

Brenda Jimenez's Professional Essay

Brenda L. Jimenez

School of Business and Leadership, University of Charleston

Brenda Jimenez's Professional Portfolio

DEL Mentor: Dr. Douglas White

October 9, 2022

Updated: April 2026

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Leadership is a lifelong journey of informed trial and error and learning. Although executive leaders must understand the magnitude of their responsibility, it is also essential to clearly understand that they are most effective when they have highly competent, talented teams supporting their journey (Davenport & Manville, 2012). As an executive, I understood this reality. Still, through my journey in the DEL program, I have developed a deeper understanding of the components that make an effective leader and of the language and literature that support many of the behaviors I embrace.

As I began to reflect on my DEL journey as an executive leader, I went back to my application essay to see where my mindset and thoughts about leadership were before embarking on this experience. The essay started with the following quote: *"If you want to improve the organization, you have to improve yourself, and the organization gets pulled up with you"* ~ Indra Nooyi. This sentiment is one that I still believe today. This experience has not only affirmed it but also taught me how best to harness my energy for my personal growth and development, supporting others on their executive leadership journey.

Therefore, I should begin this personal essay by stating that the first and most crucial component is understanding oneself. Understanding one's values and character provides a lens for how you react to ethical issues and challenges and shapes how you decide (Tichy & Bennis, 2009). It is also essential to have curiosity to drive learning and sensemaking in the decision-making process (Horstmeyer, 2020). Self-awareness of your strengths, weaknesses, preferences, work style, and knowledge informs the leader of their blind spots and where they can best contribute to accomplishing the strategic vision and ultimately leading successfully.

The second component is the ability to practice sensemaking, strategic foresight, and data collection to make the best decisions that yield the most effective solutions. To exercise these skills effectively, a strong team of advisors and staff who embrace your vision and understand the shared values that drive our work together is essential. Finally, understanding the complexity of current challenges enables leaders to identify small, achievable changes that can have a significant transformational impact (Snowden, 2016).

Developing a Leader Identity

As I look at my leader and leadership development process, it is important to note that continuous practice, reflection, and feedback are essential to developing the expertise and mastery expected of me at this point in my career.

As the CEO, the Board of Directors serves as a strategic partner, continuously mentoring and advising on the execution of the organization's vision and strategic goals. "To attain expert performance, individuals must continually monitor their performance and design intentional practice sessions around their open, specifically pertinent issues" (Day, 2008, p. 208). Therefore, self-motivation, self-awareness, and self-regulation are important at this stage of my career. It is easy to focus on what is known and not stretch or push your development, but to keep up with the fast-paced, constantly changing marketplace, one must continue to learn, maintain a growth mindset to course correct when needed, develop others, and consider new ideas and approaches to the work.

I agree with Day's (2008) assessment that a "salient and developed leader identity" may facilitate communicating a vision, motivating, directing, and supporting followers. Leaders who know themselves and see themselves as leaders will be more confident and consistent in their

actions (p. 184). To do my job effectively and build a solid team with community impact, I must be deeply connected to my leader identity.

The Leadership Development Plan

Meeting with Dr. Barnett and Dr. White to discuss the leadership assessment took my self-awareness to new heights, not because I learned something new, but because it presented a clear picture of what I already knew to be true. Furthermore, if I wanted to be an authentic leader and embrace this learning experience, my development plan needed to reflect that. Although I was told I was a well-balanced leader, two areas stood out more: my low self-regard and the need to be more optimistic and happier. As someone who is always smiling and relatively upbeat, I had to admit that my optimism was sometimes sprinkled with doubt, as evidenced by the meticulous evaluation of data to make the perfect decision. This reality was connected to my low self-regard because my hesitation stemmed from self-doubt.

As I began to outline a development plan, I realized I had to confront my self-doubt and build my confidence as I embraced this experience. According to Day (2008), strategic and adaptive competencies are complex because they rely on the mental models or schemas an individual has developed through a body of experiences and a collection of knowledge, allowing the individual to identify the best approaches, responses, or solutions to the challenge or task set before them. I concluded that trusting my instincts, experiences, team, and data analysis had to be part of my nature, or I would not succeed as an executive leader. As I navigated our executive decision-making class, this became even more salient. Great leaders thought things through and then took accountability for their decisions, good or bad, because they had done their best with what they had at the time. This literature shifted my thinking about the process of decision-making and about trusting myself as I navigate the unexpected.

