



Leadership Redefined: Engaging All Educators in a Constructivist Approach

Leadership, both its definition and practice, has been an elusive idea. For hundreds of years we have been fascinated with leadership, yet we still have few shared understandings about what it is. We are often preoccupied with the “heroes” of leadership, those charismatic creatures who have dominated the landscape, both as powerful models of values in action and as anti-heroes. We seem to understand that our failures as a global community to address the confounding questions of civilization, poverty, illiteracy, conflict and war, inequity, are failures of leadership. Our homes and schools are the birthplaces of these problems. We have not educated children to be broadly literate, to access their places in the world economy, to mediate conflict, and to value and practice equity. Yet we keep looking for those answers in the same places through the same archaic lens.

I would suggest that we have been looking in the wrong places and using the wrong lenses. These lenses have familiar panes, similar assumptions. Timeworn assumptions have persuaded us that leader and leadership are one and the same. Therefore, if only we can find the right qualities and characteristics of the Leader, we will have found the answer to the problems of leadership. When we assume that leadership lies in an individual, we look for the dispositions, skills, understandings and personality features that will make this person effective.

Then of course, goes the legend, if we teach these skills and characteristics to others, they too will be effective. We have sought to teach those skills to persons in positions of formal authority, leaving behind the vast majority of professionals who fail to see themselves reflected in these assumptions. This lens on leadership is not adequate for today’s world. Familiar paths are seductive. They coax us into moderate novelty, to tinkering with the present, to a failure to step back and think outside the box. We must depart from the familiar if we are to redefine leadership for this complex new century.

I would suggest that leadership be understood as the reciprocal processes that enable participants in an educational community to construct meanings that lead toward a shared purpose of schooling. My colleagues and I call this “Constructivist Leadership”. Learning and leading are understood as intertwined since these conceptions arise from our understandings of what it means to be human. To be human is to learn, and to learn is to construct meaning and knowledge about the world that enables us to act purposefully.

Over the past several decades we have come to understand that all humans bring to the process of learning personal schemas that have been formed by prior experiences, beliefs, values, socio-cultural histories, and perceptions. When new experiences are encountered and mediated by reflection, inquiry

and social interaction, meaning and knowledge are constructed. Learning takes place. When actively engaged in reflective dialogue, adults become more complex in their thinking about the world, more respectful of diverse perspectives, more flexible and open toward new experiences. Personal and professional learning require an interactive professional culture if adults are to engage with one another in the processes of growth and development. The concept of constructivist leadership is based on the same ideas that underlie constructivist learning: adults, as well as children, learn through the processes of meaning and knowledge construction, inquiry, participation, and reflection. Leadership can be understood as the enactment of such reciprocal, purposeful learning in community.

Leadership is situated in the processes among us, rather than in the skills or dispositions of a leader. As a concept separate from yet integrated with leader, leadership stands as a broader notion, a more encompassing idea. How we define leadership engages and pulls others into the work of leadership. When leadership means a person in a specific role enveloped in formal authority, teachers do not tend to see themselves reflected in that image. When leadership becomes a broadly inclusive cultural concept, it provokes a different response: I can see myself as participating in this learning work with my colleagues. Leadership realizes purpose, the sense of purpose that teachers brought with them into this profession.

Further, leadership defined as a form of learning locates that work in the context of teaching and learning. So defined, it forms a triangular alliance among teaching, learning, and leading. "It is what I do," suggested one teacher, "I attend to the learning of others. Now I am asked to extend my attention from my students and myself to my colleagues as well. When I become a better teacher, I become a better leader and vice versa."

The most vital aspect of this new definition of leading lies in its relationship to learning. It is not new to connect leadership to the creation of learning organizations; it is not new to envision a community of leaders. These ways of thinking have paved the way for some evocative assumptions about leadership. I would suggest that these assumptions might be summarized as:

1. Leadership may be understood as reciprocal, purposeful learning in community.
2. Everyone has the right, responsibility, and capability to be a leader.
3. The adult learning environment in schools and districts is the most critical factor in evoking leadership identities, disposition, and actions.
4. Within that environment, opportunities for skillful participation top the list of priorities.
5. How we define leadership defines how people will participate.
6. Educators are purposeful – leading realizes purpose.