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Leadership
Can It Be Taught?

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April 1994

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LEADERSHIP: CAN IT BE TAUGHT?

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April 20, 1994

PART I: "CAN LEADERSHIP BE TAUGHT?"

Two and a half years ago I made the decision to enter the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond. Since making that decision I have been caught in the middle of both sides of this question.

Well, after hundreds of hours of class time, thousands of pages of reading, hundreds of assignments and projects, and countless hours of work outside of the classroom, all dedicated to learning leadership, I have concluded that yes, leadership can be taught. As one of the first thirty-eight students to make it through this program, I will attempt to support this assertion upon which my college experience has been based.

To accomplish this task I must first determine what leadership is. To assert that something can be taught I must first ascertain what the subject is. This is an issue of particular sensitivity and complexity, and will be discussed in length in this paper. From there I will attack the question of whether this thing called leadership can be taught. How can an educational curriculum actually teach people leadership? This question is actually the culmination of a number of underlying issues which must first be confronted.

PART II: "WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?"

In Leadership for the Twenty-First Century (Praeger: 1991), Joseph Rost at first criticizes the lack of a functional, specific definition of leadership among the literature on the subject. With this I disagree. While models and theories that define phenomena are useful in certain situations, leadership studies literature must move toward a focus on essence rather than on definition. He later asserts that "Responsible scholarship requires that one clearly articulate the nature of leadership if one is going to expound on the subject" (p. 70). With this I agree. We do not need a specific, concrete definition, but rather a framework that will allow us to understand what leadership is. I will give you an example of what I mean. There are literally thousands of books, articles, and other pieces of literature available on the subject of love. Throughout history people have tried to find love, explain love, explore love, improve love, and otherwise discuss the idea of love. Everyone from the Bible to Dr. Ruth have examined love. However, a working definition has eluded us throughout the ages. Nowhere in the Bible does it say "The definition of love is..." or "By placing these variables in these boxes we can predict the outcome of a love relationship." Instead the literature examines the phenomenon. It looks at all of the various elements associated with it. From this it allows us to understand what love is. In this way we are able to consider love and better understand it and improve upon it without trying to define it in words that simply will not do it justice. Leadership is a similar issue. Efforts to define this phenomenon will continue to fail

because it is far too complex to be confined by a definition.

The problem with defining concepts, such as leadership, lies in the gray areas present in them. For all concepts there are some cases that virtually everyone agrees are cases of the concept (few would deny that a chair is an instance of the category "furniture") and there are some cases that everyone agrees are not cases of the concept (a pencil is not an instance of furniture) - but there are also some cases that fall in a gray area and can give rise to disagreements (Is a television set a piece of furniture? Or perhaps is it an appliance?). And no matter how the line is drawn, some objection is possible. If you define furniture as to include televisions, those who believe televisions are not furniture will object; if your definition of furniture excludes televisions, those who believe televisions are furniture will object (O'Keefe, p. 14). In order to settle this problem, we can focus on the shared features of paradigm cases (those that we can agree are cases of the concept) and thus develop a framework within which we can understand the concept in question. Going back to the love example, we know that love is a relationship. We know that it is a relationship of affection of some sort. And we know that this affection includes such things as loyalty, honesty, and caring. From this we are able to expand into many different kinds of love without being confined to a definition. Leadership Studies literature should stop working against itself by struggling to define leadership, and should further its cause by developing a framework of what leadership is, within which we can increase our understanding of this phenomenon in all of its different forms,

without limits. This is what I intend to do.

However, before doing so I must first make one premise very clear. There is a difference between identifying leadership and identifying effective, moral leadership. Much of the literature on leadership focuses on effective leadership only. This is appropriate for most literature because its main purpose is to improve peoples' leadership abilities. However, it is not appropriate in developing a framework for understanding what leadership is. Certainly, when studying this subject we must examine those things that lead to more effective, ethical, beneficial leadership. In fact, this should be our main focus of leadership research. However, we must begin with a foundation, and that foundation should identify leadership. The effectiveness is important later in this study, but not at the foundation. The same is true with morality. Notice that there is nothing here about success in an endeavor, or about morality in the means, objectives, or results. Certainly we must work toward promoting and developing leadership that is ethical and furthers just causes. However, someone can be practicing leadership even while they are not successful in their purpose or even while working toward ends that most would consider to be unethical. For example, leadership can be found in street gangs that traffic drugs. This is unethical, but is leadership nonetheless. Robert E. Lee was a great leader, and yet he was not successful in his overall purpose.

