each of LIFO®'s four orientation's (behavioral styles) to a certain degree. The mock LIFO® strength feedback is not representative of a real result.

Figure 2. LIFO® Strength Feedback Charts

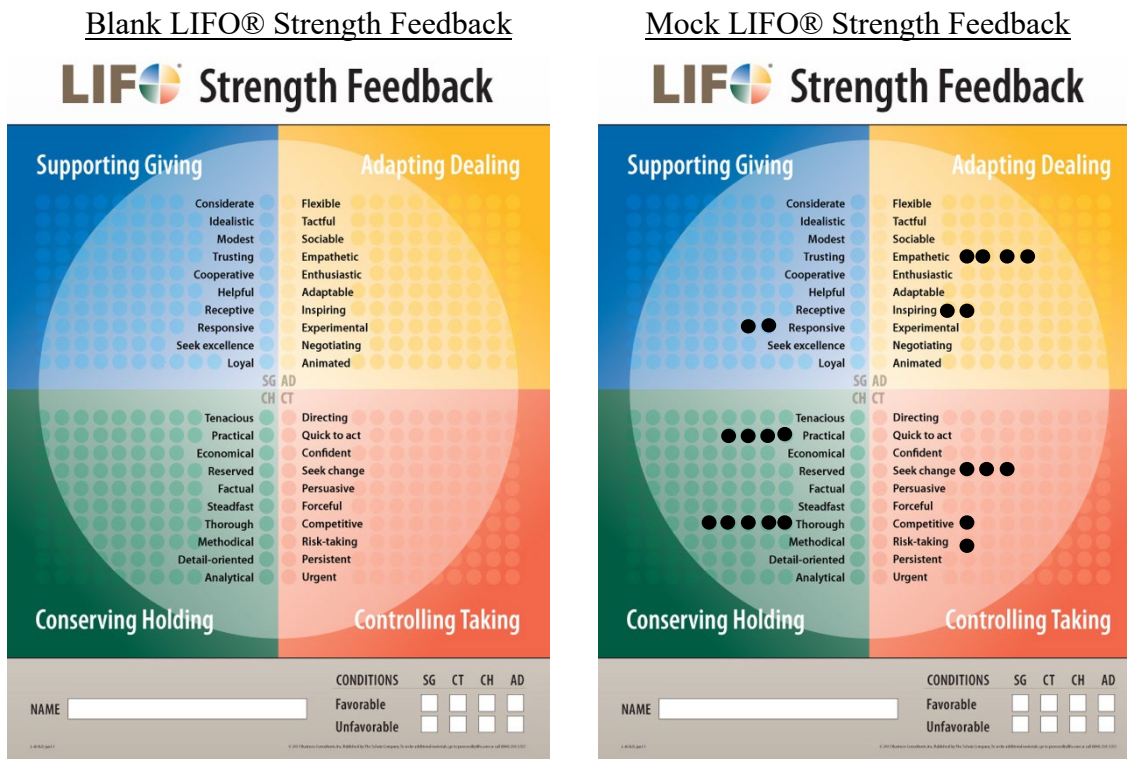


Image source : <https://lifo.co/introduction-lifo/lifo-produces-results/>

Unlike the CVI, *LIFO® connects people by what they have in common* and helps teach those who are seemingly different, understand and communicate with each other *effectively* because LIFO® allows the participant to detach a person's behaviors from who they are as a whole. For example, if, as a leader, I am a dominant conserving holding, scoring highly in the 'thorough' characteristic, and my teammate is dominant in controlling taking, scoring highly in the characteristic of 'urgency', I will no longer think my teammate is acting irrationally because they do not know what they are doing, or because they are purposefully behaving in a way that bothers me. I will be able to recognize that when my teammate is acting urgently, it because urgency is simply their preferred style- nothing more, nothing less. Additionally, I'll have the empathy to

recognize that I too possess some amount of urgency in my personality (depending on the situation, environment, etc.), and using LIFO®'s communication strategies, I'll be more able/equipped to communicate in a way that is productive and receivable by my teammate.

LIFO®'s methodology instantly became the lens through which I viewed every single person in my life and the most exciting new option (for leadership) that I had explored. I no longer saw people as 'weak' or lacking the characteristic of 'strength'. Instead, I saw people as possessing strength in their preferred styles, and perhaps that style was tact, considerate, and/or reserved (vs. urgent). In other words, no one was weak; they were simply dominant in a characteristic where I was less dominant.

At this point in my exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action, I discovered the following:

1. Knowing one's self in life is a key asset of leadership. Being afraid to be who we are is more damaging than embracing ourselves in our natural essence.
2. Leadership comes in various foundations, theories, and approaches. Being open to and having appreciation for each theory increases a leaders' impact.
3. People are not weak. Every person is strong in their own preferred behavioral characteristic, and we all possess every characteristic to some degree within our own respective environments/conditions.

With these new discoveries, I was confident that I was ready to start creating a blueprint of action for my new idea of leadership.

Planning A New Course Of Action

As I transitioned into the next phase of my transformative learning experience, I was ready to create a strategy for learning new techniques and expose myself to new and different perspectives. Thankfully for me, this was the easiest part in my transformative learning experience because I was in an academic cohort that not only fostered transformational learning but expected it. Each of the cohorts' instructors were upfront and frank in their expectations for personal, intellectual, and professional growth. In other words, they were instructors engaging in transformational teaching, a style of teaching that

involves creating dynamic relationships between teachers, students, and a shared body of knowledge to promote student learning and personal growth. From this perspective, instructors... accomplish these goals by establishing a shared vision for a course, providing modeling and mastery experiences, challenging and encouraging students, personalizing attention and feedback, creating experiential lessons that transcend the boundaries of the classroom and promoting ample opportunities for pre-reflection and reflection (Slavick & Zimbardo, 2012, p.571).

In many ways, planning a new course of action was already done for me. I was already involved in a process of learning new dimensions of leadership within an environment that fostered learning. In addition to being in an environment that fostered learning, I was in an environment that I trusted- something equally, if not more important to me. During transformational learning, "there should be a sufficient level of social support that allows individuals to safely participate in deep learning" (Kwon, Han, & Nicolaides, 2020). Without trustworthy relationships, it is unlikely that learners will be able to openly and confidently deal with triggering emotions that may arise from conversations with others. However, social support does not necessarily mean that only a sense of comfort or acceptance leads to transformation; rather, it means that both the push

into disruptions and the pull toward psychological safety should be in place” (Kwon, Han, & Nicolaides, 2020).

