RESEARCH REVISITED: WHEN STUDENT LEADERS DON'T[2]

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This introspective and reflective idea brief explores the nature of the gap between what leadership educators hope to accomplish in the lives of students and what actually happens. The author draws upon thirty years of leadership education and a wealth of interactions with leadership educators and student leaders across North America. Five latent barriers to successful leadership education are presented for further discussion, debate and application. The reader is encouraged to engage in supportive dialogue with colleagues to address difficult questions and cultural obstacles to our work.

I have been in the fortunate position of working with tens of thousands of student leaders across North America. They have taught me a great deal. I have also learned from hundreds of student life professionals, extension coordinators, coaches, deans, and faculty members who are committed to leadership education and who spend their lives in an attempt to serve students.

There are inspiring stories from the field: challenges overcome, moments of enlightenment, organizations and campus cultures improved, exemplary service to others, an issue of social justice advanced.

Underneath these examples of success, in which justified pride should be felt, there are often scores of examples where, despite the best efforts of leadership educators, a student disappoints, fails, flounders. Oftentimes, leadership educators with great intentions become disheartened and have their effectiveness questioned and programs challenged because students in leadership positions…don't. I have commiserated with them.

What follows are five broad notions from the field on why student leaders fail. I offer this idea brief in an effort to spark discussion and reflective dialogue among leadership educators and in the hopes that we continue to come together and ask tough questions. At the most recent Association of Leadership Education (ALE) conference in Spokane, there were calls for more qualitative methods and honest dialogue in an attempt to uncover what is really going on in campus leadership development (Boyd & Edgar, 2008). Perhaps that effort can be aided by a consideration of the more hidden and difficult impediments to students leading on campus.

Barrier One - The Hidden Narrative

Students come to us with powerful mind maps of how humans relate in the world. As research has shown, family dynamics and socialization have a great deal to do with shaping the leaders that arrive on campus (Hartman & Harris, 1992). When our students experience a crisis or crucible of leadership, I have found that an unresolved personal or characterlogical struggle is often at play (Bennis & Thomas, 2002). Student leaders that struggle often display symptoms of personal dysfunction. They are not usually able to see on their own that these have underlying

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causes that, unless resolved, will continue to be problematic throughout their lives. We tell students to lead from their core, but student leaders that stumble often have unresolved conflicts in their core (DiPaolo, 2008). In essence, many of them need healing in their core.

Our students come to us as full, complex human beings. The realities of human personality and characterlogical make-up are invited and uninvited guests at every leadership class and retreat (Kets de Vries, 1993). Every leadership educator has experienced moments when the overwhelming deeper needs of a student dominate and even negate our best efforts.

- Would we be more effective referring some of our student leaders to campus counseling rather than leadership activities?
- Are schools prepared to handle the onslaught of students seeking their assistance?
- How do we treat the ethical dilemma inherent in this dynamic?
- Beyond leadership development, how far do we go with personal development?
- Are we trained to make this call? If we do not make the call, who will do so and after how much damage to the life of the student and the community?

Barrier Two - Time For A Different Style

I have found that many student leaders have been rewarded with positions of leadership in college based on a style that worked for them in junior high and high school. However, this style is not necessarily effective once they are in college (Endress, 2000; Fleishman, Zaccaro, & Mumford, 1991; Yammarino & Bass, 1991). Quite often this involves an alpha female or alpha male discovering that they really cannot do it alone in college—that their personal charisma, particular area of talent, or strong will is no longer enough. People assume that a president or captain in high school is just going to carry on in college. I once had an Olympic medalist tell me, "Just because I have an Olympic medal, people think I know how to lead. I have no idea how to lead!"

Many of our student leaders have been wearing the label of "leader" without any real understanding of what that means. This may work for a while, but the enormity or added complexity of the organization at the college level becomes problematic. The cracks in the armor begin to show. Student leaders find out they are on teams or in student organizations that have many other successful leaders and they do not know how to really share leadership or adapt to a different or more collaborative style. For others, it may be time to *not* lead and learn what it means to be a successful follower (Vecchio, 2002).

- Should leadership educators, coaches, orientation leaders and other campus personnel build leadership style assessment into the first experiences students have on campus?
- How do we let student leaders know that what they bring as leaders might not work anymore, or even more difficult, that perhaps it is time to just follow first and learn?
- What mental models and paradigms of leadership education can be refocused to highlight this need?
- How can we challenge students to evaluate, and maybe even change, their current leadership paradigm when they feel they have already been strongly rewarded?
- What is the compelling case for change prior to experienced failure?

