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What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay

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What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay

Abstract

The works of a great leader will brilliantly encompass many specific critical elements. One must consider the many different ways an individual leader's own unique personality can combine the critical elements together. The critical leadership elements combined with the individual's own unique personality traits will make one realize that to break down the critical elements of the exceptional leader is a daunting task.

We are very complex, fearfully and wonderfully made creatures (Psalm 139:14) that cannot be analyzed easily. However we have likely experienced great leadership, and have asked ourselves: Why it is that this person motivates me, challenges me, serves me, stands up for me, and makes me want to be on their team?

What I Believe about Leadership and Education

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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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I have both observed and experienced great leadership in action, however, I do not believe the beautiful leadership work of a seasoned veteran can be easily codified. I do not know of a super-computer that can systematically use software to break down the critical elements of leadership and print them out one by one. I also have no expectations that a "Google" search under "leadership expertise" will provide me with all I need to know about leadership expertise. The works of a great leader will brilliantly encompass many specific critical elements. One must consider the many different ways an individual leader's own unique personality can combine the critical elements together. The critical leadership elements combined with the individual's own unique personality traits will make one realize that to break down the critical elements of the exceptional leader is a daunting task. We are very complex, fearfully and wonderfully made creatures (Bible, New International Version, Ps.139:14) that cannot be analyzed easily. However we have likely experienced great leadership, and have asked ourselves why it is that this person motivates me, challenges me, serves me, stands up for me, and makes me want to be on their team? (Gangel, 1981, p. 257). After much reflection and research on great leadership, I hope I

can lead successfully, girded with the critical elements that I value and feel most comfortable with as a leader.

I would like to share a small example of a great leader that I watched many a summer day. That great leader was my father. I remember an incident once making hay when a large load of square bales upset. Most of the hay found its way to the ground, along with one of the workers. Dad reacted quickly and got the hayrack stopped before anyone was hurt. The obvious next step for most would be to have the hay re-stacked, but that is not what Dad had us do next. What I observed next by this simple farmer was leadership wisdom that cannot be taught from a textbook, but experienced and learned from living. Instead of yelling or demanding the immediate pick up of the hay mess, Dad took one look at our situation and our white faces, and decided this would be an excellent teachable moment for us. He suggested we leave the hay so that we could take a break and talk. The haying crew sat underneath a shade tree while Dad told us over cold sodas that we were much more important than a square bale of hay. Dad's "Time out" helped us to step away and see things in a different light, straighten our priorities about life, and give us a fresh new start. I feel that my dad adequately used his authority to turn disaster into a teachable moment that

most likely saved some lives that summer. His actions that day were actions that a person could not find in a "How to" book on leadership. If I were to write a good leadership manual, I could write a complete list of critical elements that described my dad's actions in dealing with the hay crew that day.

I learned a lot about leadership that day and through the years growing up watching my father relate to others. I remember Dad sharing with me that he learned to lead by watching his father. I have had the privilege of observing and learning from many other great leaders as well, including coaches, pastors, and educational leaders. Life experiences have taught that individuals can learn how to lead and individuals are not necessarily born equipped with leadership skills. Vince Lombardi said, "Leaders are made not born" (www.vincelombardi.com/leader.html). Leadership is a learned art that my years as a father of four, coach of many teams, a detasseling crew leader, and teacher of a students has particularly prepared me for a career as a principal. These real life leadership training experiences have taught me that there are several critical elements that I want to possess to be an effective leader. Some of these elements I observed from my summer haying under my dad, others elements I observed by watching coaches,

pastors, and educational leaders. I am not necessarily saying that all good leaders need to possess these four critical leadership elements, but as I grow professionally I believe these are elements that I want to possess and develop in becoming a successful leader. Todd Whitaker (2003) states that "we learn from good and bad leaders alike, or in other words, how to, or how not to lead" (p.5). What critical elements does the good leader possess and what critical elements are lacking by the poor leader? One can learn from both types of leaders. The first and foremost of the critical elements that I desire as an educational leader is a vision for my learning community. Leaders must know where they are going so that they can truly lead.

A Vision

Proverbs 29:18 says that "Where there is no vision the people will perish." Where there is no hope, people lose direction and find themselves asking why? Why are we doing what we are doing? Why are we using this curriculum, or why do we always use that format for teacher's conferences? The lack of a vision will have us as educational leaders responding in two very different ways: being terrified of any change or jumping on the bandwagon whenever any great idea comes along. I see both of these

responses as harmful, with the potential to cause great frustration to our staff.

