

Business

Today’s Leaders are Learners: Strategies to Support Values-Based Leadership Development

Clark-Borre, L.

California State University—Chico

Abstract

Everyone grapples with the challenges of these times. Business and management scholars today are acutely aware of the obstacles facing those preparing students for today’s leadership challenges. Many question traditional teaching methods. Researchers across disciplines are asking age-old questions with renewed interest: How do we respond when risks seem overwhelming? How do we cope when “business as usual” isn’t possible anymore...when long-held assumptions don’t hold? What does it mean to be a successful human being? Leadership is less about "power" and more about influence born of the capacity to center oneself alongside those who are confused, frightened, without direction, or in need of support. It's about being useful, even uniquely so, and thus is within anyone's reach. Coaches and mentors can employ approaches to uncover a solid, even timeless basis from which anyone can access this potential, this power. Drawing on the work of enlightened business leaders and scholars - as well as philosophers whose voices and inquiries resound through time - this session offers techniques and a clear roadmap to frame an exciting journey that begins with one question: Do you have the will to lead?

Introduction

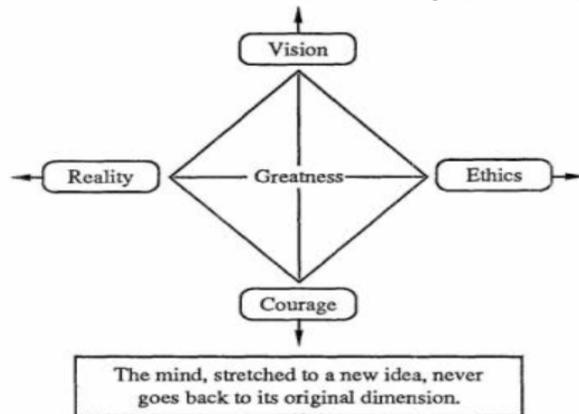
As a classroom mentor (and management educator), I am charged with helping my students become better leaders. I’m far less concerned about leadership in terms of acquisition of power, wealth or status, than I am about moral leadership—the cultivation of personal character. Aside from formal leadership models, we also lead by sharing thoughts and aspects of ourselves with others; through teaching, art, parenting, and so forth, and we lead through expressions of courage and caring. We lead daily by example. Sensible and useful action is not a glamorous topic, but it is the basis of civilized society and vital to our individual and collective sense of well-being. It is how we organize ourselves for action.

In fact, psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott is said to have told a protégé in the field of child psychiatry that you can live without a mother or a father, but you can’t live in a world that doesn’t make sense to you (Winnicott, 1990). In this conception, the guidance of a willing, nurturing care provider or mentor is precisely the mechanism by which we learn to make sense of a world that is otherwise overwhelming. As children or adults, leading an authentic life, or to lead within any context today, requires at least two elements. The first element is a capacity for sense-making, for which a grounded sense of self is integral. The second is the ability to confront the challenges of living in a fluid, dynamic era where change is thrust upon us daily, if not moment to moment. Many young adults today struggle with related anxieties. Mentors as role models have an opportunity to engage protégés in the task of confronting present challenges in order to shape a better future for themselves. This presentation offers strategies that will help us nurture leaders able to make sense of the world and their place in it through a better understanding of themselves and others. The methods are intended to stimulate the desire for a reasoned capacity for action, and turn students in the direction of inquiry based learning—loving, and lingering with, the intriguing questions that move us, and that can ultimately become more significant than any answer.

Vision, Courage, Reality, Ethics: Adopting a Mental Model

In *Leadership: The Inner Side of Greatness* (Koestenbaum, 2002) my personal mentor, Peter Koestenbaum, describes four dimensions, or “domains” of the well-adapted leadership mind and the inherent tensions between them. His model of these domains forms the basis of the book, inspiring several exercises I use to nurture young leaders. The model is introduced early in my classroom coaching, and referred to often during the semester. Koestenbaum’s model (Koestenbaum, 2002, p.33) is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Koestenbaum's Leadership Diamond Model



Vision represents the passion of the innovative mindset. The visionary is a master of the art of the possible, looking forward, always planning. Koestenbaum defines *reality* as vision's "opposite" as the leader-realist grapples with boundaries, metrics, and logistical challenges, facing reality as it presents itself. The *ethics* domain, ruled by principle, represents a higher level of development and is based upon reflection. *Courage* lies within the realm of the will and results in the capacity to make things happen, involving both the ability to take a stand and the internalization of personal responsibility (Koestenbaum, 2002).

Note that the model's axes do not represent two continua. Each domain represents its own, often contradictory model of thinking and behaving. The leader's challenge is to balance the four, as the absence of any one of them hinders leadership capacity. Koestenbaum's Leadership Diamond Model enables students to visualize this lapse as the diamond turns into something like a boomerang with the absence of any one domain (and of course more than one may be absent within a given leadership example).