I feel that too much of the literature that has tried to capture leadership has limited it to only what is considered "good" leadership. While this is what we must promote, we are building

walls that restrict our growth if we exclude examples of this phenomenon simply because they do not fit our subjective criteria for "good". It is important to keep this in mind while discussing a framework for understanding. We are trying to identify leadership situations of all kinds, without distinguishing based upon subjective judgements.

So what are the characteristics of a leadership situation? The first characteristic is that leadership is a relationship between people. For leadership to occur, there must obviously be a person (or people) employing this leadership, and there must be someone receiving it. The nature of this relationship can take many forms. The people involved might be very familiar with each other or may never have met. It could involve direct contact between parties or the communication could be through alternate routes (the press, etc.). The main thing is that leadership is a relationship between people.

Next, the leader has an effect on those being led. The follower(s) is affected in some way by the words, actions, or attitudes of the leader. The result must be one that would not have happened, at least not to the same degree, if the relationship had not existed. If a result would have come about without this leadership relationship, then the relationship is inconsequential, thus eliminating the effect necessary for leadership to have been present.

Joseph Rost, in his definition of leadership, specifies that leadership is multidirectional. "This means that (1) anyone can be a leaders and/or a follower; (2) followers persuade leaders and

other followers, as do leaders; (3) leaders and followers may change places in the relationship; and (4) there are many different relationships that can make up the overall relationship that is leadership. If a relationship is one-sided, unidirectional, and one-on-one, those are clear signs that the relationship is not leadership." (Rost, p. 105). This is an example of what I mean when I said that the literature limits itself only to "good" leadership. While it is true that most leadership situations involve multidirectional influences, this is not a critical element to identifying leadership. It might be a very common characteristic, and it might be a factor that makes leadership more effective (Remember that we are developing a framework for understanding what leadership is without distinguishing based upon level of effectiveness or morality), however it is possible for a person to exercise leadership while being involved in a unidirectional relationship. Rosa Parks provided leadership for many involved in the Civil Rights movement, and yet few of those she led had an impact on her in return. Mother Theresa is a leader for millions of people around the world, and yet relatively few of her relationships with these people are multidirectional.

Leadership, especially effective leadership, often results in multidirectional relationships among those involved. These relationships then take on characteristics that identify them as leadership relationships as well. But once again, a relationship need not be multidirectional to be considered leadership.

So what about this effect? People affect others in relationships every day, and yet leadership is not always present.

It seems as though our framework for leadership hinges on describing this effect.

The effect of this relationship is directed toward a purpose. Rost makes a distinction between goals and purposes. Goals, he says, are usually quite specific, more segmental and often prioritized, and are stated in quantitative terms. Purposes are broader, more holistic or integrated, more oriented to what people often think of as vision or mission, and are stated in qualitative terms (Rost, p. 119). Leadership toward a purpose can, and often should, include goals. However, this is a part of leadership (once again effective leadership), rather than a factor to determine a framework for understanding.

Leadership is more than simply getting somebody to do something. At times many practices of persuasion might be a part of leadership, but it is much greater than that. Leadership is bringing out the best other people have to offer. Leadership is finding the potential in followers and taking means to bring out that potential. Leadership is the effect that an individual has on other people that brings out their abilities, motivations, or values. If a relationship has a negative effect on the follower, then it is not leadership that has occurred. The improvement is in the form of the follower, as a result of the leadership relationship, being able to realize some potential they otherwise would not have realized and being better able to achieve this purpose.

So if we look at the factors involved in this framework, we find that we can identify leadership as *a relationship in which*

one party has an effect on another party such that brings out the potential within that second party to contribute to the pursuit of a purpose.

