After almost a year of planning and hard work, Beautiful Lengths 2013 was a successful event. We improved our donor numbers over last year, and everyone really enjoyed the event. There is definitely plenty of room for improvement next year, but I believe I’ve set myself up with the tools to make sure that we are even more successful next year. I had a great team behind me, and I am confident that we will be much better off in the future because of our experience this year.

All of us were brand new at this in the beginning, and had no clue what we were doing. I was involved with the campaign last year, but I really didn’t do much in the way of planning. There was one person completely in charge and she really did everything herself, so when I took over after she decided not to continue this year, I was clueless on what to do. My first step in planning the event was literally to email her and ask, “What do I do?” She sent me an email with some cursory instructions about some people I needed to contact and what general sort of steps I needed to take, but beyond that, it was up to me to learn along the way. I really had no prior leadership experience before this one, so it was challenging. I was concert master for my high school orchestra and pit orchestra during the musicals, and I was captain of my color guard team my senior year, but I don’t feel like those positions really prepared me at all for running an entire organization and putting together a large, public event at all.

Because of my complete lack of experience, I knew I wanted to take a team-based approach to my leadership style. I didn’t feel that I had the knowledge base to tell people what to do and when to do it. I did some research on leadership theories online, and found that the style I actually most used was consultative leadership, one of the Bass and Colleagues’ Five Styles of Leadership, which describes a leader that consults the opinions of his or her team, but while still maintaining the final decision-making authority (Yihan). I think initially, I had wanted to take more of a coaching approach that gave more responsibility to my team members so that they could learn and grow as leaders themselves, but that didn’t really happen, for a variety of reasons, including the fact that while I started out with fifteen to twenty interested people, in the end, only four other people besides me were truly invested in making this event a reality, and they are all graduating either before me or at the same time as me, so there would be no one to pass down the responsibility to. I am partly to blame for one of the other reasons, because, being so new at everything, I didn’t know what or how to delegate tasks to make people feel like they were making a significant contribution because I was still learning about what tasks needed to be completed, and I wanted to do everything myself so I could gain that knowledge. It was also partly because I think a lot of people were not genuinely interested in planning the event; they just wanted service hours and something to put on their resume, and since I could not offer service hours for planning, they didn’t want to do the work. We recruited people from an on-campus service organization, so I have a feeling the members were really only looking for service opportunities, not a full event to plan.

The consultative leadership approach ended up being a much better fit for our group. This approach is best used when a leader wants to benefit from the collective knowledge of the group and recognizes that he or she does not know everything, but still maintains the ultimate decision-making authority (Yihan). I wanted to handle a lot of the administrative things this year so that I could learn the proper protocols, and then once I started to figure things out, I was able to delegate smaller tasks to free up some of my time to work on other planning things. I really also needed help with creative idea generation about marketing and advertising, event day activities, and things like that. That is where my team was really helpful and I really valued their input. Ideally, I think I would like to move in the future towards a blend of the participative and delegative leadership styles. Yihan’s article describes participative leadership like a board of directors that makes one decision as a group and where each member of the group is equally responsible for that decision, while delegative leadership is a style where the group leader takes a step back and gives responsibility to the other members of the team to complete their tasks. He says that this is not a style for new leaders to try, as it involves a lot of trust in one’s team members to be competent and follow through on their tasks (Yihan). I think there are certain situations where participative leadership is beneficial, and others where delegative leadership is preferable. For idea generation, being able to work as one cohesive group ensures that everyone is on the same page and fosters a strong team environment. But as far as completing individual tasks, delegation would work better and would empower people and make them feel like a valuable member of the team. I would really like to restructure the group next year to do this sort of thing, where we work as a unit for the actual event-day activity planning, but for certain tasks, like recruiting stylists and recruiting donors, I would split people up into smaller teams with captains so that I don’t end up doing everything and not giving each item the dedication it deserves. Now that I know what needs to be done and I have trust in my team members, I think we will be much more efficient as a group.

Because we were really such a small team, communication was generally very casual. There was really no need for the formality of a large organization such as Relay for Life. We created a Facebook group to post announcements about meetings and ask for help completing various tasks. We started out having our secretary send out a large group email to post meeting updates, but as it became clear that it was really just five of us regularly attending meetings, we stopped doing that completely. After that point, we communicated through a private Facebook group message thread or by text and it seemed to work really well because people checked their Facebook regularly and responded right away. You can also see when people have seen your message, so that takes a lot of the guesswork and frustration out, unlike email, where you have no idea if the person has even received the message.

Having such a small group also allowed me to really get to know everyone’s abilities and strengths. I knew there were some people I could always count on if there was just something that needed to be done and I didn’t have the time to do it myself, and some people whom I could really trust to do their job and know the rules. One girl took initiative and went above and beyond without me having to ask, and was always cheerful, enthusiastic and full of ideas. She also had experience being in executive positions of other student organizations, so I made her my Vice President. Another girl was in a management position at her job and was responsible for interviewing and hiring people, so I knew she could handle responsibility and would take it seriously, and so I made her our treasurer. In the end, they were both very well suited for their positions.

Looking back, I don’t feel this was a particularly strong leadership experience for me, mainly because I had to improvise since I had no idea of what steps needed to be taken, to whom I needed to talk to make things happen, what needed to be done, or anything, really. It was hard to focus on developing a strong leadership technique when I was busy being concerned about how to navigate the daily challenges in the event planning process. I think now that I’ve done this once and have the knowledge I needed the first time around, I will be able to take a step back and look at how to improve my leadership technique to be more efficient. I believe the entire event will be better off for it.

Moving forward, I think that my role as leader will need to be redefined. If we split up the group into these smaller teams, then I will have less work to do in those areas, so much of the administrative work will fall to me, such as making sure we follow all the rules to maintain our student organization status and reserving the event space. It will give me the time to work on leading people and actually putting energy towards making their creative ideas happen. I’m glad I’ve gained some trust in my teammates, because I really can’t run things the same way again. Everything was disorganized, last minute, confused, and just very poorly planned. I ended up not enjoying the event itself because I was so stressed out about literally everything going on that day, which I’m really ashamed to admit because it is really a fun event, and the year before I loved it so much that that’s what gave me the courage to step up and do it again. I will definitely work to restructure the team next year, and I think setting up my event planning kit will help with delegating a lot of the work to other people because it will have all the instructions I wished I had gotten when I started. It really isn’t possible for me to try and do everything, so I’ll have to take a step back and move towards the delegative leadership style.

I learned a lot of important lessons about leadership through this experience. I was more of a manager or administrator than a leader this year, and I would really like for that to change next year. I learned by trial and error, but now I know what I’m doing, so I will be prepared for the next time. These lessons will be very valuable for my future career, especially because engineering is so team-based. I will always have to know how to work with a team, and there will be times when I will have to lead the team and know how to accomplish the ultimate goal while still leading and motivating the team. For now, it will give me an advantage over other students when competing for co-op jobs, but it will always be useful, especially if I want to move into management-type work.

Overall, I’m glad I did this experience this year, and while I regret that I was not as strong of a leader as I could have been, I really needed to go through this once to get my bearings so I can improve next year. I’ve learned how I can better structure my team and when and how to accomplish the tasks, so that I can focus on producing the highest quality results, and end up making a bigger difference in the lives of these women with cancer, because in the end, that’s really all this was about.

Works cited

Yihan, Lin. "Theories and Types of Leadership." *Theories and Types of Leadership*. Leadership With You, Feb. 2013. Web. 28 Mar. 2013.