

FEATURE ARTICLE

Reflections on Starting and Growing a Leadership Podcast

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores my experience with podcasts as a medium for leader development. The paper delves into podcasts as tools for leadership learning and provides insights for potential podcasters. Challenges are discussed, along with the benefits derived, and the essay concludes by highlighting several themes that have emerged with guests from around the globe.

Keywords: Leadership Learning, Podcasting, Leader Development, Curriculum, Instructional Strategies

Introduction

Like many others, I had some nervous energy in March of 2020 with the shutdowns relating to COVID-19. I was home with family, had some extra time and started brainstorming the path forward. I knew I would be teaching remotely for some time so I turned to podcasts as an instructional strategy—a convenient and novel way for my graduate students to consume information and learn from some of the best thought leaders. However, I discovered an opportunity because I could not find podcasts featuring the leadership scholars and practitioners I hoped to highlight. So, I turned to YouTube and began exploring videos on podcasting and what it would take to start my own.

I quickly learned there are several considerations—format, artwork, intro/outro music, requisite technology (e.g., microphone), guest recruitment, marketing techniques, and inclusion on various platforms (e.g., Apple Podcasts, Spotify). The platform I chose (and there are several) was Buzzsprout, and it has been a wonderful resource. They provide a full-service platform from educational videos to user-friendly tutorials on everything a would-be podcaster

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needs to know. In addition to the tutorials, my eyes were opened to just how popular the medium has become since its inception in 2001. The landscape is intriguing. For instance, 53% of Americans have tuned into a podcast in the last month, and roughly 90 million are monthly podcast listeners (Buzzsprout, 2023).

In this brief essay, I highlight my journey with the medium. I will begin by exploring why podcasts are an effective vehicle for learning leadership and offer several observations for readers considering starting a podcast. I continue with some of the challenges I have experienced and will share the many benefits. I conclude by sharing some of the common threads and themes that have emerged as I interact with guests from across the globe.

Why Podcasts as a Vehicle for Learning?

Podcasts are important for educators interested in adding on-demand options for learners. Like documentaries, films or TED Talks, learners can listen to (or view) the podcast at their convenience across several platforms (e.g., television, smartphone, iPad/tablet, computer). When I began *Phronesis: Practical Wisdom for Leaders*,¹ I knew I would need a medium other than Zoom for my students to learn and engage with content. In addition, podcasts complement learning across course delivery options (e.g., in-person, hybrid, synchronous and asynchronous online courses). As a result, they align with any medium of delivery, and I have found them to be extremely durable.

Likewise, podcasts allow learners to make traditionally “unproductive” time (e.g., riding in a car) a venue for learning. Learners can multi-task and learn while running, working out, gardening, or cooking. Moreover, the content is accessible to all—regardless of location. Learners worldwide have access to the content, and

the medium fosters accessibility because most podcasts are low/no-cost. Learners can access the world’s greatest minds—in essence, learning and access are democratized. Moreover, podcasting offers learners timely and cutting-edge information. A listener can gain real-time insights into the latest findings of scholars and does not have to wait for the content to make its way through the peer view process in academia. Academics can discuss their findings in real time.

Starting a Podcast: Some Considerations

Several items are worthy of consideration for those interested in starting a podcast. Firstly, what is the purpose, and what need does the podcast fill? Clarity on this dimension can help hone in on the need they hope to fill in the marketplace. For me, the purpose was to give listeners practical wisdom on leadership. My goal was to speak with academics, political leaders, founders, organizational leaders, and even students about how they think about leadership.

Along with purpose and need is the question of who is the target audience? I needed clarification on this and admittedly could have planned better. Most of my interviews have been with individuals within or adjacent to academia. However, I knew there needed to be an academically grounded outlet to hear from scholars *and* practitioners and was not able to find outlets that did that besides the Journal of Character & Leadership Development.² I capitalized on this void in the podcasting marketplace, and as a result, most of my listeners are academics, consultants, students, and to a lesser degree, practitioners. The practitioner audience is an area of focus—increasing the base of practitioners among guests *and* listeners.

Another consideration for potential podcasters is length, format, and cadence. There are short-form

1 <https://practicalwisdom.buzzsprout.com/>

2 <https://www.jclcdusa.org>

podcasts (30 min) and several long-form (3+ h). Also, there are story-based podcasts (e.g., true crime), monologue or solo format (e.g., an expert shares their wisdom), interview-style podcasts, highly produced narratives, and panel-based discussions or roundtables. I quickly landed on an interview format and often aimed to conclude within 45 min. Just enough time to complete a commute (for most), complete a workout, or get dinner on the table. A shorter format also makes editing more realistic because this dimension can be one of the most time-intensive aspects of the work. The host must decide from the beginning if they will edit out long pauses, awkward phrasing, and excessive space fillers. Ultimately, this is where I landed. I wanted my guests to sound their best, so I worked hard to edit each episode carefully. However, this takes time, and each 45-min episode can take upwards of 2 h to edit. This is one reason I have also chosen not to videotape the episodes. I may someday, but it would require a different approach—I would need to let guests know that whatever is recorded goes live. It feels like there is less control with this live approach (unless one has an extensive production budget and a video editing team). Thus, I landed on a short-form, semi-structured interview format released weekly.

