

Head or Heart? And other Challenges and Issues in Leadership Education

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Introduction and Background

This presentation explores the challenges and issues currently facing leadership educators. Many fields of inquiry and practice recognize the critical role of leaders and leadership, and as such have invested a great deal of time and resources into developing leaders. In this context of leadership development, educators strive to structure learning experiences with a causal effect of some tangible skill, knowledge acquisition, or disposition, i.e., a “leader” should be the end result. Leadership as a field of knowledge and practice offers a number of particular challenges to educators.

This presentation will be a facilitated discussion led by three experienced leadership educators. The presenters will first provide a framework of the current state of leadership education. They will then propose a number of challenges and issues based on the latter work and their own experience. Finally, the presenters will prompt and guide a conversation with participants to expand and elaborate on current issues in leadership education. Ultimately, the presenters hope to provide a coherent framework for both scholars and practitioners to further advance this important field.

Leadership educators have made great strides in curriculum and pedagogy, applying a broad variety of techniques and learning theories. As with any field of inquiry, new advances bring forth new challenges. For example, leadership educators have sought to emulate other applied fields such as teaching and nursing by introducing curricular experiences that strive to recreate the real thing. But, in creating, applying, and working through these recreations, new questions emerge such as how to recreate the more implicit facets of culture and context. This is but one of many issues leadership educators must effectively work through.

This section briefly explains a number of the key challenges that provide the framework for further discussion. As the explanations clearly illustrate, the issues range from the very abstract and theoretical to the very practical and applied.

Philosophical Issues

1. **Indirect Causality** – Assessing the impact of leadership education activities is often limited in both validity and reliability. It is not clear whether specific outcomes can be directly attributed to participation in leadership education, emerge through experience and/or necessity, or are acquired through some other source or means. Some individuals succeed as leaders, and some don't. Some of those who do succeed have leadership training, and some don't. Of course, many who do have leadership training do not succeed as leaders – in fact, many don't even aspire to leadership positions. Why are there such apparent limitations to the causal effects of leadership training?
2. **Latent Causality** - Leadership educators understand that leadership learning does not immediately manifest, and often requires some contextual or experiential dimension, such as the individual assuming a leadership position or finding herself in a position requiring she assume a leadership role. So, the resulting assumption is that leadership educators build capacity or capability to lead - the implicit and underlying lessons that one hopes will bear fruit

when the circumstances require. But the fact of the matter, as many scholars would agree, is that leaders must experience “the crucible” of the leadership challenge. And, in doing so, the interaction effects of prior learning and present experience offer a difficult, albeit not unique, challenge to leadership scholars and educators.

3. **Term inconsistency** - Education, training, development, guidance, facilitation – what are leadership educators doing? Quite often each of these terms follows from a philosophical perspective of teaching and/or learning, and each have significant implications for how leadership education is applied, the expected outcomes, and the extent of responsibility that falls to the educator.

Pedagogical Issues

4. **Development versus Developmental** – When educating young children, teachers take a developmental approach, matching their content and pedagogy with the developmental level of their students. Development happens, and teachers guide that emergence. On the other hand, when educating an adult to perform a specific task, for example driving a car, teachers take a novice-expert approach, i.e., here is how you do it, step by step. Development is the verb that teachers drive. So, which approach is most applicable to leadership? What is the developmental continuum for leaders?
5. **Lack of involvement in community/issues**: One of the key things many leadership educators have faced is the challenge of helping students along the path to being leaders in their communities because they seem to have no connection to their community. There seems to be a trend of young people engaging in “community service” activities when in high school because it looks good on their college applications or because their high schools require/encourage it, but once they get to college and beyond, they no longer make connections with their communities nor do they have issues they are engaged with. As a result, talking with them about how to be leaders in their communities does not go very far because they can’t think of any ways in which they are or want to be involved.
6. **Connecting the dots: Activity and Insight** - All too often, we only provide the “in the class” portion of leadership education and training within the context of our programs. Sure, there may be one or two exercises that allow participants to practice what has been learned, but more often than not, participants are not given the chance to practice “on the road” where it is messy, confusing and where oftentimes there are no clear cut “if A then B” solutions. On the opposite end are those programs that “develop leaders” through activities. In this case, participants have not received the “in class” driver education – they simply learn behind the wheel (good habits, bad habits and everything in between), without understanding why it is so. For example, scouting represents an incredible opportunity for people to develop and learn, much of the learning based on experiences. However, if no one is there to help connect the dots and help participants reflect on what is happening, myriad opportunities for leadership learning and growth are missed.