From our very first, to our very last encounter, the cohort instructors guided us to “trust the process”. Although I had not yet known I was in a transformative learning process of leadership style, I was aware that I was engaged in the process of learning. Trusting in the process *was* my plan. I was moving forward, trusting the guidance of my instructors, and the support of my peers, in faith that my blueprint for action was exactly what I needed.

Acquiring Knowledge and Skills For Implementing One’s Plans

In the next phase of Transformative Learning Theory, acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans, learning is the predominant feature. “Learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience as a guide to future action” (Mezirow, 2000, p.5). Learning during this phase of transformative learning requires considerable effort, as this is when the learner receives the material necessary to develop new mental models and frames of reference.

At this point in my transformative learning experience, our cohort had begun DYNM 724: Building Consulting and Coaching Tools and Techniques. In DYNM 724, we learned various “tools and techniques used in effective internal and external organizational consulting and coaching engagements” and applied the information to two large projects: a (cohort) peer to peer coaching engagement and a consulting project (Russo, 2019).

To my delight, the first tool/technique we learned (more) about was LIFO®. During our continuing review of LIFO®, I gained additional insights for leadership that I did not previously discover while studying my notes at home (during my exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions). One of those insights was that the power behind LIFO® is the *dialogue*; getting feedback and asking, “is that how you want to be” and “how are you experiencing me”? This was an important lesson for me because feedback had not been a notable part of my leadership experience as a noncommissioned officer (NCO) while in the Army. As an NCO, I was required to participate in a Noncommissioned Officer Evaluation Report (NCOER) every year. The NCOER is a standardized Department of the Army form used in performance evaluations for noncommissioned officers (HRC, 2020, Q1-1). In total, I was the recipient of three NCOER’s. Each of the evaluations took less than five minutes to finish, and none of them were given serious consideration. The NCOER’s were viewed as nothing more than a paperwork formality. It should be noted that this was not a personally motivated lack of care/consideration- the same attitude was experienced by my peers each review. In my day-to-day experiences as an NCO, feedback was not a part of my operational mindset. There were corrections on practical skills such as stitching up a wound or resetting a broken bone, but little to do with leadership skills. Under non war-time circumstances, NCO’s are required to attend various leadership schools as they rise in rank. However, the “

terrorist attacks on American soil in 2001 and the subsequent military response (i.e., GWOT) necessitated increasing operational demands for NCO leadership positions and, as a consequence, for promotable NCOs. These demands led to the situation where NCOES [noncommissioned officer educational system] requirements were de-emphasized. By 2003, nearly one in every eight NCOs was promoted without the prerequisite NCOES courses (Purcell, 2005). With the unit deployment demands

continuing to increase, the BNCOC [Basic NCO Course] prerequisite was waived on a case-by-case basis starting in 2003 for NCOs considered for promotion to SFC [sergeant first class]. Finally, conditional promotion policies were suspended in 2004 as an additional effort to provide the needed NCO inventory (U.S. Army Human Resource Command, 2003a). The consequence of the suspension was, of course, to partially disconnect the NCOES from NCO promotion (Bink, James, & Thomas, 2009, pp.1-2).

A lack of leadership skill training was not only prevalent in my every-day performances as a leader, but in my experiences as a young soldier being led by others.

Another LIFO® insight I learned, was that individuals present differently depending on what role they are acting within. Prior to taking the LIFO® assessment, an individual assumes a particular role in their life that they want applied to the assessment. This could include roles such as leader, learner, salesperson, teacher, coach, organization as a whole, and even another person (The LIFO SURVEY, 2015). Depending on an individual's assumed role, their assessment results could produce remarkably different results (this was experienced first-hand in my results between leader and learner). The diversification of roles and subsequent preferred behavior results further allowed me to remove blanket statement labels from individuals such as 'slow' or 'weak'. If an individual was taking their time to make a decision at work, that did not mean they were always a person who took their time to make a decision. It meant they took their time while in the role of employee. That same individual might behave more expedited while in another role such as student, daughter, or parent. Furthermore, this insight provided me with additional empathy towards others. By understanding that individuals behaved differently depending on their role (manager, secretary, team member, etc.), I was able to empathize that those individuals are behaving in that role for a reason known by and intimate to them only. For example, if my female co-worker is acting aggressively in her

role of manager, I am able to empathize that she might be acting that way (in that role) because she has had to endure many stigmas or stereotypes towards female leaders and is trying to make her mark in a man's world.

The last insight I gained while learning more about LIFO® was an individuals' "greatest strength can become [their] greatest weakness when overused" (LIFO surveys & languages, 2014). During my explorations of options for new roles, relationships, and action, I recognized that individuals could possess characteristics in each orientation to a certain degree. However, I did not yet understand that when possessing too much of a given characteristic, an individual can become an unfavorable version of themselves. *This realization was a monumental revelation in my understanding of human behavior.* To this day, I have not viewed human behavior as I had for 35 years prior. Because of this revelation, I stopped labeling people. People were no longer 'bad', 'lazy', 'scared', 'slow', etc. Instead, I recognized that if someone is acting as an unfavorable version of themselves, it is a manifestation of an overused behavioral characteristic.

I did not know it at the time but learning these three aforementioned insights from LIFO® would fundamentally change my understanding of leadership and would alter the course of my professional trajectory in the following year.

