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A clear V.O.I.C.E. : a reflective essay

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A clear V.O.I.C.E. : a reflective essay

Abstract

A leader can be defined in numerous ways and have endless synonyms: head honcho, boss, chief, master, etc. "Critically, the leader has come to replace the hero, and leadership, heroism." (The Drucker Foundation [DF], 1996, p. 72) Similarly, a leader can affect people through a variety of methods and achieve immeasurable results. The evolution of a leader is an endless cycle, fulfilling the needs.of the situation or the fitting to developing relationships.

The ability to reflect is a daily, sometimes hourly task in order for growth to take place. Three major themes emanate including, (1) personal values, beliefs and philosophies, (2) knowledge and skills, and finally, (3) a professional vision. Within the leadership mode, many action steps are necessary, spelled out with maintaining a "Clear V.O.I.C.E."

A CLEAR V.O.I.C.E.:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A leader can be defined in numerous ways and have endless synonyms: head hauncho, boss, chief, master, etc. "Critically, the leader has come to replace the hero, and leadership, heroism." (The Drucker Foundation [DF], 1996, p. 72) Similarly, a leader can affect people through a variety of methods and achieve unmeasurable results. The evolution of a leader is an endless cycle, fulfilling the needs of the situation or the fitting to developing relationships. The ability to reflect is a daily, sometimes hourly task in order for growth to take place. Three major themes emanate including, (1) personal values, beliefs and philosophies, (2) knowledge and skills, and finally, (3) a professional vision. Within the leadership mode, many action steps are necessary, spelled out with maintaining a "Clear V.O.I.C.E."

Personal Values, Beliefs, and Philosophies

Values and beliefs are the dominating principles in creating a successful educational environment. Not only do values define who we are, they also guide our actions which go hand-in-hand with student achievement. Taking a look at our own values and beliefs, do we have a clear voice in proclaiming our ethics through our daily

tasks? Clear V.O.I.C.E. entails a variety of terms, reflective of beliefs, values, and philosophy in the areas of **clear** expectations, shared **values**, being **open** minded, having **integrity**, **caring**, and **ethics**.

Clear expectations in an educational environment are necessary, not only for surrounding staff members, but for yourself as well. Living out personal philosophies and backing words with actions are very evident to others. More importantly, being able to reflect and honestly evaluate personal convictions are also meaningful. Dr. Else has offered four steps of reflective practice which include:

1. Describing: What do I do?
2. Informing: What does this mean? Why do I take this position?
3. Confronting: How did I come to be this way? Is what I'm doing most effective and efficient? Is it consistent with my beliefs?
4. Reconstruction: How would I do it differently? What are other options?

Often times, steps one and two come easily, while step three takes more time. Digging deep, searching yourself and past experiences is not always comfortable. Therefore, being strong enough to realize the weaknesses within ourselves is important in order for us to realize who

we are and explain our actions and words. The self-fulfilling prophecy

sporadically emerges, which can be positive or negative, depending

upon the situation. As Og Mandino (1983) offers in <u>The Greatest</u>

<u>Miracle in the World</u>, "By hearing or reading a thought or an

affirmation, whether it be truth or lies, our mind will eventually imprint

that thought and become a permanent part of our personality. We

become what we think" (p. 25). Possibly, step five could be added to

the self-reflection process:

5. Reaffirmation: Can you learn from this experience?
   Are you keeping a positive outlook of yourself?

Having clear and honest expectations for yourself and

others are vital for mental stability. Not every staff member will have

the same drive and determination to follow through with actions;

differing personalities require adverse treatment. A dominant person

that is very task-oriented will be able to reach deadlines, while a steady,

people-oriented person will struggle more with completing tasks. If

goals are too far out of reach, stress and frustration may sway the course

of success, causing dissatisfaction within the ranks. Stress cannot only

be a mental factor, but a health risk as well, leading to sleep loss or

possibly more serious conditions, such as heart problems.

Values of a leader are often reflected in the staff and students of the

school. As Dr. Else has stated, "What a leader does on a regular basis

over time, will over time, become the most important thing in the

school." Therefore, if a leader concentrates on giving out detentions

and watching every move students and staff make, rewards and

punishments will be the focus. Hopefully, a true leader will make the

focus be the students and learning that takes place within the school.

