Preparing Students to Move into Societal Roles as Leaders

Richard F. Bowman

Correspondence: Richard F. Bowman, Winona State University, Winona, MN, USA.

Abstract

Leadership instruction in academic environments involves teaching and practicing the social and emotional skills of leadership. In practice, leadership is about the ability to connect with the perspectives and emotions of others. This paper illustrates how to create four distinctive leadership mindsets in a classroom setting: (a) Living sustainably, (b) Race-conscious leadership, (c) Discovering self-worth, and (d) Conceptualizing leadership development through passions, principles, partners, and plans.

Keywords: leadership, leadership training, student leadership, instructional leadership

1. Introduction

In the Broadway show, *Hamilton*, honoring one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, the lyrics pose the question: "Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?" When your students' story is told, will it be: "We who choose to lead are humanity's best hope to save civilization" (Spodek, 2022, p. 55). Might your learners' story mirror George Bernard Shaw's declaration: "I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can" (McArthur, 2023, p. 8). When your graduates' story is handed on to future generations, will it be profoundly inspirational: "To serve is to live" (Austin, 2023, p. 15).

Everyone was born a leader. From the moment of birth, parents, grandparents, and siblings were led in response to the newborn's every cry. Each newborn radiated the face of an evolving universe, limitless until limited by self or others. Dee Hock, founder and CEO of Visa International, posits that "we were all born leaders; that is, until we were sent to school and taught to be managed and to manage" (Hock, 2000, p. 24). As students move into societal roles as leaders, they will likely encounter a distinctive consciousness about the leader/follower dichotomy: Leader presumes follower. Follower presumes choice. Hock (2000) draws the distinction sharply: "One who is coerced to the purposes, objectives, or preferences of another is not a follower in any true sense of the word but the object of manipulation" (p. 21). In the classroom, *inspired* behavior is the essence of the leader/follower relationship. Inspired learner behavior reflects the "ability to connect with the perspectives and emotions of others" (Gentil, 2024, p. 35).

As students move into societal leadership roles, an enduring concern will be how to ensure that those who lead are constructive, open, ethical, and honest. In Psalm 78, verse 72, we learn that King David inspired his people with the "integrity of his heart, and guides them with skillful hands." The enduring lesson for graduates as they transition into civic and organizational leadership roles will be that leadership is a matter of how to be, not how to do (Hesselbein, 2021). When the Greek philosopher Socrates was asked what all the philosophical commandments could be reduced to, he replied, "Know Yourself." The leadership implication for students is that leaders cannot effectively lead others until they understand themselves. Relatedly, where an organizational community will be led is inseparable from the shared values and beliefs of it members" (Hock, 2000).

In a dawning era of global endemics, macroeconomic shocks, societal disconnectedness, unbridgeable political chasms, income inequality, and large-scale ecological destruction, a *re-imagination* of leadership that is fit for our times is arguably more urgent than ever (Bowman, 2023). In Tennyson's Ulysses, the poet observes that it is "not too late to seek a newer world." What better place to launch a re-imagination of principled, ethical, effective leadership in search of a newer world than in the nation's classrooms.

2. Purposes of this Paper

The purposes of this article are to (a) view seemingly intractable societal and organizational problems through the lens of learners as they prepare to move into emergent leadership roles, (b) identify the social and emotional skills of leadership required to change the prevailing culture and the human behavior that contribute to a complex global

environment, and (c) illustrate how to create four leadership mindsets in a classroom setting: Living sustainably, race-conscious leadership, developing self-worth as the predominant determinant of leadership success, and conceptualizing leadership development through passions, principles, partners, and plans.

Creating a Leadership Mindset in a Classroom Setting: To Live Sustainably

Teachers as instructional *leaders* excel at creating a shared reality with students: "Anyone can lead, including you and I. By leadership, I mean helping people do what they want to do but haven't figured out how" (Spodek, 2022, p. 56). Students, for example, want to solve environmental problems like plastic, carbon dioxide, coral bleaching, deforestation, and wildlife extinction. Still, they have not yet been taught and practiced the social and emotional skills of leadership required to change the prevailing culture and the human behavior that together contribute to environmental crises. In a classroom setting, an instructional leadership perspective clarifies and simplifies for students the insight that environmental problems all result from one cause: human behavior, driven by the prevailing culture and societal values (Spodek, 2022).