Continuing in my acquisition of knowledge and skills, the second tool/technique from DYNAM 724 that made an impact in my transformative learning experience was a team mock consulting project. Up to this point in the cohort curriculum, we had been taught several theories, perspectives, methodologies, and models pertaining to consulting engagements. We had enough information to survive the assignment, yet not enough to excel. I believe this was done by strategic design, so as students, we would learn just as

much after our consulting presentations (during the debrief) as we would while creating our proposals. As a class, we were given a handout that described the issues that were impacting the fictitious organization. The instructors then split our cohort into two consulting groups based on their understandings of our individual preferences, behaviors, and personalities, and assigned us our first task- creating a pitch as to why the fictitious organization should choose our fictitious consulting company. In our groups, we gave ourselves a group name, established our group identity and philosophy, established our personal identities and philosophies within the group, assigned ourselves roles for the project, and compiled our pitch for the instructors who were acting as executives for the fictitious organization. Around the same time as our pitch, we had a brief Q&A with the executives to ask follow-up questions that would help our group compose the most effective and attractive consulting engagement. These first steps of the consulting exercise were exciting, fun, and seemingly harmonious for my group, and are important to note because consulting group forming was spectacularly different from the cohort group forming. As a consulting group, we had already known each other for several months and had learned social tools to support us as a group, such as LIFO®, and had learned academic tools to allow us to function more productively, such as our executive summaries.

Moving forward in our consulting engagement, our group happily floated by our timeline of engagements and deliverables. When we spoke to our fictitious competing consulting organization, they had very different accounts of their interactions. They told us stories of arguments, frustration, and disagreements they led to group members being in tears. They shared how much time and effort they were putting into their consulting

assignment. It seemed like for every hour my group spent on the assignment; the competing group spent six.

It was not until the day before our presentation that my group realized we had made a mistake. Because we were so comfortable in our initial interactions, we lost a sense of urgency and formality. We treated what little time we spent together as fun time and left a lot of what needed to be delivered up in the air to be figured out later. After class on the day before our presentation, the two consulting groups were given time to finish up their proposals and practice their presentations. Our group had nearly nothing tangible to work from. Most of our ideas were just that- ideas. We put very little work into drafting our actual presentation. Because of this, my group stayed to work on our presentation until after midnight. We learned the next day that our competing group wrapped up around 6:00pm. Even after midnight, my group still did not yet finalize proposal; but we called it quits because we were tired and crossed over into 'I don't care' mentalities. Thankfully, the instructors gave the cohort an hour of in-class time the next day, before our presentations, to work through the finishing touches.

My experiences within the consulting project were an important part of my transformative learning process for two reasons. The first reason was that although I was not yet aware I was in a transformational learning experience, I was transforming. I was naturally letting go of my 'old ways' (my frames of reference, meaning perspectives, and points of view) to accommodate new approaches. Instead of approaching the assignment as I would have in the Army, and at the beginning of the cohort, with a militant iron fist and guns blazing attitude, I took the opposite approach. I was carefree and left most of the work to chance- the chance that others would have the bright ideas, the chance that

our ideas would come together organically, the chance that my groupmates were on top of their tasks, etc. The second reason was that I was acquiring knowledge on what it meant to be a leading member of a civilian/non-government team, having a wide-reaching impact on the moral and emotional success of an entire organization (versus a more limited operational impact as I had while in the Army).

Upon completing DYNM 724, our cohort progressed to DYNM 723: The Coaching and Consulting Relationship. Up to this point in my cohort experience, I had bounced back and forth in who I was and how I was supposed to be, like an uncontrollable Newton's Cradle (a device

used to show how conservation of momentum and energy works by using a series of swinging spheres. This is usually a system of five balls attached to a structure by two strings on either side. A ball on one end is lifted, and when it is released, strikes the other four balls. This collision creates a force through the other four balls and causes the ball on the other end to be pushed upward (Virginia Tech, n.d.)).

I was active on both ends of the spectrum- militant leadership and complete disengagement- yet had been unmoved in the middle. But the middle was the real me. Not the soldier who learned to live in fight or flight, not the student in an unfamiliar ivy league ivory tower, but the real me. The middle was the young girl who grew up on a humble family farm, who loved hard, who fantasized about life in a quirky world of science fiction, who was a goofy loud introvert, who preferred a conversation of unrefined toilet humor to one of literature and art, who held her cards close yet was the first to offer a stranger the last dime in her bank account. The problem with the real me, is that she was never allowed to exist as she came. She always needed re-branding or a total remodel (soldier vs. individual). No one had ever told her she was exactly who she needed to be... that was until she had a conversation with Dr. Linda Pennington.

In DYNM 723, our cohort was given one major assignment: conduct a 360 executive coaching engagement with a fellow cohort member using the Wilkinsky 9-Step Process of Coaching (see Table 2).

Table 2. The Wilkinsky Normative 9-Step Coaching Process

Wilkinsky Normative 9-Step Coaching Process	
Getting Started	1. Call/Engage
	2. Get to know
	3. Ask client to set preliminary goals. Important to narrow focus to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behavioral goal • Intellectual pursuit
Data Management	4. Establish the Data Plan
	5. Gather data. Analyze data
	6. Feedback <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan • Deliver • Reactions
Results	7. Action Plan
	8. Implement / Support Role
	9. Begin to Disengage

(O'Connor, p.24)

The model outlines the steps of the coaching process divided into three areas. First is “Getting Started” which is defined as engaging the client, getting to know each other and setting a preliminary goal. Second is “Data Management” which includes establishing a data plan, gathering and analyzing data and delivering feedback. The third area is called “Results” and includes writing an action plan, implementing the coaching sessions and disengaging from the coaching client (O'connor, 2010, p.23-24).

Unlike the design of our consulting engagement, where we were given enough information to survive but not enough to excel. I felt as if our cohort had spent considerably more time focused on learning how to coach. I felt more prepared and comfortable to coach. To get started on our assignment, our instructor gave us each a piece of paper with the name of the person we would be coaching, and the name of the person who we would be coached by. Reading my client's name was bittersweet. Although my client was the person in my cohort who I admired the most, they were also who I feared the most. I felt as though my client was everything I was not- polished, assured, confident, successful in their career, sociable, tactful, and powerful. I had no idea how I was going to coach someone who was everything I wanted to be, yet nothing of what I saw in myself. I was intimidated... until I had that conversation with Linda.