As it is stated in Principal Leadership by Elaine Wilmore (2002), there are three major steps in creating a vision for a learning community: The first step is articulating the plan clearly to all involved. This will include from the janitors, cooks, and parents of students to businessmen that may be teaming with the school as partners in education (p.10). Clear articulation of the vision is necessary so that everyone will be on the same page working together as a team. Articulating the vision may involve the administrators having a cookout at the beginning of the year and describing what they have in mind as a leader. It could mean sitting down with lead teachers and collaboratively seeking the vision and then as a group articulating it to the rest of the community. This depends on leadership style: a directive, or team style of leadership (Lambert, 2003, p. 43).

The second important aspect of the vision is implementation (Wilmore, 2002, p. 22). Without implementation we are all talk, with no action. Specific detailed actions have to be implemented in order to achieve the vision; all the campus activities must be included to pull this off: curricular, co-curricular, extracurricular

activities pertaining to professional development (Wilmore, 2002, p. 22). The most important activity of all is the financial backing for the vision. A realistic, accurate budget is needed to fulfill the vision. If funds have not been budgeted the vision will surely die.

This brings us to what I feel is the most crucial work of the visionary, the "Stewardship of the Vision". Once the vision has been implemented, there needs to be a plan to keep the staff on track and remain focused on the vision. Often the newness of a vision statement wears off and there is a tendency to want to go back to the old ways of doing things, especially if the new ways do not immediately seem to work (Noebel, 1991, p.74). Patience can be a hard lesson to learn. I have heard that it takes three weeks to form a new habit, good or bad. Three weeks is not a very long time, but it can seem like an eternity when leaders are in the trenches trying to keep from eroding into the old ruts and bad habits from the past. The educational leader needs to hold the staff accountable to the goals and plans that were all agreed upon by the learning community. We are trying to form new and better habits in education. If there are areas of concern in the visionary processes, we should not jump to hasty conclusions before true assessment in multiple forms can

take place (Wilmore, 2002, p. 23). Maybe the vision did not truly represent our learning community. Maybe it is time to go back to the drawing board where deep reflection and study of multiple assessments are used to improve and properly adjust the processes. During the adjustment times it is important for the principal to encourage his staff so that they do not lose heart. The educational leader must be a good example of perseverance, pushing onward, and not turning back (Blanco, 2003, p. 51).

Another advantage of a well-defined vision is to serve as a safeguard to protect against jumping on the bandwagon, or accepting the latest non-researched fads that come along in education. These fads take schools down detours that can take years to turn around and can be very expensive to correct. The visionary will know where the school is heading and not allow the educational community to ebb and flow with every non-researched idea that comes along. A vision works as a hedge to protect us from temptations that lead down wrong roads. Visionary leaders are not the Lone Rangers of the school, wanting to do everything their way. They are team players who are willing to listen to those that make up the learning community around them and develop the crucial vision that is unique to that school (Lambert, 2003, p. 24). After the vision is articulated, implemented,

and managed, adjustments will need to be made throughout the year. If the staff can hold together as a team through the hard times and not lose heart, the educational team will bond closer than ever and rejoice when the vision delivers success in the end. Successes need to be celebrated in some manner so that the all will acknowledge the triumph and look forward to more great accomplishments. An educational leader with a vision is the first critical element in exemplary educational leadership. The second critical element in exemplary educational leadership I would like to discuss is charisma.

Charisma

The vision that is communicated by the educational leader must be communicated with a charisma or passion that is felt by those hearing the vision. Not all the leaders will be as charismatic and emotionally influential as a Martin Luther King, Winston Churchill, or John F. Kennedy (Daft, 2005, p.152). I believe that leaders like Martin Luther King were special leaders raised up for special times in our history. I also believe that now is the time for some special charismatic, educational leaders to inspire followers with heart felt convictions for the vision they have for their schools. Teachers with charismatic administrators may notice distinguishing,

common characteristics about their educational leader. The following are examples of these distinguishing commonalties: the charismatic administrator will be a passionate advocate incurring great personal risk and cost. The charismatic administrator creates an atmosphere of change that is highly different from the status quo, the charismatic administrator has a strong and inspirational articulation of vision and motivation to lead, and finally a leader with charisma gains the respect and admiration of his followers (Draft, 2005, p 151). These are some distinguishing and admirable characteristics that I think makes charisma a desired critical element of leadership, yet we cannot allow are emotions to run wild or unchecked resulting in "Black Hat" charisma.

