

Exemplary Leadership: A Study of Award-Winning School Leaders

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Abstract

This study examines four award-winning school leaders asking, "What makes a school leader effective?" A series of interviews were conducted with four award-winning school leaders (State Teacher of the Year, State Middle School Principal of the Year, State High School Principal of the Year, and State Superintendent of the Year), all of whom work within close geographic proximity to each other. The results were coded for themes and best practices for current school leaders who are preparing students for tomorrow's global society. The study sheds light on the perceived characteristics, skills, and best practices implemented by successful school leaders.

Keywords: *Leadership; Leadership Effectiveness; Exemplary Leadership; Leadership Characteristics*

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Introduction

John C. Maxwell, who is routinely recognized as the foremost expert on leadership and leadership development (Haden, 2014), has famously written, "...everything rises and falls on leadership" (Maxwell, 2007, p. 267). If we accept this premise, then it stands to reason that the demand for effective leaders is paramount. The history of leadership theory has evolved from the 'Great Man' theory (Carlyle, 2008) to the current favorites of 'Transformational Leadership' (Burns, 1978) and 'Situational Leadership' (P. Hersey, 1984; P. H. Hersey et al., 2012). Following the school of thought that leaders are not necessarily born, leadership scholar Warren Bennis has written, "Leaders are made, rather than born. And the way we become leaders is by learning about leadership through life and job experiences." (Bennis, 1999, p.163). Further leadership ethics scholar Joanne Ciulla writes, "Leadership is not a person or a position. It is a complex moral relationship between people, based on trust, obligation, commitment, emotion, and a shared vision of the good." (Ciulla, 2014, p. xv). The purpose of this study was to examine four school leaders who were recognized by their peers as exemplary and discover what attributes and characteristics led to their effectiveness and success.

Background

In the span of two years, four local educators within a 30-mile radius of Salisbury University were honored with the top state award for their respective job title: the 2019 State Superintendent of the Year; the 2017 State Middle School Principal of the Year; the 2017 State High School Principal of the Year; and the 2019 State Teacher of the Year. This was noteworthy as all were geographically located in a remote portion to the state. This was unprecedented and provided a unique opportunity to conduct this study. The author was fortunate to have a professional relationship with all four of these educators. As a result, this study was developed and approved and all four readily agreed to be interviewed.

The four leaders included one Caucasian male, one African American male, and two Caucasian females. Ages ranged from late 20's to mid 50's. All four are career educators with experience ranging from less than ten years to over twenty-five years and live in a rural part of the state. All four have Masters degrees and three of the four have Doctorate degrees.

Framework

According to Inc. Magazine, Chris Brady and Orrin Woodward are among the top 50 leadership and management experts in the world (Haden, 2014). As such, their work and expertise merits examination though an academic lens. In 2005 Brady and Woodward published their ground breaking work *Launching a Leadership Revolution: Mastering the Five Levels of Influence* (Brady & Woodward, 2005). They spent hours reviewing the traits that they had observed in effective, successful leaders over the years and eliminated factors that many, but not all, of these leaders displayed (Brady & Woodward, n.d., 2012). The end result was that they

listed three foundational qualities that all leaders possess: leaders are hungry, hone-able and honest (p. 26).

They were the first to identify *hunger* as a foundational quality of a leader. “Hunger itself is one of the biggest facets of leadership. Hunger provides the energy to begin, the stamina to persist, and the will to finish an endeavor. It is this hunger or ambition that births leadership.” (p. 27). They go on to present the Trilateral Leadership Ledger (TLL), a means by which to measure leadership effectiveness. The Ledger posits that *Leadership Effectiveness* is the product of *character* times *tasks* times *relationships*: $LE=CxTxR$ (p. 98-9). They provide examples of characteristics that are included in each factor of the Ledger.

This study was approached through the lens of the Trilateral Leadership Ledger and asked the overarching research question “What are the predominant characteristics of successful school leaders?”