After we had received our assignments, our class took a bio break. Linda was sitting at the back of the classroom waiting for anyone who wanted to have a side bar conversation. I took the opportunity to sit 1:1 with Linda and opened myself to vulnerability. I told Linda that I did not know how I was going to coach someone like my client; that I was no match for someone like my client, that I was inexperienced, and that my style was anything but polished and poised. I vividly remember Linda replying, "Who gives a shit what people think. Be exactly who you are. Be your authentic self." (personal communication, April 6, 2019). It should be noted that Linda's style of communication with me was personalized to my daily vernacular which includes many curse words. While it might seem inappropriate to some, it was exactly how I needed to be communicated with, and very much appreciated. Linda gave me what no one in my life had ever given me up to that point: explicit permission to be exactly who I am- that girl

who lives at the center of Newton's Cradle. Like the Grinch's heart grew for the Who's in Whoville, my heart grew for the girl who lives at the center.

Following the Wilkinsky 9-step process, our cohort would engage in coaching sessions that would span from January 2019 through May of 2019. In the first three steps, the paired coach/client set the framework for the engagement. This included creating a schedule, outlining the coaching process, establishing ground rules, creating a mock contract, developing the questions for the 360 feedback, and identifying who would be interviewed using the questions. Next was establishing a data plan, gathering the data through 360 interviews, and compiling the data into a 360 feedback report for the client. After the 360 feedback report was delivered, the coach and client developed a plan for action and identified how the coach could support the client through the plan for action. Lastly, the coach and client developed a disengagement plan that allowed the client to move forward in a manner that felt successful for the client.

As a coach, I acquired several skills and pieces of knowledge throughout my engagement. To protect the privacy of the coaching sessions, this paper will not contextualize what I learned. Instead, I will list learned takeaways:

1. If a coach cannot produce unconditional positive regard for their client, then they need to end the coaching engagement.
2. If being you is not going to work, then you need to fire the client.
3. Coaching is a developmental process, not a solution.
4. W.A.I.T.: Why Am I Talking- Our role as a coach is not to tell the client how 'fix' their 'problem'. Our role is to facilitate dialogue using self as an instrument.

5. Do not be a solution in search of a problem- A coach does not solve problems, give advice, or give directives. They listen, notice, and pay attention, acting as the vessel to facilitate growth.
6. Client's possess the answers to their questions; effective coaches create a space for their client's discovery.
7. A client who benefits from a coach is not deficient or lacking in their leadership capabilities. Conversely, they have enough bravery to acknowledge an area in their life that can be improved.

Although I gained a great deal of knowledge and skills while being a coach, I learned even more as a client. As a client, my goal was aligned with my transformative learning experience, even though I had not yet been aware I was well into my journey. In my initial meetings with my coach, I identified my coaching goal as wanting to learn how to manage negative feedback without being offended. I then chose the people in my life who I wanted to participate in the 360 degree coaching process, and identified the questions I wanted my coach to ask those people. After the feedback session, I quickly realized that I needed to change my coaching topic. With thoughtful questions, my coach helped me to realize that I wanted to be coached on how to exist as my authentic self. More specifically, how to feel comfortable in a room of my peers while being authentic to myself- the girl in the middle of Newton's Cradle.

The engagement within the coach and client process was paramount to my transformational learning experience. While coaching and while being coached, I learned that coach was synonymous with leader, client was synonymous with follower, and engagement was synonymous with teamwork. I learned that leadership meant meeting

people where they are, as they are- not where I want them to be, as I want them to be. I learned that bravery was not the absence of fear, but the willingness to authentically move forward despite the unknown.

Although I was not yet aware of my transformational learning journey, my experiences in DYNM 724 and DYNM 723 lead me to a clearer understanding of what it meant to be a leader. I acquired (learned) the knowledge and skills to bring me to tentative best judgments as a leader and as a member of a team.

CHAPTER FIVE

TAKING ACTION

Provisional Trying of New Roles

The eight phase Mezirow's theory asserts the learner begins a provisional trying of new roles. In this phase, the learner begins applying what they have learned in the previous phases into their lives in an attempt to modify their behavior (Briese, Evanson, & Hanson, 2020). John Dewey, an American philosopher who founded pragmatism, believed that the action of applying the information that the learner has cultivated is "central" in the "concept of learning" (Illeris, 2018, p.79). To capture all that the cohort had learned in the previous semesters, myself and my cohort peers engaged in two field placements: an executive coaching internship (DYNM 729) and an organizational consulting internship (DYNM 728). This next phase in my transformational learning experience seamlessly flowed with the final classes of the ECOC curriculum.

For my executive coaching field placement, I was paired up with an individual who was the chairperson of the board for a non-profit that served communities in need in South America. For my organizational consulting field placement, I was paired up with an individual who was a previous cohort graduate and who was building a women's empowerment non-profit. My instructors believed both of these placements would be a great fit due to my previous experiencing in non-profit startups and due to my relentless pursuit for female empowerment.

Armed with the assessments, explorations, planning's, and acquisitions from the previous phases, I was excited to dive into my field placements. I felt most confident and

enthusiastic to begin my consulting engagement due to my client's familiarity with the ECOC program. Unfortunately, the enthusiasm was short lived. Within 30 minutes of the first meeting, I knew that neither I nor the engagement was what my consulting client needed. My client needed a thought partner but demanded that I fulfill the duties of a business partner/secretary. My client's ideas were nebulous, unattainable, and operationally illegal. As I sat back and listened to what they were asking, I wrote down four pages of questions to ask my client in an attempt to narrow the scope of their request. My client demanded to see the notes. After I showed them the notes, they criticized me, telling me that I did not know what I was doing and that I was in over my head. In an act of "concession" my client gave me a list of deliverables. I wanted to push back on my client, denying her accusations, but I was eager to try a new style of leadership- I wanted to stick it out. The sessions going forward quickly devolved. I was frequently chastised for "not knowing what [I] [was] doing" and for pushing back on ideas and actions that I believed to be disserving my client. Nevertheless, I stayed the course. I wanted to be the transformed version of myself- I wanted to meet my client where they were, seeing them through their lens and through a behavioral overuse (LIFO®) versus a blanket personality judgement. It should be noted that I unknowingly wanted to be the transformed version of myself. Although I had evolved in my leadership style, I was not consciously aware I was in the middle of transformational learning. In an attempt to be a team player, I created and delivered every item my client had asked for including branding, marketing strategies, policy and procedure manuals, terms of service, B2B contracts, mission statement, vision statement, etc. After sharing my frustrations with my cohort peers, I was confused at the amount of work I was doing compared to the

amount of work they had shared they were doing. I felt used and manipulated by my client. I felt that my client should have known what to and not to ask since they were a graduate of the cohort.