PART III: *"ONCE AGAIN, CAN LEADERSHIP BE TAUGHT?"*

All of us are capable of leadership. We can all engage to some degree in a relationship in which we tap the inner potential of someone else. However, few of us are truly capable of highly effective leadership. To educate a person in leadership is to teach that person how he or she can best have this affect on others.

I would like to return to an earlier discussion. I stated that when developing a framework for understanding leadership, we can not distinguish between leadership and good, moral leadership. This is true for developing a framework. However, this distinction is the essential element for teaching leadership. As I said, we all exercise leadership at some time, and so do not need to be taught how to do so. However, to educate others in leadership is to teach them how to practice leadership better. So the question becomes, "Can we teach others to be better leaders?" Absolutely.

It is immediately apparent that the form leadership takes is different for every situation in which it occurs. The nature of the relationship changes in every situation, as does the nature of the effect, the purpose, and the results. In fact, there are probably as many combinations of these factors as there are acts of leadership. Placing some variables from one situation into another will often produce very different results. Therefore, it is impossible to prescribe a set of behaviors, traits, or skills that will make a person a leader in all situations. However, there are certainly a number of factors that can be taught that will give

people the ability to exercise leadership.

In order to determine if it is possible to teach people to be more effective leaders, we must first determine what factors determine a person's effectiveness as a leader, and then establish the fact that these things can be taught in an educational setting.

As I stated before, every situation is unique. Thus, to be more effective in leadership situations, one must be better able to evaluate and understand different situations. Since it is obviously not possible to give people complete knowledge about every situation in which they might find themselves, we must develop in people the ability gain this understanding themselves as the need arises.

The most important tool a person can have in any situation is the ability to think critically. It is often said that the greatest asset and the greatest weapon we as a society have today is information. The ability to use this asset, or this weapon, is critical thinking.

The first function that critical thinking allows a person to perform is information gathering. If we are going to understand a situation, we need to be able to gather as much information about it as possible. We must know where to find this information and how to go about retrieving it. In addition, we need to be able to distinguish between information that is relevant to our needs and that which is not. Finally, we must have the capacity to store the information we have gathered.

Critical thinking allows us to process the information we have gathered and draw conclusions regarding our situation. By thinking

critically we are able to sort through information and decide what consequences it has had in the past and will have in the future. It allows us to determine in what ways things might be of danger to us, as well as in what ways they are potential assets.

Critical thinking provides us with the ability to learn. If we cannot learn, then we cannot adapt to new situations, and thus are unable to provide leadership. In order to develop the necessary understanding of a situation, we must be able and willing to continuously engage in the learning process. Finally, critical thinking allows us to find and define a group or individual's purpose, and to articulate it clearly. It allows us to develop a plan to achieve this purpose, and to communicate with others. These are factors I will discuss in greater depth later.

So we can see the importance of critical thinking, but can it be taught? In fact, the teaching of critical thinking is the premise upon which our educational system is (or is supposed to be) based. The purpose of education is to teach people to think critically. It is to teach them to gather information and to process it. But the fact that it is the purpose of education does not necessarily mean that it is possible to teach critical thinking.

Critical thinking is something that is developed through practice. We are all able to think, but some have developed this skill better than others. This is because they have had more practice, and have probably had help in developing their thinking ability. Teachers of critical thinking can provide students the opportunity to engage in information gathering and processing in a

controlled environment. They can teach methods of information gathering, as well as various ways of evaluating the information gathered (scientific method, statistical analysis, etc.).

Essentially, though, critical thinking is best learned through practice coupled with appraisal. The opportunity for this type of learning is found in an educational setting, especially one in which the Socratic Method is applied.

The next factor that will enhance a person's effectiveness in understanding a leadership situation is to be cognizant of the context or system in which it is occurring. In order to understand a situation that occurs within a bureaucratic organization, one ought to be familiar with the workings of a bureaucracy. The same is true of other systems. The more familiar one is with a context in which they are operating, the better able that person will be to develop a thorough understanding of their situation.

So is it possible to teach people about various contexts and systems? Certainly. This is what business schools have been doing for years, teaching people how to operate in a business setting. We can teach people the structures of systems, channels of communication, strengths, weaknesses, and areas in which potential problems (or assets) might exist. In an educational setting we can instruct students in various aspects of many settings. More importantly, we can provide students the opportunity to experience these systems while working with someone who can explain, clarify, and instruct. (I will discuss this experiential education in greater detail later.)

