

TEACHING LEADERSHIP:
A Journey Into The Unknown

by

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The number of people involved in leadership programs on college and university campuses continues to grow and may now include close to 1,000 programs serving thousands of students. So the debate about whether leaders are born or made seems increasingly to have been resolved in favor of the position that much of what we think of as leadership can be taught and learned. This is certainly in line with John Gardner's view that the answer to the question "Can Leadership be taught?" is an emphatic but qualified "Yes" ---emphatic because most of the ingredients of leadership can be taught, qualified because the ingredients that cannot be taught may be quite important (Gardner, 157). Ever the optimist, Gardner added, we can offer promising young people opportunities and challenges favorable to the flowering of whatever gifts they may have (Gardner, 158). Like Gardner, Thomas Cronin took the position that while leadership cannot be taught, it can and must be learned (Cronin, 308). Cronin seems to argue that learning leadership requires more, perhaps much more, than formal instruction or teaching, though he offers little by way of a prescription for learning leadership.

When the Jepson School was founded, the University of Richmond gave the Jepson faculty the mission to educate *for and about* leadership. The leadership studies faculty interpreted this to mean that they had to go beyond the presentation of traditional college courses that convey knowledge and develop critical thinking. They decided to include experiences that would inspire the willingness and confidence to serve in leadership roles, enable students to integrate knowledge and values in leadership behavior, and equip them to use knowledge of leadership and their imagination to create new responses to leadership situations that would only unfold after the students had graduated. And we did so with no clear theory or conceptual framework of how leadership is learned to guide the design and delivery of learning experience.

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) has one of the world's best research and training programs for the study of leadership. Scholars there have tried to understand leadership development in order to be able to enhance the development of leaders. Some of the CCL staff have suggested that it might be useful to think of leadership development as a form of individual adult development and that leadership development could be defined as the expansion of a person's capacity to be effective in leadership roles and processes. Leadership roles and processes are those that enable groups of people to work together in productive and meaningful ways (McCauley et al, 4.) These authors go on to develop a general model of how experience affects the development of leadership.

But nowhere can we find a complete theory of how to develop leaders. Such a theory would, as a minimum, identify critical leadership knowledge, skills, and values, attitudes

and beliefs. It would have to tell us what can be learned and what may be innate. The theory might identify stages of leadership development that could be associated with different capacities and perspectives within the learning leader. The theory would also have to inform both students and teachers as to how each of these leadership outcomes is to be taught or developed. Different learning activities would be required in all likelihood to bring about changes in different dimensions of leadership. Such a theory should help learners develop cross-situational as well as situation-specific leadership knowledge and skills, since there is evidence that the nature of leadership may be contextual. And we should be able to empirically test the key variables in our theory of leadership development so that over time we could refine the ways we engage learners to increase the likelihood of helping them develop their fullest leadership potential. Some promising longitudinal studies of developmental changes and the ability to participate more effectively in leadership roles and processes are under way at Alverno College, Yale University, and the U. S. Military Academy at West Point (Mentkowski and Associates, Horvath, et al). But it will many years before these results will be in and we will know what has been learned from a practical point of view.

So we are left to our own experiences, judgment, and, yes, best guesses as to how and what to teach to students willing to think of themselves as potential future leaders. Since we must act in the present while we await a sound theory to guide the education of leaders, allow me to share my own conclusions, hunches and insights from over 25 years of trying to teach leadership. The first issue that must be confronted is what outcomes are to be achieved. If one seeks only to provide learners with knowledge *about* leadership, then teaching leadership is primarily a matter of teaching in the same way one would teach any subject in the humanities and social and behavioral sciences. One would need mainly to focus on defining a domain of knowledge and then engage the students in thinking about the subject. This is no easy task and should not be considered less worthy than the choice to promote development of other capacities for leadership. Society benefits when more citizens are better informed about the nature of leadership and its significance as a social process, especially in a democratic society.

But if one aspires to nurture the capacity to actually participate more effectively in leadership roles and processes, how does one teach leadership? A second choice now confronts the teacher. One must answer questions such as what do you and the learner want to know and be able to do? And what values or virtues of character should be nurtured since leadership is always a matter of ends and means? Here we must be concerned with much more than the best teaching methods in the tradition of the liberal arts, which might suffice in teaching to know about leadership.

In addition to the ways we impart knowledge and critical thinking, now leadership educators must find ways to allow students to experience what it means to participate in leadership roles and processes. In brief, we must create learning situations that allow students to put knowledge into practice and to experience the consequences of their actions through the reactions of others. There are many ways to do this in the classroom: written case studies, role-plays, simulations and others. We must also create ways for students to apply their leadership knowledge outside of the classroom, to find learning

laboratories and ways to capture experience for later discussion and reflection. Here we must confront the artificial ways we divide our campuses and seek to connect the many places students can experience not only their own leadership but also the leadership of other students, faculty administrators, and staff on campus. The more we can connect the classroom with other parts of the campus leadership environment, the more potent leadership education can be. And we can send students off campus to experience leadership in settings where students are entrusted with leadership responsibilities in internships, service learning, and part-time work settings. Critical to learning from experience is the opportunity to discuss and reflect with faculty and other students about the meaning of one's leadership actions and their impact on others. Early results from the work underway at Alvorno suggest that reflection is critical to both lifelong learning and the capacity to integrate knowledge, skill and character in life situations (Mentkowski).

We need to provide vicarious learning opportunities for students in addition to ways to learn from direct experience. Complex social behavior such as leadership can be taught by calling attention to more experienced leaders in action. This can be done through the use of videos, current media events such as televised speeches or events, and by bringing leaders to campus and class to interact with students. As teachers we must always be aware of how we lead in all of our interactions with students. We are continuously teaching lessons about power, interpersonal relations, communications, decision-making, motivation, respect for others and much more as we interact with our students in class and elsewhere. When we practice what we teach, we not only teach, we inspire. If we ignore what we teach about leadership, we risk creating disengaged cynics. And we need to inspire our students to believe that while the choice of whether to lead or not must be theirs, they can lead and lead well. Our future may depend upon it.

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