In an attempt to redirect the engagement, I asked my client to meet me for dinner. When I brought up my concerns to my client, my client became very upset. In a last-ditch attempt to make things right, I asked my client if they would mind if we met with an instructor, allowing the instructor to be the mediator in our conversation. They agreed. The meeting with the instructor did not go as I had hoped. I felt that due to my instructor's personal friendship and professional partnership with my client, my instructor was unable to approach the conflict with an unbiased perspective. I walked away from the meeting at a loss for what I could do for my client. During the next meeting with my client, I took the feedback that was provided to me during the mediated meeting and pushed back against some of the tasks that my client was asking me to perform. My client fired me.

As my client was on the phone, firing me, I began crying and begged my client not to fire me. I was petrified of failing my class and utterly confused at where I went wrong. When we hung up, I panicked called each of my instructors, trying to figure out what I was supposed to do next. I eventually made contact with an instructor; the same instructor who paired me with my client and conducted the mediation. The instructor reassured me that being fired from my client did not mean I was going to fail the class. They wanted to know what the process had taught me, and how I was going to move forward with that lesson to be a stronger and more prepared consultant for the future. In retrospect, I should have fired myself after the first meeting.

Thankfully, my coaching field placement was very different from my consulting field placement. I first met my coaching client over a cup of coffee at café near her home. She came into the engagement explicitly stating she had an open mind and was ready to do the work it took to become a better version of herself. After she spoke at length about the various facets of her life, we discussed the framework, expectations, and time frame of the coaching engagement ahead.

The next week, I met with my coaching advisor to discuss first impressions and map out what the next steps of the engagement would look like. My call with the coaching advisor was paramount in the way I conducted myself going forward as a coach. When speaking with my advisor, I shared several judgmental thoughts and opinions about my client. Despite the transformational learning journey I had been on up to this point, I was approaching my client through my old lenses. My advisor quickly reminded me that it is not the role of a coach to judge or label their client- that I had to meet my client with unconditional positive regard. My advisor went into additional detail, providing me with the insight and wisdom to continue forward in a way that would deliver successful results for my client. This conversation with my advisor realigned my intentions and objectives and empowered me to integrate my new perspectives of leadership into the engagement. The remaining coaching sessions resulted in a transformational experience for my client.

Renegotiation Relationships and Negotiating New Relationships

“In 1991, Mezirow (1994) expanded the original 10-phase model of perspective transformation to include an additional phase, “renegotiating relationships and

negotiating new relationships” (p.224), between the original phases 8 and 9. This new phase reflected the “importance of critical self-reflection” (Kitchenham, 2008, p.113).

After the emotional roller-coaster I experienced in my field placements, I closed myself to academic influences and took a much-needed pause to self-reflect. Through my field experiences, I learned a lot about myself and about the transformed leader I was becoming. Going into my consulting internship, I abandoned the leader who walked in the door of DYNM 720. After feeling like a fish out of water (within UPenn and the ECOC cohort) I had thought that my version of a leader was wrong in every way. In her place, I constructed a new version of a leader using many of the tools and techniques I learned throughout my various semesters within the cohort. However, like the house of straw and sticks in the Three Little Pigs, my house was easily blown down by the breath of a wolf. My house was not strong because my house was not *me*. Upon reflection, I realized that my unfavorable experience taught me that being a good leader did not mean abandoning all that had made me a leader in the 35 years prior to the cohort. It meant that I was able to negotiate my relationship with myself, adapting what worked, and leaving out what did not.

Reflecting upon my coaching internship reminded me the power and negative impact of assumptions. If my advisor had not checked my ego during our initial phone call, my coaching engagement could have gone just as poorly as my consulting engagement. Upon reflection, I realized that every leader comes to the table with different life stories and life objectives. Just because two leader’s life stories do not align, does not mean a successful team cannot be formed or that a common goal cannot be achieved. Reflecting upon my coaching engagement allowed me to re-negotiate how I

approach my leadership relationships with others, removing my biased and/or assuming lenses.

Building Competence and Self-Confidence in New Roles and Relationships

Both of my ECOC field placements taught me more about myself than about the process of coaching or consulting. The result was an increase in my self-confidence, Mezirow's ninth step of his transformational learning theory.

Self-confidence has two aspects: general self-confidence, which is a stable personality trait that develops in early childhood, and specific self-confidence, which is a changing mental and emotional state associated with the specific task or situation at-hand. We develop both types of self-confidence through automatic, mostly unconscious, internal dialogues whereby we make judgments about ourselves based on our experiences and others' feedback. While both types of self-confidence profoundly affect our thoughts, emotions, and behavior, our levels of general self-confidence are important primarily in new and unusual circumstances while our specific self-confidence is pertinent to our everyday performance. High levels of both types are essential for effective leadership and enable the leader to influence his collaborators, or followers, to build task-specific self-confidences that can strengthen their job performance (Axelrod, 2007, abstract).

Around the same time I was finishing my field placements, I had an unexpected internship opportunity presented to me. The Commanding General of Aberdeen Proving Ground was a personal friend of mine. The General asked me if I would consider interning for a Senator on Capitol Hill. I told the general that the thought had literally never crossed my mind. He proceeded to encourage me to take the internship, citing the positive change he had seen in me since enrolling in the University of Pennsylvania. After much consideration and a tedious application process, I was accepted into the intern class for a United States Senator.

The internship was three months long and structured into three (month-long) segments. The first segment was constituent services- giving capitol tours to residents of

the state who were visiting Washington D.C., the second segment was mail services-opening and forwarding mail and email correspondence to the correct legislative aid, and the third segment was legislative research at the Library of Congress for legislative aids.