In order to understand a situation, one must understand the

people involved. Even more importantly, in order to provide leadership, one must understand those on the "receiving end". People are the most important element of any situation, and understanding them is vital to being an effective leader. In fact, the one factor that is most responsible for the variation between situations is the differences of people. No two people are the same, and in fact no person is the same in different situations. As a result, one must be able to understand people in order to have an insight into a situation.

Can we teach people to understand others? We can students them the skills and information which, when utilized with critical thinking, will allow them to develop a better understanding of the people around them. Psychological and sociological concepts can be taught. This will allow them to make educated conclusions as to the beliefs, attitudes, abilities, and weaknesses of the people with whom they are dealing.

Once again, the best way to develop an understanding of people is to study people, through experience. In an educational environment we can give students the opportunity to gain this sort of experience in a controlled setting in which an instructor can facilitate the learning process. As I stated earlier, I will return to this issue in greater detail later.

Perhaps the greatest asset a leader can have is an understanding of him or herself. The building of strong relationships with others begins with a strong relationship with oneself. We cannot begin to understand other peoples' fears, dreams, and emotions without understanding our own. As I stated

earlier, leadership is about bringing out potentials from within others. To do this we must first bring out the potential from within ourselves. If leadership is unique to every situation, it is also unique to every leader.

Thus, if we are to educate people to become better leaders, we must begin with teaching them to know themselves better. Our education must include a process of learning about oneself. This is not something that can be taught. We cannot sit students down in a room and tell them who they are and what they are about. However, this is certainly something that can be learned. Students can learn to know themselves better, and an educational setting is an excellent forum in which this learning can take place. Teachers can ask questions that will make students search within themselves for answers. They can conduct exercises in which students work alone or in groups in order to gain a better understanding of who they are. Teachers can present to the students different ideas, values, and cultures that can stimulate personal reflection. In short, teachers in an educational setting can present and facilitate opportunities for students to gain a better understanding of who they are.

The next major aspect of leadership effectiveness that we can educate people in is relationship building. If leadership is a relationship, then it logically follows that to be more effective at leadership one must be more effective at building strong relationships. If a relationship is weak, the leader will be less capable of having the desired effect on others. Thus, if we are to teach people to be more effective leaders, then we must teach them

how to develop stronger relationships.

The foundation upon which all relationships are build is communication. Productive communication can enable a relationship to grow and prosper. Weak communication can, and usually will, cause a relationship to fall apart, amidst misunderstanding and conflict. Communication is the vehicle on which all of our thoughts, ideas, and feelings are expressed and shared with others. Thus, if we are to educate people how to build strong relationships then we must begin by teaching them how to communicate effectively.

There are four main components to communication; two sending and two receiving. We can write and speak to send information, and we can read and listen to receive information. Each of these components can be taught, as they have for years in our educational system.

Speaking is probably the first communication skill people are taught. Parents teach their children to speak at an early age, and their first reasons for speaking (in language or otherwise), is to express feelings and needs. As children grow up and attend school, they learn to speak to communicate ideas and to ask questions. Throughout the educational system, students are taught and practice how to speak more clearly; they are taught a larger vocabulary with which to express their feelings and ideas; and they are taught how to organize their ideas when speaking. At the highest levels, students study speech in colleges and universities, and even beyond (business executives and politicians in particular often receive extensive instruction on speaking).

Writing, the other method we have of sending messages, is also

a taught skill. Generally students learn to write in grade school, and this process continues throughout their educational experience. Students first learn to make the symbols that represent the many words they already have learned from speaking. Gradually students learn to write as a primary form of communication. They are taught grammar, language, and punctuation. They are taught how to organize ideas and to express them effectively. They are taught (and develop) a writing style. This process also continues throughout a person's education and beyond.