For example, ethics, vision, and courage without a firm grasp of reality results in a leader who is out of touch with the world as it is, and thus struggles to negotiate within its boundaries. Similarly, the impact of a courageous leader able to confront reality while demonstrating commitment to his or her vision—but lacking an ethical dimension—is found in the example of dictators who know how to gain and exploit power but achieve goals through unethical means. With any domain lacking the negative effect is the same. The spaciousness of the leadership mind is represented by the space within the diamond's image. It represents the scope of potential available to those willing and able to manage tension between polarities, depicted by the lines inside the diamond's space; to do this is to work through one's own anxieties. With limited time to examine the nuance of the model, I first set students to the task of their own inquiry into each domain. Four groups are established, and each is assigned one to examine in detail.

It's one thing to use terms like "vision" or "reality" but quite another to examine the meaning of each and encounter its depth. Volunteers from each group present their complex findings to the rest of the class. Ultimately this activity binds the many aspects of the coaching for leadership I offer throughout the course. In an activity assessment last semester, several students noted that they felt energized and powerful in these discussions, and why not? They were acting as leaders in the face of uncertainty and information that is ever incomplete. To act is to be—or at least, to eventually become. The following exercise helps students to further understand the model.

The Student-Centered Profile: "You Can't Lead What You Don't Understand"

Leaders need to understand themselves. Therefore, they need the capacity to reflect and the willingness to take time to do so. In the language of the model, self-understanding results from experiencing reality through the filter of the self. To paraphrase Marcel Proust, the voyage of discovery begins with seeing the familiar with new eyes (Proust, 1999), as we attune ourselves to possibility. The task of self-knowing is fraught with anxiety, but it forms the basis of all relationship and sense-making, ultimately enriching confidence, centeredness, and the capacity to deal with unknowns.

I became attuned to the power of the person-centered, single page profile as CEO of an organization dedicated to the support of persons with disabilities. As an extension of person-centered approaches in therapy and healthcare, Helen Sanderson (2017) is known for her extensive work in this area, and offers this introduction to the tool: "We believe that one-page profiles are the foundation of personalization, and can lead

to positive change for people, whatever their age or circumstances. They provide us with an at-a-glance way of knowing what really matters to people..." (<http://helensandersonassociates.co.uk/person-centred-practice/one-page-profiles/>) The profile's utility is not limited to disabled persons; professionals may use a version of it for networking, and I used it successfully within my own company for employee team-building.

I distribute an index card at the launch of my course and ask students their names, three things others like and admire about them, hopes and dreams for their future, and any obstacles on the horizon that may possibly impede their progress. Do they have a favorite quote? Is there anything additional they want me to know? They are reminded that they can leave any of the questions blank. But students have been unilaterally responsive, probably because they enjoy the opportunity to express themselves on their own terms. This becomes my first insight into challenges some students have never had the opportunity to disclose, perhaps because no one has invited them to do so before. I also offer my own profile as an example, so students can begin to know me.

Some students, particularly those who have had difficulty coming up with three traits that others appreciate about them, are clearly moved. They may smile, stare at the blank card, or look into the distance before writing with care. Occasionally despite effort, a student will write a trait or two, and conclude with question marks, or "I don't know what else." I take note of these responses, which are a reminder of the challenge of self-inquiry. Affirmative and genuine feedback from a mentor, preferably through time, helps in situations when a student struggles with simple self-descriptors. The significance of our attention here should not be underestimated. The positive traits of some students have never been adequately mirrored or affirmed by family or friends. When we suspect this is the case, we are afforded the chance to make a life-long difference in the life of another; or at least to have some positive impact on their well-being.

The experience of the communal exercise is powerful as an illustration that self-understanding requires reflection that isn't necessarily easy. Students understand that their effort matters to me, hopefully intuiting that sharing themselves is itself a significant act. This is yet another element of the activity's rich subtext.

I collect these cards and refer to them frequently during the semester. Consulting their cards prior to student meetings, or within the framework of coaching opportunities as they arise, supports my efforts to understand each person as best I can. (I am frequently surprised at how well young people respond to the simple fact of "being seen.") I also use the cards in planning the specifics of a given lesson to see who's likely to engage on an issue with some encouragement from me. What's often helped students find their voices in the classroom is my own ongoing effort to link, or loop, them naturally into discussion. Eyes meet, sparks fly, students smile, and reflective conversation often follows.

Drawing heavily on Parker Palmer's work, (Palmer, 2007) I let students know that I am as intent on continued learning about our subject as they are. Students are not inclined toward an active interest in every topic, but through the experience of engagement, they are able to develop a view of themselves as agents of change through willingness to participate. In personal reflections on my experiences in leading and being led, I've come to believe that leadership is ultimately about this agency—for leadership is the ability to influence, to use one's voice or to otherwise weigh in meaningfully on a subject. Every effort in this regard, every risk taken, supports the continued development of leadership as defined as the reasoned capacity for action.