Upon arriving at my Senator's office, I was introduced to my fellow interns, my immediate supervisor, and the entire office staff. After a day's worth of meet and greets, I came to learn I was the oldest person in the office (with the exception of the Senator), was the only veteran in the office, and had the highest level of education in the office. Prior to my engagement in ECOC and my subsequent transformational learning experience, this dynamic would have been *so* problematic, that I would have likely declined to participate any further in the intern program. I would have thought 'There is not the place for me; these are children who are here thanks to their lobbyist and/or trust fund parents. I am soldier who have led troops and saved lives.' However, that is not how I viewed the dynamic. I saw each of the people in front of me as trailblazers who were doing more in their young years for the nation's legislature than most people do in their lifetimes. I felt honored to be amongst them. With my transformed mindset, I opened myself to everything that I was taught, directed, and asked, and performed my tasks, no matter how menial, with dignified integrity. At the end of my second week, the Chief of Staff (COS) asked me to step out of the traditional intern curriculum and take on more responsibility. My new role was to re-develop and lead the intern program and serve as the Senator's proxy for cybersecurity events (hearings, speaking engagements, lectures, etc.) on the hill.

During the last weeks of my internship, my time in the Senators office was extended when I was accepted into a fellowship through HillVets, an organization "for

veterans interested in engaging in policy, politics, or government, and provides leadership training for veterans currently in the National Capitol Region” (HillVets, 2020). As a HillVets fellow, I continued to serve as the Senator’s proxy for cybersecurity events and took on the additional responsibilities of writing cybersecurity legislation and building relationships with members of the international cybersecurity community.

While in my Fellowship, I was invited to attend a high-profile holiday event in Washington, D.C. The event took place outside on a dreary, rainy day. As I was sitting in my seat, I saw a section of rain-covered seats reserved for high-profile individuals who were hosting wounded war veterans. Prior to my transformational learning experience, I would have gawked at the lack of planning and preparation that went into the seating arrangements. However, I now thought to myself, ‘no one can predict the weather, but someone can do something to make an unfortunate occurrence less miserable for the VIP attendees.’ Without hesitation, I removed an undershirt that I was wearing, crossed the seating platform, and began wiping off the VIP seats. After the VIP’s started taking their seats, I quickly sat back down in mine. A few minutes into the event, a woman came up to me, gave me her business card, asked me to call her, and walked away. After the event, I filed the business card away in my rolodex, thinking to myself that I was not ready to entertain any additional offers due to my fruitful and satisfying work as a Fellow.

A few weeks after the holiday event, while sitting in a routine hearing for cybersecurity matters, I was approached by the woman who had handed me her business card. She said she wanted a meeting with me and would not accept no for an answer. Knowing this woman held a high-profile seat in a high-profile office of government; I accepted her invite- it would not be wise to say no for a second time. In our meeting, the

woman asked me to leave my current position and come work in her office. She stated that she had already run a formal background investigation, completed the necessary paperwork, and had received the Senator's blessing to assume the new role she was offering me. Feeling as though the decision was already made for me, I accepted. After a handshake commitment, she informed me that my desk at the Senator's office was being cleared out and would be established in her office within the hour.

My experiences and fast-paced trajectories while in the Senator's office were the perfect place to build competence and confidence in my new roles and relationships. I became confident in the balance of leadership style I was able to strike between self, theory, and environment. Shockingly, I was still unaware I had engaged in the process of transformational learning; I simply attributed my happenings to knowing the right people and being at the right place at the right time.

A Reintegration into One's Life On The Basis of Conditions Dictated By One's New Perspective

My new professional role and my completion of studies at the University of Pennsylvania transpired around the same timeframe. The transformative phases (phases 1-10) of my transformational learning experience had come to an end. The final stage of Mezirow's Transformative learning theory occurs when an individual has experienced a transformation where a new frame of reference, habit of mind, and point of view is formed - is part of the individual – and is integrated into the individual's daily life (Mezirow, 2000, p.22). With a transformed understanding and embodiment of leadership, I began my new role in Washington D.C.

My new boss was a headstrong male, twelve years my junior. He expressed his excitement to have me, stating he looked forward to having my years of military leadership experience be a part of the office. My instructions were to build a team from the ground up that operated at full throttle in a fast-paced twenty-four-hour news cycle. Although I was initially reluctant to leave the good work I was doing in my Fellowship, I quickly embraced the history-making role I was thrust into.

I hit the ground running. Within two weeks, I built the framework, legalities, and functionalities for my new team. By the end of my third week, I had recruited and hired eleven team members, and by the end of the fourth week, we were trained and operational. During these first four weeks of employment, I performed, operated, and conducted myself through the lens of my transformed leadership style. While building the framework, legalities, and functionalities for the new team, I developed the process in which to perform- not the solution for the organization's problems. I created a space for discovery- acknowledging that neither I nor the office as an entity had all of the answers. I practiced the power of the pause utilizing W.A.I.T.- allowing those around me to richly contribute to the conversation. While recruiting my new team, I checked my ego and assumptions of the new talent, creating space for appreciation in areas of their skill sets and personalities that I was not accustomed to or proficient in.

Throughout our grueling week of training, I taught, applied, and utilized LIFO® for each of the new recruits- allowing us to see the best in each other while removing harmful labels of judgement, and recognized that one of our new recruits was not the right fit for the team- moving them to another department instead of forcing them to

commit and comply. With a team that I was proud to lead and excited to see in operation, I stood in front of my new boss awaiting our next steps.

My team quickly received our first engagement. We were excited to show the results of our hard work and dedication to the mission. By the second day of our ten-day engagement, my boss called me, screaming with anger and displeasure over how I was running my team. Unfortunately, it was not the last time he would be unhappy with my leadership.

During the initial months of my new employment, I received the criticisms of my boss and worked incessantly to improve my performance while shielding the members of my team from his abusive leadership. I doubled down on the utilization of the theories, lessons, and applications I had learned during my time at UPenn. The harder I worked, the crueler my boss became. Day after day, I was subjected to multiple phone calls when my boss would yell, curse at, and belittle me and my capabilities as a leader, and the capabilities of my teammates. I was constantly and consistently called “weak”, “a pussy”, “too forgiving”, “too amicable”, “lazy”, “incapable”, “not cut out for this line of work”, “stupid”, and “the biggest mistake of [his] career”. Although these terms are shocking and inappropriate, they were accepted dialogue within the culture and vernacular of my new work environment... almost identical to the every-day culture and vernacular I experienced while the Army. But this felt different. The difference was me- I had changed. If I had met the woman with the business card before I had been a member of the University of Pennsylvania’s ECOC cohort, I would have thought ‘business as usual’ with my new boss. But I did not meet her before, and business was not usual.