The second finding in my self-assessment that stood out came from my NEO assessment. The psychosocial section concluded: "Somatic Complaints: This person may be prone to discount physical problems and minimize the severity of somatic symptoms and medical complaints. In healthcare situations, it may be important to check for problems even when she reports no difficulties." It was challenging to read, as I know I do not put myself first, but it is clear that self-care is not a priority, even in the face of a healthcare emergency. This finding felt most accurate in the Ethics: Values and Decision-Making course. As we navigated ethical frameworks aligned with our leadership styles and experiences, altruism resonated with me. However, the more I learned about altruism, the more I realized that at its extreme, leaders forget to care for themselves in their quest to help others, and that such an approach can be misguided and ineffective.

As I delved deeper into the literature, I discovered a formula for understanding altruistic behavior. George R. Price developed a mathematical theory of the phenomenon based on Hamilton's Rule. The rule "states that altruism will be favored by selection when $rb - c > 0$, where c is the fitness cost of the actor, b is the fitness benefit to the recipient, and r is the genetic relatedness between the actor and recipient" (Kurzban et al., 2015, p. 576). This equation helps identify and quantify key factors. "It can describe when altruism is favored and any other trait. Both b and c can be positive or negative, so Hamilton's rule also predicts when selfish, spiteful, or mutually beneficial traits will be favored" (Kurzban et al., 2015, p. 576). When examining the equation, one must consider that an important variable is the actor's cost. This variable was the one I had not considered, and when you put zero in its place, it eliminated the opportunity to do good for others. I knew I could not live in that reality if I wanted to be an example for other

women and women of color in executive leadership. Therefore, I became more intentional about giving myself grace and taking time for self-care.

For the past two and a half years, I have slowly learned to put myself first to be more effective and authentic in my service to others. I have learned that I am functional but, at times, ineffective when I neglect my mental and physical health. I have been more intentional about doctor's appointments, taking time to meet friends, and interrupting my workday to take a walk or talk to my daughters.

My work focuses primarily on improving the conditions and circumstances that create great struggles for others. It requires building authentic relationships to better understand where others are coming from and their strategies for solutions. Therefore, I need to learn to be more vulnerable with my team, family, and friends and to ask for help and support when needed. Asking for help, grace, and support in the face of unexpected life circumstances is essential to maintaining balance in challenging times.

Finally, as I serve as CEO of MENTOR New York during a pandemic, I have learned how vital work-life balance is for my staff to stay healthy and continue to perform with excellence. Since we have become a 100% remote organization, I am especially mindful of ensuring they take time off, socialize with colleagues to break the monotony of work, and schedule weeklong staff retreats to review the work and reflect and deliberate in person on the topic of the moment. In turn, my team holds me to the same standard. They often check whether I am taking time off, resting, socializing, and engaging with colleagues beyond Zoom or email. I believe this has made me more vulnerable by articulating my needs and delegating work to others.

Code of Ethics

As I mentioned before, altruism shapes my code of ethics and grounds my belief that helping others makes the world a better place. However, altruism does not solve problems; it provides a compass for doing good but does not guide. As I consider the best way to drive community impact, I also value the process of bringing stakeholders together and finding solutions. Therefore, I discovered that pragmatism was an ethical process that allowed for the thinking and piloting needed when testing new approaches and adjusting to the circumstances before me.

To that end, my code of ethics is grounded in respecting others to preserve their dignity as we identify solutions that improve their circumstances—exercising compassion and empathy as I navigate the situation’s complexities and ensuring that I include those most affected by the realities addressed. Therefore, having cultural humility to have a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens in the solution that fosters belonging must be a part of every step of developing and implementing innovations and solutions. Finally, how human and financial resources are managed grounds the work. Operating with a clear understanding and ethical compass of fiduciary responsibility shapes my guiding values and drives the execution.