The first receiving component of communication, reading, is generally taught along with writing. Young children are taught how to understand which words different symbols represent. They are taught how to "sound out" words to determine their meaning, and how to understand literal meanings of sentences and paragraphs. As their education develops, students are taught comprehension and retention. This often develops to the point of learning how to "read between the lines"; that is to understand meanings that go beyond the actual words that are written.

The final type of communication is listening. Listening as a form of communication goes well beyond the olfactory function of hearing. Listening involves determining the meaning of what other people are saying. It means being able to recognize meaning in not only what people say, but also how they say it, what they do not say, and the many non-verbal signs of peoples' ideas and feelings. Ironically, even though we spend more time listening than we do engaging in any other form of communication, seldom if ever is this skill taught in an educational setting. It is as though the

assumption is made that hearing and listening are the same thing; since those of us who are not hearing impaired can hear, there is no reason to teach it. Despite this lack of formalized instruction in listening, it is a skill that can be taught just as reading, writing, and speaking are taught. Teachers can instruct students on listening skills, and can provide opportunities for students to practice these skills. In other words, listening can be taught in much of the same fashion as the other three communication skills.

Although communication is taught throughout the educational system, relatively few ever learn how to truly communicate effectively. People have a difficult time expressing their ideas so that others understand thoroughly what is intended. In addition, few people are able to understand others without being affected by their own biases. If we are to teach people to be more effective leaders, we must teach them to be more effective communicators. We must teach them to be able to understand others, and to be able to help others express themselves in a way that is understandable and accurate. We must then teach them to express their own feelings and ideas in a way that others can understand and act upon them. All of human relations rely upon communication. If we are to develop people to be more effective as leaders, then we must teach them to be more effective as communicators.

Another very important skill in developing relationships is empathy. In order to develop open, honest, understanding relationships, we must be able to see things through the eyes of others, rather than seeing everything through our own "looking

glass".

Empathy can be developed by exposing people to others' cultures, ideas, and values. Doing this breaks down walls formed by our biases. Once these walls are eliminated (or at least reduced), we will be able to see others' points of view more clearly, and then to act with wisdom rather than ignorance. The breaking down of these walls is best done through education. With education about others comes understanding, which leads to the ability to empathize. Thus, in an educational environment we can provide students the knowledge and skills necessary for empathy.

Central to leadership is the effect of bringing out the potential within others. The ability to do this is what differentiates average people from those we label as "leaders". However, this is not some magical ability some are blessed with and some aren't. Although this ability is developed over time and through experience, the cultivation of skills and enhancement of experiences can be facilitated in an educational setting.

Communication, a skill already discussed, is vital to this affect. We must be able to communicate with others in order to make clear to them how this inner potential can be reached and how it can be focused. If we cannot communicate, we cannot effectively draw out the potential that is within others. As I stated earlier, communication is a skill that can be developed through education.

Often the potential that leaders are seeking to reach is not within an individual, but within a group. In fact probably the most common function of an effective leader is developing unity and synergy within a group. However, this is also not some magical

ability possessed by only a few. To enhance a group's achievement one needs to develop certain skills and knowledge. The most important of these is an understanding of how groups function. In order to understand how to influence groups, one must understand their dynamics.

This is most often learned through experience, which takes a long time. However, it is possible to teach people group dynamics in a classroom setting. Students can study groups from a third party perspective and evaluate their processes, and they can do likewise with groups to which they belong. Instructors can teach the many theories and tendencies of group dynamics which can then be applied to this observation process. Through this process of education, we can teach leaders to better understand groups and how they operate. With this knowledge leaders can better reach the synergistic potential of groups they will lead.

There are a number of other skills that will provide leaders with tools to bring out and enhance the potential within individuals and groups. One of these is motivation. This begins with empathy, as discussed earlier, and requires the ability to communicate. In order to motivate others, one must understand them and be able to communicate with them. There are also many other theories and skills of motivation which can be taught in the classroom, and then practiced through experience. Also, role playing and experiential learning (which I will return to later) can enhance the learning of motivational skills.

