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Ethical leadership--a search for self : a reflective essay

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Ethical leadership--a search for self : a reflective essay

Abstract

Robert DeBlois (2000) in an article in Phi Delta Kappan magazine stated that "Maybe being a good leader is neither more or less complicated than knowing who you are and what your job is." Aristotle stated it even more simply as "Know thyself'. What is good leadership? We have had in recent years a plethora of books and articles on leadership from Steven Covey, Anthony Robbins, John Maxwell, to Peter Senge, with ideas on learning to take a risk to "find new cheese" to using Christopher Robin as a leadership style. What is it that all of these experts have in common? What is at the core of leadership? After reading book after book on leadership and taking seven years of leadership classes, I came across, by accident, DeBlois' article and there in bold print he states part of what I have been thinking about for the past eight years - "knowing who you are..."

EHICAL LEADERSHIP – A SEARCH FOR SELF

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Deborah Fisher Vroom

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Robert DeBlois (2000) in an article in Phi Delta Kappan magazine stated that "Maybe being a good leader is neither more or less complicated than knowing who you are and what your job is." Aristotle stated it even more simply as "Know thyself".

What is good leadership? We have had in recent years a plethora of books and articles on leadership from Steven Covey, Anthony Robbins, John Maxwell, to Peter Senge, with ideas on learning to take a risk to "find new cheese" to using Christopher Robin as a leadership style. What is it that all of these experts have in common? What is at the core of leadership? After reading book after book on leadership and taking seven years of leadership classes, I came across, by accident, DeBlois' article and there in bold print he states part of what I have been thinking about for the past eight years - "knowing who you are ..."

Leadership books, articles, and discussions center on subjects such as values, beliefs, stewardship, ethics, communication, integrity, commitment and consistency. These are all parts of leadership characteristics that define what a leader should or can be to an organization. I have been asked to look at the six ISLLC standards of visionary, instructional, organizational, collaborative, ethical and political leadership to provide a basis for leadership of schools. But what is it

that essentially creates a leader? What is the difference between a leader, a good leader, an effective leader and an ethical leader? Are they all the same, part and parcel of each other or each a very different creature? How do all of these standards combine to produce a leader?

I have been asking these questions of myself and of others and have no clear and definitive answer but do have some thoughts and reflections on the subject. The term "leadership" is defined as "an office, position, or capacity of a leader, guidance, an ability to lead, exert authority." (Funk & Wagnalls, 1990). "To exert authority" - that term seems to me to define what I don't want to be as a leader. I prefer to think about empowering people in their jobs, not about exerting authority over them. Guidance is a more comfortable term from this definition. A leader should encourage a team to explore new directions and to look at new ideas and innovations. In this sense a leader guides the team with encouragement, not with authority. The significance is for a leader and the team to realize that everyone's ideas and contributions are important. DeBlois (2000) suggests that an idealistic and democratic educational community has an atmosphere where the group realizes "that the boss neither had the answers nor pretended to have the answers." He also contends that it is important for the team to realize that "wherever we were going, we were going together" (Dubois, 2000).

Educators have learned from business over the last several years the value of developing a team approach. We know from past initiatives and efforts that a "top down" approach is not an effective form of leadership. If we approach leadership from the point of authority we may end up with compliance among those we work with but the commitment will not necessarily be present. Peter Senge in his book *The Dance of Change* (2000, p.13) states that leaders :

> appreciate fundamental differences between compliance and commitment. The word 'commitment' has become fashionable because it is widely believed that 'high commitment' work environments are more productive, and probably also because many managers feel uncomfortable telling people to 'comply' with management's directives. But the simple fact is that most management-driven change efforts do not require commitment. They are built around compliance. Either people comply with the new reorganization, or they will be at odds with their bosses. Knowing that it is difficult to discern visions from commands when they travel down the hierarchy, savvy senior managers use the power of their position with great care - because they seek to foster more than just compliance. Deep changes - in how people think, what they believe, how they see the world - are difficult, if not impossible, to achieve through compliance.