Methodology

Qualitative inquiry is widely accepted as an appropriate method of research when seeking to discover the reason and motivation behind an event or phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mason, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Further, Seidman (2019) and Mason (2018) outline useful protocols for using interviewing as a qualitative research methodology. Using Seidman and Mason as guides, interviews were designed, scheduled, and conducted with each of the educators selected for this study. The interviews were conducted in each of their respective offices at a time convenient for them. The interviewees were asked eleven specific questions regarding their leadership development, experiences, beliefs, and practices as a school leader. Clarifying follow-up questions were asked based on the initial responses. The interviews were transcribed using a transcription service and then coded for common themes using protocols outlined in Merriam and Tisdell (2016).

Results

Six themes emerged from the interviews: Character, tasks, relationships, mentoring, networking, and personal development. The first three themes coincide with the three components of the Trilateral Leadership Ledger while the last three themes were also identified by the participants as being important to their success. An argument can be made that mentoring and networking can be subsumed as a part of relationships and that personal development can be included in tasks. These three themes were prevalent enough to merit their own listing and discussion.

Leadership Defined

Before the predominant characteristics of successful leaders can be ascertained, it is important to define leadership. Brady and Woodward (2005) define leadership as “... the influence of others in a productive, vision driven direction and is done through example,

conviction, and character of the leader.” (p. 7). This definition informed their development of the Tri-Lateral Leadership Ledger.

The participants of this study were asked, “How would you define leadership?” Their responses included the following: “...building capacity in others, ... leading by example ...[leaving] things ... better than you found them.”; “...leading a group of people towards a common goal that you develop together.”; “...leadership is definitely inspiring people, it's encouraging people. It's forward thinking, vision setting...”; and “...leadership is mobilizing people to do what they thought they couldn't do by themselves.” As you can see, components of the Brady and Woodward definition are echoed in the spirit of the participants' comments. It is concluded, therefore, that the emergent themes are compatible with the Brady and Woodward definition of leadership and merit careful consideration.

Character

Researchers have begun to explore character as a component of effective leadership. Sosik et al. (2018) and Liborius (2017) both examined character in leadership and concluded that character does indeed play a role in effective leadership. This provides support for including character in a discussion of effective leadership.

Brady and Woodward include honesty, integrity, courage, proper values based on absolute truths, faith, a humble spirit, patience with others, discipline, and self-mastery as attributes of character (p. 96). Using these attributes as a lens, the following statements from the leaders interviewed support the idea that character is an essential component of effective leadership: “You have to be my three key words, open, honest and transparent. If you make a mistake, say you made a mistake. I make them every day.”; “Definitely courage, definitely integrity. You have to lead with integrity, and honesty, and truthfulness.”; “...you better act on your values. Don't say these are your values and don't act on them.”; “You have to be believable.”

Brady and Woodward are firm in their belief that character is the first fundamental factor of effective leadership. They state, “...there is an intrinsic value in developing character even if he [or she] never obtains external results from his [or her] endeavor. That is because who one becomes is much more important than what one accomplishes.” (p. 96). The idea that character is essential to effective leadership was confirmed by the leaders interviewed for this study.

Tasks

Ceri-Booms et al. (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of research that examined tasks as a factor in effective leadership. Their findings confirmed that tasks are important elements to effective leadership. While it may seem intuitive that leaders must perform and be responsible for the work that they lead, the multiple research studies examined by Ceri-Booms et al. give credence to that assumption.

“The task category simply represents the ability to get things done.... no leader can succeed without the ability to execute tasks” (Brady & Woodward, 2005, p. 97). They go on to list acceptance of responsibility, work ethic, availability, willingness to invest time, tenacity, perseverance, and execution as components of tasks. Again, using the TLL as a lens, the following statements support the need to pay attention to task: “You got to know what you're doing if you're a leader.”; “It should be constantly, what can we do next?”; “... we came together around what we felt good instruction looked like. We developed a flow chart so that teachers knew what good instruction looked like. We did that together because you can't lead people unless you can [work with them].”; ...you have to have what I call the job knowledge; you've got to know.”.