Understanding oneself and by extension, others, activates student engagement within the classroom and beyond it, building one's capacity to lead. With many students, as confidence builds, a will to lead also emerges, an element explored in detail later in this paper. The index card method enables educator and students to become more familiar with Koestenbaum's domain of reality— in this case, the reality of our unique and varied experiences in life, and the ability to create a new context through participation.

A Genealogy of Personal Moral Character

A recent theme issue of the *Academy of Management Learning and Education Journal* (December 2015) focused on *New Directions for Leadership Pedagogy*, with contributors affirming the notion that conventional approaches to teaching leadership are inadequate and dated. The issue's editors referred to "a failure of leadership in institutional life...contributing to moral malaise...leadership as an area of intellectual inquiry remains thin." (Mabey, Egri & Parry, p. 535). Educators and mentors interested in leadership coaching may appreciate another point the authors raise, that generally students have been taught methodologies and models at the expense of more human qualities such as judgement, wisdom, and morality, all of which reside within the model of Koestenbaum's ethics domain.

I ask students, “What is leadership without values?” I break large classes into groups, with each group reporting findings to the class. This introduces a bit of classicism into our management course, as they grapple with a famous Platonic inquiry “of no light matter” — the manner in which human life is to be lived (Plato, 1982). In class, we take a turn from the general to the specific with the aid of a follow-up exercise that leads us still deeper into the fundamental leadership challenge: How shall my own life be led? How will I relate to management challenges ahead, given the scope of the choices to be made?

The next exercise helps students acclimate themselves to a vision of what morality in practice looks like, its impact upon the world around us, and how its absence affects us as individuals and as a citizenry. I instruct students to write a paragraph or more about a leader in his or her own life. The instruction is deliberately vague. The subject of this essay can be a personal role model of any kind, living or dead. The single criterium is that the person selected has played a significant role in influencing the student to think and act differently in a positive way.

The writing produced unilaterally reflects love, gratitude and profound respect. Often students will write considerably more than a page extolling the value the “influencer” brings to one’s life generally. The person described is often portrayed as humble or modest, and intentionally centered on others’ well-being. It is not uncommon for students to thank me for the opportunity to write this way, most likely because it is comforting for them to do so. They also learn that reflecting upon those who have supported them is itself meaningful, and the act of following up with their “leader” to express gratitude results in a powerful experience.

I comment on each submission before handing them back, always thanking them for sharing their person with me. There is only general discussion surrounding this for the benefit of the class, but the proceedings give me a strong hook by which to hang specific points I make throughout the class with respect to learning to lead. We examine the considerable impact of one person’s actions upon another, and the ramifications of a single life lived. I suggest to those with living role models that they share their reflections and gratitude with the person involved. One student reported that her mother proudly taped the essay to the refrigerator: “We started crying together; I thought she knew how much she mattered to me.” It’s risky to be vulnerable, yet being able to step forward to declare something true is an action infused with values—an obvious leadership attribute.

Perhaps two-thirds of these essays mention a difficult obstacle faced by the writer whose leader helped him or her to successfully confront a particular challenge, enabling me to understand my students still more as individuals. What they’ve given themselves through the assignment is a touchstone of sorts for difficult times. I highlight the point that the persons we’ve trusted most, and allowed ourselves to be influenced by in a positive way, reflect the traits that are part of us as well. We could not love and be grateful for something that we don’t recognize as integrally important to us.

This is the influencer’s legacy, and that is what makes the exercise so powerful. We see that to be truly responsive to a person or situation in need is to be responsible for life itself. We are actors involved in the creation of a better world. The greatness we acknowledge and respect in another is the greatness available within. Leadership of this sort is available to anyone who is willing, and the foundation for this lies within Koestenbaum’s dimension of ethics.

Encouraging the Will to Lead

The methods I’ve described have students thinking about ethics and reality. They have also dealt with an element of risk in sharing deeply personal information with me. If I have done my job, they also see their contribution of personal storytelling as a gift to someone who wants to know them better. Koestenbaum’s dimension of courage includes the will to share, step forward, to do what matters, whatever it takes. Yet, as one student wrote in a class reflection: “It’s not always easy to hang out with my friends and bring them some of the ideas I now find interesting.”

Knowing is one thing; knowing infused with values-based action is something else entirely. It moves us and others to act. Yet the will to lead does not come naturally to everyone, especially to those whose learning has been based upon the conventional models of leadership typically idealized in business schools. In their research, Collinson and Tourish (2015) have found a general over-reliance “on transformational models that stress the role of charismatic individuals, usually white men, in setting compelling visions to which all organizational members are expected to subscribe,” (p.576). The old “command and control” model establishes barriers between the leader and the led. It contrasts sharply with the developmental approach

of enlightened organizations today that strive to become incubators of the talents of their employees while addressing the modern human impulse to find meaning in work and in life.