Imagine students entering a social studies classroom in which they encounter a statement written on the whiteboard that reads: "Environmental problems are a manifestation of our societal values. If we could magically change all pollution to preindustrial levels, but still lived our current values, would we return to our current endangered environmental state?" (Spodek, 2022).

A dedicated classroom discussion regarding the statement posed on the whiteboard might well begin with a straightforward question: "Do statements in the media such as 'here's what will happen to the planet at two degrees of warming' cause you to feel that global solutions are beyond what an individual can do?" Or perhaps prompt you to shift to a *learner mindset* focused not on fixing the world but rather on what you can do to act on your own beliefs regarding sustaining life on the planet.

For educators as instructional leaders, creating a leadership mindset in the classroom involves "using social and emotional tools like images, storytelling, role models, listening, empathy, and compassion," starting where students are, not simply where educators idealistically want them to be (Spodek, 2022, p. 56). To model for students how to shift to a learner mindset, a science educator might posit this thought for students' reflection: "Everything alive chooses its adaptive responses, how it will continue to survive amidst changes in the environment. Is learning from experience what keeps us alive?" (Wheatley, 2024, p.11)

A body of research reveals that humans' evolutionary brains were wired for visual images, stories, and metaphors, not cajoling or compliance (Cherches, 2023). For educators, values-based stories and visual imagery are an untapped resource with enormous potential for inspiring learners' values-based leadership now and in the future. For educators, the instructional goal in employing relevant social and emotional tools in an academic environment is to *inspire* students to embrace a philosophy of stewardship and to act sustainably in the everydayness of life.

In practice, educators seek to equip students with the tools to feel heard and understood in thoughtfully considering uncomfortable ideas and challenging views as they move into societal leadership roles. The object lesson for learners is that cultural change regarding living sustainably begins with one's personal change and respectful engagement in which followers *lead* by choosing where to be led. That is, where an organizational community will be led is inseparable from the shared values and beliefs of its members," not from politicized perspectives, numbers, coercion, and compliance (Hock, 2000, p. 22).

Creating a Leadership Mindset in an Academic Environment: Race-Conscious Leadership

Educators as instructional *leaders* are optimally positioned to create another shared reality with students: "Each of us has inherited a set of racial narratives about who we are, about how society is organized, and about who is worthy of the expression of their full humanity" (Wilkinson, 2022, p. 13). In classroom settings, thoughtful educators are committed to creating a nuanced awareness of racial *history*, racial *identity*, and racial *justice* in students' daily lives.

In preparing learners to move into leadership roles in a contemporary racial landscape, educators might, for example, invite students to empathetically recount the racial narratives of their formative years through journaling activities. Using developmentally appropriate questions, students might be invited to write about their personal origin stories involving conversations about experiencing racism within one's neighborhood or community. Older students might be asked to journal about historically silenced voices such as Sojourner Truth, the formerly enslaved American abolitionist and women's rights activist who argued that "Truth is powerful and it prevails" (Wilkinson, 2022, p. 17). In their journaling exercise, students might be guided by the question: "Was Sojourner's truth that the individual is only as healthy as a free and just society?"

In *The Diversity Gap: Where Good Intentions Meet True Cultural Change* Bethaney Wilkinson (2021) posits that race-conscious leadership resides at the intersection of *insight* and *action*. For students, insight involves what they see, know, and conclude. Action is what one does in light of what knows. Neuroscientist Donald Calne (2023) draws the

distinction: The difference between reason and emotion is that emotion leads to action, whereas reason leads to conclusions. The interplay between insight and action frames developing leaders' responsibility in understanding one's role in disrupting racism and pursuing racial equity. The leadership implication for students is that leaders of the future will consciously embed themselves more deeply in their own story related to the racial narratives that they did not choose, but for which they are now responsible (Wilkinson).

