I attempted to work through the leadership theory readings by continuing to look outward at the structure of the theories while examining how they aligned, or didn't, with my leadership experiences. The leader-driven theories' that emphasied individual traits, moral clarity, and inspirational behavior reinforced the subtle disconnect I've long felt. Dugan's critique that these theories romanticize leaders, reinforce heroic myths, and oversimplify relational work clarified why I often feel out of place both as a leader and as part of organizations shaped by these assumptions.

In prior courses, I've liked the thought of transformational leadership, mainly the focus on purpose and elevating collective motivation. I've tried to emulate it, but Dugan's analysis showed why the charisma-based aspect never fit me or my organizations. One major critique is that transformational leadership rests on "blurry causal pathways". The theory assumes leader behaviors produce follower transformation, but doesn't explain how or under what conditions. The mechanisms are vague, often conflating follower perceptions with leader actions, and what gets measured is usually positive feelings about the leader rather than meaningful change. Transformation in the groups I assist works best when it comes from shared identity work, community safety, and collective creativity.

Dugan's critique of authentic leadership theory is that it assumes a stable, easily accessed "core self," tying authenticity to moral alignment, and not how identity and context shape which expressions of authenticity are seen as legitimate, spoke to me. I see authenticity explored in queer arts spaces, where performers construct, explore, and sometimes amplify facets of themselves in ways that feel true to them. In these communities, authenticity is fluid, emergent, and intentional. The theory does not account for how authenticity is shaped or constrained by systems of power, marginalization, and communal care.

I thought I would appreciate servant leadershipt, but despite its language of humility and service, Dugan notes it can slide into paternalism, over-identification with moral authority, and leader-centric structures rooted in Judeo-Christian norms. I often experience feeling "too involved", carrying more responsibility than is sustainable because this model positions leaders as caretakers rather than co-creators. I recognize this in my own behavior and in several people I work with. Those people pour themselves into community work until they burn out because the model itself doesn't build collective capacity.

As the readings shift from theories centered on productivity to those centered on transformation and social justice, I found myself aligning more with the later models. The first major shift occurs with leader-driven theories (transformational, authentic,

servant leadership), which begin to couple goal attainment with individual and social advancement rather than productivity alone. Early theories assume leadership exists primarily to increase output in relatively stable environments, while complexity-driven ones recognize leadership as a vehicle for addressing systemic inequities, navigating adaptive challenges, and building collective capacity for transformation. I've worked corporate jobs that favor productivity-focused methods, while my nonprofit work often depends on approaches grounded in social change, complexity, and shared values. This shift matters because it reveals that leadership theories are deeply ideological and contextual. The question isn't just "how do we lead?" but "leadership for what?" The evolution from productivity to transformation to justice represents changing assumptions about what leadership should achieve in the world.

Challenges emerge when stated and enacted values fall out of alignment, and leaders avoid addressing these because doing so requires loss, uncertainty, and sitting in discomfort. I saw this clearly in a confidential situation within one of the organizations I serve. A leader, over-identified as the “face” of the group, framed my unwillingness to sidestep a values-based issue as a problem. This shows how leader-centric structures shape who can lead, what leadership should accomplish, and whose ways of knowing and being are legitimized or erased. Justice-driven theories offered a clearer path through shared power, explicit values alignment, and collaborative sense-making.

The justice-driven theories felt most aligned with my leadership hopes and the models I want to intentionally integrate going forward. The Social Change Model’s focus on consciousness of self, collaboration, and citizenship, and Strategic Social Change leadership’s emphasis on reframing discourse, bridging differences, and leveraging collective capacity, explains the work I want to do in community spaces where belonging, body liberation, and shared meaning are central.

It is important to reframe leadership not as a personal quality to perfect but as a relational, contextual practice tied to power, identity, and purpose. I therefore wonder how leadership communities might reframe accountability not as interpersonal tension but as adaptive work, especially when values gaps demand honest, collective learning.