I have coined my ethical style as pragmatic altruism. Pragmatism is a framework of how I think and practice my value for helping others. However, altruism provides the moral compass to ensure that the solutions implemented are focused on good and does not harm the very individuals I am trying to help. As we look at this ethical style, how the leader thinks, activates ideas and influences others is essential to its success.

Practices that Drive Habits of the Mind

One of my favorite articles was presented to me during residency. It has been a common source of literature I cite and turn to when ideating strategies for solving complex problems. The Harvard Business Review article, *The Innovator's DNA*, is an excellent guide to how innovators make sense of the world around them and grapple with challenges that may concern only a few at the time, yet the solutions and innovations created could help many. According to Dyer et al. (2009), there are five discovery skills that innovators frequently exercise in their approach to work, disrupting and finding innovative solutions to problems. The discovery skills include associating, questioning, observing, experimenting, and networking. I consider these skills the foundation of the concepts executive leaders use effectively to lead their organizations.

Most of my tenure as CEO has been during the pandemic, as I have had only about four months of pre-pandemic leadership. Since then, sensemaking and shaping opportunities have been skills I have had to refine to ensure we stay relevant and fulfill our mission during those challenging times. One of my strengths in the Strength Finders Builders assessment is that I am an activator who influences those around me. Therefore, scanning, analyzing data, and connecting the dots support the creative thinking needed to develop a solution to a given challenge. However, I believe those skills can only be amplified if the executive leader's strategic foresight is well-developed.

Boulton et al. (2015) describe uncertainty as that which cannot be known, the "unknown unknowns" (p. 214). Organizations need leaders to engage with the world's complexities to stay relevant and live up to their missions and visions. It is no longer reasonable for leaders to focus on past patterns and organizational history. Leaders need to consider events that disrupt stability and employ the recombination of resources and practices to create emergent practices that are

necessary for responsiveness and the sustained delivery of the organization's services or business constructs.

Strategic Foresight in Practice

As Director of Operations and Growth Strategies at MENTOR New York, I lead a robust strategic planning process to develop a forward-thinking 3-year plan. The plan was approved in November 2019, and I became CEO a few weeks later. Our inclusive process considered stakeholders' perspectives on our threats and opportunities, conducted marketplace analysis, and even held focus groups with people unfamiliar with our brand. According to Fuerth (2009), strategic foresight requires an environment that offers the opportunity to listen to foresight, consider actions and different points of view, and maintain a continual, well-informed exchange between the producers and consumers (p. 21). Engaging the board, the staff, and the executive in strategic foresight is essential to developing forward-thinking strategies. Leaders at all levels of the organization who embrace that complex mindset make a significant difference in how organizations respond to change and stay relevant.

Because the plan was forward-thinking and accounted for some changes the organization needed to make and the shifts in technology and the workforce that the market was hinting at, the pandemic became the test of whether we had exercised strategic foresight that responded to an unpredictable and limited marketplace. Our strategic plan provided a road map for virtual engagement and the expansion of our services, which we believed would be gradual, as we had to change individuals' perceptions of virtual learning and engagement to inform them about their work. During the first 18 weeks of the pandemic, MENTOR New York was well on its way to the virtual expansion across the state it had planned to accomplish over three years.

Although we could never have predicted the pandemic, systems thinking, sound judgment, and the creation of safe-to-fail cultures enabled the board, CEO, and staff to consider small organizational shifts that disrupted systems and led to long-term innovations in their services. This reality positioned MENTOR New York to more readily identify emerging practices and introduce innovations that can help address the "unknown unknowns" that arose when we least expected them. As we end this strategic planning cycle in December 2023, to my surprise, we have exceeded our three-year plan expectations with a new structure, program innovations, and a healthier financial and program services portfolio.

Navigating Complexity

According to Day (2008), strategic and adaptive competencies are complex because they rely on the mental models or schemas an individual has developed through a body of experiences and a collection of knowledge, enabling the individual to identify the best approaches, responses, or solutions to the challenge or task set before them. Leaders today benefit from understanding complex adaptive systems and how they work. This lens allows them to identify the change needed to make transformative decisions.