Another consideration is equipment. Initially, I thought I would need to purchase extensive equipment. And while there was an investment to get up and running, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that it only required a few hundred dollars. I purchased a \$150 microphone and an ethernet chord and used my Zoom account to record the discussion. As mentioned, I also used Buzzsprout, which helped me get the audio to all the major hosting platforms (e.g., Spotify, Apple Podcasts). Artwork, music, and front/back matter were also considerations. Several videos I watched said not to overthink these dimensions, so I did not. My daughters recorded the intro/outro, I had a friend design the logo, and I was ready to invite guests!

What are the Challenges?

There have been several challenges in this 3-year project that are worthy of discussion. The most challenging three are sound, time, and marketing. While I have invested in some basic equipment like a microphone and an ethernet cable to ensure a solid internet connection, many guests still need to do the same. Like the bad Zoom meeting from the early days of COVID-19, some guests still need to invest in quality solutions for sound and connectivity. This makes it difficult to make *them* sound their best, and in some cases, I have had to remove entire segments because the connectivity could have improved. While I prepare guests for these requirements, a good number still enter Zoom unprepared.

Another challenge is time. In the early days of the pandemic, 5–6 h a week on a podcast episode (e.g., recording, editing, cleaning the transcript, developing the show notes) was manageable for me. However, I recently reached a point where I could not do it alone, so I recruited some talented people to help with editing and transcription. Interestingly, several new automations have been introduced to streamline the process further. For instance, software can adjust audio levels, suggest episode titles, complete the transcript, break the discussion into chapters, and suggest show notes. Some platforms will even help you find sponsors and monetize your podcast if you want subscribers.

Building an audience is the third challenge. It has been a slow and steady endeavor to build the base of listeners. On average, the podcast has about 4,500 listeners each month and is rated among the top 3% of all podcasts (www.listennotes.com). At the time of this writing, the podcast is just shy of 100,000+ downloads. One of the challenges for podcasters is that very few people stick with it long enough to gain traction. Good content, consistency, and longevity are key components to success. More than 190 episodes of *Phronesis* have been released, and it continues to grow gradually—the

chart is a slow slope moving “up and to the right.” To build awareness, I have partnered with the International Leadership Association, which has served as a wonderful partner in securing guests and an international base of listeners. In addition, I post weekly episode announcements in several areas of LinkedIn, post to a listserv, and reach out to a list of about 3,000 individuals. Another growth mechanism involves co-hosts and their networks—One of my most successful series of episodes was with Dr. Jonathan Reams. We interviewed many authors from a book he wrote about his interest in adult development and leadership.

A final challenge, and it is more subtle, is my comfort about putting myself “out there.” I am always concerned that I will inadvertently offend, disturb or cause controversy. My guests and I discuss nuanced topics that are not always in my area of expertise. I try approaching these conversations with a “beginner’s mind,” but I imagine that could be frustrating for some listeners. Another dimension of putting myself out there is the self-promotion dimension of the work. This does not come naturally, nor does the prospect of centering myself. However, for the podcast to grow, I need to build awareness and stay on the radar of potential listeners. One of the ways I do this is to focus on the content and the guest and use that to help drive awareness.

What are the Benefits?

The podcast has been the most rewarding professional project I have undertaken and has many benefits. However, I will focus on four themes that have emerged for me. These benefits can be placed into four primary domains—relationships/networking, professional growth, finding my contribution, and casting light on guests. First, I have built so many wonderful relationships because of *Phronesis*. Guests I met online have turned into multi-episode conversations and real-life talks over coffee. Likewise, some of these relationships have led to writing projects, and others have led to workshops or in-person consulting engagements. As a

result of these 200+ conversations from the podcast, I have built my network and have a much stronger command of the landscape of leadership scholars.

Secondly, without a doubt, I have grown more professionally than I ever would have imagined. I would have told anyone I knew “a lot” about leadership in March 2020. And in some ways, I did; but now I know how little I knew. The podcast has profoundly systemized my learning. Each week I speak with an expert on a topic, and I must be “on game” and ready to be present for the conversation. Truth be told, there have been a few “deep end” moments – but that is okay. That is how I know I am learning and growing, and that feels so good. A wonderful gift is that I get to learn alongside listeners. These conversations are helping me synthesize my perspective on leadership. As leadership scholars and practitioners, we should all be in the mode of lifelong learning and knowledge expansion.

I truly enjoy writing, but mostly with a practitioner’s eye, versus wanting to excel in the top academic journals. This left me uncertain of my “place” as an academic. While I have published in strong journals, written textbooks, edited special issues, and won best paper awards, that is not “home” to me. It is not where my natural energy lies. The podcast has helped me find my voice and the space to contribute to the community. And hopefully, as listeners engage and learn with me, they also make better sense of this grand puzzle called leadership and leader development. We all have our role in the process, and the podcast has helped me to solidify mine.

