

“The Secret”: Building Success in the National Student Advertising Competition

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Abstract

The National Student Advertising Competition teaches many valuable tools and lessons to students, especially leadership. But, what is the best way to teach leadership while also teaching students ethical/moral behavior and responsibility in a national competition? Using a combination of servant leadership and the Maieutic Socratic Method, the experiences of one Ad Team adviser shows how students can learn “The Secret” to success.

Keywords: Leadership, Success, Team Building, Competition, Cognitive Growth

Leading from the middle, or better, leading by allowing students to make all the important decision about a competition may appear to be unthinkable to some professors and professionals; but, if the purpose of college is to help students learn to be the next wave of professionals, such a concept does have merit. In addition, when competing in student competitions such as the National Student Advertising Competition (NSAC), this may be a novel approach to student and team success.

In the notoriously competitive field of advertising/strategic communications, post-secondary competitions are taken extremely seriously, and the National Student Advertising Competition is no exception. Sponsored by the American Advertising Federation (AAF), the NSAC requires teams from more than 200 participating universities to develop comprehensive integrated marketing communication campaigns for a national client each year. Recent clients have included Mary Kay Cosmetics, Pizza Hut, Glidden Paint, and J.C. Penny (AAF, 2016). The AAF requires the corporate sponsor to provide a case study underlining the company’s campaign objective, the history of its product and its current advertising situation. The case study needs to reflect a real-world situation facing the company and provide objectives they would like student campaigns to achieve. Successful campaigns require that students research the product and its competition, identify potential problem areas, and collaborate to devise a completely integrated marketing campaign for the client (AAF, 2016).

Teaching students how to conduct a campaign is only part of the puzzle for advisers; the other part is guiding them how to think creatively and critically while developing their professional skills. This requires quality teaching, but how to coach/teach such a team where students individually become more responsible? The current adviser at a Northwest U.S. university chose the servant leadership model using the Maieutic Socratic Method to attempt to accomplish this objective.

Servant Leadership Defined

Leadership is more than managing people. Leadership requires a clear vision so others will willingly follow (Stoll, 2012). As Gerhard K. Becker (2007) explains, leadership is often the compass for a group of people or organization.

Becker argues it is only by exploring the moral dimensions, recognizing that business does not operate in an immoral space and acknowledging leadership is grounded in principles of common ethics that a true leader can hold the power and authority necessary to serve both the individuals and the organization. Referring to the “Welch theory,” Becker (2007) cites former General Electric CEO Jack Welch who described his leadership philosophy this way: “The Welch theory is those who do, get, and those who don’t, go.” This, Becker said, makes leadership all about authority and power with lineage back to Machiavelli, but it can lead to unethical behaviors if the person pays more attention to the individual’s needs than the organization’s needs.

On the contrary, Mark Zuckerberg has worked diligently to safeguard Facebook’s notion of horizontal communication and the feel of a startup, even as the company has expanded to approximately 12,000 employees (McCracken, 2015). McCracken states that Facebook’s now infamous new building - Building 20 - has been outfitted to preserve the stripped-down, collaborative atmosphere of the workplaces that preceded it when the company moved last year. Zuckerberg has religiously stressed the importance of creating an accessible culture, which is why the floors in the new facility are still bare cement while girders and vents remain exposed. In addition, staffers, as before, are encouraged to write on walls; and everyone, including Zuckerberg, work at tables in open areas.

On another level, former New York Mayor, Michael Bloomberg is using his experience and leadership to help revitalize 35 cities around the world (Gay & West, 2015). From Athens, Greece to Kansas City, Missouri, Bloomberg Associates, an arm of Bloomberg Philanthropies, is working on a number of projects, including a European city challenge to develop “bold solutions to major problems and to improve life for their residents” (Gay & West, 2015). Although it is not an overtly stated servant leadership philosophy, Bloomberg is spreading the gospel of city management, and attempting to solve seemingly obstinate problems. The Bloomberg philosophy (Gay & West, 2015): “Parks are good. Corruption is bad. Bypass Bureaucracy. In the end, cities will win.” By working side-by-side with city governments, Bloomberg and his team are encouraging community involvement while offering their experiences; this is not making decisions for the city leaders, but using major metropolitan experience to show examples of alternatives to problems.