By the third month of employment, the stress created by my boss's verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse had significantly negatively impacted my mental and physical health. In line with the findings of several cross-sectional studies on the physiological and psychological effects of work-place bullying, I experienced chronic fatigue, depression, increased sickness, anxiety, manic behavior, low self-esteem, somatization, increased injuries, and neuroticism (Hansen et al, 2006). What I *knew* to be the 'right' way of leading others and conducting one's self as a leader was in direct conflict with what was being shown to and asked of me.

Around this time in my employment, I was mulling over various topics for my ECOC capstone. I had previously considered and written introductions for three other capstone ideas, none of which interested me enough to write a lengthy paper on. I was anxious and worried about how I was going to devote time to an assignment I was not emotionally connected to. Thankfully I had a capstone advisor, Bruce Friedman, who showed me a great deal of patience, compassionately supporting me throughout my angst. On a scheduled phone call with Bruce, I shared some of my circumstances at work, and how they conflicted with the lessons I had learned at UPenn. Bruce responded, "it sounds like you're having a disorienting dilemma" (B. Friedman, personal communication, und.). I responded, "yeah, I know." But I did not *really* know. I vaguely remembered hearing the term disorienting dilemma while in DYNM 722 but did not know what it meant or how it applied to my current situation. Before ending our call, Bruce encouraged me to read about disorienting dilemmas, and encouraged me to "keep my head up" (B. Friedman, personal communication, und.).

As I sat on my front doorstep, pondering what Bruce had just shared with me, I began to google *disorienting dilemma*. The words on my phone screen jumped out at me. THIS WAS IT. I was experiencing a disorienting dilemma. I ran inside to my whiteboard and frantically began scribbling an outline for my capstone. Knowing I was too excited to make sense, I yelled to my fiancé to come into the room so I could explain my thoughts, and gain clarity on how I could structure my capstone. With my fiancé's calm guidance, and a lot of help from various google search's, I came to understand that my disorienting dilemma was only a dilemma because *I had changed*. When I said the words, "I've changed" out loud to my fiancé, he asked, "Why?" (T. Bohne, personal communication, 2020.). I replied, "because of ECOC." He responded, "THAT is what you write about-how ECOC changed you" (T. Bohne, personal communication, 2020.). Using my fiancé's insight, I began researching what I came to know as the Transformative Learning Theory by Jack Mezirow. Through my Transformative Learning Theory research, and subsequent capstone outlining, I *finally* realized I had transformed my understanding of what it means to be a leader due to the various teachings, interactions, and lessons I experienced as a member of the ECOC cohort.

Enriched with my new understanding of my transformation, my entire perception of my boss and my workplace challenges had changed. Instead of feeling defeated and less-than, as I had prior to transformative learning epiphany, I felt encouraged, energized, and confident in my leadership style. In the following four months, the abuse from my boss nor the toxicity of my workplace had stopped. Because of the political climate and upcoming election, the environment had actually become even more toxic. The harder I tried to stay true to my transformed style of leadership, the more challenging it became to

operate in my role and lead a team of individuals who I had trained to conduct themselves according to my standards of professionalism (versus my boss's). Nevertheless, I remained steadfast in my dedication to the mission, and pressed on.

In late September 2020, I received a call from my boss stating that he was bringing in someone who “had the right set of balls” to do my job, and that while I was not technically being “demoted” I was no longer going to lead the team’s efforts (anonymous, personal communication, 2020.). After the call ended, I submitted my resignation letter, effective immediately. I had reintegrated into my life based on the conditions dictated by my new perspective- a perspective that had no chance of survival in a political campaign.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

As I finalize my capstone, I have been removed from my previous employer for a little over four months. The process of writing this capstone has been a bittersweet balance of academic necessity, self-realization, and cathartic therapy. As much as I dislike writing and the act of converting my thoughts into words on paper, I have reflected a great deal about my journey while in the ECOC cohort, providing me with an immense appreciation for the transformative learning process that I otherwise would not have gained. I have come to be thankful for every instructor, student, author, presenter, theorist, and influence I have encountered at the University of Pennsylvania. Because of them, I am a better leader and a better person.

Through my transformative learning process, I traveled along a journey of self-discovery. I started my journey, entering UPenn as a head-strong soldier ready to jump higher, work harder, and think stronger than everyone else in the room. After realizing that my preferred methods collided head on with my surroundings in the ECOC cohort, I stumbled through my journey, many times, taking one step forwards and two steps back. I have no doubt, that if it were not for the integrity and professionalism of my instructors, and the emotional safety of UPenn, I would have lost my way. But neither my instructors nor UPenn gave up on me. They were my compass, forever by my side, weather I wanted them to be or not.

Having experienced transformational learning, I have found that my life has opened itself to the most loving, supportive, and healthy relationships I have ever been a part of. Because of the revelation in my understanding of human behavior I am kinder,

more compassionate, more understanding, and more empathetic to the behaviors of others. Most importantly, I came to understand my relationship with myself; adapting what works, leaving out what does not, and living every day of my life with a growth mindset (versus the fixed mindset I had prior to UPenn). Instead of reflecting on my experience with my former employer with anger or hatred, I am thankful for their place in my life. Because of them, I was able to understand and reaffirm the awesome power of transformative learning.

The leadership road that lies ahead of me is unknown. Our world has been turned upside down due to international political and social unrest and the deadly Coronavirus that is now inflicting a second wave of death upon our populations. As I search for a new company to call home in our times of unprecedented uncertainty, I face the same challenge as many of my recent graduate peers- a struggling job market with massive unemployment rates (Lorinc, 2020).

Although I am eager to be a part of an organization where I can embody the leadership qualities that I have learned throughout my time at UPenn, I am at peace knowing that wherever I land, I will be a better version of myself. I will carry the lessons, experiences, and memories that the ECOC cohort has gifted me, and exemplify the standard of leadership that would make the University of Pennsylvania proud.