Charisma has not always been used to benefit the group, organization, or society. Charisma has been used for self-serving purposes, which lead to deception, manipulation and exploitation of others. Adolf Hitler, Charles Manson, and Idi Amin were also leaders with charisma. These were the charismatic leaders that chose to wear the "Black Hat". This proves that the foundation of charisma is not always logical and rational, but at times emotionally charged ideas that are risky and potentially dangerous (Draft, 2005, p. 152).

This brings me to the two different types of charismatic leadership motivations that can destroy or empower an organization, personalized and socialized charismatic leaders. Personalized charismatic leaders react to organizational problems in terms of their own needs rather than the needs of the organization. This will bring disaster to the followers that have bought into the vision. Some characteristics of personalized charismatic leaders are self-aggrandizing, non-egalitarian and as mentioned earlier, exploitative (Draft, 2005, p. 153). A socialized charismatic leader is empowering, egalitarian, and supportive. Personalized behavior is about caring for self, the very behavior that Adolf Hitler increasingly exhibited as World War II progressed, whereas socialized behavior is based on valuing others.

Charismatic leaders communicate the plan or vision clearly to all involved from the teachers to the custodians. Charismatic communication is very unique in itself because the leader with charisma will use conventional or unconventional methods to transcend the status quo and create change that is understood (Draft, 2005, p. 152). Unconventional communication is refreshing to me because I think that the fads of political correctness are stifling and too conventional. Everyone

starts sounding like the same old record skipping over and over again. I do not want to offend anyone by crude or rude conversation, but I will not be confined by correct rhetoric that puts listeners to sleep. I want my speech to be understood by all. I want to reveal that I care about my staff by laying out clear and concise goals that are easy to follow by all in my learning community. A "revealer" might be a good way to describe a charismatic leader, one who does what it takes to communicate truth. Charismatic leaders may look peculiar at times as they boldly and transparently share values and what is important to them. I am sure I may look like an odd ball at times, but many times this look will enhance the image of myself as a leader (West & Armstrong, 1980, p. 19). It should be apparent to my colleagues that I am a selfless leader, not a leader bent only on self-preservation.

National Football League quarterbacks like Joe Montana, John Elway, Brett Favre and many others come to my mind when thinking of great leaders. With two minutes left of a game they were able to passionately lead their team onto victory. When these football legends would step into the huddle, they would not robotically call the next play. They would call the play with fire in their eyes and a heart felt determination that inspired their teammates.

They demanded greatness from their teammates and themselves. Their charisma was what separated them from other quarterbacks.

I may have implied that a charismatic leader is a zealous, peculiar leader that gets people to follow them by their eccentric behaviors, however that is not the case. That is not what I have in mind when thinking of good leadership. The degree of oddness is not the goal of being a good charismatic leader, nor, as I mentioned earlier, will I ever speak with the charisma of a Winston Churchill. However, I will remain focused on the vision. I will speak passionately of it, and make sure it is understood by using conventional or unconventional methods.

Moral Leadership

Besides having the critical elements of a vision and charisma to properly share the vision, I believe there is another critical element of leadership. A leader is to be a moral compass whose needle stays pointed steadily north even when it is popular to face other directions or change like the wind (Aikman, 2004, p. 138). Imagine hiking the Canadian Northwest Territory, being dependent on compass' needle that does not consistently stay on North. One would have nothing to depend on for direction and would begin to wander in circles. Moral leaders and their principles are

always popular and spread across all generations, religions and continents. When I spent a year in the The Gambia, West Africa, I lived among the Wolof people. They are Muslims who are also steeped in the animistic cults of their African heritage. I was surprised at the moral similarities the Africans shared with this "Tubaab" or "White skin" from the United States. I believe that for many Americans they believe that it is just a Christian belief to try to be moral. The truth is that the six world religions all share basic principles of morality: "You reap what you sow", "Actions are more important than words", and the "Golden Rule", not forgetting the universal basic principles of fairness, kindness, dignity, charity, integrity, honesty, quality, service and patience (Covey, 1991, p. 95). The laws of science teach us that it is impossible to break the law of gravity. We can only break ourselves against the law. Consider the absurdity of trying to live a life, run a school or business based on the opposite of the universal basic truths. I doubt that unfairness, deceit, baseness, uselessness, mediocrity, or degradation is a solid foundation for a successful school (Covey, 1991, p. 95). That is why it was a must to include moral leadership as one of my critical elements.

As a leader I do not want to try to bump up against the wall of the law, but completely surrender and strive to be the moral leader that my learning community will expect and appreciate. This is the scary or unsettling side to someone like myself challenged to be a moral compass. I have to examine my life to see if I am abiding by the moral principles. If we are under the constitution, we are under its laws, everyone, even the president! As an educational leader I may be tempted to try to exclude myself from the law or moral principles that rule, when actually I must be that example of that moral compass that is always pointing north and not any other directions, but the direction that is right.