When leadership is discussed it often is put in terms prefacing it as good or effective or ethical. Is there a difference? What is good leadership verses effective or ethical leadership? Can you be good and effective but not ethical? Or good and ethical but not an effective leader? The dictionary defines 'effective' as "producing or adapted to produce the proper result. Being in force, as a law. Producing a striking impression, one who is fit for duty"(Funk & Wagnalls, 1990). Honestly, I

am not sure that I particularly like this definition of leadership, "being in force, a striking impression" (Funk & Wagnalls, 1990). Rather, I get the idea of someone in a position of power not someone creating a school community. The world has known many effective leaders throughout history but not all of them were good or ethical leaders. Steven Covey (1990) presented Hitler as an example of an effective leader who had values but whose values were not centered on ethical standards. The consequences for being effective but not being ethical were "momentous - the dislocation of the entire world for years"(Covey, 1990, p.95). History provides us with other examples such as Alexander the Great whose deeds have had repercussions in the areas he traversed for over a thousand years. Alexander is considered to be the greatest military mind and commander in history, an effective leader who led his troops to victory time and time again but in the areas he conquered his name is still considered to be profane due to the extensive and horrendous activities that took place after the lands were conquered. History provides us with numerous examples of leaders who were effective but not good or ethical.

Good is defined by Webster (1981) as "morally excellent, virtuous, honorable, worthy [as in 'good reputation'], generous, having beneficial effects, helpful, [as in 'good advice'], suitable, skillful, genuine, valid". Any one of these definitions are excellent paired with leadership. If we are to be a "good leader"

should we not be morally excellent, genuine and honorable? Are leaders not role models to their team? Even closer to home a principal is a role model to not only their teachers but also to parents and community but most importantly to students. Moral excellence, honor and integrity are upon what the office of a principal must be built. This is where we cross over into the realm of ethics.

Ethics is "the study and philosophy of human conduct with emphasis on the determination of right and wrong. The principles of right conduct with reference to a specific profession". Dean Bottoroff (2002) in an article on ethics states that "The principals of ethical reasoning are useful tools for sorting out the good and bad components within complex human interactions." He goes on to state that ethics are more than a collection of values that in fact, real ethics establish "what values to hold and when to hold them". He continues by saying that "we must adjust our values, thinking and behavior to be ethical and to remain ethical over time. Hence, ethics demands a willingness to change." If a principal or leader is to have ethical standards where do they develop them or learn to implement them into their school or program? I have taken classes for over six years in the field of education without ever having a class in ethics. In all of my prepatory classes for my degrees in English or theatre or elementary education I was never required to discuss or deal with the ethics of teaching. Numerous articles point out that ethical issues have been given little attention in administrative or teacher

preparation programs. Principals are expected to be a "moral agent who must often make decisions that favor one moral value over another." (William Greenfield 1991). Greenfield also points out that "As leaders, principals have a special responsibility to exercise authority in an ethical way. ...teachers must be convinced that the principal's point of view reflects values they support. Coercion through bureaucratic authority will seldom have a positive, lasting effect."

Larry Lashway (1996) states in his article on ethical leadership that "Real leaders concentrate on doing the right thing, not on doing things right." Lashway believes that the lives of school leaders are "filled with difficult ethical dilemmas." In discussions with teachers about leadership I asked them what was important to them about a principal. In all cases they discussed the fact that a principal must be someone you can trust and respect someone you believe has integrity and commitment to the school, the students and the teachers. Everyone I talked to listed qualities that relate to good or ethical leadership. [All participants in personal conversations requested and were promised anninimity.] Patty (personal communication, November 26, 2000) stated that "without respect and trust you cannot develop other aspects of leadership such as collaboration or vision. Why would you want to collaborate with someone you can't trust or believe in." Virginia (personal communication, December 6, 2000) discussed the principal as a role model believing that:

even in your private life if you do not exhibit high morals and values it will carry over into your job. A principal should be beyond reproach. If my child is going to a school where the principal has a bad reputation I would ask them to be reassigned. In a case where that is not possible I would question the school board's decision to keep them in their position.

