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### R3D3: Leadership Application: Working as a Paraprofessional

Before even moving to Mankato to start my first year of college, I began looking for and applying for jobs in the area. I knew I would need to support myself financially and was looking for a job that would also provide me with valuable experience in my future career in special education. I had worked as a paraprofessional before, during my senior year of high school, and decided to apply for a job as a paraprofessional with the Mankato Area Public School District. I applied for the job online, which was followed by an online interview. At the end of my interview, they asked where I would like to be placed; giving me options of high school, middle school, elementary school. Within the age groups they offered me different types of classrooms; some were life skills, autism spectrum disorder, or emotional behavioral disorder classrooms. I quickly decided to work at an elementary school in a classroom with students who have autism spectrum disorder.

I felt some nervousness leading up to starting the job because of the new environment, structure, and people. Learning a new school layout is confusing at first and causes some uncomfortableness. It took me a few days to adjust and feel more comfortable. Also, while I had previous experience working as a paraprofessional, this role was different. In my first role I worked with middle school students who had mild to moderate disabilities, usually learning disabilities or emotional behavioral disorders. In this new role I would be working with younger

students who have severe autism spectrum disorder. Lastly, another challenge in any job is understanding those you are working with. I felt a bit overwhelmed at the first meeting and trying to learn about the staff and students I work with closely and their tendencies. At first, I was very passive and slow to take any action because I was not sure of the norms in my work environment.

As I gained experience in my new role, I was able to better understand the expectations of each person on the team and how they aligned with their strengths and weaknesses. There are five other adults that I work with all day, one is the special education teacher and the other 4 are paraprofessionals like me. The special education teacher is the most knowledgeable about autism spectrum disorders, the individual student needs and goals, and the daily routine and tasks. She spends time planning, problem solving, and coordinating which best fits with her strength in knowledge. The other paraprofessional roles are broken up according to personal strengths and weakness. For example, one para is very artistic and oversees the daily crafts. Another has a hard time focusing on multiple things at once, so her role is with students who need one-on-one support. Capitalizing on and being cognizant of the individual strengths and weaknesses helps our team be more effective.

My personal strengths and weaknesses are apparent in my role as well. My leadership strengths according to StrengthsFinder are achiever, futuristic, relator, command, and activator. The strengths that are most at play in my role as a paraprofessional are relator, command, and achiever. With my strength of relator, I have formed close relationships with those I work with and am there if someone needs someone to connect with. As someone with command as a strength, I find that I am often looked to when control and making decisions is needed in a situation. Even if I am not making the decision myself, I am asked for a second opinion or to

reassure someone else on my team. Lastly, the achiever strength allows me to contribute to the team through working hard. This strength helps develop trustworthiness within my team members and myself and gives them more confidence in me. These strengths culminate in certain roles in my job. For example, if our lead teacher is out, I can use my command and activator strength to help coordinate and lead substitutes throughout the day. I explain expectations and guide them through our schedule, I also pick up extra tasks to compensate for the staff member who is out. I use my strength as a relator to support my co-workers well-being. The connections we have allow them to share if they are struggling with a situation, in or out of work. We have challenges in our work, and I can support them as someone who fully understands their work environment.

My weaknesses according to StrengthsFinder correspond with my strengths. One weakness is that others may have a hard time understanding what I am saying, because I am too focused on the future. I find myself needing to break things down more intentionally when explaining my plans to others. This weakness shows most when I am talking to a colleague about student behavior, I find myself going too in-depth about what I think the solution might be before explaining the full situation I encountered. Another weakness is that I gravitate towards pre-existing relationships and do not branch out if I already know other people. I must be conscious of this to ensure I am not missing out on new relationships and/or opportunities. I had to overcome this weakness when I first started the role, because I had no pre-existing relationships. Now, if we do have any new staff, I do find myself being quieter around them than pre-existing staff. I have overcome this and developed close relationships with some new staff; I am glad I have those relationships and I can now see how important it is to improve in this weakness.

The team I work with has successes and failures of all magnitudes. Successes that seem small to others, like staying to our schedule and having time to set up our next activity can make for a much more successful day. Larger successes, like the whole team working together to deliver a successful lesson, are also important. Success is made possible because we work as a team and have specific roles. Our roles are intertwined so success for one is success for all. For example, if another staff member has been working with a student in the morning and was able to successfully regulate their behavior, I will have more success when doing an academic task with that student later. This dependence between colleagues is also a part of what makes our 'little' successes so rewarding.

Failures are also a part of the team experience. Some common challenges and failures are miscommunications which results in an overlap or absence of responsibilities or difficulty understanding the expectations between co-workers. For example, if one staff member thinks the other is responsible for making sure a student completes handwriting work, when in fact it is their responsibility. As a team failure is inevitable, and to move toward progress you must respond appropriately. Things that do not help my team improve is blaming or belittling. Within my team we have learned to instead be open and talk out challenges to work towards less problems in the future. The team changed as we learned about ourselves and each other and experienced successes and failures. We unemotionally address the problem and plan for a solution to avoid it in the future. The change within us is necessary, and we have grown overall for the benefit of our work environment and our students' needs.

After learning more about leadership competency and applying it to my role as a paraprofessional I have many takeaways for the future. I need to continue to learn about my own strengths and weaknesses through reflection, open conversations, and tools like Strength Finder.

I need to practice best utilizing them in a team environment. I also need to be aware because they may change over time. In the future as a special education teacher, I will be coordinating paraprofessionals in my own classroom. I will keep in mind their personal strengths and weaknesses to best coordinate a schedule and team that aligns with the strengths and weaknesses. Overall, I will apply what I have learned in leadership competency by remembering that everyone's values, strengths, and weaknesses are unique and valuable in their own ways. I will lead in a way that addresses these unquities for effective leadership and encourage growth within individuals and the team itself.