

New Approaches to Leadership Formation: Moving From Knowledge to Wisdom

Chester J. Bowling, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist
Community Leadership and Management
Ohio State University Extension
bowling.43@osu.edu

Introduction

The goal of all leadership education is the “improvement” of human systems such as groups, teams, organizations, communities, etc. A review of the mainstream leadership literature will leave us with the impression that leadership is basically about a leader and her/his followers. The goal of the leader is to get the followers to do things they don’t want to do. But looking at human interaction through the constructionist lens leads us to a different belief about leadership. When we, from this point of view, observe a group that is working well together we notice group members doing things that lead to the accomplishment of a common goal. Limerick, D., Cunnington, B. and Crowther, F. (1998) call this behavior “facilitative behavior.” They go on to say that “It is not hidden behavior; it is recognized and expected by others in the system – it is a role.” An interesting thing to notice is that everyone in the group is in either small or large ways contributing to the goal accomplishment. It might be said that everyone at one point or another is playing the role or constructing a way of working together that can be described as facilitative behavior.

In western culture the basic belief is that if there is quality leadership the chances of achieving a desired result is significantly improved. Although this seems like common sense it is easy to forget that improved human interaction, which leads eventually to the accomplishment of a task, is the ultimate goal of leadership. We may also be working under the assumption that there is one right or one best way for leadership and group action and by extension task accomplishment to happen. In this paper we want to suggest that there are an infinite number of ways for leadership, group action and task accomplishment to occur. The path to multiplicity in leadership, group action and task accomplishment goes through and postmodern and constructionist leadership education. Through these philosophical perspectives we can enhance our ability to create human systems that that achieve desired results and simultaneously increase a sense of communal action and social satisfaction.

Postmodern/Constructionist Theory and Leadership Education

Postmodern theory holds that humans are social creations and that their institutions are constructs upheld by humans acting according to their images of reality.

“Postmodern theory is emancipatory. Individuals are freed from the imperatives and restrictions of structures, because these have been discredited and

demolished: ‘Rather than introduce imperious guidelines to regulate order, postmodernists illustrate that persons are able to approach one another freely through the *recognition of difference*’ (Murphy, 1988, pp.611-612). In other words, individuals are free in every sense. They are free from artificial hierarchies and structures and free to be different, to be themselves. Lyotard (1984), in particular, stresses the role of information technology in allowing people to be free, to create their own local knowledges.” (Limerick and Cunnington, 1993 pp. 9).

There are some who view postmodernism as relativistic and chaotic. The multiplicity of interpretations and discourses that are welcomed can appear to be conflicting or contradictory. But we suggest that the tolerance of difference in postmodernism allows for more freedom and creativity in human systems. We are no longer victims or pawns limited by conditions or conditioning, (Ferguson, 1980) but rather social partners in a decentralized society. We are capable of imagination and invention, which leads to new possibilities and social innovation.

Constructionism emphasizes the interactive role of social relationships and examines how different relational influences shape life.

“Constructionism can be defined as that philosophical position which holds that any so-called reality is, in the most immediate and concrete sense, the mental construction of those who believe they have discovered and investigated it...“Learners respond to their sensory experiences by building or constructing in their minds, schemas or cognitive structures which constitute the meaning and understanding of their world.” (Saunders, 1992)

Social constructionist theory has begun to overshadow the learning-as-process model, which has been the dominant paradigm defining education. Its rise to prominence within the last decade is shifting the theories of social interaction that have defined the work of leadership educators. The most significant influence of constructionist theory upon education has been its endorsement of collaborative learning. Instead of the learning-as-knowledge acquisition model, in which the influence of other class members has been perceived as unnecessary, the constructivist, or learning-as-knowledge-creation model sees collaboration as essential to learning. As class or group members work collaboratively to construct new knowledge about leadership, group behavior, and task accomplishment multiple interpretations, responses, discourses, and options are encouraged. Because the learning process is creative instead acquisitive it may be better thought of as “leadership formation” rather than “leadership education.”

In addition to denying or reducing interpretations, responses, discourses, and options for positive human behavior the learning-as-knowledge acquisition model often creates inert knowledge, a term first used by Alfred North Whitehead. Inert knowledge refers to knowledge that does not come to mind when it would be appropriate or useful. It is knowledge that is stuck in the situation where it was acquired. Thus the individual might

perform well on a test but not be able to apply what they know to "real life" situations. Students know the information but it is not visible in their behavior.

New Approaches to Leadership Formation

Two implications of the constructionist view of leadership formation are:

- If leadership is facilitative behavior and everyone engages in facilitative behavior, everyone should be involved in leadership formation.
- If leadership is facilitative behavior the goal of leadership formation should be the development of facilitative behaviors.

To achieve these goals leadership educators can design curriculum and programs that engage learners in the development of new behaviors that make positive differences in the way groups, teams, organizations, communities, etc. work together. As a starting point for that project we have modified Andrew Yeaman's "Eight Ideas for Postmodern Instructional Design" (1994) to create Eight Ideas for Postmodern Leadership Creators. It does not seem congruent to continue calling those of us doing this work "educators" thus the term "creators" which can be equally applied to those who have been previously called students.

