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Hidden Strength: Encouraging Spiritual Leadership Attributes Among School Leaders

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Abstract

Today, district and school leaders are being recognized for their contributions to improving schools and enhancing student achievement, and this recognition is coming at a pivotal time in the evolution of education in the United States. The need to educate a new generation of learners that are capable of transforming the United States is paramount. Each state has a responsibility to provide the best education it can to its population. Kentucky has made great strides with its education reforms. The state's alignment of Senate Bill 1 Core Academic Standards with the national Common Core Standards offers great promise (Holliday, 2012). Spiritual leadership traits and attributes exhibited by district and school leaders are gaining recognition as an effective leadership style for correcting what is wrong with the nation's schools. Personal observations as well as research has shown that there are defined patterns of behavior among certain district and school leaders that indicates their successful use of these spiritual leadership traits and attributes in their daily actions and decisions. This paper discusses the key spiritual leadership traits and attributes that influence successful leadership and provides a list of the essential competences of spiritual leadership that are commonly employed by spiritual district and school leaders to improve schools.

Keywords: Spiritual leadership, spirituality, educational leadership, organizational culture, leadership effectiveness

Introduction

Communities are searching for the leadership qualities in administrators who will promote high performing schools. It is the belief of some researchers that schools can become sustainably renewed (Senge et al., 2000; Wong & Nicotera, 2007; Razik & Swanson, 2010). Successful schools rely on successful school leaders. Jazzar and Algozzine (2007) maintain that successful school leaders must be persons who have a clear notion of who they are and understand their role as educational leaders. Leadership styles play a major role in the effectiveness of educational leaders, and because the educational leader is a person who has the responsibility to offer an alternative to the way things are it is important for him or her to maintain an effective leadership style.

Effective leadership is needed to shape the future of schools, and shaping

the future of schools requires the vision of a person who can motivate and encourage change. The status quo is the enemy of change. It attempts to improve upon the existing status of things rather than targeting new possibilities and innovations in order to reap successful benefits from new workable solutions.

One emerging leadership style that school leaders are slowly embracing is the spiritual leadership style. This leadership style has the characteristics to make changes within schools that are necessary for the prescribed purposes of improving schools and increasing academic achievement among students. It is an emerging leadership practice that is taking on new importance in twenty-first century schools. Spiritual leaders motivate and inspire school stakeholders as well as other organizational leaders to reach difficult goals; this style of leadership is similar to servant leadership (Fry, Matherly, Whittington & Winston, 2007). Listed in the table

below are what I have found to be the essential competences of spiritual leadership. This list combines both characteristics of leadership and personal self-concept identity construction. The

caring aspect of spiritual leadership complements the passionate aspect of spiritual leadership and allows for authenticity in leadership activities.

Table 1: Essential Competences of Spiritual Leadership

Caring	Passion: Combination of Heart, Mind, Body and Spirit
Reflect respect for people	Is accountable
Responsible	Involved in causes
Loyal	Empathetic
Take risk and handle adversity	Respects truth
Have faith in people	Show courage
People-oriented	Is even tempered
Have higher values	Inspire trust
Know themselves	Believe in a higher power
Talk to their adversary	Do the will of their followers

The school administrator, with a spiritual leadership style, practices a kind of servant leadership, which is central to caring about others. The above table lists the traits associated with caring leaders and traits that identify leaders that are passionate. Greenleaf (2002) expressed that the individual that is a servant expects something better to occur. This style of leadership involves motivating and inspiring individuals through a clear vision and agenda that serves the school’s needs. Educational leaders see themselves as on a mission to give of themselves to the work of the school and community (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012). Charles S. Lauer (2003). Spiritual leaders take responsibility, look out for their colleagues, and lead by example not by dictatorial orders and punishment. This attitude of looking out for others is certainly what makes the spiritual leader an effective advocate for school improvement and student achievement.

