Workforce Education Leadership in the Twenty–First Century

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership is a much discussed term with meanings often related to the context in which is considered. Winston and Paterson found over 26,000 article using the term leadership in an academic data base related to education but contend, as others have, that the researchers are like the proverbial blind men describing an elephant. (p. 6). Their multifaceted definition gives credence to the statement that the meaning has much to do with the context in which the word leadership is used.

When we consider leadership in workforce education and educational events, we cannot think only of those who provide for the educational event. We must consider both those who arrange for the sessions and those who plan and design the educational event. Leadership is needed in all these areas and that leadership differs in subtle ways. For successful education of an existing workforce, leadership has to come from both those who perceive a need for educational event and those who will facilitate the educational event. This also applies to those who would provide educational event for those seeking to re-enter the workforce or enter the workforce in a new field. What it means to be a workforce education leader for the twenty-first century shows the radical shift in how our society perceives and relates to those in leadership positions. We will address both these characteristics and necessities in the following article.

ESTABLISHING OUR TERMINOLOGY

Leadership

To adequately address this topic, we must first decide how we will define leadership. The dictionary definition reads almost like the classic circumlocution. "the position or function of a leader, a person who guides or directs a group: an act or instance of leading; direction" ("leadership," n, d.). Winston and Patterson provide what they call an integrative definition of leadership based on "over 90 variables that may comprise the whole of leadership" (p. 6). Their definition reads as follows:

A leader is one or more people who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s) who have diverse gifts, abilities, and skills and focuses the follower(s) to the organization's mission and objectives causing the follower(s) to willingly and enthusiastically expend spiritual, emotional, and physical energy in a concerted coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission and objectives. (p. 7)

This definition covers many characteristics and skills difficult to sustain or promote in a large institutional stetting and is perhaps a bit idealistic. Others might question whether this would apply only

to a small unit within a larger organization. However, Allio (2012) might agree with this definition but might add a less immediate or personal set of characteristics.

We often look to leaders to clarify purpose and values, set direction, build community and manage change. In other words, leaders must practice strategic management – develop a researched vision, a viable strategy, a focused plan and a measured implementation process and then prepare for discontinuity by continuously monitoring the environment. (Allio, 2012, p. 8).

Former Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates has written extensively about leadership (2016). In his experience, leaders must provide goals and vision as mentioned by Allio (2012). Leadership as viewed by Gates sets deadlines and is willing to decentralize the organization if the leader want change, for example, educational events that move the organization forward. The leader must trust those supervisory leaders in the organization to carry out the plans and procedures the leader has set. One of the problems Gates stresses is the need for transparency as in the sharing of information among those who will be affected by change. These elements give us the practice of leadership in general.

Distilling these points of view on leadership was accomplished by business columnist Justin Bariso. Bariso arrived at the following definition in a discussion with other commentators: "Leadership is a process of social influence which works to increase the efforts of others in pursuit of a common goal." (Bariso, 2015, para. 18). If we combine this with the somewhat tongue-in-cheek definition by efficiency expert Peter Drucker as quoted by Bariso, "The only definition of a leader is someone who has followers." (2015, para. 5) we can provide a working definition for our discussion. Leadership is that process by which those who have responsibility and power within a social structure are able to influence and direct the actions of others in the structure towards a common goal.

Workforce Education

In our areas of interest, we must also define what we mean when we use the term workforce education. One university what provides contractual educational events for businesses defines it this way, "[our service] …connects organizations and individuals with comprehensive programs to improve performance, increase productivity, decrease costs, and get bottom-line results." (Weber State, 2016). Another university defines those activities recognized for continuing education hours as "…those postsecondary activities… that develop or enhance the skills of existing employees or members of any business or industry." (University of Arkansas, 2016). The emphasis in both of these phrases centers on the needs of businesses to improve the skills of employees as an enhancement of the business.

We must, however, include those situations were individuals who are currently without employment are seeking to improve or augment skills to secure current employment as well as those who are involved in preparing students to enter the workforce. Many states have agencies that provide for this kind of re-education while providing services for employment seekers. Here also, leadership is needed to insure the proper kinds of educational events are designed and facilitated.

Workforce education also encompasses the vocational classes taught in the public schools. Sometimes termed Career and Technical Education (CTE), these are also an essential part of the field. While the University of Arkansas definition limits the occurrences to post-secondary education, CTE too is workforce education and in need of leadership. The needs of our economy for trained workers demands that those with an aptitude be provided with the education they need. Workforce education then consists of a

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