

Chapter 12

Courageous Leadership: Transitions to Sustainability by Empowering Institutional Excellence

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ABSTRACT

The chapter addresses leadership in educational institutions. Leading a diverse group of people towards a common vision can be both exhilarating and risky and thus requires courage. Courageous leadership embraces human imperfection while emphasizing self-reflection tracked via the personal leadership thread which ultimately leads to authentic leadership. The chapter further defines the fractal approach which strongly emphasizes the idea of leadership as a partnership consisting of a clear definition of leaders and learners and comprised of the following pillars: reflective practitioners, communities of belonging, innovation, and conscious citizenship. This approach ultimately leads to empowering individuals to be architects of their own learning who are committed to ethical decision making in order to improve life and living on the planet.

INTRODUCTION

Schools are microcosms of the world and require a good dose of courageous leadership to lead a group of people with diverse mindsets, perspectives, lifestyles and abilities towards a common vision in order to educate and morph the citizens of tomorrow. Providing a clear vision and a well thought definition of leaders and learners is a first step towards developing authentic leadership and outlining a course with intentional excellence. Only when each part of the educational institution reflects the whole can educational leaders assume pride for success. The Fractal approach to leadership ensures that ‘best fit’ individuals ultimately join the institutions that are committed to preserving and sustaining excellence. This approach ultimately encourages educators to tap into and foster the wisdom of young people in order to cultivate ethical mindsets that will lead to improving life and living on the planet.

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THE COURAGE TO LEAD

Embracing Human Imperfection

Why does leading need courage? Considering that courage is defined by Woodard (2007) as one's ability to feel the fear and keep going anyway, it takes courage to lead because leading has risks and while personal risk can be deterring, the risks that involve others as well as the institution one leads can be detrimental to one's health. Leading can also be exhilarating when a course is set in motion towards a well-defined vision because every step closer to that vision can promote a myriad of feelings from satisfaction to exhilaration. Furthermore, when a group of people, believe in the same vision and walk the similar path towards realizing it, the combined energy can create incredible momentum and vigor adding potent fuel towards the direction of the vision. Such combined and collaborative energy is so powerful that it can transform an institution.

Leadership is about defining a clear vision and developing an action plan to accomplish this vision while empowering people towards this path. It is about people; influencing them to move towards a common goal (Northhouse, 2013). But, while leading has an ideal aspect attached to the very word, it is common knowledge that leading is also about managing; in fact, managing could take up the greatest chunk of a leader's day and management can be less than ideal. Managing is more about processes, tasks, problem solving, moving forward sometimes against the tide and getting things done so as to clear the path towards the vision (Yemm, 2012).

More importantly, the courage to lead is about embracing human imperfection: our own and the imperfections of others. Yet, leaders must always portray an image of strength and perfection in order to inspire confidence. It is true that we look to leaders to guide us through the challenges, to portray strength, confidence, knowledge and skill; superhuman abilities that somehow rub off on us when we are less confident, afraid or insecure. But leaders have natural limitations; experience their own fears, insecurities, doubts and make decisions that may not always have optimal outcomes. Similarly, the people they lead also have natural limitations due to limited abilities, experience, and knowledge. Effective leaders however tend to move horizontally (Clark, 2004). They are interested in doing things for others and with others and less so for their own advancement and prestige. They move forward and when things don't go as planned, they preoccupy themselves with working things out, removing the obstacles or rounding out the sharp edges. This is different from always moving vertically because continuous vertical movement means constantly moving up. Inevitably there is a preoccupation with doing things perfectly, with critical self-evaluation, with a desperate need to avoid mistakes and a highly competitive attitude. Effective leadership means having the 'courage to be imperfect' (Dreikurs, 1957) and allowing others to do the same.

Personal Leadership Thread

We are unique individuals with many commonalities; we have similar body functions, brains, hearts but we also have personalities and characteristics unique to each of us. As individuals we can only be understood holistically and within the context in which we were raised, not in terms of isolated behaviors and actions (Lundin, 1989). The Personal Leadership Thread (PLT) refers to a leadership style that emerges from ones approach to life, perception of personal belonging in the world and what one believes one needs to do in order to succeed. Adler referred to this concept as a style of life or lifestyle. Lifestyle

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