Intersection of Insight and Action: An Illustrative Learning Activity

Zulu is the largest ethnic group in South Africa. The Zulu standard greeting, *Sawubona,* is how one says hello. In the Zulu tradition, however, seeing is much more than the simple act of sight---it is the ability to see beyond sight (Rinne, 2022). In daily life, *Sawubona* means I see all of you, your dignity and your humanity. I see your dreams and your fears, your agency and your potential, your power and your pride. As the *Sawubona* greeting melodically rolls off one's tongue, it expresses a resonant sense of: "*I see you and I value you. I accept you for what you are"* (Rinne, p. 58). The customary response to *Sawubona* is *shiloba*: "I exist for you."

The take-away for students as developing race-conscious leaders is that seeing beyond sight is an emotional calling to lead out of what is in one's soul. The leadership implication for educators is that students' ability to understand and interact with the *other* across and beyond cultural barriers is a prerequisite for allowing democratic societies to function (Dewey, 1916).

Creating a Leadership Mindset in a Classroom Setting: Developing Self-Worth

In working with thousands of leaders in profit, non-profit, governmental, and educational organizations in more than one hundred countries during the past twenty-five years, Fenton (2022) found that "self-worth is the number-one determinant of a leader's success over the long term" (p. 43). The implication for students as they transition into emergent leadership roles is that "you simply cannot be a successful leader without high self-worth" (p. 43). Strikingly, Fenton's research found that most leaders struggle with self-worth despite the fact that it impacts the way one leads oneself, one's team, and organization.

In an instructional environment, educators help students understand that self-worth is different from self-confidence or self-esteem. Self-esteem is situational. A student who exhibits remarkable skills on a basketball court or demonstrates distinctively competent skills working on cars in one's back yard may have high self-esteem while also experiencing low self-esteem in an algebra or literature class. Having high self-worth involves an innate understanding that leaders derive validation from within, regardless of external conditions. High self-worth leaders are "consistently positive and upbeat; they commit to always learning; they do not judge others; they have a clear purpose and are courageously living it; and they exhibit a high level of self control and self-discipline" (Fenton, 2022, p. 45). In contrast, individuals with low self-worth need to be externally validated and are frequently negative, indifferent, moody, self-absorbed, unnecessarily private, tend to lack self control, prefer to micromanage others, and often perceive feedback as a personal attack (Fenton).

Intersection of High Self-Worth and Low Self-Worth in a Classroom Setting: An Illustrative Learning Activity

High self-worth educators lead instructional activities in an aura of freedom and personal accountability, as opposed to fear and control. For decades, beginning teachers were armed with a fear-based self-protection mantra: "Don't Smile until Christmas." The implication was that because students are viewed as the cause of most classroom problems, they need to be micromanaged with a litany of classroom rules and consequences. Tellingly, Fenton (2022) argues that "it is impossible to embrace a freedom-centered rather than a fear-based leadership style of leadership if you do not believe in your own self-worth--and the worth of others" (p. 49).

Living one's calling as a freedom-centered classroom teacher by intentionally practicing high self-worth instructional behaviors involves giving students a heightened sense of choice, responsibility, and accomplishment in daily instructional activities. Research suggests that to sustain engagement in innovative lessons and group projects, learners require more autonomy over tasks (what they do), time (when they do it), technique (how they do it), and team (whom they do it with) (Pink, 2009). Mehta & Fine's (2019) research findings suggest that both in life and in school deeper learning occurs when students embrace challenges by trying to produce something consequential, when they see purpose in what they are doing, when they have a *choice* involving what they are doing, when they have constructive feedback on their work, and when they are part of a community that not only supports them but also holds them to high standards.

The take-a-way for educators is that one's classroom is only as freedom-centered as one's level of self-worth. The impaling implication for educators is captured in Martin Luther King's admonishment: "You can't teach what you don't know. You can't lead where you won't go." High self-worth educators are not threatened by learners' self-directed learning, but instead celebrate it by promoting human to human relationships. Martin Buber (1958) underscored that point in his assertion that in the ultimate sense it is relationship that educates. Remote teaching and learning in the midst

of COVID-19 abruptly reminded educators and students that the classroom is not just a place to learn but also a place to experience the high-impact conscience skills of our youth---kindness, caring, forgiveness, and empathy. The leadership implication for educators is that learners "innately possess these qualities by virtue of being human" (Wheatley, 2024, p. 8). The leadership implication for students is that simple instruction almost never produces behavior change. Humans learn from *reflecting* on experiential activities in the cauldron of daily life (Rodgers, 2022; Dewey, 1916).