Shared values of a school-community are critical in raising student

achievement and in maintaining a prosperous direction for the district.

"Without values, otherwise effective leadership can be grossly

destructive socially, as proved by dictators such as Hitler and Saddam

Hussein." (DF, 1996, p. 223)

Richard L. Daft describes values as ". . . learned, not inherited, but

some values become incorporated into a person's thinking very early in

life." (2002, p. 127) Overall, most parents take credit for values

instilled in their children, impacting attitudes and behavior, in turn, creating noticeable distinctions from person to person. In order to develop and recognize shared values, a cross-section of the school-community must be summoned in order to mindfully work together. Regular meetings should take place, encouraging stake holders to discuss their values and deciding upon the common threads that bind an educational philosophy for the school district.

Being a complainer can be one of the opposites of open-mindedness; but a familiar quote states "Complaining is like sitting in a rocking chair; it gives you something to do, but doesn't get you anywhere." Through the dialogue of Jennifer James' (1996) Thinking in the Future Tense, leaders can gain better insight on how to maintain an open mind, especially for change and planning for long term issues that may arise. "Whenever you feel tension, ambivalence, conflict, fear, anxiety, or excitement, it is a signal that a window in your mind is trying to open. Give it your attention." (p. 115) There may be an uneasy feeling, but as long as there is an understanding that "leaders will always see the need to develop and enhance a situation or

environment," (NASSP, 1997, p. 48) perseverance will prevail. Not all stake holders are open-minded in a school-community, but as a school leader, the ability to know your people and build relationships will evolve into trust. Followers that trust will often times take risks and remain open minded when change takes place.

A key component in gaining trust is integrity. "Having integrity means integrating ourselves with principles. . . .If you have integrity, you are not caught up in a constant state of comparison with others. Nor do you feel the need to play political games, because your security comes from within." (DF,1996, p. 157) The educational system can become political on all levels—athletics, board member relations, hiring of staff, even in the grading of students. Although judgment may waiver in any given circumstance, having the integrity to "walk the talk" is key. Having consistency in thoughts, words, and actions is not always an easy chore, but will definitely create trust among those invested. Moreover, integrity "requires truthfulness with oneself as well as with others in terms of what is genuinely valued and what is considered important." (DF, 1996, 137)

Caring is one of the key ingredients required for becoming a successful leader. Mandino explains his theory, as an updated equivalent to karma; "The only certain means of success is to render more and better service than is expected of you. Think not ye are being cheated if you deliver more than the silver you receive." (1983, p. 99) Caring can be in many different forms, but the main point is to make sure those around you are aware that you care. Informally, a leader can lend an ear when a staff member needs to talk about personal problems or needs empathy when dealing with a difficult parent or student. Advice is not always required, but some teachers are willing to hear various ideas that might work.

As noted in The Leader of the Future, "Although it is possible to succeed in leading people toward a particular goal through fear and intimidation, that is not leadership. Good leaders pay attention to the human needs of their colleagues and subordinates." (DF, 1996, 300) It is common knowledge that more bees can be attracted by honey, some leaders find it their duty to make others atone for their

"sins." The behavior of members of a school can be modified through pure, sincere caring.

Ethics are very similar to beliefs and values, with a slight connotative difference. While all three can easily be used within the same means, ethics encompasses more than personal beliefs and values; ethics becomes more of a professional element. "By integrating ethics throughout the organization, leaders make personal and organizational integrity a part of day-to-day business." (Daft, 2002, p. 205) Developing trust within a group may take time, but once developed, it is a component that helps in every aspect of an organization's development.

Knowledge and Skills

Knowledge and skills can be acquired in many ways, but experience is often times the best teacher. In a basketball game, when challenges arise, choices must be made. With 30 seconds to go, the score tied, and the opponents have possession, the question is if and when to foul. The end result—a win or loss. Athletics are often related to life, so does this mean if a mistake is made, we cannot gain some

type of knowledge or skill? Everything happens in life for a reason and if experience is the only thing to gain, there is success. Again, a "Clear V.O.I.C.E." must be present as key elements of knowledge and skill demonstration; keeping the same acronym, but substituting the representative words, **clear** communication, being a visionary, organization, influence, consistency, and empowerment.

