

Leadership Philosophy Statement

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Introduction

Leadership to me is about creating spaces where people around me feel safe, inspired, and motivated. My leadership philosophy is to help and support the people I serve so that they can achieve their goals. As a leader, I want to make sure that I listen to and understand the people I supervise and treat them with respect and dignity. Empathy, integrity, and inclusion are the core values that guide my leadership practice.

Reflection

My leadership philosophy is shaped by my lived experiences in a male-dominated society. As an Afghan woman, I grew up in an environment where many women were not allowed to work outside of their houses. In addition, due to traditional societal and cultural beliefs most women were expected to stay home and raise children. In Afghanistan, being involved in society specifically for women from minority groups, is very challenging. I am from a Hazara ethnic group, which is only 20% of the entire population in the country. Throughout the years, the Hazara people have been marginalized and have limited educational and job opportunities. Being a Hazara woman, living and working in such a society, I strongly believe in leading with empathy and the values of integrity, and inclusion in the leadership process.

My leadership principles are very close to the Transformational and Authentic leadership styles. Transformational leadership is about creating change in the lives of those who we lead, while Authentic leadership is about being true to ourselves and reflecting these behaviors in our interactions with our followers (Ruben et al., 2016). Reflecting on these concepts, I am the type of person who values relationships and genuinely cares about the people around me. Like in authentic leadership, in my interactions with friends, family, and colleagues, I appreciate honesty, and my relationships are built based on trust. According to Ruben et al. (2016),

authentic leaders know themselves very well and their actions are aligned with their values and beliefs. I believe leadership starts with self-awareness. To be a good leader, it is important to be true to ourselves and be aware of our strengths, core values, and beliefs.

I have learned and grown as a leader by working in national and international organizations in Afghanistan and in the U.S. Throughout my life, I have faced challenges that shaped my personality and leadership style. Simon & Hoyt (2019) state that women in leadership positions often face challenges due to gender stereotypes and societal beliefs that women are less qualified for leadership positions than men. As a woman, this theory resonated very well with me because of my experience working as a Human Resources Specialist with the AKDN (Aga Khan Agency for Habitat) organization. At the office, I was the only woman who got a senior position. Throughout my job, I struggled a lot to prove that I was competent enough to hold the position. In addition, I had to work twice as hard as others to be heard, seen, and valued. These experiences taught me to become resilient and more confident in challenging societal biases and advocate for more women involvement in society and leadership roles in organizations.

Coming to the U.S. as an international student was the biggest milestone in my life. During my first year at KU, I struggled a lot not only to navigate cultural differences, but also to fit into a culture where I often felt that I did not belong and was not included. For instance, working as a Human Resources Assistant at the KU Memorial Union, I was the only international employee in the entire office. There were times when I struggled to feel included because of cultural differences. Heifetz's perspective on ethical leadership explains that in a supportive environment, followers feel safe talking about their problems (Heifetz, 1994 as cited in Northouse, 2022). In my job, I strive to create a space where students from marginalized groups feel safe and share their problems. While advising students, I make sure that I listen to

these students and respect their unique backgrounds. Some students struggle to speak English since it's their second language, so I practice patience and encourage them to express themselves without feeling judged. By showing empathy and understanding, I will help students feel confident and valued.

Despite the challenges I faced navigating two different cultures, these experiences have transformed me in many ways. I learned the importance of empathy, and understanding people from different cultures. For example, in my current role as a graduate assistant with international support services, I serve a diverse student population on campus. As an international student myself, I can relate to the challenges that many international students are facing to feel included, accepted, and fit into a white dominated environment. Therefore, I aim to create programs that not only help these students to get familiar with a new culture but also foster a culture of belonging and inclusion. The International Student Conversation Series is one of the programs that provides a safe space for international students where they can share their own stories, learn new tips for cultural adjustment, and connect with others.

At my work and among my colleagues, I want to be seen as a leader who cares for others and makes a positive impact on their lives. I aspire to be the type of leader who leads with examples and works with my followers to help them build confidence to reach their highest potential. I serve as an advisor for the Jayhawks for Afghanistan and the International Women's Association. I believe leadership is about motivating team members to get things done. In my role as an advisor, first I set goals and expectations, then I work with them to make sure they are on the right path, and I will supervise them in the areas they need help.

My leadership philosophy is inspired by my mentor, Dr. Mary Banwart. I have known her since 2016, and she is one of the most influential people in my life. Her ability to understand

others, communicate with authenticity, and care for people are the qualities that make her an inspirational leader. For instance, when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, she reached out to me and all other Afghan girls to make sure we were safe. She and her team have been so supportive throughout the process of evacuating us from Afghanistan. In addition, her authentic leadership style shaped my perspective on leadership and how I envision myself as a leader. I want to develop the same qualities in my own leadership journey. I would like to be an inspiration for other women and girls in my country.

Similarly, reflecting on Transformative Leadership, I am also inspired by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf the former President of Liberia. After reading her life's story, her contributions to Liberia's economy and advocacy for women's rights to education, I have learned that leadership is about having courage and being willing to fight for the things that we care about. Ellen Johnson dedicated her whole life to serving the people and community of Liberia. Her ability to challenge societal beliefs about women and use her voice to bring a positive change in the lives of thousands of people in Liberia is inspiring. What I admire the most about her is her strong commitment to justice, inclusion, equality, and empowering women. However, she faced many challenges being a female leader in a male-dominated country, her work continues to inspire women around the world. Like Sirleaf, I want to be remembered as an inspiring leader who makes a positive impact on other people's lives.

References

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