The spiritual leader can be characterized as a caring leader who

does not want to deliberately hurt another person. He or she would never

want to be a person who is mean, cruel, or insensitive. The spiritual leader always treats people with kindness and generosity, and promotes the greater good for those whom he or she directs. This characteristic—leading by showing concern for others and being responsive to the needs of others—is an exemplary leadership competence. By practicing the principles of caring, the spiritual leader can make a difference, be a successful leader, and gain the support of the organization’s members and supporters.

The spiritual leader has a heart that is in tune with the purpose of the group, organization, or community. It is natural for the spiritual leader to have a sense of community within and beyond the workplace (Groen, 2001). This leader has an understanding of the needs of the group and intends to take the group to the next level of involvement by encouraging them to be more attentive to the details and specifics of

their goals. He or she inspires trust and confidence in others by reshaping the purpose of the group and helping the group to invest in the outcome of its actions.

The spiritual leader defends civility and works to enhance the value of everyone. He or she knows that being culturally competent is a way of acknowledging the value and worth of individuals from different cultures and perspectives. This style of leadership is often attributed to African American school leaders who seek to respect people regardless of who they are and hope for finding equity and social justice among groups (Dantley, 2010). The school administrator, practicing a spiritual leadership style, embodies this value and uses it to build cooperation and support among all stakeholders.

The following are a few of the attributes and positive characteristics that distinguish an individual's spiritual leadership style. These attributes and distinguishing factors categorize a person as a spiritual leader. They also highlight the strengths that spiritual leaders possess; strengths that afford them the opportunity to make a difference in school settings.

Self-Assessment

The first attribute of a spiritual leader is to conduct a regular self-assessment of his or her essential characteristics and traits as a leader, to determine their effectiveness in getting things accomplished. This self-assessment allows the individual to gauge how his or her spiritual leadership practice is working. It also gives an indication of how the spiritual leader's convictions, personal values, meaning, purpose, and wholeness in life assists him or her in accomplishing assignments

and overcoming difficult challenges. The leader must have a cause as well as beliefs and core values that he or she can embrace and identify as his or her authentic professional leadership style. The old adage, "if you do not stand for something you will fall for anything," is true of spiritual leadership—professional core values and having a worthy cause is critical for an individual's personal convictions.

The personality of spiritual leaders must reflect a solid image made up of integrity and professional honesty. Standing up for a cause is a value that exalts a sense of personal responsibility that people can recognize. The philosophy is simple: the spiritual leader stands for values and reflects those qualities upon the members of his or her organization. In turn, the members mirror the values of the spiritual leader and complement the overall well-being and the strategic plans and expectations of the organization.

Moral development and ethics play a role in the personal identity assessment of a spiritual leader. How the individual acquired moral principles can influence his or her spiritual aptitude and beliefs. Moral influences can be acquired from within his or her intergroup community membership. Social group membership can be of a racial or social identity nature, and the group identity can have an influence on an individual's moral beliefs and spiritual characteristics (Passini, 2010). Therefore, a spiritual leader's principles are influenced by the traditions, customs, rituals, and ceremonies that come from the experiences encountered with people within the social group of which he or she is a member. Parker Palmer (1998) discusses the complexity of these roles as "an undivided life" (p. 167). This

concept plays well with spiritual leaders who oftentimes are faced with the dilemma of having to wonder if their allegiance to the school is divided when they decide to separate themselves from school matters and press to seek a spiritual sabbatical from the day-to-day involvement of school activities.

Spiritual leaders routinely conduct professional self-assessments (sometimes in a formal manner, but oftentimes in simple self-reflection) to determine their suitability in a school setting. The following assessment questions serve to assist spiritual leaders in seeking to clarify their roles and effectiveness in leadership positions.

- Do people see me as being honest, moral and open, willing to tackle challenging situations in a professional manner?
- Are teachers in my school willing to come to me with their concerns, ideas, and worries knowing that I will give immediate attention to their issues?
- What are my professional ambitions, what do I want to accomplish in a leadership role?
- Who do I hope to influence?
- Am I a person who shows empathy towards others?
- Is modesty a quality that people see in me?
- How do I feel about what people say about me, especially when they are disappointed with my decisions?
- Do I get even or try to find a way to overcome conflict with communication?
- Do I feel that parents are the most pressing problem in the school or do I see parents as an

agent for collaboration and change?