When I first began this essay it started in my mind as as a piece on what other people believed comprised ethical leadership. I spent a large amount of time talking to teachers, parents, grandparents, administrators, as well as students about ethics, leadership and especially about the role of ethics in the school and community. I wanted to see if what I believed in, valued or cared about was at all reflected in the profession that I had chosen. These conversations as well as an unscientific survey and interviews that I conducted left me with very mixed emotions. Mixed, in the sense that I discovered perhaps more than I bargained for in regard to attitudes on ethical leadership and also about myself. This last discovery has lead me to spend a considerable amount of time in soul searching as well as in reading and discussions. Willam Greenfield (1991) calls the public school a "moral institution" and discusses the "moral dimension of school administration" as well as the moral complexity of the administrator's role". This complexity was a key component in my search for the definition of an ethical leader and of an ethical administrator.

Many of the teachers and parents I talked to expressed concerns that there was little they could do to remove a principal who was not ethical. In one case the

principal had been charged at least twice with driving under the influence and had been caught at least twice in extramarital affairs, but was still in office as principal. The teachers and parents questioned his effectiveness as a leader when he has lost the respect and trust of those he works with on a daily basis. What does this say to students when they see this type of situation? Educators talk about integrity, honesty, relationship building and stewardship but it means nothing at all if your principal or leader does not demonstrate it in everyday life. Spencer J. Maxcy (2002) in his book Ethical Leadership states "Many professional educators seem to have lost their way. One announcement after another of unethical or immoral episodes suggest we have a failure in value-oriented practices in our schools. Some professional educators are either ignorant of ethics or seem not to care if they are unethical!" (p. 1) Maxcy goes on to give examples of current problems in schools such as principals reporting false test scores, extortion, and sexual immorality. Are ethical problems really so rampant in our schools? Very simply, yes.

In my interviews and discussions with students, parents, volunteers and other workers in our county's schools I was informed time and time again of incidents and practices that they considered unethical.

Tim (personal conversation, September 2002) discussed with me an incident that he had witnessed where a friend of his was "grabbed by the throat and

shoved into a locker" by a principal in front of other students and a teacher. Tim

said his friend had questioned the principal's right to drop him from a class he was

taking. The incident was reported to the superintendent's office but was not

investigated. Tim, the student involved as well as two others I talked to who had

witnessed the incident, said that they not only lost all respect for the principal but

for the teacher who had witnessed the incident as well. "She just stood there and

didn't help. I used to think she was cool but after that I didn't. She told us to

drop the whole thing." (Tim, 2002)

Another student, Taylor (personal conversation, October, 2002) told me

that "a principal's job is to watch over everything. They should have the highest

standards on everything." Taylor also had a story to tell. "When I was in seventh

grade I lived in New Mexico. The dress code was very strict and our shirts had to

come down so far below our waist. The principal would often check by lifting our

shirts up – but he always lifted them up high enough to look at our bras. You

should have seen my mother when she found out." Caroline (personal

conversation, October, 2002) in her discussions with me told me the story of the

fifth grade teacher who left a distinctive impression upon his students. "He used

profanity, the F word when he was upset. One time he threw a desk across the

room. He scared me. I was always afraid to ask for help."

Verbal assaults, sexual harrassment and outright threats were only a few of the incidents reported by the students, teachers, parents and grandparents whom I interviewed and surveyed. The most common incidences involved administrators lying to students, parents and to teachers. Two students, Bill (personal conversation, February, 2001) and Jeremy (personal conversation, April, 2001) told me almost identical stories involving their removal from the high school to an alternative program in their community. Both had been involved in verbal altercations at school and their "punishment" was to be sent to the alternative program. When I pointed out that this was not a valid punishment and that the school board had strictly prohibited such (the alternative program was classified as a 'by personal choice only' program) both students repeated that they and their parents "were not given a choice". Lying, by administrators, does not seem to stop with parents or students either. Judith, (personal conversation, November, 2001) a teacher, discussed with me an incident where she had attended a meeting with several other teachers and an administrator. After a lengthy discussion on an important topic, they all felt that they had come to a consensus on the issue they were discussing. The following week at a local board meeting the administrator announced a decision entirely different from what the teachers had discussed with him. Judith felt "betrayed and very angry". She felt that perhaps they needed to tape their next conversations.

