

What Is A Leader, Anyway?

by Marianne Jones

What makes a leader? While often asked in political and business settings, this question is somewhat new to the early childhood field. In fact, Kagan and Bowman (1997) cite as a “fundamental

problem” the failure of the field to define “whether there is a particular set of skills associated with leadership, and, if so, what skills are important” (p. 6).

This article reports on a study by Jones (1998) that asked child care center directors to discuss characteristics of leaders — to go beyond “You know one when you see

one.” Forty-nine directors in three California counties participated in this study. Participants were divided into nine focus groups — three for each sector: public, private, and not-for-profit. Focus group research requires homogeneity of groups with respect to experience, a condition that has been found to maximize participants’ comfort level and candor (Krueger, 1988, 1994). The focus group process facilitated in-

depth discussion of directors’ ideas about the nature of leadership and how leadership is demonstrated in daily practice. The process also provided for cross-comparisons of perceptions across sectors.

As the complexity of leaders and leadership has come to be appreciated, there is greater awareness of the roles that circumstance and relationships play in the making of a successful leader. There is also awareness that leaders operate in a variety of environments that demand different approaches, qualities, and skills. The data derived through this study provided some insights into the connection between leader characteristics and kinds of relationships participants perceived as essential.

A common approach to the study of leadership over the decades has been the cataloging of traits. Trait theory, as it is sometimes called, suggests that understanding and emulating qualities identified in great leaders can result in the replication of great leaders (Burns, 1978). However, as Wheatley (1992) points out, distilling the parts as a means of understanding the whole ignores the impact that the parts have on one another in the creation of the whole. Further, it fails to consider how the parts interact with environmental

influences to give them their unique signature and significance in the minds and hearts of followers.

Directors in this study relayed their perspectives through accounts of their day-to-day experiences in their centers. In addition, some directors reflected a broader orientation to leadership through their work with professional organizations and local or regional political bodies. On the whole, participants’ responses clustered into three categories: Interpersonal Characteristics, Personal Qualities, and Skills Associated with Leadership.

As with all aspects of human development and behavior, categories are overlapping and interactional, rather than discreet. The categories that emerged from this study are no different. However, for ease of discussion, they have been defined by their distinctions:

- *Interpersonal Characteristics* are relationship-dependent. That is, a person must be relating to others in an intentional way for the qualities to be apparent, or for that matter, to be necessary. Interpersonal Characteristics exist in the context of social interaction and are an extension of one’s value system as it is exercised in relation to others.

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- *Personal Qualities*, on the other hand, are seen as building blocks of one's character, having their foundation in childhood. They are perceived by participants as being difficult, if not impossible, to acquire later on. Personal Qualities are viewed as being fundamental to who one is, that is, who one perceives himself or herself to be, and who one is perceived to be by others.
- *Skills Associated with Leadership* represent those abilities that are acquired through education and practice. They are part of general competence, regardless of where or how one employs them. They can be honed and exercised with minimal regard for initiating, maintaining, or improving relationships.

Interpersonal characteristics

Themes that run through the contemporary leadership literature include building connection with others — the purposeful establishment of relationships — identifying with followers, motivating others to be their best, and sharing meaning (Burns, 1978; Bolman & Deal, 1984; Wheatley, 1992). Consistent with the literature, participants saw a leader's ability to create a sense of connection through the formation and maintenance of satisfying relationships, to share meaning with others, motivate others, and identify with and not be out of reach of followers as essential in the early childhood arena. These themes ran through the dialogue with directors from all sectors.

The interpersonal nature of leadership was the predominant theme of participants' dialogue. Without exception, all groups specifically identified *building connection with others* and *the ability to motivate others* as essential to leadership. The unsolicited and unanimous emergence of these qualities as identifiers of leadership gives them considerable weight.

For participants, connection with others and motivating others are part of the fabric of four interrelated areas. These areas include: a) building or growing others (i.e., recognizing someone's talents and purposefully helping them to fulfill their potential), b) teamwork and the ability to connect with others, c) leading by example, and d) the ability to motivate and inspire others. Directors not only addressed the relational nature of leadership, that is, people in relationship with one another and its importance, but the interrelated nature of leadership characteristics themselves. The following excerpt from a participant illustrates the complex and integrated nature of these qualities:

"[Leaders] draw attention . . . when they speak, I listen and I want more. Because when they speak, I hear the truth. . . . And I'm convinced this is going to help me grow. I get a thirst, not because of their physical presence, but their ability to just grab me. . . . It stays on my mind, and it helps me search more. . . . It helps me want to be like [them]. I can't be that person, but to take what I'm getting from that person and have it grow within myself . . . it helps me a lot."

This director touched on multiple qualities when she cited the leader's ability to convey truthfulness, the leader's influence on the listener's personal growth and desire to grow, and the leader's ability to inspire. These ideas, and their interconnectedness, were echoed in conversations among directors in each focus group. Excerpts of directors' discussions are presented here:

"[A leader is] one who is willing to roll up their sleeves and get into the trenches and do what it takes to teach others and to show others how to get the job done."

"[A leader needs to have] a selfless commitment . . . for the good of

whoever you're leading with the good of the group in mind."

"A good leader is someone who manages to let the people under them excel. They're able to bring out the best in those people."

"And I would also say [leaders are] motivated and motivating . . . they motivate other people."

