



Revista de Administração da Unimep

E-ISSN: 1679-5350

gzograzian@unimep.br

Universidade Metodista de Piracicaba
Brasil

McManus, Robert M.

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Revista de Administração da Unimep, vol. 7, núm. 2, mayo-agosto, 2009, pp. 47-56

Universidade Metodista de Piracicaba

São Paulo, Brasil

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The Importance of Leadership Education and Leader Development

Robert M. McManus, Ph.D. (*McCoy Assistant Professor of Leadership Studies and Communication - Marietta College, Marietta, Ohio*) robert.mcmanus@marietta.edu

Revista de Administração da UNIMEP, v. 7, n.2, Maio / Agosto – 2009

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Revista de Administração da UNIMEP

ISSN: 1679-5350

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Mestrado Profissional em Administração

When I tell acquaintances that I teach Leadership Studies, I inevitably get the question, “How do you *teach* leadership?” or worse, the quip, “Leaders are born not made.” When asked to write this article, then, I saw it as a wonderful opportunity to share how leadership can be taught using a worthwhile curriculum, specifically within the confines of a Liberal Arts approach to education, such as that found at the McDonough Center for Leadership and Business at Marietta College. The McDonough Center has remained a pioneer in leadership education in the United States after being established in 1987 as the first program of its kind. I have taught in the McDonough Center program for two years, and in light of this rich exposure, I would like to provide a synopsis of my thoughts on the field of Leadership Studies and Leadership Education.¹ In the next few paragraphs, I will take the opportunity to articulate the broad history of the field of Leadership Studies, answer some of the field’s detractors, as well as detail a basic curriculum of study based upon the McDonough model in hopes of answering the question “How does one teach leadership?”

Let me begin with a brief history of the field to acquaint the reader with the long history of the systematic study of leadership. I’m sure some of us imagine the study of leadership is a newer discipline, and, indeed, in some respects it is, but many scholars have pointed out leadership’s ancient roots. We are all familiar with works of great thinkers in Western Thought such as Plato’s *Republic*, Aristotle’s *Politics*, as well as the role Aristotle played in the tutelage of Alexander the Great. Many would argue, Machiavelli’s *The Prince* is a treatise of leadership that is still relevant today. Others present Confucius’s *Analects* and Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching* as exemplars of leadership literature from the East and ancient times. Indeed, as Bernard Bass

¹ I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Gama Perruci at the McDonough Center for this time and conversation as I have developed the thoughts presented here. I also thank Linda Z. Roesch of the Worthington Center at Marietta College and Dr. Naaman Wood of Tidewater Community College for their suggestions on this essay.

notes, there is evidence of the study of leadership as far back as 3000 BCE as evidenced by the inscriptions of symbols for “leader,” “follower,” and “leadership” found on ancient Egyptian tombs.² I begin with a brief lesson in ancient history simply to establish that the study of leadership is nothing new. Indeed, some of our most esteemed thinkers throughout history have devoted their attention to this topic.

Martin Chemers presents a succinct and more recent history of the field of Leadership Studies in his work “The Social, Organizational, and Cultural Context of Effective Leadership.”³ In it, he lays out a more contemporary history of the study of leadership starting at the beginning of the 20th Century. The type of scholarship in this period focuses upon what has been called the “Great Man Theory” and “Trait Theory” of leadership lasting from the early turn of the 20th century to approximately World War II. The “Great Man” period – and yes, it is called the Great “MAN” period because of its woeful lack of mention of female leaders – grew from the prevailing idea that leaders were born, not made, and that such leaders had common characteristics such as drive, motivation, and charisma. This basic idea began to be questioned by conflicting scholarship, and this, coupled with the need for more leadership during the War demanded a more developmental understanding of leadership. The Behavioralist Period, which was a movement in other academic fields at the time, reversed the dominant paradigm with the idea that leaders did not have to be born, but could be “made” or developed; hence, the birth of modern leadership education. This period lasted from 1948 to the late 1960s and features the social scientific study of behaviors, such as interpersonal skills, approaches to power, and

² Bernard M. Bass, *Bass and Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research & Managerial Applications*, Third Edition (New York: Free Press, 1990.) 4.