Creating a Leadership Mindset: Passions, Principles, Partners, and Plans

On the Road Less Traveled: an Unlikely Journey from the Orphanage to the Boardroom, Hajim (2021) offers educators and students a useful framework for conceptualizing leadership development. Hajim's 4p's are: Find your passions, find your principles, find your partners, and find your plans (Hajim, 2021).

Find Your Passions

In speaking to a group of school children, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos remarked: "We all have passions. You don't get to choose them; they pick you. But you have to be alert to them" (Davenport, 2018). Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine was welcomed recently by millions around the world as a miracle. CEO Albert Bourla's passion was encapsulated in his observation that deep in Pfizer's DNA is the "principle that everybody deserves to be seen, heard, and cared for." Moreover, "it's not about rich countries and poor countries. It is about how you provide access to all" (Chopoorian & Gross, 2021, p. 83). In instructional, organizational, and workplace settings, it is essential to be sensitive not only to one's own passions but also to the passions of others (Hajim, 2022). The leadership implication for learners is that people evolve, passions evolve, and *relationships* evolve in reaching out to those around you, sharing your passion with them, and enlisting them in a common societal purpose (Bowman, 2022). Francis Hesselbein, who led the creation of the *Leader to Leader* Global Academy for Student Leadership and Civic Engagement observed that "in the end, leadership is all about valuing relationships, about valuing people" (Hesselbein, 2021, p. 5).

Find Your Principles

Stanford University has an ethical reasoning class requirement for all students. Former President John Hennessy argues that the "purpose of ethical reasoning isn't to solve all of your ethical dilemmas for the rest of your life." Rather, the purpose of the course is to provide learners "a framework for dealing with ethical issues that will arise in your career" (Gross, 2020, p. 71). In an interconnected, morally interdependent world everyone's behavior potentially affects everyone else (Bowman, 2022). In daily life, when we know our beliefs we can then act with greater consciousness about how our behaviors affect others (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996). In academic and workplace settings, principled inspired conduct is internal, intrinsic, and enduring (Pink, 2009). Moreover, in the highly-social context of the classroom and workplace, common values such as truth, honesty, fairness, justice, integrity, and *empathy* enhance individuals' capacity for personal growth and collective action in the development of society (Bowman, 2022). Being part of something bigger than ourselves is the reason that we exist. When Albert Bourla became Pfizer's CEO in January 2019, he passionately unveiled a new purpose statement for the company: "Breakthroughs That Change Patients Lives." Despite encountering frightful moments in the high-stakes race for a safe mRNA vaccine, Albert's singular vision and passionate pursuit created the miraculous breakthrough that changed patients' lives around the world (Susman, 2023).

Find Your Partner

In a volatile-uncertain-complex-ambiguous world, learning is no longer a solo act. Success requires relating to individuals of relatively equal status and diverse backgrounds in an increasingly interconnected world (Seidman, 2007). When extraordinarily talented undergraduates arrive at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), for example, they "rapidly discover that it is impossible to succeed solo" (Ancona &Gregersen, 2018, p. 34). Whatever else COVID-19 has taught us, collective collaboration and functioning partnerships have proven vital in driving the nation's response to the pandemic (Bowman, 2022). Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine development, for example, involved more than 46,500 people and 150 research centers, with billions of cloud data entries from all around the planet (Chopoorian & Gross, 2021).