With these examples in mind, how can teamwork be taught in a method, which is both moral and stretches the student to want to achieve a leadership that is both multidimensional and ethical or moral in nature? Stoll (2012) described moral values as the relative worth an individual places on motives, intentions and actions directed toward others. The four prime elements are honesty, justice, responsibility, and respect (Stoll, 2012). Foster and Carboni (2009) detail the reasons why moral/ethical leadership is a necessary element in teaching college business courses, stating the attention to moral leadership better provides a grounding for the real world practice of management, making students better prepared to be leaders themselves upon graduation. A fitting combination of teaching teamwork grounded in moral or ethical values that create openness and liberty can be found through a servant leadership model.

Servant leadership is not a set of techniques or activities. It is a way of being, a philosophy of living and influencing (Wheeler, 2011). To even consider servant leadership, Wheeler said administrators should examine their goals and determine whether they have a commitment to modeling and practicing leadership as service. Quoting Robert K. Greenleaf, the father of the servant leadership model, Wheeler (2011) said, “It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first.” Specifically, Wheeler (2011) detailed the nine servant leadership principles as:

1. Service to others is the highest priority
2. Facilitate meeting needs of others
3. Foster problem solving and taking responsibilities at all levels
4. Promote emotional healing in people and the organization
5. Means are as important as the ends
6. Keep one eye in the present and one on the future
7. Embrace paradoxes and dilemmas
8. Leave a legacy to society
9. Model servant leadership

When it comes to teaching, Wheeler (2011) said, “Servant leaders are comfortable in their own skin, live their values, humble, calm, and less intense in their approach to others, and have genuineness about them. They are observant, connected, and open to others.”

This fits well with the millennial generation, the estimated 80 million people born between 1985 and 2000 who do not necessarily fit the traditional molds of business; many reportedly want success on their terms, which may not be the conventional models and trappings of accomplishment (Danford, 2013). Reportedly, Danford said, this means ethical/moral satisfaction as well.

To deliver this outcome in a classroom, the servant leadership technique lends itself to the Maieutic Socratic Method for just such a conveyance. How instructors choose to communicate pedagogically is a subjective debate; however, the Maieutic Socratic style is a method with known success of increasing principled thinking and cognitive growth in participants through a question and answer process (Barnes, Tallent & Stoll, 2015). To date, there is no available literature analyzing the usefulness of using the Maieutic Socratic Method and servant leadership to lead students in academic competitions, but the authors of this work believe the two theories can and do work harmoniously in teaching leadership and building successful teams. However, as Stoll (2012) cautions, social values such as loyalty, hard work and sacrifice can easily be corrupted without strong prime moral values to guide them, especially in a team setting. It is reports of poor leadership and unethical practices in business, which has many of the millennial cynical when responding to traditional leadership methods (Danford, 2013). It is incumbent on the professor to maintain the ideals, and the servant leadership style can aid students in learning about the positive values that build team success

Previous studies in sports, journalism and general education course populations suggests the Maieutic Socratic Method of teaching has long been a standard in many classrooms, with the concept of teaching by questioning considered to be a bedrock of the form. But as Grant (2012) and Leigh (2007) both explained, the Maieutic Socratic Method suggests the idea of birth as the word “maieutic” derives from the Greek word maieutikos or midwife; so the method centers on teaching by engaging the student as a partner with whom the teacher reflects upon the evidence and reasons for a claim while creatively seeking reasons to test the veracity of the belief. Because servant leadership builds on engagement between professor and student to fully develop the nine principles, using the style and the Maieutic Socratic Method is a logical combination.

