

The Lonely Leadership Discarded

By John Kim

In the past, the words “lone ranger” always appeared in my mind whenever I reflected on being a “leader.” I don’t know definitively where this association originated but I have a few speculations. It could be because, growing up, I always pushed myself to be the “leader” in my social circles which meant that I would inevitably butt heads with my friends. For instance, in elementary school, I would try to assert myself as the “boss” of my friends and order them around and so this is where the “lone ranger” experience kicked-in; kids rarely stuck around to continue to be bossed around by me. Later on down the line, in high school, I remember volunteering to be one of the leaders of a class project. Even in this academic setting, I was bossing my friends around and they started to distance themselves from me — the phone calls trickled to a minimum and hangouts became nonexistent. And I would just give in to that misleading voice telling me, “such is the fate of any leader...the lone ranger.”

I was tired of being alone and entering college I decided that I was done with leadership! I retired my lone ranger boots for good by no longer aspiring for the pinnacle of hierarchy, the forefront of responsibility, the position of praise and anything related to being a “leader.” Or so I thought...

Ironically, by discarding my desires to be a leader, I was able to become a true leader or at least rediscover the leader within me. This didn’t happen because I became better at bossing people around, but because I realized that I had an incomplete understanding of leadership and I simply

needed to reevaluate it. Originally, I didn't resonate with my understanding of leadership because the hierarchical, individualized approach of leadership that is the prevailing understanding of leadership in our society only served to alienate me from everybody I cared about. However, through various experiences in college, I was able to change my conception of leadership by adopting an approach that was more focused on collective interests and shared responsibility rather than individualistic aims, authority, and command. Recently, I discovered that such an approach was modeled by the immigrant labor movements in the past and present and it has a name — *shared leadership*.

As with any paradigm shift, the process of changing my views of leadership to the model of shared leadership isn't an easy or immediate one. However, there are various ways in which I am nurturing my understanding of shared leadership and even putting its ideals into practice.

One such way is through the class projects in which I am a part of the film committee. It is such a powerful learning experience when one can discuss and learn about a certain concept and instead of ending it there, they're able to experience it firsthand. Such is the case for me in our class because as I learn more about the immigrant labor movement and their model of shared leadership I am able to approach my group project with the very ideals discussed. I must admit, though, that I sometimes find it difficult to approach the group setting with the highly-cooperative and anti-hierarchical approach of the shared leadership model since I have a lifetime of experiencing the opposite approach. However, as I take a look at the efforts of the activists in the labor movement, the reality that it isn't about individuals but rather the collective voice sets in and I am compelled to continue in my journey with the shared leadership model.

Another example of how the shared leadership approach is helping me realize and develop the leader within me is through my involvement in the college group at my church. I recently joined the staff to help launch our new group and we have been engaged in heavy planning for our students. The wonderful thing about our staff of four is our understanding that everyone has an equal voice and I even pointed out the fact that we were employing the shared leadership approach at one of our meetings! We even took personality tests and shared our strengths and weaknesses in order to assess how to better work with each other. Being able to point out how the shared leadership model is working for our staff has been quite a rewarding experience for me. It is one thing to be unknowingly engaged in shared leadership but to acknowledge it and be consciously employing it allows our group to work better together and it prepares me for leadership in other capacities for the future since I am learning more about myself and people in general.

Finally, as I reflect back on the dynamics of my class group (film committee) and how I am contributing to shared leadership in it, I realize how much more I could be doing. For example, I could get to know more of the members on a personal level rather than strictly conducting business with them. I have their existing leadership skills and their new leadership skills written down but to bring this experience of shared leadership into the real world, I know it requires more than head knowledge. Furthermore, there are certain members of the group who seem to over-dominate and I struggle to comply with them. I find myself tempted to ignore their input and disregard their roles. However, they truly offer a lot to the group because they have unique gifts that they are using to advance our progress. I realize that I need to continue to recognize that our goals in our group are not about advancing any individual, especially myself, but rather

it is an effort for something that is beyond any one of us. For instance, this film that we are promoting (*Grassroots Rising*) has the potential to spark much needed discussion and awareness on our campus and I strongly believe that it is a privilege to be responsible in bringing it to our campus. Therefore, as I continue to execute my responsibilities in making the presentation of the film a success, I will make an effort to get to know my fellow teammates. At the end of the day, through this venture of shared leadership we can build and experience a sense of community and make our campus that much smaller, that much better.