At the beginning of this semester, I described a leader as “a person who is an example of what they are trying to accomplish; one who listens, works well with others, and is not afraid to let other people demonstrate their strengths. Leaders trust in the people they are working with in order to achieve a common goal.” While I still find this to be true, I now believe a leader has many more qualities and strategies that help him or her promote an environment conducive for accomplishing goals. Kanter (1999) identified the most important characteristics that a leader can bring to an organization are “passion, conviction, and confidence in others” (p. 2). I agree with these and believe that these characteristics are an important part of gaining followers. As Sinek (2009) stated, people do not buy what you do, but rather why you do it. Without passion, conviction, and confidence in others, it is difficult to get other people to invest in your “why.” On the other hand, when a leader is fully invested and believes in why they are doing something, followers with similar beliefs will immerge. Thus, my leadership definition or philosophy has expanded to, first and foremost, start with me. As a leader, I need to know why I am doing something, and it should be very meaningful to me. This will help me to find followers who feel similar or have the same beliefs as I do, and together we can work as a group toward one common goal.

In addition to leaders being passionate themselves, leaders need to cultivate passion in others. A key theme in this course was that leaders need to foster active followership. Hock (2000) noted that true leaders cannot compel followership, but rather need to induce it through constructive, ethical, and honest means. Doing so begins the leader/follower relationship on a foundation of trust rather than tyranny. On the other hand, Ciulla (2010) warned of the pitfalls of bogus empowerment. She defined empowerment as helping others recognize their own power, recover lost power, or gain new power. Thus, bogus empowerment is the concept that a leader is falsely giving the impression of empowerment without actually empowering anyone. When a leader gives only bogus empowerment, it creates distrust and followership is likely to fade. Now that I understand the concept of bogus empowerment, I will reflect on the type of environment and subsequent empowerment I am giving those around me as I move forward with my career.

Leaders also need to create opportunities that allow followers’ skills and talents to shine (De Pree, 2001; Watt 2007). Furthermore, leaders need to be willing to become a follower, at least temporarily, when giving these opportunities (De Pree, 2001). By letting followers excel, true change and success within the organization can occur. While I noted the importance for leaders to trust and work well with their followers in my initial definition, I never considered the importance of a leader “giving up the reigns.” Initially, I thought that this would be counterproductive or would have been a sign of a poor leader. By the very foundation of the word, it would seem that a leader would always have to be the one in charge. However, this course has opened my eyes to the opposite; that true leaders not only are willing to follow, but know when to follow, and are not only willing to let others shine (perhaps even outshine the leader), but understand the importance in doing so to better the team or organization and achieve common goals.

Kornives, Lucas, and McMahon (2006) discussed the leadership process of “knowing-being-doing,” another new concept I gained through this course. Essentially, the process states that everyone involved in the leadership process must be knowledgeable, must be aware of self and others, and must act. This process highlighted for me the idea that certain “criteria” must be in place for change to happen. In the future, if I am in a situation where change is stagnant, I can reflect on the process to see what may be missing from my team. Is my staff knowledgeable of the situation? Are they aware of how they themselves are thinking and feeling, and how others around them are thinking and feeling? Are we, collectively and individually, taking appropriate action? I feel, however, to really be able to examine a change process in this way, I would have to “get up on the balcony” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002), another key concept I took away from this course. I had previously thought about the importance of a leader taking a step back and observing the situation, but the metaphor and explanation Heifetz and Linksy (2002) provided really underscored that I would need to take myself out of the picture in order to fully observe what is happening.

Another quality leaders need to have is to be responsive to a constantly changing world and diversity within an organization. Managing diversity is a part of leadership that I never had considered prior to this course. Aguirre and Martinez (2002) highlighted the importance of managing diversity when they outlined their two key features of leadership: (1) engagement of people in a process that identifies them with goals, and (2) potential to change the institutional environment by implementing diversity goals. Furthermore, Offerman (1997) pointed out that diversity does not end with categorical groups, such as race or gender, but instead diversity extends into individual differences between and among groups. Thus, diversity is everywhere, all the time, and collegiate coaching is no exception. The world of coaching is full of diversity. Staff members of all different backgrounds, experiences, and temperaments form collegiate coaching staffs. In addition, it is not uncommon for athletes from across the country and the world to compete together on the same team. With such a great potential for a diverse group as a college coach, I am thankful to have learned the importance of recognizing diversity still needs to have a leader that is willing to engage and set goals for the team. As a leader, I will need to have strategies to manage diversity. Offerman (1997) supplied one such strategy through the three T’s: time, trust, and training; there needs to be a long-term commitment to empowering and training a diverse group, which will help build trust among the whole group.

Throughout this course, I have also come to realize the importance of followership. In the beginning of the course, I defined a follower as “a person who believes in what their leader is about, but may not agree with all of their actions or choices and is too timid to voice their own opinion.” I do not believe this to be true anymore. A follower can and should voice their opinion. If this opinion is different, it can lead to what Lencione (2003) described as a productive conflict or a situation where, by confronting a conflict and working it out, people are more likely to find a solution. Even if followers have similar views and beliefs as their leader, followers should still be willing and able to voice their opinions. As a coach, I am going to have to understand that having a follower voice their opinion is a good thing. I should listen to what he/she has to say and allow for the creativity to flow while keeping an open mind. The follower may see something that I may not have, and it could be very beneficial to not only me, but the group as a whole.

As I move forward with my career as a cross country and track coach, I feel confident that I will be able to apply the new learnings to my work, as I feel my leadership philosophy has expanded and improved as a result of this course. Below is a chart that summarizes my thoughts on leaders and leadership before taking this course compared to my thoughts now after completing the course. As you can see, some of my beliefs have not changed, but rather have been enhanced through this course. Other beliefs have changed entirely, particularly my thoughts around followership.

This class has challenged my thinking about leadership and followership, and has given me the opportunity to reflect on my own leadership philosophy. My new knowledge of leadership is much more detailed and goes further beneath the surface than it had when I began this course. While learning about leadership is a never-ending task, I have gained a lot of understanding and useful strategies to help guide me in my future leadership endeavors.