Using Servant Leadership in an Ad Team Setting

To date, servant leadership has been used in teaching sports, educational technology and business leadership (Huber, 2014; Jacobs, 2011; Wheeler, 2011); but could it also be used to coach a university NSAC team? That was the question by the university’s Ad Team adviser. Prior to his accepting the position in 2012, the previous four teams had placed close to the end or at the bottom of their Pacific Northwest division in NASC. The Ad Team had not even experienced marginally successful attempts since the mid-1990s, when a team placed second nationally. The new adviser decided to couple servant leadership with the Maieutic Socratic Method. This changed the team dynamic from a top-down style to an approach where the team members were responsible for elements including bi-weekly dinners, weekend meetings, organized agendas, fundraising, brainstorming, editing, connecting with each other on social media outlets, organizing travel arrangements, and nominating an account executive. The adviser also knew that the new approach was a drastic departure from the previous culture, and time would be needed to cultivate the new team dynamic he desired. With this notion in mind, the adviser knew his role would be one where he would ask questions and probe students on choices they made regarding the campaign. Before the adviser even began giving specific directions to the Ad Team however, he reiterated to the faculty that he was just an adviser in the NSAC process, not the decider.

In the first two years of the servant leadership approach, the university’s Ad Team won its regional division, and in the third year, came in a respectable fourth place. The question is: Was it the combination of the Maieutic Socratic Method and servant leadership style that made the difference? This paper argues the answer is yes; the combination was the major change factor. Nonetheless, the change did not come without struggle on both the part of the adviser and the student teams. The style was a radical idea and departure from previous pedagogical methods, but the School of the Journalism and adviser believed the combination worked.

The following is a template for creating a similar program using the experiences of the university’s Ad Teams 2012-15.

Finding Smart Students and the Selection Process

The School of Journalism at this specific university consists of approximately 350 students and is comprised of the following four majors: Advertising, Public Relations, Journalism, and Broadcast/Digital Media.

The Ad Team selection process has become quite competitive, requiring students to submit a resume, cover letter, portfolio and a letter of recommendation. In addition, the professors have opened the Ad Team to student participants outside the School. To incentivize Ad Team, students receive six-college-credits for participation, and are allowed access to a network of former Ad Team participants working in the industry.

On average, approximately 125 students apply for the Ad Team each year, which only consists of 15 positions. Moreover, the number of applicants has been rising during the past four years. Due to the increasing volume of applications, the adviser began emphasizing candidates' grade-point-average, letters of recommendation, portfolios and faculty recommendations. Interestingly, the past two Ad Teams have consisted of multiple students outside the School of Journalism. In addition, several of the selections have had minimal advertising or public relations experience. As evidence, the 2015 Ad Team had two team members majoring in physics, two majoring in art, and another in clothing textiles and design.

When the Ad Team was selected, an email was distributed to all candidates announcing the new members. A follow-up email was sent to the selected members only, with a meeting time to discuss team roles, the desired culture, and expectations for the next year. In addition, the initial Ad Team meeting was when contact information and connections via social media were exchanged and a group Facebook page was created. Remarkably, the adviser was regularly asked by his contemporaries about why he would exchange contact information and connect via social media with undergraduate students; the response from the adviser was that he was trying to create a culture of horizontal communication, where each member was on the same level, including himself.

The adviser's notion for selecting the team and trying to create a culture of horizontal communication and openness was derived from Bill Simmons' 2009 book, *The Book of Basketball*. The adviser was particularly drawn to one quote from Simmons regarding a conversation he had while watching old footage of former teams and players stating, "I didn't see the words 'stats' or 'numbers' in there. That's what makes basketball so great. You have to watch the games. You have to pay attention. You cannot get seduced by numbers and stats."

Simmons' larger idea aligns with the servant leadership model, which is about being a participant that wants to create and be part of a culture where each member feels valued, but more important, the team members' value each other and the time they have together. Simmons specifically writes about how he came to this belief after a meeting with Isaiah Thomas, a former Detroit Pistons superstar who won multiple championships as a player in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Simmons had always respected Thomas as a player; however, as a coach and general manager, he would regularly insult Thomas's ability in those positions with crass humor. His ESPN columns regarding Thomas's ineptitude in these positions were often some of the website's most read material (Simmons, 2009).

