

It feels silly to write another paper about leadership... I mean, isn't "leadership" just a social construct? Part of me wants to extol the virtues of leaders, of changemakers, of innovators, but then again, that would further a narrative that leaders are special, that they exist on a different plane. They're not. They don't. They're just people. Plural. And that's the point - leadership exists in the collective, in the whole - it is a shared experience. The characteristics of leadership that resonate most with me are those rooted in fostering community, collaboration, conflict, and the resolution of conflict. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, the characteristics of leadership that I would like to focus on are:

- Humble and unshackled inquiry.
- Dismantling hierarchy.
- Collective enoughness.

Humble and Unshackled Inquiry

Leadership flourishes in "the why" and "the want." Whenever people question the status quo and our imaginations are evoked, leadership grows like a tree sprouting from concrete. With humble and childlike inquiry that involves the simply question of "why?" people harness "the strength of their ignorance, which gives them permission to task obvious questions" (Senge et al., 2015, p. 28). Just as Laura Pinsoneault said, "the fix is in the why," and this "why?" - an "obvious question" – stimulates a collective growth mindset that leads us to justify, to ruminante, and to reimagine.

At the start of the year, I aptly wrote, "leaders in the social sector must employ the golden keys to ask (and keep asking): 'What do we want? And what steps are we taking to achieve that want?'" Leadership emerges when the collective unshackles themself from the fixed pole of a

status quo and starts asking better questions. These questions are not “rooted in reactivity, suspicion, and scarcity” but “in our strength and our interconnectedness.” (Gottlieb, 2020). The social constructs that have been built over the scope of human existence are so imposing that it can be difficult to look beyond them; sometimes all we see is problems; and yet, it’s imperative to look beyond. Kailyn Kenney reminded me of this when she recounted a story of her raising her hand during a training session with correctional officers. She questioned why the training focused on building walls between officers and inmates (with bricks of “reactivity, suspicion, and scarcity”) instead of building bridges of mutual understanding and “interconnectedness.” To be clear, leadership didn’t exist when Kailyn raised her hand but in the moments afterwards, when a rumbling of collective murmurs from the crowd turned into questions of “why” and of what the training could be. Again: “What do we want?”

Dismantling Hierarchy

As stated in *Thinking in Systems*, a well-constructed hierarchy "evolves from the lowest level up" (Meadows & Wright, 2008, p. 99). Leadership emerges when “the lowest level” is valued so much that the concept of levels no longer matters. Inspiringly, both Ian Bautista and Danae Davis have worked to blur the lines of hierarchy in order to improve their systems. Ian has sought to reduce the demands that the Greater Milwaukee Foundation imposes on grantees and instead asks how the foundation can be better funders and partners. This humble switch exemplifies how when we “build relationships based on deep listening, networks of trust and collaboration start to flourish” (Senge et al., 2015, p. 28). Similarly, Danae Davis and Milwaukee Succeeds challenge traditional hierarchy structures in education by asking youth questions like, “How would you rethink high school education?” When leadership occurs, people learn from

each other regardless of role, age, class, race, gender, or whatever social construct and power dynamic may be inhibiting communication. When leadership occurs, you notice that people “authentically collaborate with others and empower others to assume leadership positions as well” (Gagoomal, 2021). When leadership occurs, hierachal planes are dismantled and leadership emanates from all angles of the whole.

Collective Enoughness

We are enough and we have enough. An asset-based approach encourages us to identify the strengths that exist in a community, the “bright spots,” and to then nourish and grow those seeds of strength. Leadership manifests in such moments when we “relentlessly [ask] two questions, What do we want to create? and What exists today? This creative tension, the gap between vision and reality, generates energy” (Senge et al., 2015, p. 31). As an example, Brisa Ramirez and the Clark Square Neighborhood Initiative (CSNI) have shown how generating such energy can involve simple switches. Brisa and CSNI helped “tweak the environment” by introducing more benches, murals, and bollards into the Clark Square neighborhood, which increased community engagement, pride, and safety. In this way, their leadership didn’t impose but cultivated already fertile soil. And the truth is, all soil is already fertile enough to allow everyone to thrive, if only we stopped competing in a fear-based zero-sum game. I would extend this to say that a necessary precondition for leadership to occur is an absence of fear and a surplus of love. When those conditions are met, you can feel leadership’s warm embrace of collective enoughness.

Hi, I’m Harsh

I entered the Trinity Fellows program with a curious mind, a disdain for hierarchy, and a chip on my shoulder (I barely got off the waiting list). Along the way, I've doubted my intelligence and abilities yet persisted thanks to my growth mindset. In my previous leadership reflection, I signaled that I had a lack of knowledge of social sector systems and a deep desire to expand my nonprofit vocabulary. The strengths of my growth mindset and curiosity have helped me progress with this goal. I now proudly say that I am a systems thinker and that I have been throughout my life (although now I have better terminology to direct riders and motivate elephants). While I anticipate that my dissatisfaction with the status quo and disregard for hierarchy (another strength) will get me into trouble at various times to come (what's new?), I also understand that conflict is critical to change efforts and that conflict will constantly surface as I work to deconstruct the caste system, wherever it exists. I am eager to prototype and to fail, and I aspire to continue being the type of person who is so "convinced that something can be done that they do not wait for a fully developed plan, thereby freeing others to step ahead and learn by doing" (Senge et al., 2015, p. 28).

As I continue my journey, I recognize that I will need to work on moving with patience, challenging my own assumptions, and listening to others deeply. It can be hard to shift systems that seemingly do not want to budge or face their own reflection. Nevertheless, while change takes time, that doesn't mean that simple yet profound switches can't occur daily. And as I continue to grow in my agency placement and beyond, I will work to challenge the "us vs. them" assumptions that populate life in the social sector. I will instead aim to build bridges between myself and others through the process of deep listening, humble inquiry, and imaginative thinking. I hope to remember that "...the blind spots of most change efforts, which are often based on rigid assumptions and agendas, fail to see that transforming systems is ultimately about

transforming relationships among people who shape those systems” (Senge et al., 2015, p. 29).

As systems are social constructs, it is key to focus on the social elements at play – people and the relationships between them - and of course, to lead with love.

In Summary

The wicked leader is he whom the people despise.

The good leader is he whom the people revere.

The great leader is he of whom the people say, “We did it ourselves.”

-Lao Tzu

I wrote in my previous leadership reflection that “true leadership is not a singular noun but an active verb.” It’s a decent thought that unknowingly spoke on the difference between stated purpose (words) and actual purpose (behavior). Going further, I now posit that leadership emerges in an experience, a moment in time, created by people. Just as our emotions are states of being that rise and fall with the tides of our spirit, so is leadership. When the conditions are met – humble and unshackled inquiry, dismantling hierarchy, and collective enoughness – leadership thrives. This leads me to say, I’m not a “leader,” nor do I want to be. I’m simply a person who wants to engage with other people in constructing the loving conditions for leadership to appear, as if it were a summoned spirit, infusing us with the energy of the potential for what could be and what is yet to come.

References

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