

by
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One Person at a Time

The Power of Human-Centered Leadership

Periodically through my career, I have been asked about my philosophy of leadership. Each time, I have struggled with the feeling that I need to offer a deeply intellectual statement, based in both research and current educational theory. Thirty-four years later, I have come to a place of better understanding and acceptance of who I am as a leader. I am not deep. No one would characterize me as particularly intellectual, and I have rarely had time to engage in educational research. Truly, when it comes to me, what you see is what you get.

I have read a lot of books, participated in professional development, and achieved a master's degree in educational leadership... most of these activities, if I am honest, have not had an enormous impact on my thoughts about leadership. What has influenced me, however, is my life experiences, both within and beyond the workplace.

My conclusion about leadership is quite basic, but it works for me. Leadership is about taking off your formal 'leader' hat whenever you can. It's about

ignoring your positional power and showing people that you are a person, just like they are. It's about hanging up your ego at the door when you arrive at work each day. It's about serving, not being served. Fundamentally, leadership is about being a decent human being to everyone, and most particularly to those who consider us their leader. It sounds simplistic, but there is power behind that simple concept when it is kept at the forefront of our minds as leaders.

My view is that everything that every one of us does every day impacts how our students, our staff, our coworkers, and our community experience us as leaders. Whether you are a school leader or work at the district level, I would argue that, collectively, Principals and Vice-Principals hold enormous power and influence to make things better or worse for people through our actions, our decisions, and our words. One person at a time.

I was raised by two parents who, while quite different from each other, held a fundamental belief in the power of respect. My father, a former secondary school teacher, continues to be highly intellectual at the age of 90. He has always been a critical thinker

who taught his children to question and to argue against those who believe they are the keepers of the 'one right answer'. My father taught me to believe that there is rarely one right answer in any complex situation, and to question anyone who claimed to have that right answer. He counselled that perspective is everything, and that just because I saw things a certain way, it did not mean that others did.

He taught me about the power of listening rather than speaking, of making the effort to truly understand someone's perspective, and of asking people to help me understand rather than focusing on what my next words would be. He taught me the value of choosing my words wisely, of thinking before I speak, and of accepting that everyone has something to contribute if you give them the time, the space, and the respect to make that contribution. One person at a time.

My mother also taught us about the importance of how you treat people. But where my father tended to focus more on respecting how other people think, my mother focused on the heart. She modelled, expected – insisted – that her children would treat others with kindness, empathy, and caring. When we



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didn't, we heard about it. She did not believe that one should be kind to others just to receive kindness back, but rather because it is the right thing to do. Whether we liked someone or not was irrelevant to my mother. What was relevant was how other people experienced us, their feeling after an interaction with us, and whether they left feeling better or worse, listened to, or not. One person at a time.

My mother was no fool. Although my father occasionally accused her of being a Pollyanna, she was under no illusion that kindness came easily in some situations, or with some people. She recognized that it could take work to be kind, and that when someone else was unkind, the easiest route was to respond the same way. What my mother clearly understood, though, was the power of using kindness and respect to navigate challenging people and situations. She believed in rising above, and giving the benefit of the doubt. She taught me that anger is often rooted in fear, and that an angry person may respond better to a kind and understanding word than to reciprocal anger.

I believe there is enormous power in how we behave toward those we meet. In our role as school and

district leaders, we encounter people who do not treat us with kindness or with respect. We come across others who believe that they are the keepers of that one right answer, who judge, who refuse to accept other perspectives, or who come from a place of unkindness or disrespect.

I would argue that the Principal and Vice-Principal roles today are more complex, more challenging, and more exposed than ever before to disrespectful or unkind interactions. Our society is stressed and, unfortunately, leaders often bear the brunt of that stress. Rising in the morning and anticipating the challenges of the day ahead can be daunting. It can be tempting to respond to disrespect with disrespect, to unkindness with unkindness, knowing that people should know better. It is imperative, though, that leaders strive to maintain their baseline of kindness and respect, no matter how challenging that may feel. In standing by this core value, we rise above the stress and the chaos, the disrespect and unkindness, and we model grace and understanding. Ultimately, we create an environment where people can bring forth their best selves to each other in order to serve the children and families of our communities. One person at a time.

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