- Is my spiritual leadership style supported by values and personal principles of excellence in everything that I do?
- As the educational leader of my school, how do I handle isolation, alienation, and confusion?

There are also reflected questions that the spiritual leader can ask about the core values of the school or organization he or she is associated with such as, does the core organizational values:

- Guide organizational decision making?
- Motivate and inspire people to a cause and a connection with the organizational vision and higher purpose?
- Provide moral guidance (including giving direction in times of ethical dilemma or crisis)? (Ferguson & Milliman, 2008, p. 442)

The answers to these questions will undoubtedly give spiritual leaders who work as school administrators a barometer as to their position on critical principles governing spiritual leadership practices.

As a spiritual leader working in a school setting, the leader must be able to handle isolation. On some issues, the leader will feel that he or she does not have the necessary supporters and friends to assist with the responsibilities the position entails. The leader may feel as if his or her supervisor is micro-managing, and every decision and action is under close scrutiny. How well

equipped the individual is to be an effective spiritual leader is determined by how he or she handles and responds to those feelings. The spiritual leader must have an established and tested set of principles that will guide his or her decisions on issues, large and small, especially those issues that are in conflict with a supervisor. An educational leader of a professional development school in the mid-west section of the United States once explained that there were no small issues. He maintains that all issues in the school are large issues and it takes a large person with solid values to understand and recognize what must be done to accomplish the school's mission.

Spiritual leaders use self-assessment as a guide to know the importance of the issues they confront on a daily basis. They utilize their intellectual, ethical, moral, and emotional intelligence in a sophisticated manner in order to get tasks accomplished. Spiritual leaders often ask: Do I go with the consensus of the majority, or do I stand for what I think is right based on research and survey opinions? This question demands answers that are honest and courageous in order to acquire and maintain the respect and support of stakeholders necessary to exert the authority, influence, and power to get things accomplished.

Communication Skills

Communicating the mission of the school must be followed up with the well-developed plans of the administrators, teachers, staff, and students who have a shared responsibility in telling the positive story about the school and its purpose. This is an important aspect of developing trust

and a sense of community in the prescribed actions of the educational leader and stakeholders. Every action must be filtered through the comments and voice of the school leadership team. To some degree, this participation by the school leadership team can be compared to an exercise of shared governance—people are given the right to buy-in and take responsibility for the course of action that is being presented by the leadership. By all measures, communication is the core of effective leadership (Hesselbein, Goldsmith, & Beckhard, 1996). Spiritual leaders realize this important factor and incorporate all forms of communications—spoken, written, digital and broadcast communications—into their leadership style.

Deep listening is an important attribute of a spiritual leader. The spiritual leader has a great gift of listening. Listening is a communication skill that school leaders must acquire in order to gain the proficiency to work in school settings. Listening is the key to effective communications especially when dealing with parents (Whitaker, Whitaker, & Lumpa, 2000). This communication skill is one of the most important aspects of spiritual leadership. The spiritual leader hears others and makes every effort to understand the pain and disappointment as well as the joy and excitement that is transmitted in the voices of the people that he or she encounters. Listening is not the best quality of most school leaders, although it should be. It seems that in the course of school leadership, some school administrators believe their only role is to tell others what to do and consume entire meetings without giving others a chance to talk and be heard. There is a difference between leadership and

management operations. A manager is a title that can be given that signifies a position – a leader is a title that other people give you (2011).

Spiritual leaders demonstrate the ability to care about people, and listening is one way to show their concern. Spiritual leaders know that their responsibility is all about others and not about themselves. They acknowledge and value the stakeholders of schools by taking the time to listen and to recognize what is important to them, what is on their minds, and what is causing them distress. The form of listening employed by spiritual leaders is described as humanitarian listening. They want to recognize the human values of every person they come into contact with and show interest in each person's concerns.