The mentoring movement is a complex adaptive system. The MENTOR Affiliate Network drives the complexity of that system because it comprises diverse stakeholders who work together to scale mentoring in the United States. The network is a neutral network of independent components that sometimes act as a unified whole, learning from one another's experiences and adapting to the changing environment.

The network has a complex structure among its members as they work toward a common goal, constantly adjusting as trends emerge, new practices are established, and young people provide feedback (Edson, 2012). This complexity requires most MENTOR affiliate CEOs, like

me, to constantly navigate it to determine the best approaches to ensure all stakeholders benefit from significant program outcomes and impacts.

This complexity is best observed in the projects I selected for the professional portfolio. Two of the projects focus on my executive leadership at the national level, including mentoring moments with my CEO colleagues. The other two projects focus on supporting program executive leaders through leadership development in response to a changing marketplace and the new challenges it presents. The final project focuses on supporting young people as they navigate the loss of opportunities during the pandemic. This project is the one that culminates the impact our mentoring movement's mission and vision can have. These projects represent the body of work that executive leaders must grapple with when engaged in a complex adaptive system that functions as a collective enterprise to achieve maximum impact.

Portfolio Projects Drive My Interest in Accelerated Leadership Development for Women of Color in the Nonprofit Sector

As I began exploring a possible dissertation topic, I designed and developed two projects that piqued my curiosity about the potential variables driving the desired outcomes for the individuals engaged in the project and their lived experiences. The Civic Leadership Program and Career Readiness Youth Fellowship Programs aim to address leadership development gaps that arise for women of color as they explore and advance their career opportunities by building social capital and engaging in civic and philanthropic endeavors. In the nonprofit sector, although the workforce is mostly made up of women and women of color, of the 45% of women in executive leadership positions in the sector, only 18% are women of color (Uchida, 2025). Furthermore, the leadership crisis across all sectors will be felt in the near future, as the baby boomers retire and become less engaged in workplace constructs, a gap in knowledge,

leadership, and task migration is beginning to emerge (Hirsch, 2017). This will mean that women of color are poised to become the future executive leaders in the sector.

Accelerating leadership development is complex because frameworks can be created, yet everyone responds differently to the variables that enable accelerated experiential learning. For women of color, many barriers still exist to accessing leadership development opportunities that build the experiences, social capital, and mentor relationships needed for advancement to executive leadership (Corneille et al., 2019). As a result, many women of color take on risky and undesirable projects and initiatives to develop key skills and showcase their competencies, in order to be recognized and considered for future leadership opportunities and promotions (Glass & Cook, 2020). This experience, coined the “glass cliff,” has become a key source of leadership development for women of color (Glass & Cook, 2020). I am curious about how this shapes executive leaders who happen to be women of color, leadership development strategies, social networks of support, and the development of proficiency in key skills like sensemaking and strategic foresight that are critical to effective leadership.

COVID-19 has shifted the world order. Human behavior, economics, political instability, shifting generational leadership, and technological advancements have created volatility and unpredictability in the marketplace and in the communities that nonprofit organizations serve (Willie, 2024). As we look at these realities, the demand on executive leaders to make difficult decisions while maintaining their moral compass and mission-focused strategies will be essential to solving some of the most complex challenges the communities they serve face, given limited and shrinking resources.

Given the two realities our sector faces and my lived experiences with the challenges of being a woman of color in an executive leadership position due to gender and race, I am curious

to explore what variables drive courageous decisions and actions to do what is right for the communities the organization serves in the nonprofit sector led by women of color. My research question will examine the role courage plays in nonprofit executive leaders' decision-making in a volatile and continuously changing marketplace.

Conclusion

Developing and implementing these five projects during the DEL journey has provided the experiential learning needed to make the literature and practices of effective leadership "stick." It has reinforced my leadership identity and made me a more conscientious leader. As I prepared my bio for our 3rd-year residency, I asked my staff how they would describe the gift I bring to the work as an executive leader. Without hesitation, they shared the following, which best captures my approach to leadership. The staff stated, *"Your unique gift is to break complex concepts into simple analogies or metaphors that are easily understood and to allow us to consider how we may address the challenges before us realistically and creatively."* If I can influence others' thinking and activate change, I feel I have accomplished my best work as an executive leader.

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