

What Is An Innovative Educational Leader?

Joseph M. Marron, National University, USA
Dan Cunniff, National University, USA

ABSTRACT

This paper outlined the traits of an innovative educational leader in our changing society. It discussed the difference in a manager and leader, as well as the specific dispositions that differentiate the innovative educational leader from what many consider the average leader. The authors used the acronym “HELPSS” to highlight the leadership skills and traits that many practitioners believe are necessary to qualify a person as an innovative leader.

Keywords: Leadership; Higher Education; Innovative Educational Leader; Administration; Assessment; Accountability

INTRODUCTION

The study of leadership style began to emerge in the early twentieth century. The first research centered on leadership traits that were being exhibited by the commonly accepted “great” leaders of the time. The general belief was that “great” people were born with leadership characteristics or traits. Furthermore, only “great” people possessed those traits (Northouse, 2012). Most of the research of that time focused on determining what those traits were and if they were universal to all leaders (Bass, 1990). It took until the 1940s for Stogdill (1948) to surmise that no specific set of leadership traits had been found that identified leaders versus non-leaders. Stogdill did use one word characteristics to describe leadership, but was not able to prove that traits such as insight, responsibility, and initiative were indeed universal characteristics of “great” leaders. By the time Stogdill (1974) published his second work, he was openly speaking about situational leadership and how that relates or interacts with the leadership traits or characteristics one possesses.

Statement of the Issue

Education in the 21st century is changing more rapidly than most experts would have ever imagined and technology seems to advance almost on a daily basis. Social media touches every part of all our academic stakeholders. Academic instruction and student service delivery methods that did not exist a decade ago are now commonplace. Public support to education has eroded to alarming levels. Our school districts and institutions of higher education now face intensified scrutiny from the accrediting bodies. Assessment and accountability, which many in the education community hoped would be quick moving fads that would fade away, instead became a permanent part of the landscape.

Today’s educational leader is dealing with complex issues on a daily basis and economic realities are forcing the educational leadership to become more creative and innovative. Leadership is required at all levels of the Institution. Administrators and teachers should exhibit leadership traits with trustees, colleagues, deans, directors, parents, and students that give them confidence in their leadership abilities. Today’s leaders must demonstrate leadership to an incredibly large number of constituencies in the various departments and programs, including supervisors, fellow administrators and teachers, entry-level professional staff, and support staff, to ensure that the needs of the students are being adequately serviced. For entry-level staff, there is a role-modeling type of leadership that is needed for most interactions that occur with students. Leadership with fellow entry-level staff, supervisors and senior management should be viewed as a growing and maturing work in progress. It is important that the leadership growth and maturation be observable by the various constituencies through daily interactions.

In today’s society, there is a great deal of leadership that must be delivered on every educational campus on a daily basis. It doesn’t matter that the issues are complex or that the demographics are rapidly changing. The

leadership that is provided to a school, district, program, a department, a division, or the college itself should be strong and consistent throughout the Institution's organizational chart. Educational administrators are often asked to identify a personal individual leadership style. Perhaps the best answer to that question is that it depends on the situation. A very dogmatic style of leadership, no matter how inclusive it might be, will not be as effective as understanding that each situation that requires leadership attention is unique.

Leadership does not stay the same for each individual interaction, administrative decision, or crisis situation. People and policies change in education every day. The exceptional leader understands this and has the ability and flexibility to shift leadership style to maximize effectiveness.

For any leadership style to be effective, there still needs to be an "Innovative Educational Leadership Skill Set" that serves as the foundation for an individual's leadership style. The skill set that the authors' feel will serve all educational administrators is a bit more personal than those that appear on most leadership characteristics lists.

The acronym "HELPSS" provides the reader with a simple guide to consider when addressing the skills and traits of an innovative leader.

Heart

Heart is a necessary leadership skill that is central to everything we do in education. It gives the leader a sense of compassion that comes into play every day on our campuses. This skill gives us pause to think for a few moments about individual situations and not lump everything together for the ease of dealing with it via institutional policies only. This is an area where reflection also comes into play.

Heart as a leadership skill allows us to give great meaning to the work that we do. It lets us enjoy a sense of celebration within the institutions. Heart lets us legitimately develop relationships and a caring attitude toward our fellow employees. Staff and faculty morale has a direct connection to our institutional heart. A good heart can be observed in attitude, work ethic, and morale that are generated by the organizational leader, but it is hard to define.