Talking to teachers brought to the forefront my feelings on an personal incident that happened to me several years ago. I had received a call from my principal asking me to attend a meeting scheduled with another administrator to discuss an activity in which one of our volunteer instructors was participating with her class. I was not apprehensive at all about the meeting and rationalized that I was included because of my position within the program in which I was working. It was only minutes into the meeting when I realized that this meeting had another agenda. It began with a verbal attack by the other administrator on myself for not informing the administration about the activity the other instructor was planning. When I answered that I had no knowledge of it until the instructor gave me a copy of a letter that she had written to the principal, I was called "a liar". My principal also verbally attacked me saying that by not informing them I had "stabbed them in the back". Nothing I said was listened to and then the administrator and my principal followed up by attacking my character and my professional relationships. I was informed that I was extremely difficult to work with, that no one liked to work with me, that I was unprofessional. I asked for specifics and the administrator read off a list of names comprising my co-instructors, volunteers, social service personnel and administrators and counselors from the high school. He said that he and my principal had talked to all of them and that each had said that I was "impossible to work with". When I left this meeting I was completely

devastated and felt like all of my hard work, long hours and networking had just

been for nothing. I returned to my building and sat in my car for a very long time.

As I entered my building I asked my two co-instructors if they had time to talk. I

repeated for them the conversation that had occurred at the meeting. Both of them

looked at me and responded that at no time had they ever said any of the things

that I had been told. One of them said "outside of hello on maybe two occasions I

have never spoken to him about anything". I decided then to do my own

investigation. Every single person on the 'list' told me the same thing – those

conversations had not occurred. Finally I spoke with a member of the school

board who told me this piece of advice, "Never, ever go into a meeting with them

without another person or a tape recorder. In fact, don't talk to **** one on one,

ever without one." (Jan, personal conversation, November, 1998) That day I lost

all respect for both of these administrators. Did I continue to work with them, yes,

that was my job. Did I like it, no. I doubt if either one of them could ever earn

back the respect or trust that was lost that day. Over time there have been other

incidents with other administrators that I have witnessed or heard about, lying (to

parents, students as well as teachers), minor theft, and improper use of school time

(running personal errands, grocery shopping, washing the car, working on their

house, and playing golf). Sara Boatman and Todd Adams (1992) in an article on

ethical leadership discuss the idea that it is "tested through ethical dilemmas", and "practicing it requires role modeling and courage".

A website called Ethical Edge (June, 2002) says that "An organization is essentially how and what it communicates". They go on to state that:

> A learning organization is one that seeks to create its own future;
> that assumes learning is an ongoing and creative process for its
> members; and that develops, adapts and transforms itself in
> response to the needs and aspirations of people, both inside and
> outside itself. A learning organization doesn't learn in order to
> achieve its mission. Learning and growth is its mission.

What, as an organization, are we communicating to the community, to our students, parents, teachers and ourselves? This is a question that I continue to wrestle with each day as well as the question of my own evolving ethics as a future administrator. Maxcy (2002) discusses in his book on ethical leadership the concept that school leaders at the beginning of the century were expected to be ethical and to exhibit family values and to hold a certain station within their community. "Americans expected school administrators to be models of the virtues they held dear." (Maxcy, 2002, p.13) He believes that as America moved into an era of science, training and management that there was a shift in perceptions among educational prep programs leaving behind ethics. "The expectation that school leaders would also be moral and ethical leaders gradually collapsed as school administration took on more of the trappings of science. … educational leadership preparation and practice became dedicated to effectiveness

and efficiency." (Maxcy, 2002, p.13) With the shift towards management we

effectively wedged out the subject of ethics.

Thomas Sergiovanni (1992) in his book, Moral Leadership, discusses the

failure to provide adequate leadership.

