A Reflection of the Self: My Personal Leadership Platform

Introduction

What is the purpose of leadership? What personal characteristics are possessed by a successful leader? How do you know a good leader when you see one? When posed, these questions seemed to evoke confusion amongst respondents. Over the last few weeks, I asked colleagues and confidants these questions. Their responses were widespread and varied. Some focused on specific character traits such as honesty and integrity. Others recalled a famous leader or described a specific leader’s legacy. One common theme was that they all had a different response.

This paper reflects my personal thoughts on my leadership. The reflection is based on how I view myself as a leader and takes into account what I know about how others view my leadership. Data collected from surveys, peer interactions, and evaluations over time have provided insights into how my co-workers and colleagues perceive the work I do. This useful feedback has afforded me opportunities to make adjustments to behaviors and develop skills that will enable me to excel in my leadership journey. I plan to solicit this feedback to continue growing my leadership.

The Purpose of Leadership

The purpose of leadership within schools is to corral the gifts and talents of all the members of the organization in order to best serve the students and families while providing exceptional learning experiences for them. I feel strongly that public school leaders are servants who really need to be involved in the communities they serve so that they may better understand their constituents.
In turn, building Principals should know the strengths and weaknesses of their employees and work diligently to harness the benefits of their strengths and build upon their weaknesses. One way to accomplish this is by offering high quality job embedded professional development opportunities. A principal’s vision sets the direction in which she wants to take the organization. For example, if your vision is that ALL students can learn, then your daily actions, or mission should support that vision. Continual reflection is a mainstay of an effective leader.

The Relationship between Leaders and Followers

Society glorifies leadership. Books and other publications on the topic of leadership abound. A recent search on Amazon.com netted a listing of over 72,000 books published on the topic of leadership. So, if the societal emphasis is placed on the glory of being top dog, where do the followers fit in? There does not seem to be as much research that supports or suggests models for followership. This realization stimulated a few thoughts regarding the relationships between leaders and followers.

Leaders are followers too. Even the CEO of a major corporation answers to or follows policies and guidelines put in place by a governing Board of Directors. We are all graced with unique strengths and talents. Situations in all organizations arise in which an adaptive challenge poses a problem and needs to be solved. Another individual, besides the leader, may need to take the lead role and assist. It is during these times that a leader needs to have the self-awareness to realize that he or she does not possess the particular skills necessary to get the job done; instead he or she should realize each follower’s talents and empower them to get the task at hand accomplished.
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It has been my experience that the followers often make the biggest contributions to an organization’s success. In my particular organization, there is the cheerful administrative assistant who greets school board visitors with a friendly smile and welcoming charm daily. She shows leadership when she uses her charm to quell tense situations and prevents them from escalating. There are teacher leaders who serve as instructional coaches. They show leadership every time they work with colleagues who are struggling to plan effectively and differentiate to meet the needs of the students. Without these individuals, my school system would not be the success it is today.

Shared Leadership Success

Shared leadership can be a wonderful thing. In order for it to work, the individuals need to have attain “structural clarity” or the respect for one another that is grounded in trust. The structural clarity is established through clear communication about negotiables and non-negotiables of all parties. In Reframing Organizations, Bolman and Deal refer to this as “developing a common commitment to working relationships” (p.105). The best teams I have been on have taken the time to get to know each member’s talents and which tasks they are best suited to attain prior to assigning them. I have found that shared leadership works best when all parties can share concerns openly and hold themselves mutually accountable. I agree with Bolman and Deal’s assertion that, “A focused, cohesive structure is a foundation for high performing teams. Even highly skilled people zealously pursuing a shared mission will falter and fail if group structure constantly generates confusion and frustration” (Reframing Organizations p.106).
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What Motivates Individuals to Contribute Wholeheartedly

Individuals are motivated by various stimuli. Some are motivated by intrinsic needs and others by extrinsic rewards. It is my belief that a great leader takes the time to intimately know his constituents and learns what motivates each of them. I have made it a practice as a leader to ask my employees what drives them to keep pressing on? The answers are all different and surprisingly, usually do not involve more money. For instance, one of my instructional coaches recently shared that my positive attitude and encouragement are what keep him pressing on. Another employee who had beat breast cancer shared that her will to survive and conquer her disease are what motivates her to strive for perfection daily. By the mixed responses, one can ascertain that motivation is a complex subject. There is no universal model or recipe to dictate motivation for the individuals within our organizations.

Definition and Characteristics of Effective Leadership

In The Deep Blue Sea (2001), Wilfred Drath explains that this confusion over what leadership looks like is in large part due to the societal changes that are rapidly taking place. He defines leadership as happening when “people in a community or organization share some knowledge principle that will allow them to recognize when leadership is happening” (p.xvii). This definition allows for flexibility when explaining differences in leadership styles. His definition is appealing to me in that it offers a flexible framework which allows us to identify what effective leadership is and what it looks like when it is taking place.

Leaders possess many character traits. In fact, Drath warned In The Deep Blue Sea (2001), that “generalizing about the traits of leaders will produce long lists of possible qualities” (p.35). He further went on to explain that many of the traits on the long lists would come down
to personal "qualities of dominance." Some of the character traits that I believe are essential for effective leadership manifest themselves as leadership tasks. Being able to solve adaptive challenges, create vision, and maintain commitment are essential tasks when it come to measuring leadership effectiveness.

