

Developing a Leadership Mindset in Middle School Students

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Leadership is one of those enigmatic and elusive qualities, universally desired but all too seldom found. Most educators would like to be able to develop it in students, but are often uncertain about how to begin.

Believing this problem to be rooted in confusion about the nature of leadership itself, I propose to examine the concept with the intention of developing a working definition that will allow us, and our students, to better see and to learn from the leadership that permeates our lives.

Debunking Some Distracting And Harmful Myths

Let us begin by debunking a few of the myths that can distract and mislead us. Leadership is not confined to the heroic, it does not always require charisma and it often has little to do with trailblazing. The traditional view of leadership involves dominant figures, almost exclusively male, who are cunning but principled, and strong but benevolent; the modern equivalent of the chivalrous ideal, King Arthur. These figures are, in addition to being physically and intellectually dominant, personally charismatic. They inspire confidence and loyalty in others by virtue of their compelling personal power, and they use this power to protect us from hostile forces and to show us the way forward.

In *The Fifth Discipline* (1990a), Peter Senge comments,

So long as such myths prevail, they reinforce a focus on short-term events and charismatic heroes rather than on systemic forces and collective learning. At its heart, the traditional view of leadership is based on assumptions of people's powerlessness, their lack of personal vision and inability to master the forces of change, deficits which can be remedied only by a few great leaders. (p. 340)

With such an impossible ideal of leadership, is it any wonder that we often do not find it? Moreover, if we did find it would we really want it? The traditional model of leadership is more appropriate to a cult than a community. It invites others into passive dependence and subjugation rather than inspiring them to personal expression and fulfillment. This is surely not what we want when we cry out for leadership, and yet it is the model that characterizes the "leaders" that are most frequently portrayed in books, films and political campaigns. Is this the type of principal you would like to have? Is it the type of teacher you would like to be? Is it an ideal that you wish to perpetuate with your students? Surely not!

Developing A Clearer Definition Of Leadership

In order to develop a more realistic and attainable image of leadership, it is useful to begin by distinguishing leadership from its close relative, management. These terms are often used synonymously. Sometimes leadership becomes merely another term for highly effective management. In fact, however, they are significantly different. Confusion arises from our failure to distinguish between them. This stems from the fact that people in positions of authority, like principals and teachers, are generally expected to provide both management and leadership because they are operating in settings that have simultaneously the characteristics of both organizations and communities.

Organizations are mechanisms; they prize reductionism, analytic reasoning that breaks complex activities down into smaller tasks that can be accomplished more easily by individuals. Organizational managers provide the command and control which will maintain order and efficiency in the mechanism by ensuring that members comply with its rules and accomplish their individual roles.

Communities are organic ecologies; they are based on holistic, synthetic sensitivities that value connections and bind people together on the basis of shared values and purposes. Community leaders represent the values and articulate the vision that will invite voluntary commitment to the community and strengthen relationships between its members.

Schools, classrooms and even the larger society itself have both organizational and community dimensions. Thus, they all require both management and leadership. The trains have to run on time, and they have to arrive at desirable destinations. Unfortunately, combining effective management and inspirational leadership is a difficult challenge.

Management, no matter how gentle or kind, is fundamentally an exercise in positional authority over subordinates. Leadership, on the other hand, depends on personal influence over followers. The former demands compliance: the latter invites commitment. It is entirely possible to be a highly effective manager while being an entirely ineffective leader, and very effective leaders can quite easily be incompetent managers. Ideally, of course, we would like to have both, but in practice each person tends to be more naturally inclined towards one or the other role. It is difficult to achieve a balanced blend of the two because we are often insufficiently aware of the distinctions and they are in many ways, contradictory roles.

Asked to identify someone to whom they would ascribe the title of "leader," most students are very likely to choose someone who takes charge and shows the way for others because they hold the traditional view that dominates in our society. In order to help students develop their own leadership abilities, the first thing we must do is to free them from the conceptual prison of this mythical, largely unattainable, and not particularly desirable archetype. Even if we were able to develop this sort of traditional leadership capacity in our students, would we really want to unleash a horde of little emperors on the school? What would happen as they all set out to "lead" in this way?

Defining A Leadership Mindset

In addition to distinguishing between management and leadership, it is important to distinguish between leadership and leaders. This is a difficult task because we don't have many terms other than leader to describe someone who is in charge of a classroom, a school or any other organization. "Take me to your leader" is simply too endemic a notion to be easily displaced. However, even if we lapse into careless use of the term leader, we can be vigilant about our understanding that leadership is not something that is practiced exclusively by leaders. Many leaders don't show much leadership, and even when they do we have to appreciate that there can be no leadership without followership. Nelson Mandela did not end apartheid and Pierre Trudeau did not create multiculturalism. They were leaders of those movements, and they showed very effective leadership, but nothing would have happened if there were not many people who were willing and able to be led. Moreover, the influential relationship they had with their followers was mutual, not unidirectional like the relationship between a manager and a subordinate. They taught and they learned, they led and they were led.