The listening quality of spiritual leaders is an essential asset that other leadership styles could adopt. Listening is an exercise that spiritual leaders in schools demonstrate by being passionately interested in wanting to help others. The willingness to be quiet and listen is a learned phenomenon that spiritual leaders use to uncover the truth without being judgmental. This humanitarian listening activity is an action that gives new meaning to the old adage "people are born with one mouth and two ears." The purpose is to listen twice as much as they talk.

Listening is a constructive and positive exercise that helps the spiritual leader gain support and loyalty from the school stakeholders. People love listeners and spiritual leaders capitalize on this strength for the purpose of becoming comfortable in operating in school settings. Having vulnerability and problems discussed can become a difficult task; it becomes even harder when the leader realizes that the people

he or she is talking to are not paying attention. This disrespectful action is an example of why spiritual leaders are so effective in guiding schools to success. They have their antennae out, always patient while listening for the cues that signal how to prevent and solve a problem and how to enhance rapport (Waddell, 2010).

The virtue of listening, for a spiritual leader, is fundamental to effective leadership. Simply stated, effective school administrators with a spiritual leadership style are great listeners. It is their hallmark; the one thing they do very well. In the United States, it is common to maintain eye contact with a speaker. This is a display of respect. It is also a sign that the listener is giving the speaker his or her undivided attention and concentration. When people share their opinions and views, the spiritual leader automatically summarizes what was said, reframes the points that were mentioned, and asks questions to seek clarification. This is a wonderful skill that builds truth and provides a tremendous benefit to the spiritual leader in solving problems—a skill that would be beneficial for all leadership styles.

Collaboration

Spiritual leaders have the uncanny ability to make and keep valuable contacts. Contacts are precious resources in the arsenal of a leader. It has been said that it is not what you know, but who you know. Connections can be the force that propels a school to higher levels of effectiveness and success. Having the right person or people on the leadership team of a school is the fuel that lifts creative ideas to the next level of accomplishment. A positive contact may be the alchemy

required to steer the school in the right direction and to assist the school in realizing its goals.

Spiritual leaders' attributes build relationships and develop great contacts through networking and partnering with stakeholders. These connections can assist organizations in reaching their goals. The spiritual leader understands this resource is essential to being a successful leader and cultivates it within his or her organization. The spiritual leader practices successful collaboration with all stakeholders that have an interest in the school and its goals and mission.

Spiritual leaders realize that developing an advisory board for his or her school is a useful tactic for building a roster of resourceful contacts. It is very difficult for one person to provide all of the direction and energy required for a school to be successful. Therefore, it is imperative to create an advisory board made up of representatives such as parents, civic leaders, business owners, clergy, and law enforcement representatives who are passionate about serving and guiding the outcome of the school. The advisory board does not replace the school board. Instead, the advisory board works on projects to enhance the overall mission of the school. This entity provides the spiritual leader with additional human resources who advocate for the goals and mission of the school. By carefully selecting the members of the advisory board, the spiritual leader has board members who assist with data gathering, public relations, establishing after school programs, fundraising efforts, and reinforcing the school's commitment to its purpose.

Schools environments produce a culture that is unique to those who study

and work in the building. That culture may be one of isolation or one of collaboration. However, effective collaboration is not only for external constituents. Teachers, students, and administrators within an individual school can regularly engage in professional dialogue with colleagues and share ideas. The spiritual leader understands collaborative school cultures and uses his or her values, beliefs, and practices as a positive reinforcement to improve the overall school quality and student achievement through involving the whole school.

Building a team of resourceful networks is not one-sided; it is about mutual benefit for all those involved. What can the school do for those who are assisting it? How can the school's cause be helpful to them? What are the mutual interests of all the stakeholders? Spiritual leadership cultivates positive relationships in order to improve the school and increase student achievement.

Spiritual leaders realize that collaboration is an activity that takes place every day among a large number of key players and stakeholders. Educational leaders, with a spiritual leadership style, understand that building relationships is the life line that keeps a school alive and successful and they envision the role each person plays in expanding the school's mission. They know that it is just as important to be a resource for those individuals invited to join their cause, as it is to solicit the help and resources of those individuals for their cause.

