

Stacia McFadden

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Leadership Monograph:

REARing Community through Authentic, Inclusive Leadership

“[S]He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind.”

~ Nelson Mandela, Long Walk To Freedom, 1994

What is Leadership?

Leadership, by definition, is the action of leading, influencing, or guiding a group. It has historically been associated with authority, hierarchy, seniority, or other characteristics that position power within an organization. However, leadership is far more complex and consists of multiple dimensions (Northouse 32). As independent schools become more diverse in cultures, ethnic groups, languages, socio-economic backgrounds, opinions, religious beliefs, sexuality, gender identity, neurology, etc., leadership that once reflected a homogenous dominant group must be reconceived and allow leaders to lead in different ways (Lumby and Coleman 15). Nelson Mandela compares leadership to shepherding, stating “[S]He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind.” The leader described in the quote exhibits humility, abandoning the need to exist physically in the lead position, yet encourages and facilitates forward movement of a team who feels valued and safe, toward a shared vision.

[R]elationships Influence Culture

Culture is complex. It is developed amongst a group who shares a variety of accumulated experiences that seemingly inform the collective to think, feel, and behave in a similar fashion. The systems of behaviors, whether positive or negative, have the potential to be passed on to new members as a correct way of being. (Schein 6).

Leaders must be strategic in their quests to usher a community through cultural “shifts” that will allow organizations to optimally perform. Since culture is a product of human interaction, healthy relationships are critical in establishing strong teams. As Daniel Coyle discovered in his research of successful teams, building safety, sharing vulnerability, and establishing purpose were all skills needed collectively to connect teams and accelerate them into action (xix).

Teams exhibit signs of safety when members connect and create authentic senses of belonging. The 2019 *Harvard Business Review* article, “*The Value of Belonging at Work*,” found that workplace isolation lowers organizational commitment and engagement (Carr). To achieve the opposite, teams must work to strengthen communication skills, eliminate toxic behavior or individuals, celebrate victories, provide meaningful feedback, and more. Elena Aguilar calls such acts “building a culture of trust,” which is cultivated when structures exist to foster healthy relationships and make decisions (40). “Encourage the Heart,” a practice of exemplary leadership created by Kouzes and Posner, aids in building such a culture as it supports the need for humans to be appreciated and celebrates victories to create a spirit of community. Note, care must be taken to ensure that diversity and inclusion efforts aren’t masked as fostering belonging. When leaders fail to see race, age, sex, ability, or any other marginalized

descriptor of a colleague, that leader is unable to create and sustain a community that “draws strength from diverse backgrounds, experiences, perspectives, and concerns” (Horsford 124).

Sharing vulnerability, the willingness to show up and be seen in the face of uncertainty, takes courage and liberation. When teams take risks collaboratively, workplace trust ensues. As comfort with vulnerability increases, so does one’s sense of self (George 89). Dr. Brene Brown admits that trust and vulnerability likens its relationship to the chicken-egg debate; however, “We need to trust to be vulnerable, and we need to be vulnerable in order to build trust (31).”

High purpose organizations create narratives that connect to shared goals and values. Leaders must define, rank, and be clear about priorities, identify skills and people best suited to accomplish tasks, and focus on and measure what’s most important (Coyle 229-232). As Aguilar guides leaders to define purpose and meaning for their teams, the connection between the team’s work and the organization’s vision must be clear (pg).

[E]mbrace Challenges as Opportunities

When a situation does not go as expected, anxiety, fear, uncertainty, or a number of other emotions may arise. “Negativity Bias,” humans’ natural attraction to ruminate on negative information rather than positive information, thus leads to feelings of blame, shame, and guilt. When these emotions present themselves within a team due to conflict, individuals assume one of three roles Stephen Karpman identifies as **Victim** (oppressed, powerless), **Rescuer** (enabler, hero), and **Persecutor** (villain, oppressor) (Emerald). These roles, known collectively as “The Drama Triangle,” do not create an

environment that is desirable, productive, or sustainable. In *The 15 Commitments of Conscious Leadership*, victims rarely take full responsibility for their roles in situations, rescuers over function by taking more than their share of responsibility, and persecutors continue to find fault and place blame (48).

A positive alternative to “The Drama Triangle” is “TED” (The Empowerment Dynamic), introduced in 2010 by David Emerald. This model promotes the victim to creator, the villain to challenger, and the rescuer to coach. The creator, the character who centers the situation, focuses on the desired outcomes and actionable steps to obtain success. The challenger holds the creator accountable for growth and learning. Finally, the rescuer becomes a compassionate coach, assisting the creator in the development of the vision and action plan.

A leader who is able to shift a culture from “The Drama Triangle” to “The Empowerment Dynamic” creates an environment where team members take full responsibility for what is occurring, allowing learning and curiosity to spark co-creativity.

