

New Paths to Effective Leadership

Effective leadership is less about how smart we are, how well we speak, or even what we believe. It's not what a leader says or promises but their presence, comportment, and actions that affect whether others follow them or are open to their ideas. Leadership is about how we show up as people.

Think back to the best leaders you've encountered in your own life and you'll find that they had more than glib tongues and high IQ's. They possessed a variety of 'soft skills' and personal qualities that helped them build relationships and develop trust. The deeper your relationship, the more you trusted them, the more successful they were. So it is that effective leadership involves far more than the etiquette of the professional domain. Effective leadership is personal.

Embodiment & Trust

Most educational leaders are well-intentioned, dedicated, and smart people working in increasingly difficult and challenging jobs. While these qualities are fundamental to leadership success, they don't insure it. Recently I facilitated a group discussion on leadership with a dozen classroom teachers. Here are a few of their comments about their own principals:

"He's too political. His views change to suit the situation."

"She'll throw you under the bus to save herself from being embarrassed"

"He micromanages everything."

"She doesn't enforce her own rules consistently."

"He has favorite staff members who get everything they want."

"She doesn't follow up on things she says she's going to do!"

The gap between well-meaning leaders who feel they've earned the trust and loyalty of those they lead and the complaints of those being led is well documented. A survey by Development Dimensions International found that 99% of employees think trust in the workplace is a vital need at work, but only 29% reported a high level of trust within their organization. According to the Harvard Business Review fully 65% of workers don't trust their managers and supervisors. Why? The most cited reason is that management doesn't do what it says.

A simple incident serves as an example of this point. A building principal speaks often to his staff about the primary importance of Professional Development to the success of the school's future growth. However, when confronted with a tight budget he cuts back on PD while continuing to fully fund other areas. Remember our new definition of leadership? It's not what a person says or promises, but their way of being in the world that makes a difference. Clearly, the principal is out of alignment with his own stated beliefs and his staff knows it. Trust is compromised.

The good news is that contrary to some beliefs we don't have to be born leaders. We can cultivate the personal qualities of an effective leader, but we need to have the courage to travel a new path. It will take more than "getting smarter" cognitively and simply 'knowing' more. We know intuitively that the traditional route of listening to lectures, reading books, writing and talking about leadership won't make us effective leaders anymore than reading a book about playing the piano will make us keyboard virtuosos.

The new path for emerging leaders is one of personal and professional self-reflection, practice, and feedback. The 'soft' skills and personal attributes that we so often look at as secondary to our success are actually "essential" skills, and in order to cultivate the attributes of an effective leader we are asked to look within to explore our strengths and gifts, as well as the habits and historical patterns of behavior that get in the way of our success.

Purpose and Passion

There are many ways to begin our leadership journey but a great starting place is to re-connect to our purpose. No matter how strong our original calling to service, life can hijack us. Things need to get done. There are plans to write, budgets to be developed, reports to analyze, personnel issues, kids, parents, new programs to be implemented...the list is seemingly never ending. As more and more of our time is devoured by the important details of our jobs, the underlying purpose of our work and our lives drifts further into the background.

Being in integrity with our heart's purpose creates a more powerful presence. When we're living and acting from our purpose it's easier to

speak authentically and inspire others. Without a strong sense of purpose we'll find it difficult to create narratives that enroll our staff to our vision, or build the trust necessary to shift the behaviors of our teams.

Re-connecting with our purpose can also simplify our lives. We can use our purpose as a GPS system to locate ourselves in a complex and crowded world or a complex and crowded day. Having a strong sense of purpose makes it easier to make decisions because our inner conversation is simplified. It comes down to this, "Is the decision I'm about to make, or the action I'm about to take consistent with my purpose?"

One caution, we can't fake a connection to purpose. If we promote a sense of purpose that isn't embodied we'll be perceived as inauthentic. It will actually work against us. Knowing we should have a purpose and actually having one that resonates in our hearts are two different things. But when our personal and professional life's purposes are aligned we're more apt to live and work from the "sweet spot", a place where challenges are met with much less drama and stress.

Courage

Another personal leadership characteristic that we can cultivate is courage. Courage is an important and often overlooked component of the personal leadership journey. It's etymology is from the French 'cour' or heart. There's little question that being an effective leader requires a lot of heart. After all, it takes courage to live in integrity with our beliefs. It takes courage to hold a vision for our organization, our department, or our team. It can be daunting to confront the issues, obstacles and people that stand in the way of the future we wish to create. It takes courage to look at ourselves and our beliefs and to hold ourselves accountable. We can either complain about those we lead or realize that they reflect our leadership.

Courage shows up in difficult performance evaluations and in apologies when we make mistakes. It shows up in being fully present and listening to criticism even when we feel a wave of defensiveness wash over us. Courage can be deciding to leave the familiarity of methods that we've employed for years to try new ways of leading that might be more effective. For some of us it takes courage to delegate and to trust in the competence

of others. For others it takes courage to step into our power and to provide direction and leadership.

Conclusion

For those us who spend the most productive part of our days and lives leading others, leadership is a crucible in which ‘who we are’ and ‘what we believe in’ is made public and tested. It’s during our leadership journey that we encounter challenges that bring us to the frontiers of our knowledge, experience, values and beliefs. It’s on the leader’s journey that we face a variety of difficult choices and must take action, or refrain from it, having only our own ‘soma’, (mind, body, and heart) to guide us. It’s in this unfamiliar place, in the midst of an unfamiliar crisis or challenge, an unscripted moment of truth, and left without a roadmap, that we find out the kind of leader (and person) we really are.

Adopting this new vision for developing effective leaders is about aligning what we value and what we believe, with what we do. It’s an inner journey of personal and professional growth because for effective leaders these domains are two sides of the same coin. The better people we become, the better leaders we are...and...the better leaders, the better people. We can do our best to compartmentalize our ‘real self’ from our ‘professional self’, but the truth is we have only one self and it can’t help but show up in our leadership presence.

The leader’s journey is much more than an intellectual exercise and traveling the path takes a serious commitment to self-reflection, practice, and feedback. New behaviors and new learning will make us feel clumsy and insecure at times; but we’ll continue walking the path because it serves a higher purpose. We, as emerging leaders, can be the catalysts that transform our schools, and through them, the world in which we live. We only need cultivate the seeds of the effective leader that are present within each of us.

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