Visionary Leadership

Spiritual leaders are visionaries by nature. They know that the way to predict the future is to invent the future

today. They realize that the way to turn around a failing school is to recognize the value of all members of the school and community. Developing a vision for improving school performance is the primary focus of spiritual leaders. They see it as their duty to develop a road map for getting to the proper place in building greater school success. They encourage others to share their vision of the school and to get actively involved in promoting a wholesome school environment. They work to ensure buy-in on all school plans from stakeholders. Visionary spiritual leaders know how to build teams that work toward the manifestation of the vision they hold for the school.

Spiritual leaders use the vision statement of the school to spark interest in all stakeholders to become advocates committed to greater academic performance among students and successful school improvement. They display boldness, inspiration, and insight to ensure that the school vision has a meaning and purpose that will benefit the school.

The spiritual leader's vision is the fire within, the commitment to succeed, and the desire to build synergy. Visionary leadership is a characteristic of the spiritual leader. It is the exercise of inner convictions and innovative actions. The spiritual leader is aware that having a vision that all stakeholders support is the best way to promote a positive commitment to school improvement.

Additional Attributes of Spiritual School Leaders

Spiritual school leaders are charismatic and have personalities that inspire followers. Charisma is a gift. Dictionary.com defines charisma as an

extraordinary power and appeal of personality; natural ability to inspire a large following (2012).

In its simple definition, charisma is the ability to charm or influence people. It is an extremely powerful trait that puts followers at ease and encourages a positive involvement among all members of a school.

Spiritual leaders are also empathetic. They enjoy helping individuals by lending an open mind and a caring attitude to problems and difficult situations. Empathetic spiritual leaders are easy to identify because they take the time to investigate every aspect of a problem in order to ensure they have the facts straight before making a judgment, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of making premature judgments. In short, they appreciate the thoughts, beliefs, desires, and aspirations of colleagues and stakeholders. They understand and want to understand others.

School administrators practicing a spiritual leadership style are known for their loyalty and earn the allegiance and respect of colleagues and stakeholders. Their devotion to the agenda of the school and commitment to the work at hand are demonstrated in their willingness to partner with external networks in order to improve the overall success of the school. A loyal leader brings creativity, excitement, and innovations to a school. This characteristic is coupled with unfailing displays of dedication through commitment and passion. Loyal spiritual leaders give of themselves selflessly in true devotion to the mission of their school. They make sacrifices and they partner with stakeholders in making sure that the purpose and goals of the organization are maintained. Their most

admirable trait is their demonstration of loyalty through action—they talk the talk and walk the walk. They can be depended upon to deliver and follow through on commitments.

In a school environment, it is vital for spiritual leaders to embrace change. The spiritual school leader must not be afraid of innovation. School administrators that practice the attributes of spiritual leadership must be aware of the transitions that are taking place in the school. They must see themselves as change agents, always looking for ways to make the school successful. Change becomes a part of the spiritual leader's curiosity and this curiosity is incorporated into the operational process of the daily activities of the school. Spiritual leaders are individuals who embrace change by realizing that schools are living organism that must adapt to a rapidly changing world, a world that is becoming more competitive with the advent of web-based technologies.

Spiritual leaders realize that change is a process—not an event. It is a journey that involves transitioning from the familiar to the unfamiliar—a unique experience of cultivating growth. School administrators with a spiritual leadership style welcome the opportunity to adapt to change, no matter how difficult it may be. They are not afraid of change. In fact, knowing that change will produce new opportunities, these leaders promote advancing beyond the status quo. Change keeps spiritual leaders active, motivated, optimistic, and adventurous.

Spiritual leaders are futurists; they anticipate future trends. They have a unique perspective that allows them to anticipate and influence the future through their innovative approaches to research and networking. They work with their membership to gain a better

understanding of and to gain an appreciation for the opportunities in a rapidly changing world. Scenario projections are for future market potentials are commonplace for spiritual leaders. They understand and anticipate future trends, willingly share these possibilities with their school, and seek total involvement from all stakeholders.