Learning is a responsibility of the entire team, even its leader. In the article, “Good Leaders Are Good Learners,” the authors, a doctoral student and two business school professors, explain how leaders learn best from experience (Keating). Using Susan Ashford and Scott DeRue’s mindful engagement experiential learning cycle, the researchers found that leaders exhibit the most growth when cycling through three phases: setting challenging learning goals and working toward them, intentionally experimenting with new strategies alongside a coach, and conducting post-experimentation reviews for insight.

[A]ctions Create Reality

The gap between a school's vision and its reality is difficult to identify and interpret. Peter Senge identifies this as "creative tension (150)." The gap can discourage people, making the vision seem unattainable, or the gap can motivate people, moving them toward the vision. There are two resolutions for releasing the tension: pull reality toward the vision or pull the vision toward reality.

In order to accomplish the task most schools desire (moving reality closer to the vision) organizations must see themselves as a whole and discover how to utilize individuals' commitment and capacity to learn at all levels. This requires a strong allegiance and shared understanding of the vision, an ideal and unique image of the future for the common good. Inspiring vision entails such clear communication that others are just as excited about the possibilities and able to understand and proclaim the vision. With a leader's hope, enthusiasm, and power of persuasion, members of the organization should be compelled to enlist in the collective pursuit of actualizing the vision.

It takes more than effective communication to move an organization toward a goal. Senge suggests that it takes a learning organization, one that combines adaptive and generative learning thus enhancing its ability to innovate (14). Additionally, learning organizations "continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire ... by continually learning to see the whole together (3)."

A system, referenced above as "the whole," was defined by Donella Meadows as "an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves." David Stroh builds upon Meadows' definition by specifying that a *desired* purpose be achieved. Systems thinking assists people in understanding the purpose the system is

accomplishing, often revealing that what they desire to be isn't the actualized purpose. Eventually, individuals realize the role their actions play in affecting the larger system. Since their actions create the reality, solutions to change the reality are within their reach and control.

[R]eflection fuels Growth

John Dewey was one of the first to write about reflective practice as he explored the relationship between experience, interaction, and reflection within the learning process (1933). When reflection is practiced using cognitive techniques such as knowledge retrieval combined with connecting those memories to new experiences, stronger learning occurs (Brown). Bill George, author of four bestselling books about leadership, posits that introspective practice (reflection) and receiving feedback are the best ways to develop self-awareness and self-acceptance (2015). Busy leaders, in particular, need to make time daily for deeper reflection, evaluating actions and conditions of situations to develop a better understanding of themselves. This practice ensures that actions align with who they mean to be.

Receiving feedback is also important for the growth of leaders, often surrounded by people who tell them what they want to hear. Constructive and honest feedback is critical in the development of a leader who strives to be authentic. George suggest the use of anonymous feedback tools or support teams to solicit honest critique (95-96).

Reflection and feedback require ruminating on something that has happened in the past. Mindfulness, which has gained in popularity within the past 15 years, is achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment. Jeff Jordan, former president of PayPal, wrote "becoming a great leader demands tremendous

self-awareness (Leaving it on the Field).” There is immense power in the ability of a leader to use mindfulness as a tool of reflection in the moment. In *The Mindful School Leader*, the authors share several benefits of mindfulness which include improving the ability to slow down or stop automatic responses, having greater capacity to handle complex situations, and achieving greater balance and resilience (Brown and Olsen, 10-12).

Who is the Leader I Aim to Be?

Prior to my experience with the Klingenstein Center, I was a practical leader. When I witnessed an example of great leadership, I sought to learn from that leader and implement practices that appeared to work for them. Now, I have immense respect for theories and research that support the practical application of leadership best practices. As a Black female raising a Black son working in independent schools, I reflect regularly on the intersectionality of my experiences that have shaped my purpose for remaining in these institutions. I want to use the inspiration of my story to influence, empower, and connect the communities in which I find myself. I listen to understand, I think to connect, and I speak to build. I strive to create a safe space for all where individual ideologies are examined and potentially challenged with care, thoughtfulness, integrity, and compassion.

I aim to be a leader who clearly communicates the vision of my community and myself, without wavering or negotiating my core values. I aim to be a confident leader who will challenge processes that do not serve the greater good. I aim to be a collaborative leader and team player who support my colleagues and make them look

brilliant. I aim to be a humble and trustworthy colleague who builds relationships that foster meaningful exchanges of praise and feedback. I aim to be a visionary leader who remembers where I came from and does not forget to check in on those I'm not around as often.

As an authentic leader, I will model transparency and vulnerability while enlisting others to accomplish our shared aspirations. I will not shrink from challenging opportunities that require innovative problem-solving. I will honor the strengths and talents of others by building trust and empowering them collaboratively.

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