"[Leaders] appreciate success in others and enjoy success in others without being threatened . . . they can appreciate other peoples' talents and ability and not feel that they have to do it all."

These participants highlighted several behaviors and attitudes that contribute to building connection with and motivating others. They included participation on the part of the leader as a team member — being with followers "in the trenches" in the conduct of daily business as opposed to being above them. They identified the leader as teacher — knowing more, yet sharing knowledge and expertise to promote the growth of others. And, they spoke of the leader as mentor — recognizing and valuing others' strengths and actively facilitating their development. These behaviors and attitudes signal commitment, caring for others, inclusion, and consideration of followers' needs and desires. Inspiration and motivation spring from these acts. One director, speaking as a leader, summed it up when she said:

". . . when I'm leading a staff, and they grow out of being with me . . . I'm happy about that. If I have encouraged them and motivated them and allowed them to develop, then I'm happy when they move onto a better position."

In that single statement, this director linked encouragement, motivation, and assisting in the growth of others with her own sense of satisfaction at the

success of another. Beyond the responsibilities the leader has to her followers, this statement illustrates the reciprocal nature of the leader/follower relationship. Followers benefit from the actions of leaders; leaders derive benefit from the act of leading followers.

Personal qualities

Two personal qualities — integrity and responsibility — were identified as essential by all focus groups, marking them as common denominators of leadership, and thus giving them substantial weight. As with interpersonal characteristics, personal qualities exist in a context of many interlocking attributes. Integrity, one of the two qualities declared by all participant groups to indicate leadership, is used to illustrate this point. Center directors generally talked about *integrity* in terms of fidelity to personal moral standards in one's dealings with others and in one's trustworthiness. Leadership is a social activity. Therefore, personal qualities demonstrated in the context of leadership are necessarily intertwined with interpersonal characteristics. Integrity, as a personal trait, is anchored to trustworthiness — a quality followers ascribe to leaders. A person cannot speak of one without the other when discussing leader/follower interaction. Leading by example, for instance, is the public representation of one's honesty about what one stands for and the integrity with which one lives his or her beliefs. Integrity is the source of credibility. Reliability and leading by example are the evidence of one's credibility. The circularity illustrated here among these various attributes was evident throughout participants' discussions.

Directors generally used the term *responsibility* to describe personal ownership for one's actions and decisions, and acceptance of what leadership involves. These excerpts

reflect the meaning given to responsibility by several directors:

"[A person is a leader] if they're willing to take on the responsibility of what they believe in . . . willing to say 'this is something that is worthy . . . this is something that means something, and I believe in it and, therefore, I'm leading it.' [A leader is] a person who is willing to take on those responsibilities not only for the glory of it, but the mud that comes with it as well."

". . . when you choose to take on this [leadership] responsibility, you have to know that you're willing to go the whole nine yards."

"The buck stops here. . . . [Leaders are] willing to take the blame if something doesn't go right."

". . . a good leader is someone who takes on ownership and says 'this is who I am . . . this is what I do' . . . and is truthful."

Everyone who is employed within that organization has some kind of a leadership responsibility, maybe not the ability, but responsibility definitely. It goes all the way to the aide.

Skills associated with leadership

In all group discussions skills associated with leadership constituted the shortest list. As in the previous discussion on personal qualities, skills were highly interrelated with interpersonal characteristics. In the case of directors, skills centered on two characteristics: 1) having practical experience, and 2) being knowledgeable, as in having education. In their view, knowledge of the field in both a practical and theoretical sense gives a leader credibility with those who follow.

The relative weights placed on qualities

in the interpersonal, personal, and skills categories by participants suggests a hierarchy of value or an order of dominance seen to exist or be required in the exercise of effective leadership. Interpersonal characteristics are viewed as indispensable to the efficacious leader. They are, in fact, seen as the magnet that draws followers, making leadership possible. Personal qualities complement the interpersonal. However, one can possess and display personal qualities, yet lack the ability to attract others or sustain a following. It is the interpersonal characteristics that convey to others that which they find worthy of following. Interpersonal characteristics, then, are viewed as primary, with personal qualities playing a complementary, but supportive, role. The extremely light treatment of skills by all participants in the study indicates that, while they are viewed as necessary, they play a tertiary role.

This study presents evidence that participants across sectors share a number of perceptions regarding the fundamental attributes and behaviors of leaders. Its findings stand in contrast to the notion that differences in perception are a function of sector affiliation. This is not to suggest that differences among sectors do not exist. Instead, this study highlighted the fact that significant similarities do exist across sectors, at least with respect to perspectives on leadership.

Consistent with contemporary leadership literature in other professions, early childhood educators in this study perceived leadership as an instrument of social connection. Leaders are expected to build relationships and to facilitate the building of relationships that embody respectfulness and demonstrate value of, and concern for, others. Leaders are expected to motivate and inspire, not so much by their words, as by their actions. These interpersonal characteristics are complemented by one's integrity and by the responsibility one demonstrates towards

colleagues, subordinates, and the field-at-large, and fortified by their knowledge and practical experience.

Unraveling the complexity of leadership is a daunting task that continues to engage researchers. As the early childhood field works to define itself, it is crucial that we strive for greater understanding of leadership and continue to look for ways to cultivate leaders. This study is, perhaps, a step in that direction.

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