Leaders must also be able to develop policies that will allow an organization to reach its potential. Groups, especially larger

ones, need to have effective policies so that they can function effectively. A lack of such policies often leads to chaos, while inappropriate policies can build walls which inhibit individuals and groups from reaching their potential. Thus it is important for a leader to be able to develop policies which will enhance an organization's ability to reach its potential. This ability can also be taught in the classroom. The various skills necessary to developing and explaining policy are typically taught either in the classroom or in a seminar setting. By learning these skills a leader can improve his or her ability to help an organization reach its potential.

If leadership is affecting a person or group in such a way as to reach its inner potential in the pursuit of a purpose, then an important element of leadership is this purpose. First, a leader must be able to recognize and define a purpose so that everyone has a clear understanding of what it is that they are working toward. We can never get there if we don't know where we are going, and it is not uncommon for people to seek a purpose which they do not really understand.

As I said, we must know where we are going if we are to get there. Perhaps the most important function in reaching our potential is forming a plan for achieving our purposes. A leader's effectiveness is greatly enhanced by the ability to develop and communicate a plan. This plan will give people direction in their pursuit of a purpose.

The ability to develop a plan is yet another skill which can be taught. We can instruct students on how to effectively break a

project down into achievable goals, and then how to relate these goals to others. A productive way of teaching this is to look at the plans others have devised to achieve their goals and evaluate these plans. Also, students can practice developing plans and receive assistance and constructive criticism from instructors.

I would like to return to my earlier discussion on ethics in leadership. As I explained about effectiveness, though leadership does not necessarily imply morality, leadership education should. If we are to teach people to be more effective leaders, it is in our best interest to develop ethics in those we are cultivating for leadership.

Ethics and morality are things that each of us develops within ourselves, with many contributions from others such as parents, teachers, and other role models. We develop our own set of morals and values based upon the examples set by others, as well as our reflections on what we observe. This process can be enhanced in an academic setting as well, much in the same way that we can develop empathy. By exposing people to other cultures and values, we can help them to reflect on things they may not have thought of in ways they may not have conceived. In addition, we can present moral dilemmas for students to consider so that they can practice making decisions in these sorts of circumstances. Also, this type of practice enables students to develop and refine their own set of values so that when placed in a difficult situation they have a better idea of how to respond.

The teaching of ethics is an area of tremendous growth within our educational system and beyond. Most universities have classes

on ethics and many companies around the world now employ some sort of ethical education for their employees. This is an aspect of leadership that is important in an educational program.

As I have stated many times throughout this paper, perhaps the best way to learn the skills necessary for effective leadership is through experience. This fact seems to be one of the primary reasons for the belief that leadership can't be taught. People believe that only through experience can one develop the knowledge and competencies necessary for leadership, not in a classroom. This belief is wrong. In fact, the classroom setting serves as an excellent opportunity to provide and enhance experience. This is called experiential learning.

This form of education can take many forms. The most obvious is the internship. There are many other opportunities to learn through experience in an academic setting. Organizations to which a student belongs can provide this opportunity, as do class projects and role playing exercises.

In addition to offering the opportunity to gain experience, an academic setting provides students the chance to reflect on their experience and to gain input from others on this reflection. It is remarkable how much more we can learn from experiences when given the opportunity and assistance to reflect on them. By doing so we can teach students to become "reflective practitioners", a skill that can greatly enhance our lifelong learning. In fact, this may very well be the most beneficial skill one can develop for leadership. In order to grow and develop as leaders, we must continue to learn. The best way to learn is by reflecting on our

experiences. This is a skill that is best developed in an educational setting where we can receive input and opinions from others.

PART IV: *FINAL THOUGHTS*

There are certainly many aspects crucial to leadership that probably cannot be taught. Among these are courage and self confidence. To be most effective, a leader often must possess both of these. However, these traits can be cultivated in an educational setting. More directly, these are inner potentials possessed by all people. An educational setting is an excellent opportunity for the exercising of leadership by teachers and others in order to reach and develop this inner potential in students.

Everyone is capable of being a leader; of leadership. Through education, we can teach people to be more effective, ethical leaders. We can teach them skills that will enhance their effectiveness in leadership situations. We can develop in students the ability to process information and make intelligent, ethical decisions. And we can teach them the greatest ability one can possess; the ability to learn. Without learning we are doomed to mediocrity. With learning, we can accomplish greatness: we can become leaders.

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