

Leading for Social Justice
Leadership Reflection
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Reflecting on leadership, and my growth as a leader is a constant for me. Working with people is exhilarating, complex, rewarding, and difficult work. Each day brings new challenges, regardless of what has happened in the days and weeks before. Approaching leadership with a status quo approach is never possible, and reflecting on these dynamics helps me better understand the world, how it works, and what makes others behave the way they do (ELCC 1.2, 1.3, 1.4) (National Policy Board For Educational Administration (NPBEA), 2011). That does not mean I have it all figured out. I doubt anyone does.

My journey as an educational leader started the first day I greeted my very first students. I started teaching in a rural district, and then in a suburban district, with “no first hand knowledge of the realities of urban public schools” (Kozol, 2005, p. 18). Regardless, setting the tone for instruction, establishing routines, and most important of all, building relationships with staff and students all led to my ability to later influence, make choices, connect others, and make things happen. I am intrinsic by nature, so reaching out and meeting new people is something I have to work hard to accomplish. Leadership is all about people, and being able to communicate with others effectively. I have grown in this area over the past ten years, and certainly am now better able to see information “through the lens of equity” (Marshall & Olivia, 2010, p. 316). I now find it much easier to understand what makes people react, behave, and act the way they do.

My leadership style has grown from a classroom teacher, to teacher influencer, to directing others and leading a team, to lately impacting an entire school district and beyond (ELCC 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4) (National Policy Board For Educational Administration (NPBEA),

2011). One of the ideas I struggle with most is that I am able to do what I do, and have the responsibility I do, at my age. Certainly, when I was younger, I saw others in similar positions and imagined they must be much wiser and older, but have since learned that age has nothing to do with skill, and that anyone qualified to make something happen should be offered a seat at the table. In my current role, I am constantly surprised by the mature leadership skills already present in others I am fortunate to mentor and coach.

Experience, however, does take time, and I am always ready to learn from others, regardless of what area the opportunity comes from. School operations are often poorly defined, and leadership based on experience, background knowledge, and complex connections to various team members is often key to success. I have on more than one occasion reached out to others for guidance in sensitive situations, seeking clarification, history, advice, and feedback. Such information does not always come from above. Many times, a leader must be willing to seek information both from superiors and junior team members (ELCC 3.4) (National Policy Board For Educational Administration (NPBEA), 2011). After all, it is hard to be everywhere at once, and reaching out to a teacher for some background knowledge with one of their colleagues often yields much more information than asking the principal. The ability to do either, however, is dependent on relationships established and nurtured over time. One of the key traits of any leader is to work well with people. For me, this is an area I am getting better at every day.

In the past few years, I have run a few social experiments with groups of colleagues, friends, teachers – anyone wanting to join. Many have been quite forward in pushing a certain idea, or designed around changing some sort of behavior. For example, I ran a “Happiness Project” last year that aimed at retraining the brain to favor optimism and happiness over negative thinking. We exploited technology to prompt us daily for happiness stimuli, and I asked

the group to respond, either in writing, freeform, or some other medium. Another project included responding to weekly prompts generated by the team members in a 6-month long effort to think, reflect, challenge, and grow. One of those topics ended up exploring privilege, and what it meant to be from the dominant class in America. At the time, I felt differently than I do now, and I know personal growth has taken place in between. My ability to feel empathy now is much more developed than in the past. It is a skill that can be learned, practiced, and leveraged to yield better equitable decisions, informed situations, and optimal outcomes for a wider audience. Using my privilege to change others is something I have not thought much about, until now, and I know it will change the way I think and act going forward (ELCC 3.3) (National Policy Board For Educational Administration (NPBEA), 2011).

Arguably, it is hard to see privilege when one is privileged. I think that is true for all people. Try asking a politician for the price of milk, or what public school is all about, and privilege will rear its ugly head and sneer back at you. Ask a farmer about how corn grows, and you might find yourself up against another privilege – the privilege of knowing how to grow corn. If you are willing to learn from that, personal growth happens. If you are not, you will likely miss out. Privilege, depending on one's viewpoint, can hinder or hurt any situation. Equity for example, can only be approached in an environment that “embraces a set of underlying assumptions” (Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009, p. 11) about what is possible. As an educational leader, it is important to leverage and exploit privilege for the benefit of others, or for those less fortunate. The ability to make things happen for others is one of the many benefits of leadership, and is one of the things that feeds me as a leader. I certainly do not get up in the morning for the paycheck. While it is a nice benefit, what I am able to do for others is what drives me. Valuing others for who they are, and celebrating diversity, will only help “enrich

conversations” (Jones, Jones, Lindsey, & Tillman, 2010, p. 29) and support the mission of equity for all.

I see myself as a person who opens doors for others, and helps navigate. Perhaps this is why I am so fond of orienteering. I have a certain skill set that I have developed over years of active practice. Technology is one of the many areas I am adept, but keeping those skills to myself serves no one. Sharing with others, and allowing others to improve and grow, is where I am able to best leverage my privilege of having had access, opportunity, and the ability to learn myself. Supporting my colleagues, teachers, parents, and students is one of the most rewarding aspects of doing what I do (ELCC 5.2, 5.5) (National Policy Board For Educational Administration (NPBEA), 2011). Helping others do what they do, but now better, faster, and more efficient, is what leadership to me is all about.

I am by nature, a solitary creature. I function best by myself, when I am allowed to forge ahead, ever steadfast and resolute that my skills and abilities will yield a planned outcome. This is who I am, and I am aware of the many difficulties this can generate for me, and others. I relate well to others in general, and much better now than 15 years ago. I have realized that relationships and collaboration will make a better supported journey, and that all problems cannot be solved alone (ELCC 6.3) (National Policy Board For Educational Administration (NPBEA), 2011). Others, who know this about me already, work with me, and treasure my ability to get things done. New acquaintances take a while to warm up to me. I believe in skills and abilities, and feel very passionately that if those around me are unwilling to be ever increasing their own skill and expertise, I am likely to find another team. I work best in a results-oriented environment, where I am able to solve tasks and projects in creative ways, and where others understand that I am a bit different. The key is, however, that I am aware of all this,

and work hard at compensating for my faults when it comes to working in groups, or with others across teams. However, this does not mean I am anti-social or shun working with others – quite the opposite. But if the working team is not skilled or have what it takes, I will likely move to improve the situation.

Reflecting on all of this is valuable. As a leader, thinking about leadership is one of the ways of promoting self-growth, or “self-education” (Jones et al., 2010, p. 61). Ownership of learning and self-improvement is vital to any successful leader, and reflection promotes the refinement of growth, and helps inform the many nuances of gaining experience in leadership.

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