

Two years ago, after singing the National Anthem in a small group at the ROTC commissioning ceremony, one of the officers presented us with medal coins. One side of the coin is inscribed "leadership and excellence". At the time, it seemed like a cool gift, but "leadership and excellence" seemed detached from our service of 2 minutes at a ceremony. Throughout the past two years, I have thought more about what leadership and excellence mean, and their relationship to my interests and activities.

My definition of leadership has changed substantially over the past four years. In high school, leadership was defined by the positions you held in organizations. The quality of one's leadership was determined by how **well** the people you led thought you were doing at your job. Were we really leaders back then?

Though it is difficult to rate the quality of one's leadership, these past four years have given me a better gauge for leadership quality. Harvard has taught me that real leadership is less about the **title** and more about **what** you do. Often, my heroes may have not had the title to back up their struggle against a group's mentality or traditions. They raise awareness of issues that affect an entire group, whether the formal leaders want to tackle these issues or not. In my experience, these issues have been as small as changing an offensive award title, to as big as changing the structure of governance. In high school, I probably would have dismissed radical thinkers for trying to create unnecessary chaos. Now, I realize leadership is more about adapting to the present and being true to your ideals.

In certain situations, I wish that I had stuck more to my beliefs. In high school, I was part of an organization that empowered student leaders through conferences and programming. The organization was eventually taken over by adults who thought that conferences were ways to make profit, and that empowering students was a secondary goal. Instead of fighting for the organization, I was resigned to the fact that I was graduating soon, and didn't have the time and energy to make meaningful change. My own missteps as a leader have shown me the strength of true leaders to take on challenging issues that I may have been afraid to take on.

The people who have earned my unconditional respect have earned it by demonstrating the highest levels of personal integrity. For example, one of my closest friends is an exemplar of quality leadership. As a conductor, he works on building his choirs up instead of making excuses and creating distress. He is caring, and genuinely invested in the welfare of the people he leads. His intelligence, insight, musicianship and dedication are apparent to every person he has led. He is a leader with integrity, because he has led through challenges instead of allowing the challenges to lead him. I strive to follow in his example of leadership, especially with the musical groups I lead.

Excellence is less removed from leadership than I once thought. Excellence can come in different forms, but mainly practice and performance. For instance, a lesson or class that is prepared properly has the potential to be excellent. We should strive for excellence in all aspects of daily life, to give the grand scheme a chance for greatness. Beyond the little bits of excellence interspersed in daily life, excellence can also be a rare and moving experience. I will never forget singing in Sanders Theater three years ago in an emotionally charged concert. One of the pieces we performed that night, by Pablo Casals, was simply the most beautiful and meaningful performance of any piece that I had ever been a part of. This performance was **excellence**. It was excellence in the moment, in the practice, in the preparation, and in every aspect of it. Getting to experience artistic excellence never leaves you. It has shaped my view of performance and what musical excellence means to me. Some might argue that the experience set my standards too high, but I think it makes me more persistent and knowledgeable in my pursuit of musical excellence.

This coin may have not been my golden ticket to universal leadership or excellence. I still wonder whether I have done enough during my four years to make a mark on the groups I have been a part of. Despite my own shortcomings as a leader, I now understand what exceptional leadership and guided excellence look like. These are the experiences I will use to motivate me in my quest to educate; a profession often criticized for its lack of leadership and excellence. No matter where that journey takes me, I know I have heroes, leaders, and this coin to help me on my way.