Nonetheless, Simmons sentiments toward Thomas changed after a poolside meeting they had at a Las Vegas hotel while doing research for his book. Simmons recalls the anxiety he felt before meeting Thomas, who had often been the punch line in several of his NBA columns. After the initial anxiety subsided, Simmons described Thomas as kind and thoughtful, and someone who knew more about basketball than he could have imagined (Simmons, 2009). A lifelong Celtics fan, Simmons was curious to know other than talent, what made Thomas's Pistons' teams become great. Much of Simmons' curiosity to this question was derived from the rivalry developed between Thomas's Piston teams and the Celtics during the 1980s. The Pistons had lost to the Celtics multiple times in the playoffs before finally besting them in route to their first championship in 1989. Thomas replied to Simmons question by stating, "The secret of basketball is that it's not about basketball" (Simmons, 2009).

Thomas continued by stating a term he coined, "The Secret," which he described as the love his Pistons' team members had for one another and their late coach, Chuck Dailey. Thomas claimed it was "The Secret" that made those championship teams so special and great too (Simmons, 2009).

Simmons and Thomas continued the conversation by discussing a controversial trade of superstar, Dantley for Mark Aguirre in 1988. After the conversation with Thomas, Simmons (2009) states: Maybe Dantley was a better player than Aguirre, but Aguirre was a better fit for the 1989 Pistons. If they didn't make that deal, they wouldn't have won the championship. It was a people trade, not a basketball trade. And that's what Isaiah learned while following those Lakers and Celtics teams around: it wasn't about basketball. Those teams were loaded with talented players, yes, but that's not the only reason they won. They won because they liked each other, knew their roles, ignored statistics, and valued winning over everything else.

Simmons (2009) went on to say the following:

Fans overlook The Secret completely. Nobody writes about The Secret because of a general lack of sophistication about basketball; even the latest ‘revolution’ of basketball statistics centers more around evaluating players against one another over capturing their effect on a team. Numbers help, but only to a certain degree. You still have to watch the games. The fans don’t get it. Actually, it goes deeper than that—I’m not sure who gets it. We measure players by numbers, only the playoffs roll around and teams that play together, kill themselves defensively, sacrifice personal success and ignore statistics invariably win the title. We have trouble processing the ‘teamwork over talent’ thing. But how do you keep stats for ‘best chemistry’ and ‘most unselfish’ or even ‘most tangible and consistent effect on a group of teammates’? It’s impossible. That’s why we struggle to comprehend professional basketball.

After the conversation, Simmons continued to seek examples of other NBA champions who carried the same belief as Thomas, and actually found a quote from Bill Russell in his book, *Second Wind* that expressed a similar notion; stating, "I always thought that the most important measure of how good a game I played was how much better I made my teammates play" (Russell & Branch, 1980).

Team Dynamic

With “The Secret” in mind, the NSAC adviser saw Ad Team as a continuous content journey and growth opportunity for him and the team members, and an endeavor where success would not occur overnight, but would be constructed over time and through his participation in team events. In the servant leadership model, Gill (1993) states a key component for classroom success concerns positive team building through lessons that build on previous sessions and instructor participation. The adviser sought an open, caring, and trustful environment, so he could facilitate interactive discussions and active listening that also had empathetic argumentation. The adviser desired to create an atmosphere where team members learned to appreciate divergent points of view, and in the process, improve their own critical thinking and reasoning skills. The adviser also knew that by utilizing the Maieutic Socratic Method in addition to servant leadership, he could possibly create a learning environment that encouraged critical thinking and critical inquiry between him and the team (Gill, 1993).

More important, the continuous content journey would provide the adviser with time to establish his academic ability, which he felt the students would trust and respect if the proper environment was established. It also helped that the adviser had advertising and public relations experience with a major firm in New York City, which appeared to help with the team’s initial commitment to his pedagogical style. The adviser also aspired to be part of positive change, and was committed to the concept that Ad Team could be a catalyst for helping team members become better citizens. Gill (1993) states this approach must cause the instructor to be committed to caring about participants, and they must be genuine in their concern and care; but also, the instructor needs to be open to controversial and sometimes uncomfortable topics while being present with the students.