**Personal Assets for Leadership & Other Factors Which Impact My Leadership**

I am always amazed about how much we learn about ourselves when we face difficult decisions to make. Over the past year, being in the doctoral program has demanded personal reflection. During this time, I have learned many things about my leadership. For example, I always have had a propensity to take control of a situation; however, I have not always been aware of how that may impact others. For instance, if assigned a group project, I may just jump right in and take on more than my fair share. While some group members welcome this as it is less for them to do, others may be offended and feel undervalued. Obtaining my scores from the LCI inventory affirmed my controlling nature. The reflection has helped me to make a mental note to self to back off a bit when I feel the urge to take over projects.

As a leader, I tend to prefer a neat and orderly approach to solving problems. In choosing individuals for various roles on teams, I look at their individual strengths and weaknesses and place them so that they can perform optimally. I approach conflict with diplomacy and try to see varying perspectives when trying to resolve conflict. It is the strength in the Myers-Briggs "E" that permits me to take pride in learning and teaching new things. I prefer interacting with others to solve problems and respect various perspectives that others bring to collaboration.

Assertiveness is a trait which I possess that allows me to be direct with individuals or groups when the situation calls for assertiveness. I am keenly aware of the interconnectedness
that exists within organizations and tend to plan and think ahead to anticipate problems and devise plans and systems to put into place to solve those issues when they arise. Employees have told me that I am easy to talk to and that they feel comfortable coming to me when problems arise. I welcome their solutions to issues and assist them with getting the wheels in motion to put their plans into place in a timely manner.

Because I am so detail oriented, I tend to focus on details and at times, can be critical of others work. I set high standards for myself and tend to do the same for others as well as organizations. Having an awareness of these tendencies allows me to pull back from a situation or individual and examine my behavior to adjust it if I am being overly critical or judgmental. This has come with age. When I was younger it was sometimes very difficult for me to temper my thoughts and notice that I was being critical. Over time, I have worked very diligently to overcome this debilitation and have noticed great strides and improvements.

At times, I can be so passionate about my work that I take criticism too much to heart. In order to be able to gain perspective I have had to work very diligently to take criticism constructively and use it to my benefit when it comes to a project I may be working on. As with being overly critical, I have worked on taking criticism constructively and am much better at this then when I was younger.

Participating in the inventories and EDLP 700 reaffirmed what I have known about myself for quite some time. Since I had not taken the Myers-Briggs since undergraduate school, I was able to realize how far I have come in working on not being overly critical of others and being able to handle constructive criticism and use it to my benefit to improve the quality of work I produce which directly impacts the achievement of the students I serve.
As a district level administrator, I see my main role as a coach for the Principals, teachers and district staff members that I work with. The purpose of coaching is to build capacity for programs and to assist school teams in their school improvement efforts.

My superb organizational skills permit me to keep information for thirty schools plus numerous residential day facilities straight and accurate. Currently, I serve as the Testing Specialist for Stafford County Public Schools and have had many opportunities to work with strategic planning, school improvement planning, various title programs, and with the Virginia Accountability Assessment Program. Some qualities I possess that permit me to make significant positive impacts on student achievement are my willingness to adapt and grow professionally, my excellent communication and organizational skills, and my ability to lead others.

The Leader I Aspire to Be

I aspire to continually improve and never give up. The foundation for who I am as a leader has already been laid. The fundamentals are in place. The focus for me now is to continue to fine tune and enhance my leadership skills. One area of my leadership I would like to continue expanding is goal setting and reflection. Currently, I am participating in professional development sessions regarding teacher evaluation. After one recent session, I began to reflect upon how teacher evaluation has changed over the past ten years. Then I began to focus on how my personal thoughts on teacher evaluation have morphed. I had mixed emotions. I felt disappointed that my feedback to teachers when I first became an administrator was so poor as compared to the type of feedback I provide now. I turned this thought around quickly and thought how great it is that I have grown in my evaluation of teachers. This reflection reaffirmed my beliefs of how vital self-reflection is to be successful.
Impact of the Texts on My Leadership

Thus far in my course of studies, I have read three texts on leadership. Reframing Organizations by Bolman and Deal is a wonderful resource. The text taught me to see a situation from more than one vantage point or “frame.” The book contained many interdisciplinary real world examples of issues in organizations. I plan to refer back to this frequently as it helps me to gain perspective and make sense of complex organizational issues.

The Deep Blue Sea by Wilfred Drath was a philosophical work which demanded a new way of thinking about leadership and what is means. This book provided a framework for distinguishing between leadership principles and leadership tasks. It reinforced the importance of relational dialogue as a means of increasing the likelihood of coming to the realization that we share some common knowledge principles. This book offered a very interesting way of defining what leadership is and how we know when it is happening. Basically, when individuals have a shared knowledge principle that leadership is happening, then it is.

The Five Dysfunctions of A Team by Patrick Lencioni is a great book to use with teams at work. It takes form as a fable written to tell a story about a female CEO who is faced with the ultimate adaptive challenge: a dysfunctional team that may destroy the company if not reeled in soon. Throughout the story, Lencioni reveals the five dysfunctions: Absence of Trust, Fear of Conflict, Lack of Commitment, Avoidance of Accountability and Inattention to Results. I appreciated the real world examples portrayed through this “story” and have actually used some of the suggestions contained in the latter section of the book to help improve my team at work. I will definitely continue to use this book with my team and plan to implement it as we work through our professional learning community.
Conclusion

While working on this assignment, I realized how difficult it is for me to write about myself. Upon reflection, I have come to the conclusion that this will be something I will continually have to work at. My work in the doctoral cohort at VCU thus far has challenged me to participate in some deep reflection. These reflections are helping me to grow professionally and personally. I welcome the learning experiences and value the feedback from everyone.
References