Barrier Three - Student Leader Collapse

Another dynamic that leadership educators face is the utter burnout of our student leaders. Many of our student leaders (and their educators) are exhausted physically, intellectually, and emotionally. We keep telling students to "get involved," and they have followed our advice. Perhaps our first advice should be to encourage them to discover what matters most to them and then be very selective in their involvement. Is this an opportunity to introduce the concept of "less is more" rather than "more is better?"

I have seen many student leaders turning to any number of ways to cope with the competing demands on their time and the enormous expectations that they feel—whether these demands originate internally or externally. Once we pull back the veil—if students allow us to see their vulnerability—it can a bit shocking to the student and to the leadership educator.

We talk about mind-body-spirit balance, yet we often do not model this as leadership educators and we lavish awards on students who do not maintain this balance, either. I have been frequently surprised at the number of complex coping mechanisms students employ, just to get through the school year. Students often "self-medicate" through the use of common stimulants, binge drinking episodes, or the growing prescription drug network. Sometimes, they simply break down.

- How do we help student leaders learn healthier lifestyles when campus culture seems to reward those who do not live them?
- What are we, as leadership educators, modeling for students?
- What theoretical or practical models of student leadership can we highlight in our programs to prevent the toll on stressed students?
- Is there a place for an intentional "less is more" message in our leadership curricula?

Barrier Four - The Attached Umbilical Cord

A common chorus I hear from those in the field is the growing presence of domineering parents. Gone are the early days of American higher education where the parental role was limited after the bus or train or stagecoach left the station. The modern parent, of helicopter fame, is much more involved in campus life. This presents all kinds of psychological, social and legal challenges to leadership educators (McEwan, 2005; Wong Briggs, 2007). This dynamic can be an unexpected source of exasperation and frustration for colleagues and students alike.

I recently had a leadership educator report to me that he sat with a new student who was stunned and saddened by the sudden realization that *nothing* he had done in his life, up to that point, was his own decision. This student was Class President, Captain of the Track Team, a Merit Scholar, and led a host of other organizations. He saw that he had ended up at the college of his parent's choice in a major in which he had no interest.

If student leadership education has self-efficacy and personal empowerment as core psychological underpinnings, are we facing a crisis in the power of students to evolve as thinking, emoting, and separate beings (Bandura, 1997)?

- Are we getting a generation of student leaders who are performing for authority rather than leading from a place of purpose and strength?
- How do we help students claim the intellectual and interpersonal freedom that is necessary to be an authentic leader—an author of one's life?
- How do we encourage a type of separation from parents while respecting their contributions?
- Is there a familial trend that requires us to first exhort our student leaders to "know thyself" before we ask them to lead anything?

Barrier Five - The Price of Leadership

The most common complaint I hear from university presidents, deans of students, campus life professional and faculty members is the lack of accountability and responsibility exemplified by student leaders. Many campus professionals feel a sense of personal betrayal when students, in whom much has been invested, do not come through.

Despite our best efforts, many of our prized student leaders are just unable to pay the price of leadership. When it comes down to drawing a line in the sand on any number of social or ethical issues, our exemplars are often unable to hold their peers accountable. The price is very high, of course, because students who demonstrate this kind of courage are often quickly rebuked and risk harmony in relationships. College students are vulnerable in their status with peers and it takes courage and strength of character to be a principled leader, especially regarding the need to belong and the risk involved in not complying with peer-group dynamics.

The difficult truth is that we feel good about the students who have gone through our classes, retreats, and programs, yet too many are willing to accept the perks of a leadership status without really earning them. The whole point and purpose of our educational efforts is lost if, during a moment of truth, our students repeatedly back down from the challenge.

A related dynamic is the expectation of other students that the leaders are supposed to do all the work. Students will often grant other students the title and position of leadership, but then place unrealistic demands on what that means for an organization. Somehow, being a student leader has come to mean that the leader is supposed to do all the work.

- What can we do to embolden student leaders to do the right thing during crucible moments?
- How can we best create early networks on campus that may serve as supports of principled student leadership?
- As leadership educators, are we modeling accountability for our students?
- How do we help students see the value of principled leadership in a culture where there are so many examples of failed leadership?

- How do we help student leaders promote a sense of shared responsibility in organizations?

Next Steps

I offer these broad notions humbly and introspectively in an attempt to promote courageous dialogue and honest discussion among those of us who care about student leadership development. It is critical that we create the space in our professional lives to come together and ponder these phenomena. This effort could unlock some of the mysteries in the lives of the students we serve and reveal a hidden curriculum on campus that we should take into account when we design our programs and create our courses.

Perhaps it is time for leadership educators to engage each other, and these challenges we face, in a different way?

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