Spiritual leaders project their plans into the future, in order to understand the present situations and circumstances. They research and listen to new ideas. Moreover, even when others write their ideas off as grossly impractical, the spiritual school administrator still considers these impossible concepts to be feasible. They use their spiritual leadership style to reinforce a belief in the future by forecasting future events and trends.

Spiritual leaders inspire trust in the members of the school. They treat trust as an essential element of their leadership, which they are willing to work hard at earning and maintaining. They work to gain trust by not misleading people and welcoming transparency.

School administrators have a very demanding job. They know that once they have misled the members of the public and those of the school community, they have lost the allegiance as well as the respect of their supporters; therefore trust is the bedrock of the spiritual leader's personality.

Conclusion

School leadership is a serious business. It is leadership that differentiates successful schools from unsuccessful schools. The most successful school leaders are individuals who are fully engaged in the business of their schools and in the communities

where their students reside. Incorporating the spiritual leadership attributes in school administration provides a balance for the school leader and for the school constituents. The spiritual leader depends on every member of the school to successfully carry out the goals and the mission of the school.

The spiritual leadership style may not be for every school administrator. However, for those who want to have more control of their daily decision making practices, this style provides many positive attributes that build on serving and doing the will of the stakeholder. After all, one does not leave their spiritual self at the school door in the morning – it is an intricate part of their total personhood.

Some might think that spiritual leadership is related to religious convictions. Most certainly, leaders who are affiliated with churches and faith-based organizations employ some of the same techniques in their spiritual leadership; however, a leader does not have to be religious to have a spiritual foundation. This style of leadership is not the domain of religious groups only. Spiritual leadership is a style that can be employed by anyone who believes in the principles of service to and caring for others. Spiritual leadership attributes are leadership characteristics that can be developed and practiced in all styles of leadership.

As mentioned earlier, the school leader employing the attributes of spiritual leadership is evolving into a new form of servant leadership. The school administrator has a central responsibility to care about students, teachers, and external stakeholders. The school leader who practices these spiritual leadership attributes is a person

that is desirable; one who most people would like to be around. They are known for motivating and inspiring individuals and have a clear vision and serious agenda that serves the school's needs. Spiritual leadership involves teachers, students, and parents in school activities, and the spiritual leader routinely gives appropriate praise to all who are responsible for the success of the school's goals.

Doing the will of the people is the aim of the spiritual leader. Working to make schools better is the objective of this leadership style. The spiritual leader, when confronted with great challenges, will oftentimes retreat to a quiet place and employ prayer, meditation, or a sense of quietness to come up with an appropriate response to the situation that confronts the school. Contemplation, not confrontation, is the preferred practice for spiritual leaders when solving problems. This is evident by the select attributes of the spiritual leader.

Spiritual leadership traits are found in a number of school administrators. Unfortunately, most do not openly declare themselves as spiritual leaders; in some environments they are afraid of retribution and misunderstanding from colleagues and external stakeholders. Nonetheless, the fact remains that some individual school leaders are not comfortable expressing their commitment to a spiritual leadership model seemingly because it is not a very popular thing to do.

The spiritual leader has hidden strengths that are used in positive personal ways to show dedication to building better schools by serving the constituents of the school in an effective manner. Some school leaders may call this style of leadership transformative leadership or servant leadership;

nevertheless, it is apparent that spiritual leaders are dedicated to success and they demonstrate the fortitude necessary to be effective leaders by employing the attributes discussed in this paper.

Regardless of their identification with a spiritual leadership style, these spiritual leader attributes are reflected in many effective school leaders. They are known as a person who reinforces the idea that accomplishment comes from

individual contributions that are motivated by a caring and ethical leader. When one sees a school administrator who is ethical, kind, and caring; who is always treating students, teachers, and school stakeholders with respect and generosity; and who is promoting the greater good for all, most likely that person is a spiritual leader who is making a difference in student's lives.

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