A fourth benefit is that I have an opportunity to shine a light on the incredible work of others. Not only the academics that so many of us have learned from but the practitioners as well—the individuals doing *the work*. I think of Sara Safari, a woman who has climbed the seven summits and is helping women in need worldwide. Or Funto Boroffice, founder/CEO of award-winning Chanja

Datti, a waste collection and recycling social enterprise dedicated to transforming the waste in her environment to value and creating jobs. I think about Doug Keil, who represented the United States in the 1980 Winter Paralympics, won 2 Gold Medals in para-alpine skiing, and founded *Challenge Alaska*. And, of course, Sara Saeed Khurram, M.D., who is digitizing healthcare in Pakistan—a country where upwards of half its citizens have never seen a physician. It has been a pleasure to learn from and to amplify their messages.

Threads and Themes

A mentor whom I met through the podcast often laments that leadership is a field is a Wild West of random topics, incoherent narratives, poorly developed ideas, and continues to encourage me to keep working to make sense of it all. I am on that journey, and it has become a purpose of mine to synthesize the themes across various conversations. So, at almost 200 episodes, here are some items for consideration as we continue to explore and learn.

I have had Dr. Barbara Kellerman (Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School) on the podcast three times, and it is always a lively conversation. She discusses the leadership triad—leaders, followers, and contexts. And in many ways, the themes of my discussions nicely fit into these three domains. One could also think of them as levels—individual, group, contextual.

First, at the individual level, Dr. Douglas Lindsay (United States Air Force Academy) shared during our conversation on a podcast a thought from Dr. Robert Hogan (Hogan Assessments) and Robert Kaiser (Kaiser Leadership Solutions) that “who we are is how we lead” (2005). That floored me—“Who you are is how you lead.” As my guest Dr. Mike Mascolo (Merrimack College) suggested, “Each person is an infinity,” so an entire world is underneath the Hogan & Kaiser quote. For instance, I have had several conversations that rest

on the notion that leadership is not sustainable without character, integrity, and a solid understanding of one’s values. However, we can add lived experience, personality, maturity level (i.e., developmental level), knowledge/expertise, and several other ingredients underneath that umbrella. So fundamentally, if you are in a position of authority, who are you? As my guest Chip Souba, MD suggested, this personal growth work is a “mountain without a top.” What are you doing to *become* a better version of yourself *every* day? What’s your system for achieving this objective? If others are in our care, they deserve it. So, at the individual level, what are we doing to prepare to be the “who” we want (and need) to be as leaders?

Another theme throughout my conversations is the followership or the “partnership” that is the next level of our conversation. Once the individual interfaces with others to move toward a better future or some other cause, how are they approaching the work? As Dr. Ron Riggio (Claremont McKenna) said in an episode, “Leaders don’t do leadership, ‘leadership’ is co-created by leaders and followers working together.” Think about that for a minute. How leaders engage in their work with others matters. People like Dr. Ira Chaleff (Executive Coaching & Consulting Associates), Dr. Barbara Kellerman, and Sharna Fabiano (Author) continue highlighting followers and their critical role in the conversation. We need to understand better how leaders *and* followers co-create a space where the best work can be done. This is an area of exploration for several scholars who view leadership as much more than just an individual contribution.

A third theme is the many contextual shifts we have witnessed in recent years. Context is an important part of Kellerman’s leadership triad. There are so many to name, but a few that took up bandwidth were COVID-19, hybrid work, supply chain, hiring, remote teaming, social justice, complexity, and digitization. These contextual shifts have profoundly impacted how

leaders approach the work. And many of these topics serve as ripe opportunities for young scholars to explore as we work to understand better how each will impact organizational life. While we have seen several contextual shifts in a short period, these seem to represent the “work” of leadership. Whether it is a regional banking crisis, a war in Ukraine, or crippling political tensions, leadership is increasingly complex, and we have an opportunity to help practitioners navigate the “white-water,” as management scholar Dr. Peter Vaill would say. Contextual shifts are the norm. *How* leaders think about the work matters greatly. To simplify, are the problems technical or adaptive (e.g., Heifetz & Linsky, 2017) or, put another way, simple, complicated, complex, or chaotic (e.g., Snowden & Boone, 2007). How are we as leaders moving to understand our context more fully?

Conclusion

In short, podcasting has been a highlight of my career. It has helped me find my voice and contribute to the conversation of leadership and leader development in a productive and unique way. As you consider whether podcasting is for you, I hope the above thoughts will help guide your decision. While I love *Phronesis*, I want to underscore other wonderful podcasts on leadership (and followership) that can help you decide. They are—*The Leadership Educator Podcast*, *WorkLife with Adam Grant*, *Leadership Lab* and *Lead & Follow*. Each provides a wonderful contribution to the conversation.

In one of my most memorable episodes, former Major League Baseball pitcher Josh Lindblom shared his journey of attending undergraduate and graduate collegiate courses *while playing*. He had so many pearls of wisdom in the episode, but this quote nicely summarized my thinking about this project. Josh said, “I’m a work in progress and not where I want to be. But that doesn’t mean that I stop working.” Exactly!

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