When the course officially commenced, the adviser and team regularly examined the best practices to assist team efficiency. The adviser felt it was necessary the team be organized and structured, where each member was aware of his or her roles and responsibilities; but also, provide avenues so each member could evolve and enhance other team members’ performance and knowledge. To assist in team development and chemistry, the adviser asked the team to select an account executive to oversee scheduling meetings, agendas, deadlines, and helping members with role development and tasks they would be responsible for executing. The account executive also assembled and distributed weekly progress reports and maintained documentation via the Google Drive regarding the team’s current production status. Nonetheless, some team members had other ideas for what their roles should be when they were initially assigned. When this did occur, the adviser and account executive would intervene to help the team member find alternative means they could do to assist the team while rotating some responsibilities to other members.

After initial roles had been assigned to members, the adviser saw the team’s first chance to begin unifying, and it concerned its fundraising efforts. The operational cost for Ad Team in 2015 was approximately \$4,000, which is needed for supplies, student travel, and team building activities. Much of the fundraising activities involved weekends and nights. Examples of fundraising activities included, pancake feeds, Krispy Kreme Doughnut sales, a local paint and ceramics business Wild @ Art hosting wine and canvas nights, and concession sales at university sporting events. Asking the Ad Team to surrender personal time for fundraising activities was often hard to require; however, the adviser believed his participation would motivate other team members to partake, which proved to be accurate.

Fundraisers also were catalysts that lead to increased dialogue among team members that was not specific to the Ad Team campaign, providing opportunities for the students to know each other and the adviser on multiple levels. Due to the social and monetary success of fundraising activities at the beginning of the term, the team began scheduling bi-weekly potluck dinners. The bi-weekly dinners were theme based, and required small groups within the team prepare a dish to be shared. Like the fundraisers, the Ad Team members asked each other that the majority of conversation not be dominated by the NSAC project. This request allowed the group's dinner dialogue to veer in several directions; nonetheless, the adviser believed the team's bond grew stronger through the fundraisers and bi-weekly dinners. More important, due to these activities, the adviser believed students were more likely to participate in work that extended outside the parameters of the class schedule, because of the strong relationships they had fostered.

The Importance of Attending Night and Weekend Meetings

After the initial part of the semester, the Ad Team began regularly meetings on weekends and evenings outside of class to develop content for the campaign. Like the fundraisers and bi-weekly dinners, the adviser would join the team and listen as they worked on preparation, strategy, and campaign applications. Often, the adviser rarely spoke as the team debated, discussed, and critiqued each other's work. When the team asked for adviser's feedback, he would be honest with his thoughts, but also stress final choices needed to be made by the team. Nevertheless, there were structured events where the adviser's voice was heard. When the adviser's voice was heard, it was on an equal level as the team members. Examples included: brainstorm sessions, editing, and strategy implementation.

The Adviser: Protagonist and Devil's advocate... What Happened in Class

The adviser was able to create a learning environment that supported and challenged members' thinking in a positive way. The adviser also permitted students to openly trade dialogue and drive the direction of the agenda during the class. If the adviser felt students were getting off the topic, he would redirect the students to the agenda they had arranged. The open dialogue and free exchange of ideas in class were possible due to the welcoming environment the team had created through all the extracurricular activities they had conducted together, which created trust. In turn, the students seemed to have more confidence within the confines of the class due to the rapport which had been established.

The adviser also felt it was necessary to build up the team's confidence by celebrating successes and learning from the mistakes made during the campaign production process. In addition to celebrating and learning, the adviser constantly watched for signs of trouble and would alert the account executive and team before class so they could address the situation and brainstorm possible solutions during their scheduled time. It also was necessary for the adviser to stay abreast of all developments in the industry, and pay specific attention to the policy and procedures for the NSAC competition. The adviser believed in being progressive with the tools being utilized within the industry too. For instance, the adviser regularly discussed the importance of honing research skills, communication/marketing knowledge, and digital tool techniques, which could benefit the team and final product.