Leadership can have its impact on one's physical well-being as well. In order to be effective, the leader's health must be maintained to provide the energy needed in the daily stresses that occur on a regular basis. It is important to "re-charge your batteries" on a regular basis, as Stephan Covey might say, to be critical since you are the source of motivation and inspiration of a wide variety of individuals, both personally and professionally. Suggestions for ways to address re-charging include running, yoga, meditation, reflection, prayer, walking, and working out. Balance is important in being an effective leader. This includes having quality time for family and friends, finding time for your personal solitude to collect your thoughts, and making certain you get enough rest each evening (Covey, 1990).

Empathy

When the authors began their search for a statement that reflected the essence of empathy as a trait of the Innovative Educational Leader, they kept being drawn back to a quote by noted author Maya Angelou (1969) who said: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." How a leader treats people most likely determines how they feel both about the leader and the organization. The major finding of the literature review from the Hawthorne studies was that the greatest positive impact on the workers' productivity was increased attention from their leaders/management (Hawthorne Effect, 2011). This was supported by Peters (1985) who found that the leaders/managers in the more successful companies got out from behind their desks and "wandered" around engaging their staff and workers, asking for their input and, in essence, giving them attention. General Zias (Peters, 1985, p. 291) further supported this view by concluding that in order for a leader to have respect and obedience from soldiers, the leader must treat them with respect and dignity, which can only be done by spending time with them. The authors' long tenure and administrative experiences in education allowed them to observe that superintendents and principals, who were participative and consultative with their staff and teachers on major decisions, inevitably were better supported by their team and ultimately more successful with their board and constituents.

Learning

Is learning knowledge a leadership skill? The authors of this paper answer that question with a resounding yes! People respect knowledge. Knowledge is power and continuous learning is necessary to keep up with the developments in pedagogy and technology. People will follow leaders that they believe have the talent and knowledge to lead them. Did you enter teaching or administration because you thought you had the ability or the knowledge to be a good at it? Somewhere along the line, did you discover that you had a talent for dealing with people? With students? Did you improve your talent by preparing yourself professionally by learning through your graduate degree in higher education, student personnel or educational administration? Do colleagues or supervisors respect you for your knowledge base in various aspects of education? Do you attend conferences, workshops, seminars and stay up on the latest technological advances in the field? If you increase your knowledge base, you increase your learning. Are you the go-to person on your campus for any aspect of education? Do you remain humble about your talent so others see it as a positive part of your leadership skill set? Your ability to learn and share your knowledge will earn the respect of others and can be a powerful leadership tool.

Passion

Passion is an extremely critical skill that cannot be overlooked in education administration. Remembering that we are discussing all educational administrators from entry-level to senior management, the authors believe that there is no substitute for “Passion for the Profession” in discussing innovative educational leaders. Even as one ascends the administrative ladder and daily contact with students diminishes, a passion for working with those students should not be lost. Senior administrators will have to create intentional opportunities to maintain interaction with students. It will not be the easiest thing in the world to carve out time for students, but it will be worth it. Colleagues, subordinates, and students will note which administrators have retained a passion for working with students.

Another difficult aspect of being an innovative educational leader through the cycles of change is maintaining passion for all the responsibilities within your department, school, district, or division. As human beings, it is only natural that there would be parts of our jobs that we would lose passion for. What is critical for the administrator is to not show that lack of passion to the various constituencies with which you interact. Try to find ways to revitalize your interest in whatever aspect of the job you no longer care for. Never delegate tasks or assignments because you have lost your passion for the responsibility. Never publicly acknowledge that you don't enjoy budgeting, personnel matters, strategic planning, technology, assessment, or any other areas that you can grow weary of and lose the passion you once possessed. Passion fuels motivational drive, so it is an incredibly important leadership skill to possess throughout your career.

The Other P

Perseverance has emerged in the last five years as one of the most critical leadership skills an Innovative educational leader can possess. The condition of the economy, the drop in state public support for her education at all levels, and the increased call for assessment and accountability have required administrators to make detailed plans on just how to persevere through the hard times. Leaders at all levels of administration are working with their teams on how to survive the crisis, while still moving forward. Innovative educational leaders, in this climate, realize that growth is stalled and is not likely to return until the economy and public support rebound. Perseverance is seen in administrators just trying to hold onto resource levels for their program or department. Trying to replace retiring or departing staff members now requires long, drawn-out search processes, persistent and often argumentative discussions, and perseverance unheard of a decade ago. Budgets must be checked and rechecked on almost a daily basis. Perseverance is a relevant leadership skill when expectations are to improve and grow a program, when at the same time resources are being cut to the bone.