³ Martin Chemers, “The Social, Organizational, and Cultural Context of Effective Leadership,” in Barbara Kellerman’s *Leadership: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984) 93-108.

follower satisfaction. Such studies were adapted as tools for the development of those in leadership positions. The Behavioralist Period was followed by the current contemporary period in Leadership Studies. This period focused upon contingency approaches to understanding leadership in which scholars started to acknowledge the vast complexity of the leadership phenomenon. It was during this period that James MacGregor Burns authored his seminal book *Leadership* (1978), which became a rallying cry for the revival in Leadership Studies and education. Now, in this era of globalization and rapid communication, the field of leadership has started to examine the vast implications culture can play in leadership situations. This is just a brief summary of the more recent history of Leadership Studies offered to provide a context for my basic argument, that is, that the systematic education and development of leaders is something we *can* do and something we *should* do as educators.

It is important to establish a brief representative history of the field of Leadership Studies as an entrée into some of the questions posed by critics of Leadership Studies and Education. It would seem that the field of Leadership Studies suffers from two basic fundamental problems within the Academy. 1.) Many of our colleagues in traditional disciplines such as the natural sciences and the arts question the legitimacy Leadership has as a field of academic study. There is a misunderstanding of the difference between the rigorous study of leadership within the academic context of the humanities and sciences and what has come to be disparagingly known as “airport literature” or “popular” literature; and 2.) Some wonder if there is a place for the systematic study of leadership as well as the leader *development* within the context of a thoughtful liberal arts curriculum.

I will begin with the first question: “Is leadership a ‘legitimate’ academic discipline?” My answer is, not surprisingly, “yes,” of course. However, I realize I must justify this. As I laid

out in the introduction, the study of leadership has a long and prestigious history that has once again begun to flourish. Programs such as my home institution's McDonough Center for Leadership is attracting students and scholars across the United States, and indeed the world, to the purposeful and focused examination of leadership. Indeed, McDonough was the first program of its kind in the United States, but today dozens of leadership programs exist within the confines of prestigious universities such as Harvard University's Center for Public Leadership, University of Richmond's Jepson School of Leadership and, Duke University's Hart Leadership Program. What is often misunderstood by those in the Academy who have not had the opportunity to focus their attention on the systematic study of leadership is the vast, rigorous, and heuristic body of literature that has been created in the last century, specifically in the last thirty years.

Additionally, the field of Leadership Studies has developed a strong history using both social scientific and humanistic methodologies. Bass provides evidence for this claim in his 1192 page encyclopedic tome of *Theories and Models of Leadership*:

By now, it is fair to say that every procedure known to social science in general has been applied specifically to the study of leadership. These procedures have included autobiographical analysis, biographical analysis, case studies, the evaluations of news record, memoranda, and minutes of meetings; the analysis of speeches; biodata analysis; studies of communication patterns; autologs and observers' logs of leaders' activities; ratings by observers, superiors, peers, subordinates, and clients; judgment of verbal protocols and individual interviews. Increasingly, investigators are using two or more approaches to increase the confidence in their efforts. (Bass 54-54)

The field of Leadership has become a field of study not unlike that of other disciplines found within the context of a liberal arts institution such as history, biology, and music.

Still, many people wonder, understandably so, “How does one teach leadership?” The term evokes suspicions of popular literature, such as Steven Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, *The One Minute Manager* or *The 10 Day MBA*. I don’t doubt that such texts have their value. That is not, however, how the best programs in leadership are structured. A reputable leadership program will educate their students in leadership through the liberal arts, calling upon the best thinkers in ancient and current research on leadership and prepare them to think critically, act responsibly, and grow personally. In leadership, there are no easy answers that can be found in simple formulas or step programs. For example, at the McDonough Center, we start our students off with a Western approach to leadership looking at works such as Plato’s *Republic*, Aristotle’s *Politics*, Marx and Engle’s *Communist Manifesto*, as well as American thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. We liberally introduce literature that relates to leadership such as Henrik Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*, George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, Ayn Rand’s *Anthem*, as well as exposing them to some of the contemporary theories and models that I described earlier. We also provide the student with a regimen of assignments designed to hone their critical thinking skills and challenge the assumptions, values, and purposes of the texts and authors they are studying. The student then enrolls in a course addressing the social analysis of organizations and the implications certain structures have upon leader/follower relations within specific environments. This course examines prominent paradigms found within organizations that are structured as machines, organisms, and cultures. We continue to expose the students to classics such as William Golding’s *The Lord of the Flies* as providing examples of how environmental factors change the leadership situation. Our