Be Progressive: Help Students Evolve and Understand the Research Process

The adviser routinely stressed that a key part of being progressive concerned research training and skill comprehension. In addition, the NSAC competition provided research software tools to assist students with media buys, demographics, and other pertinent information for their campaigns. While explaining the research tools, the adviser would ask team members what they needed to know before drafting the campaign strategy and its tactics. As research questions arose, team members would record what was being said so they could research the questions at a later time. While researching the questions, the adviser would use the research tools in combination with the students -- walking them through the process of how the tools could be used to answer questions for the campaign. The adviser believed by working with students during the research process, it provided validity to the team's direction, but also ownership from members when brainstorming concepts for the campaign.

Falling on the Grenade: When Conflict is about to, or Had Occurred

The adviser believed one of the most valuable roles he played for the team was termed, "falling on the grenade." With several intelligent and occasionally dogmatic team members, the adviser noticed there were a few instance when conflict was about to, or had happened among segments of the group.

When this was the case, the adviser would insert himself into the situation, and make a decision he thought was best for the team. If the adviser could insert himself into the situation before conflict had happened, he would make a decision, and inform the disgruntled party within the team that it was his decision. The adviser's rationale for this method was that he thought it would be better to have a team member(s) possibly irritated with him than with each other. The adviser also thought it was important when informing the disgruntled segment within the team that his decision was based on past precedents and theories used in similar advertising, public relations, and marketing situations.

Another example of the adviser falling on the grenade occurred in 2013 and 2015, when the team failed to reach its \$4,000 fundraising effort. Participation in NSAC is an expensive endeavor and requires money to subsidize travel, computer software, materials, and production. Though the goal for each team is to raise a generous sum of money, it is not always achieved. When fundraising efforts are not achieved, the adviser and team have to write a request to the department chair and college dean explaining why its fundraising effort was not met, and how the additional money will be spent. After the letter was completed, the adviser scheduled a meeting with the department chair, and then brought the request forward to the dean. In each instance where the team failed to fundraise \$4,000, the dean and college have subsidized the remaining costs for NSAC. More important, in each instance where the adviser had to submit a request on behalf of the team for additional funds, the effort and his willingness was noticed, and positively mentioned in his final class evaluation by some team members.

Conclusion

Utilizing a servant leadership approach for the NSAC competition allows advisers to adapt to the roles of a facilitator and team member (Bauersfeld, 1995). Some NSAC instructors may prefer a didactic lecture when covering the material in campaign-like courses. In this case, the applied servant leadership style coupled with the Maieutic Socratic Method allowed the adviser to assist team members in obtaining their own understanding of the content and drive the class's direction. The emphasis thus turned away from the adviser and the content, and towards the team members (Gamoran, Secada, & Marrett, 2000).

This dramatic change of role implied the adviser needed to display a totally different set of skills than a teacher (Brownstein 2001). A teacher tells, an adviser asks; a teacher lectures from the front, an adviser should support from the side or back; a teacher gives answers according to a set curriculum, an adviser provides guidelines and creates the environment for the learner to arrive at his or her own conclusions; a teacher mostly gives a monologue, an adviser is in continuous dialogue with the learners (Rhodes, 1999). An adviser should also be able to adapt the learning experience by using his or her own initiative to steer learning to where team members want to create value (Di Vesta, 1987).

The authors believed much of the positive effect stemmed from students knowing they had unconditional support during the NSAC process from the adviser and each other. When the NSAC course commenced, the adviser knew the team members needed to be aware he had the team's best interest in his mind. Multiple examples were discussed, but the adviser realized early in the process that team members desired an environment of comfort and liberty, so they could work, discuss, or relax when needed. To create the welcoming environment, the adviser was always available to student needs, and permitted the team members to control the campaign by listening to their advice, and allowing their voice and creativity to pervade throughout the NSAC process. More important, this servant leadership model permitted the team to work together, be open to constructive criticism, and be honest with each member's dealings.

The adviser's goal in the NSAC completion was that a servant leadership model in the tradition of Robert Greenleaf and in combination with a Maieutic Socratic pedagogical style would help student participants grow as people while being served, and become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants to others in the future. Thus, the adviser believed Isaiah Thomas and Bill Simmons would be proud: "The Secret" had been accomplished.

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