Strategy

Strategy could easily have been the first leadership characteristic that the authors would identify for today's administrator. How well do you plan? Are your planning, organizing, and implementation skills readily apparent to

all of the college constituency groups that you interact with? What is your working knowledge of your institution's strategic plans? Do you understand how to move or maneuver projects to successful completion? Do both your subordinates and your supervisors readily understand your strategy for resource allocation within your program, department, school or division? Are the strategies you employ always viewed as having integrity and not self-serving? Do your colleagues express faith in the strategies you put forth, particularly if it is impactful on their students, parents, program, or department? Are the strategies developed in a transparent manner, with great inclusiveness from appropriate constituencies? Is maximum communication utilized up and down the organizational ladder as strategies are developed and implemented? Finally, are your strategies viewed as successful and, most importantly, seen as improving or bettering your program, department, division, institution and, most important, the students? If you have answered yes to most of these questions, then strategy is an important leadership tool you have as part of your Innovative Leadership skill set.

Speed

Speed is a leadership skill that elicits applause from fellow administrators. How do some administrators seem to move at the speed of sound and accomplish tasks and projects in the shortest time possible? There is a sense that they just "get it done." Leaders who possess this skill excel at putting together and leading committees through their assigned charge and responsibilities. As a leadership skill, speed is only relevant if quality work accompanies the speed. Many of us have had employees who have passed the speed test but failed the quality control examination. There can sometimes be very distinct advantages to "speedy" leaders. Often items that are finished first are viewed in a superior manner. This may lead to some improved resource allocation for their department. "Speedy" leaders are perceived as very accomplished because whatever they submit to the institution is on time and complete, while others are still working on their committees, projects and tasks.

You gain your level of leadership confidence by developing your own skill set and the traits discussed in this article. Developing and exhibiting these traits will give confidence to your colleagues and to your team. People are assured at all levels of the administration that tasks will be accomplished with your innovative leadership. A reliance on your ability to succeed soon develops within others and your belief in yourself can become inspiring for your employees, especially those looking to develop their own leadership skill set. Your other leadership skills will all be enhanced by your confidence. Confident leaders wish and want to take on more responsibility and usually the school, district, college, or the university comes to rely on them.

By finding opportunities to use these traits and skills, the innovative leader will be perceived as strong and confident with the knowledge to lead the organization. In many cases, they develop a sense that their career is going in the right direction and that they are part of a progressive organization where they can contribute to its success. People within the institution will seldom question strategy, passion, heart, or discipline, but will quickly pounce on an opportunity to question a leader if he or she does not exhibit confidence and strength.

Identifying an Innovative Educational Leader

It is often mentioned, you know an innovative educational leader when you see one, but identifying their specific traits are often hidden in their daily problem-solving activities. As stated in the textbook *Innovative Educational Leadership through the Cycle of Change*, innovative leaders are individuals who inspire trust among their fellow workers, they have been effective team members and served well in past leadership roles as a collaborator, and they take the "extra step" to make certain that the team mission is accomplished (Cunniff, 2013). It is also clear that the innovative leader uses assessment data to make organizational decisions and strives for continuous improvement, providing credit where credit is due.

CONCLUSION

Development of the traits and skills presented in this paper is highly recommended for all levels of innovative educational leadership. Outstanding leadership in educational administration creates success for teachers and students, both inside the classroom and outside the curriculum. Development is facilitated for both graduates and undergraduate students when administrators examine their own Personal Leadership Skill Set and expand their

vision of how to best serve the multiple populations in today's schools, school districts, college, and university campuses. By remembering how a true innovative leader can implement the traits of having a good heart, empathy, passion, strategy, and speed, (HELPPS), he or she can have successes beyond their own expectations.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dr. Joseph M. Marron is currently Professor and Program Lead Faculty for the Master of Science Degree Program in Higher Education Administration at National University in La Jolla, California. Dr. Marron received his Doctorate in Higher Education Administration from Vanderbilt University and his Post-Doctoral work was completed at the Institute for Educational Management at Harvard University. Dr. Marron served as Vice President for Student Services and Enrollment Management at a number of public and private colleges and universities for more than two decades. Dr. Marron has presented over 100 juried presentations and academic papers at National and Regional Higher Education Conferences, Institutes and Symposiums and held numerous leadership positions in various Higher education Professional Associations. E-mail: jmarron@nu.edu (Corresponding author)

Dr. Daniel T. Cunniff is the senior editor of the textbook *Innovative Educational Leadership Through the Cycle of Change*, and Professor of Educational Administration at National University in La Jolla, California. Dan was the past interim chair of the Department of Educational Administration in the School of Education, at National University based in La Jolla, California. He holds a B.S. and M.S. from Northern Illinois University, and a Ph.D. from Walden University in Educational Administration. He has been a teacher at all grade levels, a principal, assistant superintendent in Fairbanks, Alaska, and an active superintendent of schools in the north county of San Diego. E-mail: dcunniff@nu.edu

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