Koestenbaum asks his protégés point-blank, “Do you have the will to lead?” This is also the title of an extensive article about his ideas published in the year 2000 by the business magazine *Fast Company*, authored by Polly LaBarre. He was the first to raise the question in a way that compelled me to respond outside the boundaries of the comfort zone conferred by my title at the time. As he says, leadership is less a technical challenge, and more about developing the ability to find realistic answers to the basic questions of life. For example, what does it mean to be a successful human being? What choices must I make to live the life I want to lead? How do I handle risk? How do I make peace with the ambiguities of life (LaBarre)? Every question is centered around the true interests of the self, and each reflective response is enabling, driving aspiring leaders to motivate and lead others through an authentic grasp of how human beings thrive and do their best work.

To encourage the will to go a bit further along the track, I rely on an article that highlights the idea of unique usefulness. If there are crystalline “aha” moments in my classroom, it is usually the reflection the students do upon hearing the following story.

In 1993, a reporter interviewed the famed Dr. Lewis Thomas just prior to his death. The reporter noted that his inquiries appeared draining on the great doctor’s waning energies, until he asked this one: Is there an art to dying?

"There's an art to living." He brightens a bit. "One of the very important things that has to be learned around the time dying becomes a real prospect is to recognize those occasions when we have been useful in the world. With the same sharp insight that we all have for acknowledging our failures, we ought to recognize when we have been useful, and sometimes uniquely useful...If we paid more attention to this biological attribute, we'd get a satisfaction that cannot be attained from goods or knowledge. If you can contemplate the times when you've been useful, even indispensable, to other people, the review of our lives would begin to have effects on the younger generations." He pauses and reaffirms: "Plain usefulness" (Rosenblatt, 1993).

So, when have we been useful, perhaps even uniquely so? This is the question students address here. We have each been useful. If a student struggles to identify such a time, I refer them back to the earlier exercise in which a “leader in their life” was uniquely useful to *them*. Usefulness is not all about the grand gesture. Sometimes it’s difficult to know just how much we matter through our small daily acts until someone helps us to see, which is the aim of this activity. Perhaps it’s fair to say that courage depends on what we *are able* to see, for this is what elicits response in the first place.

A deep topic indeed, but Koestenbaum’s concerns about traditional leadership include “too little tolerance for the character-building conversations that pave the way for meaningful change” (LaBarre). In a distracted and time-pressed world we seem to be losing the art of conversational give-and-take. Within the classroom, I consider it an essential leadership practice that takes concerted effort on my part to bring about, but the reward is in students who begin to find their voices and learn to listen to others.

Koestenbaum also observes that leaders are too often riveted to the objective domain, seeking solutions through metrics, or via the application of technique or template. He notes that the objective domain is not always the best place to seek answers to the paradoxes and ambiguities of life and work that confound us (LaBarre). Perhaps we might be challenged instead, particularly if we can agree with him that “The new economy just happens to be the form that (the existential challenge of leadership) takes today.” (LaBarre). The more deeply we understand our own capacity to be of use, and how important “usefulness” is within the framework of a life lived fully, the more likely courage will grow as we step forward to claim usefulness as part of our unique identity, and express it as an aspect of our personal destiny.

Conclusion

Those in positions to mentor and coach leaders today face a critically important task. A recent Gallup study noted that millennials are disruptive and “different... and will change the world more decisively than any other generation” (2016, p.1). The study’s findings indicate that today’s young adults desire a sense of purpose. They are pursuing development over job satisfaction; they want coaches rather than bosses, and they want

ongoing conversations over annual reviews. They want to develop their strengths, because “for millennials, a job is no longer just a job—it’s their life as well” (2016, p. 2-3).

In a forward to the study’s findings, Gallup Chairman and CEO Jim Clifton noted that his organization “is recommending that our client partners change their organizational cultures this year from old will to new will” (2016, p.1), reflecting the priorities of this generation. Clifton asks his partners to do something that relates to Koestenbaum’s dimension of vision, namely to launch an entirely new perspective of the future. We as educators, mentors, and coaches are vital to this mission. The exercises presented here can assist in this process, leading to a richer coaching experience on the side of both educator and student, mentor and mentee.

Seventeen years ago Koestenbaum said, “For the first time in history, man is responsible for his own mutation as a species” (LaBarre). We are responsible. We live according to the lights of our lessons in life; and what we have yet to learn can constrain us mightily if we fail to address the right questions about our personal and shared experiences. Our commitment to those questions, and our willingness to help our protégés address them too, can profoundly shape the world to come.

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