Moral leaders are not always appreciated for the righteous stands that they take. A person very rarely gets honored for doing what is right in this world. For example, I have never been pulled over by a Highway patrolman for driving the speed limit. The job description of the state patrol is not to compliment good drivers, but to arrest those who are breaking the law. I remember in high school a group of classmates and I was reprimanded for our behavior. The news traveled fast around the school. It was not long before we were very popular on campus. We made a name for ourselves, we thought. It was all enjoyable until the

discipline was administered. The lawbreakers are the ones that get the attention. However, attention is not what I am after as a moral leader. I am not after making friends, but establishing a community that appreciates a moral compass that can always be counted on to faithfully pointing North, the direction that is always right. Many have thought that the home and the church are the only places morality and values should be advocated. They forget that students will always get morality education from their teachers whether it is a good or bad influence (Frase, 2000, p. 83). The fact is, students are watching how we conduct ourselves. I hope to relay to them the basic moral code that people must adhere to for a successful society to function.

A Servant Leader

"A Servant Leader?" This may sound like an oxymoron. Are you a servant or a leader? Can you be both? However, I love this critical element of leadership because it does convey to the staff that they are loved and appreciated, and when someone is on the receiving end of love they in return want to show love. It is highly contagious. A servant leader is someone who starts a chain reaction of servanthood from the top of an organization working its way down to the student (Marzano, 2003, p 60). This is different than the traditional leadership ideas that

service starts at the bottom with the janitors and stays at the bottom. Just think what kind of eye opening response I might receive from the janitor if I, as the principal, would bundle up and shovel some snow. I was recently reminded of a beautiful example of servant leadership on the anniversary of 9/11. On this anniversary I vividly recall seeing Mayor Giuliani and President Bush in a serving capacity. At that time of great need they looked like anyone else frantically working trying to make sense of the horror. Yes, they were calling the shots as well, but I guarantee that those who were working shoulder to shoulder with them were willing to go the extra mile for them.

Personally, I think that it is possible to be a leader without a servant's heart, but it will separate you from being a great leader. A person who is under the authority of a leader with a servant's heart will be more willing to serve as well; the element of service is a contagious one. One becomes motivated because of a leader that would not ask someone to do anything that he/she would not do (Kurson, 2002 p. 12). I hope that I can be a servant leader that my staff will refer to in such away. I feel that this philosophy of servant leadership is an example of the "Golden Rule". If all workers on the team will

empathetically put themselves in the shoes of their colleagues and try to make each other's job easier, wonderful team relations and work will be accomplished.

As a leader in education, I want to be seen like those selfless workers in New York City three years ago. At that time no one was too concerned about who was leading, they just had an important job to do, and it would take a team effort to do it.

As educational leaders we also have a very big job in front of us with the high demands of No Child Left Behind that weighs heavy upon us. As New York City Firemen and volunteers endured the 9-11 tragedy as a team, we too need not worry about traditional authoritarian hierarchy. As an educational leader I will hold a position of authority. However, I will not need to show positional strength by sitting behind my desk and looking important. We will all need to humble ourselves, roll up our sleeves, and get to work. I want to actually look for ways to serve those under me. I do not want to exploit those under me to pursue my own selfish needs I want to serve their needs. I want to try to make their job easier, more meaningful, more satisfying and more productive as teachers (Rush, 1985, p. 218). In Stephen Covey's book, *Principle Centered Leadership* (1991) he talks about the joy of serving

anonymously. Covey speaks of a psychological, emotional, and spiritual reward or by-product one receives when he/she enters into a selfless act of service (p.140). This is especially joyful when it is kept anonymous. Covey makes the challenge of stepping outside of your own job description and secretly operating on the "Second mile principle" going above and beyond the call of your duty. People are so focused on their job at hand, they are missing out on the refreshing second mile in service, serving without recognition.

With these four critical elements developed and working for me, I know I will be the principal that I would need to be a principal that a staff could look up to, and know that they are loved and appreciated. I would be a principal whose staff could be sure that I would support them in their leadership roles as teachers. I want parents that are allowed access to my office to discuss concerns. I want business partners in the community to know that they are important stakeholders in the next generation of contributors to this great democratic society. In this free country, I do not seek the freedom to do what ever I want to do, but the freedom to do the right thing. The right thing is being a responsible leader for my educational community.

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