Effective leaders lead by example. Case in point, consider the great coaching legend John Wooden. Even in the midst of his 10 National Championships run, it was not uncommon to find him sweeping the gym floor. Leaders do what needs to be done. There are no menial tasks, just tasks that need to get done! Wooden understood this and led by example.

Additionally, leaders are able to inspire others to accomplish the tasks that need to get done. The task factor is not a call for the leader to become a workaholic or a control freak communicating the attitude that they are the only one that can get things done and done correctly. Effective leaders learn to delegate tasks and build mutual trust so they know that the tasks will get done. The leaders interviewed for this study made it very clear that they are doers, and that a significant measure of their success is their ability to not only get things done, but to inspire and lead others to get things done.

Relationships

Intuitively, we all concede that relationships are vital to effective leadership. Adams et al. (2020), Luu (2019), Chrobot-Mason et al. (2016) and Weymes (2002) have all examined relationships as a component of effective leadership and concluded that relationships matter. Brady and Woodward state “No leader can experience success alone.... Leaders must accomplish things through, with, and for people, and that can happen only with the ability to build relationships.” (p. 98).

The importance of building relationships in becoming an effective leader was very clear in the statements of the leaders interviewed. Among the comments were: “... [it] is about building those relationships, acknowledging others and building capacity.”; “I had built relationships that were strong enough to withstand the rookie mistakes that I made.”; “You need to be able to figure out how you build relationships...”; “... you got to surround yourself with people who you can invest in and build up so that they can move it forward.”.

By its nature, leading and leadership requires other people. John Maxwell has famously stated “He who thinks he leads, but has no followers, is only taking a walk.” (Maxwell, 2002, p. 69). Effective Leadership requires building rapport with others. Stephen M. R. Covey (2006) calls it the Speed of Trust. People must trust the leader or they will not follow.

The leaders in this study echoed these sentiments and strongly emphasized the need for effective leaders to establish strong relationships with the people with whom they worked.

In addition to the three factors of the Trilateral Leadership Ledger, three other themes emerged from the interviews as important components of effective leadership: Mentoring, Networking, and Personal/Professional Development.

Mentoring

The idea of successful individuals having a mentor who guided them is centuries old. As far back as the ancient Greek philosophers, Socrates mentored Plato who in turn mentored Aristotle (PUSHfar, n.d.). In a more contemporary setting, mega-church pastor Rick Warren, author of the number one best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life* (Warren, 2002), was mentored by leadership and management guru Peter Drucker (Karlgaard, 2004). Other noteworthy mentor/mentee relationships include Bill Gates being mentored by Warren Buffett, Oprah Winfrey being mentored by Maya Angelou, J.J. Abrams being mentored by Stephen Spielberg, and, although they never met, Nelson Mandela being mentored by the writings and teachings of Mohandas Gandhi (PUSHfar, n.d.).

Researchers have also found mentoring to be essential. Tabloski (2016), Early (2016), Lamm et al. (2017), DeWitt and Stufft (2019), and Carpenter et al. (2019) all explored the relationship between mentoring and leadership effectiveness through the lens of different disciplines. All reached the same conclusion: mentoring matters! When analyzing the interview transcripts from the leaders in this study, they made the following observations: “I do have a group that are honest with me and tell me when I'm screwing up, and I think that's important...”; “I reached out to mentors...”; “Everyone needs to have mentors...you need to figure out who your mentor is. If you don't have one, you need to find one.”; and “[A mentor] built that capacity in me. He helped me go from where I was to where I needed to be.”. These leaders recognized that, while their performance (tasks) assisted in their receiving accolades and being recognized with their respective honors, they would not have achieved any of this without the assistance of sound mentoring. They concluded, as the literature supports, mentoring matters.