Developmental Issues

7. **Superficial definitions of leadership**: Students seem to have very superficial definitions of leaders and leadership, which usually involve some sort of official position. When asked to define leadership, they use common examples of people who have positional leadership and seem to ignore people who demonstrate leadership in other ways. It seems that among young people the conceptualization of leadership has become more narrow.

8. **Lack of confidence:** Many students seem to be unsure of their “place in the world” and are focused on getting a job, making money, buying nice things, and supporting a family. They seem to lack confidence that they have what it takes to be an effective leader and a positive agent for change in the world or in their community.
9. **The Challenge of Time** - I came across a quote by Jay Conger a few years ago, and it has stuck with me. The quote says ”Most would agree that to seriously train individuals in the arts of leadership takes enormous time and resources – perhaps more than societies or organizations possess, and certainly more than they are willing to expend.” There are a lot of leadership “camps” and “sporadic” trainings in the market, but to seriously train someone in leadership, a “camp” (one-six day experience) simply will not do. It can only be a part of a larger process. Could a world class pianist be developed by attending a 3-6 day learning opportunity? I think not (even if you are working with Mozart). Developing leadership capacity is in some ways similar to developing other skills, competencies, or behaviors – it takes time, consistent practice, coaching, and reflection. Yet many organizations, divisions, and departments are not structured to facilitate this “deep work.” As a result, individuals spend years in organizations with few opportunities to truly grow as an effective leader in a variety of contexts.

Curricular Issues

10. **Prevalence of “bad” leaders:** Unfortunately, there seem to be more examples of “bad” leaders (to use Barbara Kellerman’s framework, “bad” leaders can range from incompetent leaders to evil leaders) than “good” leaders in our immediate experiences and in the news these days. Too often we don’t discuss the implications of bad leadership and how it affects us as individuals and what we can/should do about it. Students often seem unwilling to think of leadership in these terms and, until pushed to do so, don’t think of this other side of leadership.
11. **The Curse of the Numbered Maxims** – How many habits, traits, skills, laws, characteristics, rules, and maxims can one leader keep track of? Leadership educators are faced with an immense barrage of assertions regarding what effective leaders know, do, or are like. While an experienced leadership educator can sort and organize this amassed wisdom, facilitating emerging leaders to taking a mindful approach is far more challenging.
12. **What about Context?** - If leadership is a relationship between the leader, followers and the context, then how do you teach “context” to future leaders? Where do you even begin unpacking the infinite number of challenges anyone in a leadership role will face?
13. **Head or Heart?** - Transformational and Servant leaders speak from the heart to the heart. Yet, we know this, and those leaders strive for this, through mindful reasoning. Leadership relies on the qualitative relationships built between leader and follower; yet leaders need to strategically guide those relationships to some reasoned purpose. For leadership educators this duality between head and heart raises considerable curricular questions, i.e., what can be taught and when. Clearly both are necessary, but how are both taught?

Conclusion

14. **Competing with Snake Oil** - Thousands of organizations call what they do “leadership” training or development. The term leadership has taken on impressive and important, if not elusive, implications. It is desirable, attractive, and ultimately a money maker. However, any time an idea, particularly a highly complex and applied idea, takes on this reputation, the potential for mindless approaches and outright abuse multiplies. How does mindful, informed,

and research-based leadership education address this challenge? Should the field create clear guidelines and parameters of what leadership development/training should entail?

The aim of this session is to both expand the conversation and inform leadership educators regarding some of the most prevalent current challenges and issues. Leadership education is unique in that the concepts and applications are so broadly practiced and relevant – all fields and professions utilize leadership, or certainly could benefit from doing so. Theory and practice are very closely interconnected, and students demand this connection be explicitly addressed. By maintaining an awareness of the unique issues and challenges in this field, leadership educators can better meet the needs of their students and the organizations and communities they seek to lead.