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APPENDIX A

COHORT EIGHT FORMING QUESTIONS

1. What do I need to do to be an effective cohort member?

Honesty, authentic, integrity, participate, balance, supportive, psychological safety, judgement-free, trust, openness, engage, pay-attention, embrace, active listening, open up, avoid-assumptions, presence, accountability, vulnerability, fail, learn, listen, connection, insight, positivity, communication

2. What do I need from others to be an effective cohort member?

Engage, thoughtfulness, honesty, acceptance, feedback, question, dig-deep, push, challenge, openness, perspective, listen, respect, support, authenticity, compassionate-criticism

3. What should I do/want to do when I notice others are not participating as richly/fully as they could be in/between class/in projects?

- Reach out to offer support
- Lend an ear/shoulder
- Communicate the importance of balanced participation
- Engage them in areas of interest
- Learn triggers
- Have a one-on-one conversation/check in
- Remind them of their importance in the group
- Call them out
- Talk to them
- Tell them it's okay, you're ok, it will be ok
- Question how I can best serve this cohort member in this particular situation
- Speak to the person privately – assess personal needs – group needs
- Assess dynamics of the group

4. What is the best way to provide feedback to one another if I have something to share that would assist them in being a more effective cohort member?

- Share feedback privately – if interpersonal issue
- Group discussion about what/what's not working
- Speak to them with honesty
- Provide support
- Tell them it's okay, you're okay, it will be okay

- Be open to ideas
- Continue to ask questions
- Communicate openly both positives and negatives
- One-on-one conversation
- Ask if open to feedback
- Check assumptions
- Feedback on the behavior, not the person
- Make suggestions in formal and informal ways
- Avoid you statements and accusations
- Ask clarifying questions
- Be genuine with feedback

5. How does the cohort evaluate its effectiveness as a cohort on an ongoing basis?

- Clearly defined benchmarks/expectancies
- Regular check ins through formal and informal channels, round robin style
- Share how one another is processing material
- Peers individual engagement to the project
- Gauge how the group is feeling
- Closeness, loyalty, bond, support
- Peer feedback
- Communication between all members
- Pulse progress towards aligned goals
- Are we being too delicate? Are there ways to “break it” responsibly and with compassion?
- We are effective if...
 - ○ We are laughing more
 - ○ We are giving honest feedback
 - ○ We are sharing our failures and successes
- Hold each other accountable for process
- Appreciative inquiry

The Ten Promises

Our Ten Promises

1. SUPPORT: We promise to support and empower each other through highs and lows
2. TRUST: We promise to trust the process and always keep each other’s best interests at heart
3. ENGAGE: We promise to engage and connect regularly
4. LISTEN: We promise to listen with mindfulness, purpose and without judgement

5. FLEXIBLE: We promise to stay flexible and welcome change
6. AUTHENTICITY: We promise to be authentic to ourselves and vulnerable with each other
7. FEEDBACK: We promise to seek, give and receive feedback with grace
8. ACCOUNTABILITY: We promise to drive growth and learning through mutual accountability
9. GRATITUDE: We promise to express our appreciation and gratitude for each other
10. FUN: We promise to laugh, celebrate and have fun together

These promises are a reflection on each individual member of the Cohort VIII. We have the ability to change or amend the contract at any-time. In-case of conflict, we will go back to our foundation and promises to each other.

- 30 SEC ZEN: PAUSE, Reflect
- PULSE CHECK-IN: Just like in class, a time to check-in

APPENDIX B

CORE VALUES INDEX™ KEY

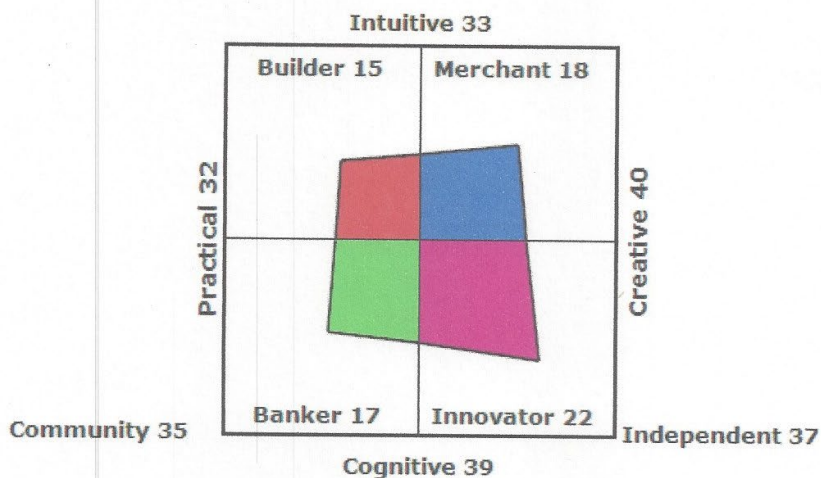
11%	<h2>Builder</h2> <p>Core Value Power (Personal energy applied to make a positive difference)</p> <p>Supportive Value Faith (I know what to do now. I will know what to do next)</p> <p>Contributions to Team Action Results</p> <p>Learning Style Decide and Do</p>	<p><i>Intuitive</i></p> <p>Core Value Love (The nurturing of core values in one's self and in others)</p> <p>Supportive Value Truth (The ways things are)</p> <p>Contributions to Team Relationships Vision</p> <p>Learning Style Talk and Listen</p>	18%
15%	<h2>Banker</h2> <p>Core Value Knowledge (The How and Why of things)</p> <p>Supportive Value Justice (Knowledge and resources are available to all and used appropriately)</p> <p>Contributions to Team Conservation Information</p> <p>Learning Style Read and Analyze</p>	<p><i>Cognitive</i></p> <p>Core Value Wisdom (To see the way things are and to know what to do about it)</p> <p>Supportive Value Compassion (To remain inquisitive and observant, seeking understanding)</p> <p>Contributions to Team Assessments Solutions</p> <p>Learning Style Assess and Solve</p>	5%

Practical (left side), *Creative* (right side), *Independent* (top-left to bottom-right), *Community* (top-right to bottom-left)

APPENDIX C

MY CVI RESULTS

The CVI assessment found that you are a **INNOVATOR/MERCHANT**.



Your primary value set is Innovator and your primary core value is Wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to see the way things work, and to know what to do about them.

Your secondary value set is Merchant and your secondary core value is Love. Love is the nurturing of core values in one's self and in others.