Networking

The old adage says that “It’s not what you know, but who you know” (Popik, 2009) that puts you ahead. While this can be a topic of great debate (we have already established that there are multiple factors that lead to effective leadership), networking (who you know) is an important component of effective leadership. Virtually every profession has some form of professional organization that, among other things, promotes and provides opportunities for networking. Researchers such as Burbaugh (2017), Hassan et al. (2018), and Palalic et al. (2019) have also examined the relationship between networking and effective leadership and have found that networking does matter and can have a positive impact on effective leadership.

The leaders interviewed for this study made the following observations regarding the role of networking in their success: “Whenever I really need some advice or pointers, I know I can go

to some solid people who have been there, who have been down that trail that can help me.”; “...just talking with the professors who all have experience in administration. Then talking with the other students and just really learning from each other. I think that's how you really learn.”; “...I think more networking than anything.”; and “Definitely develop myself through networking. I love to network with other people.” These leaders expressed understanding that effective leadership cannot be practiced in a vacuum, but rather is the result of an intricate web of networks that work together to contribute to success as a leader.

Personal Development

Brady and Woodward (2005) identify *hone-able* (or the self-awareness of the need to continue to learn and grow) as an essential quality of a leader (pp. 44-48). They state, “A true leader knows that no matter how much he [she] has achieved, he [she] still has more to learn.” (p. 45). The idea of learning and self-development being a key component is logical and easy to accept; however, in recent years researchers seem to dance around this component. Turner and Baker (2017) looked at pedagogy and its role on leader and leadership development, Prochazka et al. (2017) looked at self-efficacy and leadership, Bligh et al. (2018) looked at mindset and leadership, and Steele and Day (2018) looked at self-attention and leadership. This would appear to be an excellent area for future in-depth analysis: the role of personal development on leadership effectiveness.

Despite the apparent lack of recent research in this area, the educators in this study were quite vocal about the important role personal development played in their leadership journey. The comments included: “...but the other thing is, you never stop learning.”, “I would say a lot of self-reflection...”, “I read a lot.”, “I am the kind of person who wants to learn and who is very open-minded to learning...”, “I would say it is my drive for constant improvement.”, and “Then definitely through reading too. I'm a big reader, huge reader. I love to read Leaders are readers.”. These leaders have honed in on the concept that continual education and personal/professional development are essential. While it may not be surprising that these top educators value continued education, there is widespread acknowledgement that top leaders are readers and continue to improve themselves (Levin, 2017).

Once a leader determines that they have learned all there is to learn, they are finished as a leader. True leaders are always learning. They are always seeking new knowledge, new perspectives, new options, new ways of doing things, and new ways of thinking. Leadership, like learning, is a process and not an event. The most effective leaders are the best students and are always striving to increase their knowledge base. This is critical to being a successful leader.

Conclusion

Brady and Woodward approach leadership through the eyes of practitioners and not theorists: “The material presented here is not theory, but rather real-life experience from the perspective of two business men.” (p vii). Subsequent research appears to support many of their ideas and models. Through a review of the literature and the interviews with the four award-winning educational leaders of this study it became clear that the Trilateral Leadership Ledger

and its components, Character, Tasks, and Relationships, are keys and critical components of effective leadership.

In addition to the TLL, the leaders in the study identified mentoring, networking, and personal development as important facets of their leadership development and effective leadership. There was consensus that mentoring matters, networking is a key for any effective leader, and that effective leaders are always advancing their own learning and professional development. The relationship between a leader's own learning and personal/professional development and their leadership effectiveness merits further research.

The implications of this study are potentially far-reaching. It has established that it is reasonable to use the TLL as a guide to measure leadership effectiveness. Aspiring leaders and those who coach and train leaders can use the results of this study to begin an examination of the characteristics essential for effective leadership and leadership development. In the end, everything does rise and fall on leadership.

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