If we want our students to develop leadership, then we have to begin by appreciating that, like citizenship, leadership is something that can be undertaken by everyone. Moreover, unless a critical mass of people is willing to practice it, there is no possibility that one heroic leader can provide it alone. What we need is not more leadership abilities in a few, but a broad-based leadership mindset for all. If a class, a school or society is characterized by a broad-based leadership mindset then leaders will arise naturally, and when they do arise there will be fertile ground for their leadership amongst others who can both follow and sustain them.

A leadership mindset is characterized by a general willingness to both lead and be led in activities that comply with personal values and serve collective purposes. I suggest that the attributes of caring, collaboration and courage would make a good starting point for such a mindset. A leadership mindset begins with caring, by which I mean principled commitment to ideals, purposes and other people, not mere sentimentality or even a general sense of compassion. Unless we care about something or someone there is little reason either to lead or to follow. The more students understand that about which they care, the more they will be inclined to take action in service of those ideals, purposes or people that are important to them. Therefore, a leadership mindset begins with clarity about core beliefs and relationships. Students have to decide for themselves what is worth fighting for, and what is worth fighting against. Our job is not to tell them what that is, but to help them to discover it for themselves. If they then intend to work towards a goal through leadership they must be prepared to collaborate. Leadership is a social function. There are no lone wolves in leadership. It is something that is done with others, either by leading or by following, or both, but always in consort with others. This requires connection and communication in order to clarify purposes, establish action plans and identify roles. It also requires the humility and wisdom to know when leadership is best expressed through leading or through following.

Finally, leadership takes courage. Students need the intellectual courage to think critically and see things for themselves, without being either entirely subject to or dismissive of convention. Students need to be able to avoid group thinking and to be able to challenge collective opinion in a constructive way when necessary. They also need the personal courage to live by their ideals and serve their identified purposes in the face of their own doubts and despite the criticism of others, without making the facile assumption that others are necessarily wrong. Perhaps this is the thing that takes the most courage, being able to make a decision, take a stand and act according to one's best understanding without the comfortable illusion of certainty.

Developing A Leadership Mindset In Students

And how can we go about developing a leadership mindset in students? Since this is a matter of "inner work," it is one of those things that can be learned but not taught. However, we can give our students the tools and the opportunity to learn it by introducing the concept, providing the language and creating the opportunities to use it. A metacognitive awareness of leadership issues and the language to use in describing those issues will equip students to learn from their experience and thus to develop a leadership mindset. By making the distinction between management and leadership, identifying the importance of both, discussing the differences and tensions, describing leadership behaviour and teaching the language of a leadership mindset, we can give them the tools to analyze both societal events and personal experiences. Once they are able to talk about leadership with clarity they will be able to recognize it in others and in themselves, begin to understand the challenges and the rewards of leadership, and work towards improving their own leadership capacity. They will also be better able to know when to lead and when to follow, and be able to do both in a principled and socially productive way.

Leadership understood in this way is easy to find. We do not have to look to idealized icons like Winston Churchill or Mother Theresa. There is leadership all around us in our homes, schools and communities. Whenever people bond together in a common purpose, they are participating in leadership, whether they are the designated "leader" or a follower who makes the leader. Whenever one person invites another to join with them they are leading, and whenever someone accepts that invitation they are empowering leadership. Teachers lead, parents lead and students lead. Sometimes this is a quiet personal act and sometimes it is a highly visible social act, but the fundamentals of leadership are the same in either case. As students become more proficient at recognizing and describing leadership, they will benefit by improving their own leadership abilities and inclinations. They may also be inoculated against the growing cynicism that would have us believe there are no longer any good leaders, which is both a false and destructive assertion.

Once students have begun to develop a leadership *mindset*, they will be able to utilize a leadership *skill set*, which is the traditional focus of leadership activities in schools. Decision making, group process and communication skills do not constitute leadership, but they do enable it. Confidence building exercises will not create leadership ability, but they may unleash it. Leadership is a way of *being* that begins with a way of *viewing*. The greater the skill set and the self-confidence the more students will be able to act on

their mindset. Without the mindset the skills and the confidence are pointless, and in the worst case they can even be harmful because they are just as effective in the pursuit of poor ends as good ones.

Of course, the best way to teach leadership is to model it. This is a challenge that is intensified when students are empowered with concepts and language that enable them to distinguish leadership from management, inspiration from insistence and vision from dominance. They will be more critical observers of their teacher's practice in the classroom and in the school, which will raise the bar on their expectation of adults around them. However, they will also recognize true leadership when they see it. The teacher's job then is to make sure they do. Rising to this challenge can be a growth experience for the teacher as much as observing and learning from it is for the students.

Conclusion

I have suggested the concept of a "leadership mindset" as a way of understanding the social dynamics of leadership and of approaching leadership development with middle school students in a way that all can embrace. It is my hope that this notion is a fertile one, but it is clearly also embryonic. Therefore, I invite you to make it your own and to adapt and modify it as necessary to make sense to you in your context. It is intended to complement rather than replace the many useful approaches to leadership development that already exist.

References

Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday/Currency.