The majority of arguments in a relationship are based upon a communication problem. Sometimes there is no communication, other times it may be a misinterpretation of vocabulary. Many educators can relate to miscommunications when standards and benchmarks were brought into the forefront in the state of Iowa. What do students need to know and when do they need to know it? What does the staff become responsible for? The Drucker Foundation (1996) offers four general guidelines in establishing clarity through communication:

> *Well-articulated expectations of high performance
> for each and every member of the organization and
> the belief that everyone, including the leader, will
> be evaluated against those expectations on the basis
> of performance.

> *An understanding that communication is a two-way
> process in which leaders listen, hunger for feedback
> and new ideas, and are driven by a need to compel
> and to influence, not to command and control.
>
> *An appreciation of the principle that well-informed
> team members are the most motivated and strongest
> achievers, and a willingness to communicate with
> teams and to follow through.
>
> *Confidence and trust in employees, and a desire to
> give opportunities to any individuals who are eager
> to accept the accountability that necessarily goes
> with responsibility. (p. 254)

Communication evokes many conditions—influence, encouragement,

and advice. But the greatest component of communication is listening.

If staff members feel like their opinions are heard, a relationship of

team and trust can be developed. One of the most difficult parts of

communication is the accumulation of information that is sometimes

tough to know what to do with. Confidentiality is one type, as well as

other knowledge being perils of the job. "Leaders must decide what

few pieces of information people really need to know . . . the most

effective communication is in-person, personal, and in the form of a

dialogue." (DF, 1996, p. 136)

Clearly communicating a vision adds to the success of any organization. Vision for an effective working system came into play when a shift from a management style to that of a leadership role, occurred during the 1970's. As a manager, orders are given from the top administrators, down to the subordinates in a specialized form of various duties. Rewards are often times given, resulting in the workers only doing enough to get by or when supervision is present. The management style of a business corporation or factory does not work in schools, and currently is shifting in the business world as well. Instead, the theory of being a leader has surfaced, resulting in a focus of creating a flourishing atmosphere and healthy work relationships.

One key element of the shift from management to leadership is the concentration on what is happening or will happen next. A manager thinks short term: today, maybe even tomorrow or next week. On the other hand, a leader thinks of next year, five more years, etc. Overall, the visionary characteristic must be utilized in a leadership role. The Drucker Foundation believes in a leader "willing to turn the pyramid upside down to implement a vision." (p. 85) By

turning the pyramid upside down, the boss which was once seen as responsible is now responsive. Therefore, the responsibility is shifted to the workers. "If you work for your people, your purpose as a leader is to help them accomplish their goals." (p. 86)

The implementation of a vision is one which requires the input and maintenance of all stakeholders. As seen in the video, "Fishsticks," all employees work together to ensure the success of the organization. The employees and employer work as a team to ensure three goals in reaching the vision: commit, see it, catch it. They also incorporated four daily tasks including: play, make their day, be there, and choose your attitude. Just as a vision influences sales in a fish market, vision is important in the educational dome as well. "For a school to have a clear direction about teaching and learning, the fundamental beliefs and vision must be incorporated into the very fabric of the organization." (Tewel, 1996, p. 43)

Although management has shifted to a leadership role, the ability to prioritize and use organizational skills instills efficiency in a school. State requirements of reporting drop out rates, absences, test

scores, and other data will drive any educator to lunacy. Attaining a good computer program may be the first step, but the ability to prioritize duties on a minute-to-minute basis is also important. Organization can be seen when looking at one's desk or the ability to carry meetings in an efficient manner. Organization goes further than self-rewards, it makes others feel safe and trustful.

Organizational skills and communication can be highly influential skills. Overall, Heifetz (1994) believes "Leaders not only influence followers but are under their influence as well." (p. 17) The ability to mobilize people to tackle issues is a vital ingredient of leadership. Although, leaders must be sure responsibility is shared within the organization—if it is not, "the fault lies with the leader." (Heifetz, 1994, p. 14-15) Influencing others to take responsibility and feel needed in an organization is a component in sharing the pressures of being successful.