- There are several workable ways to engage in leadership formation, not just one ideal solution.
- Consider possibilities and not just problems. Your task is to generate new and more value congruent ways of leading and working together.
- Be open to learning from the learners. Make sure everyone has full voice in the creation of new leadership knowledge.
- Avoid the romantic notion that there is a perfect meeting of the minds. Although people engage in communication all their lives, there is rarely an absolute correspondence in understandings.
- Generate multiple interpretations, responses, discourses, and options in your message.
- Expect diversity in the way students understand and in what they understand. Advocate these myriad pathways of understanding as superior to our past reliance on a linear, pipeline transmission of knowledge. Each learner is unique and brings to learning his or her own background, interests, needs, and perspectives.
- Examine, learn from and build on leadership formation that that succeeds.
- Evaluate successful leadership behaviors. How was the original task accomplished? What other positive things have happened? Have new ways of leading been created?

These ideas can be used in an endless number of ways to co-create curriculum and programs for leadership formation. Any process that creates knowledge about successful action in a human system is leadership formation. The goal here is not memorization and replication of successful actions as this leads to inert knowledge. The goal is the development of facilitative behaviors. Behaviors that:

- Make possible multiple interpretations, responses, discourses, and options.
- Through the recognition of difference, facilitate people approaching one another freely.
- Sustain freedom from artificial hierarchies and structures and allow people to be different, to be themselves.
- Ignite imagination and invention and lead to new possibilities and social innovation.

Possible Approaches

For all these examples you will need a group experience from which to draw. The experience can come from a video, a story (actual or fictional - written or oral), an experiential exercise created just for this purpose, an experience the group had while working together on a project or task, or a picture or photograph of a group. Leadership creators should remember that every activity should begin with a predetermined conclusion. The goal is to encourage the group to actively co-construct or co-reconstruct their knowledge about successfully working together.

Using **IDEAL** to discover leadership knowledge

I = Identify the question. Work together to define what the group wants to know. e.g. How do the members of the group gain full voice? or What was it about the group members that made working together fun? If understand fun, for example, is the objective, the group experience will need to be selected from experiences that group members describe as fun.

D = Discover the best of what was created. This activity is focused on observation, which includes listening. The group creates questions and interviews people who participated in the group experience or they watch a video, read a story, or reflect on a picture. They are focused on thoughts, feelings and actions that make fun, for example, possible.

E = Exploring possibilities for the future. During this activity the group asks the participants from the experience, or each other if the experience comes from a video, a written story or a picture, what else might be possible in this experience. They ask the participants to first imagine an ideal experience of working together and having fun and then to tell the group about the imagined experience.

A = Actively creating new behaviors. Here group members engage each other in a dialogue and use what they have heard, seen and felt to co-create new ways of working together that help them achieve their shared goal while creating deeper social bonds and satisfaction.

L = Look for the positive effects of the behaviors they have created. As group members integrate the new behaviors in their actions they should focus on those

moments when the group is the most successful in working together. Observing what is working and building on it leads additional social innovations.

Be Artful With **Questions**

Follow Blooms (1956) taxonomy of questions to construct what successful leadership looks like.

Inference Questions – Go beyond the immediately available information. Ask the group what they know about successful leadership from their experience or from the video they saw. Push beyond the facts to discover feelings and thoughts.

Interpretation Questions – Ask the group to reconstruct or imagine the positive consequences of the behavior they experienced or observed. What was it that made the experience fun? How do you imagine that the participants in the experience generated fun?

Transfer Questions – These questions help the group to move from what was or is to what might be. How can more fun be created in the group? What other ways can we work together that would generate more fun? How can we bring into our group some of the fun we saw in the video?

Expectation Questions – Use questions that help group members understand their positive expectations. Ask them to think about a time when they were working in a group of people and having fun. Then ask, what did you think would happen as a result of your participation in the group? What were you hoping for or expecting?

Reflective Questions – These questions should help group members explore the indicators they are using to identify positive or successful experiences. They include questions like; How do you know what successful leadership is? How did you know what fun is? What did I see that led to the conclusion that the participants were having fun?

Forming Leadership Through **Inquiry**

This approach to leadership formation makes experience central. Group members investigate and inquire about leadership. Their own observations serve as the source of data. They create the concepts and principles of leadership through discovery, imagination, design and innovation. When leadership is presented through inquiry group members move beyond that which has been written about leadership and begin to construct new forms and ways of leading. Leadership is constantly changing to meet the demands of an ever-changing world. Using inquiry for leadership formation accelerates the evolution of leadership while simultaneously focusing participants on creating social innovations.

Leadership Formation Inquiry starts with curiosity, willingness to suspend judgment, open-mindedness and optimism. Group members adopt a curiosity about the world of leadership and are not afraid to admit they don't have all the answers. They are willing to accept a variety of viewpoints without passing judgment and recognize that there are an infinite number of ways for groups to work together successfully. They are always looking to what works.

Leadership Formation Inquiry should begin with appreciation. The primary task is to describe and explain those exceptional moments, which give energy to the organization and activate members' competencies and energies.

Leadership Formation Inquiry should be applicable. Study should lead to the creation of knowledge that can be used, applied, and validated in action.

Leadership Formation Inquiry should be provocative. An group is capable of becoming more than it is at any given moment, and learning how to determine its own future.

Leadership Formation Inquiry should be collaborative. This assumes an inseparable relationship between the process of inquiry and its content.

The goal of these processes is to facilitate the creation of knowledge. Through them group members will reconstruct their social reality – what they believe is “true” about leadership.

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