> Why has the yield in practice been so dismal, given all our efforts?
> I believe there are two reasons for the failure of leadership. First,
> we have come to view leadership as behavior rather than action, as
> something psychological rather than spiritual, as having to do with
> persons rather than ideas. Second, in trying to understand what
> drives leadership, we have overempasized bureaucratic,
> psychological, and technical-rational authority, seriously neglecting
> professional and moral authority. In the first instance, we have
> separated the hand of leadership from its head and its heart. In the
> second, we have separated the process of leadership from its
> substance. The result has been a leadership literature that borders
> on vacuity and a leadership practice that is not leadership at all.
> These are harsh words, not offered lightly. (p.3)

This is a damning statement for the training of educators. If we truly are

role models for students then perhaps the field of ethics should be incorporated

into the training of all teachers and administrators. Maxcy (2002) believes that

"School leaders who lead their schools with moral character help provide a model

of ethical behavior for every student, teacher, staff member, and parent associated

with that school" (p.15). He also suggests that "if there is a crisis in our schools

today, that crisis is made worse by the absence of good leadership" (p.13).

During the summer of 2002 I took an unscientific survey of attitudes about

the school district and views on ethical leadership. My surveys were taken by

friends to Little League games, church potlucks and set out on the counter at the local tire store. I put out 100 surveys and received 68 returns. They were filled out annonymously. I asked 6 questions plus gathered information on their age group, gender and number of children. Overwhelmingly people felt that they could not trust the administrators in the school district. They rated teachers slightly higher. All had similar comments on the idea that administrators and teachers need to be held to a higher standard. People in the 65-80 year old age range were especially upset by the lack of values and morals displayed in our school administrators. I had the opportunity to talk to some of the people who filled out my survey and their anger was quite apparent.

Over the past two years as I sat through my graduate classes I heard one of my cohort members voice his concern over his struggle between "what is just and what is fair" (Panoch, personal conversations, 2001, 2002). Even though he frequently voiced this concern, I felt little effort was actually given in addressing the subject. Where will this discussion be held? As a future administrator will he struggle with this continually or after he is certified, will he instantly have the answers? Maxcy (2002) points out that "If we are to know the way to make leadership ethical, we must examine our attitudes towards ethics and morals, and the ways in which justice and compassion affect our choices in education …." (p.91). He also points out that it is "not a simple matter to be just" (p.95). The

concept of fairness he terms "an elusive ideal". In his book on ethical leadership

Maxcy (2002) gives us the "Case of Unintended Harm". The case deals with a

principal struggling with the idea of justice verses fairness in a situation involving

students, stolen prom decorations and the band for the prom. It points out that if

you just follow the rules (justice) that sometimes you will miss out on what is

really happening – the why behind the incident. I struggle with this concept of

justice and fairness myself. Should rules always be followed exactly when

distributing justice? Shouldn't an investigation involve the why of an incident? I

had a discussion with an administrator on this subject and he told me that "instead

of becoming a principal that I should have become a counselor" (personal

conversation, May, 2002) He went onto explain that administrators need to

always look "at what is good for the district not what is good for the child" This

statement upset me a great deal because my assumption was that they should be

the same thing. Should I be a counselor instead of a principal? No, I don't think

so. Instead I believe that there should be more principals that think as I do.

Maxcy (2002) calls this the "caring attitude" of principalship. He also states that

the "prejudice against caring school leadership is still strong" (p.104). He

continues by describing this leadership as being able to "treat people in an open

and fair manner" that they were "more willing to listen and to dialogue, wishing to

develop relationships with students and teachers" (p.104). Other terms that Maxcy

In closing I would answer my questions on leadership by stating that I believe you can be an effective leader without being a good or ethical leader, but I would not want to be nor would I want to serve with someone who was effective but not good or ethical. It would be somewhat like the Biblical parable of the foolish man who built his house upon the sand, when the rains came down and the floods came up the house on the sand came tumbling down. The wise man on the other hand built his house upon the rock (ethics) and when the floods came his house stood firm.

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.

- Mahatma Gandhi

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