Avid sports fans will probably agree there are good and bad officials hired to referee ball games. The key to being a good official depends upon the consistency of calls. Therefore, one can be a

poor official, but actually be considered better than one that is inconsistent! Confusing as it may seem, consistency ties closely together with expectations. When surrounding people know there is a consistent educator, they know exactly what to expect, when to expect it, and how to expect it. Although consistency can arguably be a character trait, future administrators must knowingly rely upon the ability to realize when actions need to be taken. Consistency in discipline is a prime example of skill development. Following a student handbook may sound pretty easy, but a lot of judgment and logic come into play as well.

Continuing to move away from a manager role, empowerment creates an organization where "people not only know where they are headed but are empowered to get there." (DF, 1996, p. 86) Losing the role of a critic, judge and evaluator, the new method in getting from point A to point B is to be more of a coach or supporter. When teachers perceive themselves to be empowered, "a high trust level" and "decision making driven primarily by student needs" (Short, 1997, p. 5) results.

Professional Vision

The future of Iowa schools looks wonderful for young administrators. With a high turn over rate expected by the year 2003, options and salaries should dramatically increase. Obviously, administrators will be of high value in a state that already puts education at the top of its "value list." As a professional educator, school leaders are expected to maintain a vision and direction for their future based upon the ever changing world of education. Small schools continue to merge due to cutbacks and state mandates specify alignment and accountability in every classroom. The authors of Best Practice for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools (1998) summarize their thoughts:

> This is an agitating, painful, and exciting time for America's schools. Since the mid-1980's we have been enjoying and enduring the most intense period of educational reform in this century. Everyone has gotten into the act: politicians, parents, teachers, taxpayers, teacher educators, social critics, journalists, and researchers—all are passionately involved in school renewal. Education-oriented cover

> stories, blue-ribbon commissions, government
> reports, exposes, recommendations, talk shows,
> documentaries, conferences, jokes, gossip, and
> legislation abound. Indeed, we are writing this
> book during the reign of yet another "Education
> President," in a state with a self-declared
> "Education Governor," and in a city in the
> middle of the most visible school decentralization
> experiment in American history. For the moment,
> at least, education is the issue of the day.
> (Semelman, Daniels, Hyde, p. 1)

All of these issues become goals and the vehicle to arrive at a

professional vision.

The direction of education is sometimes driven by the

business world and other times by federal or state initiatives. One of

the most important is driven by our state, the mentoring program and

teacher compensation package. New teachers, led by veteran teachers

is one way the state feels they can keep Iowa natives in Iowa schools.

Mentors are expected to go through training and mentees are given

opportunities to learn and reflect with an experienced educator. As

Danielson (1996) notes, "Teaching is one of the few professions in

which novices must assume the same responsibilities as veterans in the

field." (p. 55) Therefore, a mentoring program issued by the state, has caused a challenging wave of heated discussions and squandering of monetary resources.

"For America to survive as a place of freedom requires that the people stand together. The common schools of this country are the one place that we can still experience the sense of common purpose with those who are different from ourselves." (Houston, 1998, p. 50) Just as schools have a common purpose, administrators must align themselves and stand together on the battlefield of education. One method in approaching a commonality is finding a Clear V.O.I.C.E. . Of course, this does not entail every single skill or trait an administrator should encompass, it is only a beginning. A career which many shy away from due to the low pay and pressures, there is a definite need in education to find true leadership. "Schools need capable and caring principals who can recognize problems and face them with inspiring leadership and hard work and who possess the vision necessary to make progress." (Gilman, 2001, p. 74)

Many comparisons have been made to school leaders, one of which is the Lone Ranger. As Paul Kimmelman explains, "Everyone seems to be looking for the Lone Ranger of Education—you know, the miracle worker who will fix all of the educational deficiencies in the United States with one 'silver bullet.'" (1998, p. 52) Why must the educational battles of our nation be fought alone? And why is it even thought of as a war?

A vision for the future must revolve around team and becoming a leader that entails a multitude of capabilities. The flexibility to roll with the punches and being persistent in trying times becomes more of a personal attribute. Some believe educators are born, leaving little explanation for life-long learning. Leadership is a constant evolution, influenced by experience and reflection of oneself.

In the end, an administrator should have the vision to search for a Clear V.O.I.C.E. And among other ingredients in becoming a successful school leader, being a well-rounded individual seeps through. As Elaine L. Wilmore explains in a recent article, "Take care of yourself. Retreat. Find solitude and peace. Look deep into

yourself to feed your soul. Your district will be better for it. And so will you." (p. 39)

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