Find Your Plans

Plans bring order to chaos. In *How to Survive: Self-Reliance in Extreme Circumstances* Hudson (2021) recounts a series of astonishing feats of stamina, ingenuity, and resilience. Salvador Alvarenga, the world's longest documented survivor at sea, spent 438 days drifting across the Pacific Ocean when his fishing trip went awry in 2012. For teachers and students, this readable book's takeaways offer insights related to the ability to understand context and seize opportunities in perilous circumstances that transfer well beyond calamity (Bowman, 2022). Specifically, Hudson argues that coping with dire circumstances and disruptive events in daily life depends on what he calls the Survival Triangle: *Work, hope, and plan. Work* involves at least a minimum of effort to change your circumstances to begin to feel some measure of control. That feeling of control ignites a spark of *hope*. On the basis of hope, one can *plan* further measures to save oneself, leading yet to further concrete actions. Instructionally, the Survival Triangle is both an

inspirational and practical answer to the question, "Can students be taught the foresight capabilities that will allow them to adapt to complex environments, societal disruptions, and dire circumstances resiliently?" (Bowman, 2022) The instructional implication for educators and students is that resilient and empathetic behaviors that begin with one tiny action, however seemingly inconsequential, function to create the *momentum* essential to behaving resiliently (Fogg, 2020; Bowman, 2022).

The 13th Century Persian poet Rumi observed that the essence of resilience is "the essence of being human" (Anderson, 2021, p. 11). Resilience is deeply human; resilience is deeply creative (Bowman, 2022). Admiral Jim Stockdale was the highest-ranking United States military officer in the "Hanoi Hilton" prisoner-of-war camp during the height of the Vietnam War. During his eight-year imprisonment, he was tortured more than twenty times, living out the war without any prisoner's rights, no release date, and no certainty that he would even survive to see his family again (Collins, 2001). During his internment, he fought an internal war against his captors to create conditions that would increase the number of fellow prisoners who would survive unbroken and prevent his captives from using prisoners for propaganda purposes. At one point, Admiral Stockdale beat himself with a stool and cut himself with a razor to deliberately disfigure his body so that he could not be put on videotape as an example of a "well-treated prisoner" (Collins, 2001, p. 84).

The Stockdale Paradox is one of perhaps hundreds of inspirational stories that educators might select to share with their students. This particular story's eye-opening moment of truth, however, is remarkably piercing and actionable in preparing students to confront the unknowable in their unfolding lives: Always retain faith that you can prevail in the end, while still exercising the discipline required to confront the brutal facts in your environment. Throughout their lives, students will be responsible for both teaching themselves and evaluating themselves on their ability to retain the "unwavering faith that you can prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties, *and at the same time* have the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality" (Collins, 2005, p. 34).

3. Discussion

Thoughtful educators search for school-wide opportunities for students to learn and practice the social and emotional skills of leadership. Teachers support students in identifying the issue, problem, crisis, or opportunity that defines the work of leadership. It is the *work* that brings people together, not relationships. Leadership scholar Margaret Wheatley (2024) pinpoints the challenge: "The Work: Place the work in the center and keep it there" (p. 11).

Mehta and Fine's (2019) analysis of what works and what does not in American high school education revealed that the most memorable parts of the school experience occur on the edges of the core curriculum. All-consuming extracurricular activities such as "theater production, school newspaper, student year book, community-service activities, and athletics permit students to achieve a shared goal (the work) while absorbing the leadership skills and dispositions central to achieving success and significance in later life " (Bowman, 2020, p. 30).

Thoughtful educators sense that the greatest challenge for middle school and high school students as developing leaders is not "understanding the practice of leadership, it is practicing their understanding of leadership in the everydayness of campus life, one conversation, one selfless act, one instructional activity, and one community-service task at a time" (Bowman, 2014, p. 63). In every opportunity that students are given to speak and to serve, they are auditioning for informal leadership.

4. Conclusion

Whether in the classroom or the workplace, the need to be heard and respected is universal. To be heard and respected, it is important for learners as informal leaders to know why one wants to lead and why one thinks others will follow their leadership. In creating a leadership mentality in a classroom setting, thoughtful educators invite and inspire students to view themselves as informal leaders *now*, not just at some future date.

Lastly, the foundational purpose of education is the development of society. In diverse settings, the litmus test of leadership is whether it nourishes the community's well-being or protects individuals. As students move into societal leadership roles, whatever the issue, problem, crisis, or opportunity it is the *work* that allows individuals to come together to become more curious, engaged, creative, and humbled leaders.

Competing interests

Not applicable.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

Copyrights

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