students also serve at various non-profit organizations while learning to apply their knowledge directly to their experience. Their next class is a research driven course of study that explores the various theories and models of leadership found in the field today, and teaches the students the various social scientific and humanistic methodologies used to study the field. In this course, students start to develop their own leadership statement based upon their reading and thoughtful reflection. Finally, our students enroll in a Globalization and Leadership course that exposes them to various cultures and models of leadership that may be found in Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, and Latin American cultures, thus providing the student with a more inclusive view of the world in which they live and will ultimately lead. McDonough students are also expected to complete an international experience or internship, develop and implement at least two significant service projects, and complete a capstone that applies their knowledge to a specific project, all while completing approximately 100 hours of community service. This is just one way of going about structuring a program in leadership education and development, but one that has proven to be effective. Other programs might offer different types of classes with various themes, but their basic course objectives remain very similar.

This leads me to the second question in the current debate over Leadership Studies: “Is there a place for leadership development as well as scholarship in the Academy?” Leadership programs are divided on this, usually falling somewhere in three camps: those that are completely centered upon skills development, those focusing completely upon scholarship, and those that merge both of these approaches, as we do at the McDonough Center. What has been called “leadership development” programs focus upon training students in the *skills* needed to communicate and lead effectively, such as interpersonal skills and conflict management. An exemplary program of this kind is housed at Kansas State University. These types of programs

are often located in the student life branch of colleges and universities. Such programs are sometimes accused as lacking the scholarly rigor of other academic disciplines. There are others that take an exclusively scholarly approach to the study of leadership, favoring theory over praxis. The Jepson School of Leadership at Richmond University is an outstanding example of this approach. Such programs usually have high standards for academic rigor, but those outside these conclaves usually ask the question, “So what?” “How are students in these programs prepared to assume leadership roles and be successful leaders upon completing such programs?” In large part, this is why the McDonough center has merged these approaches combining the theory with the praxis of leadership as described in the curriculum above. This golden mean approach is the best for creating students who understand not only the theory of leadership, but have experience in its practice as well. Education is not mere instruction. It is not the “data transfer” from one mind to another in the context of a three-hour-per-week required course. It is the shaping of the intellect to teach students to think critically and to act responsibly as they relate to their fellow human beings. To “think” and “act” is the student demonstrating his/her knowledge of the theories discovered in the classroom to inform his/her interaction with the environment outside of the classroom. Put quite simply, theory without practice is dead. If a student passes a basic “leadership” course with an “A,” but thereafter cannot work with his or her fellow students without modeling effective behavior, ethical decision making, and thoughtful communication, then the course, the student, and—above all—the educator has failed. There are far too many leaders who know how to read a map, and yet still fail to reach their destination. We don’t need to train more.

I believe a common underlying question to “What do you teach?” and “How do you teach leadership?” is the question “Leadership for what?”; meaning, a student studying political

science, for example, may or may not become a politician; however, the field of leadership is supposed to produce “leaders” to go out into the world to become . . . well, leaders. To this I reply with a two-fold answer. 1.) The Academy has always had an appreciation for the development of knowledge for knowledge’s sake, or for *pure* research, and rightfully so. That is a core value of the Academy. Why should that be any different for the field of leadership? 2.) Arguably, the training of ethical and persuasive leaders has been the focus of the Academy for millennia, or as Cicero would say, we should train “the good person to speak well” as we seek to cultivate thoughtful and productive citizens. We are simply reviving a discipline that directly relates to the purposeful outcome of an education befitting a free citizen developed by the founders of our greater Academy. So, in answer to the question, “Leadership for what?” I reply, “Leadership to be able to think critically and act responsibly as is the ultimate goal for all people, no matter what their desired vocation.” That is, to be able to participate thoughtfully and energetically in a democratic environment, to critically question the validity of claims proposed, to articulately and persuasively express themselves, to creatively solve problems, to create empathy and understanding with others, and ultimately to serve the common good.

After hearing about the need for and approach to training leaders, I am sure there are those who may ask how would an institution go about creating such a program. Let me offer my take on the basics of such a curriculum. First, such a program must be based within the liberal arts creating what my friend and colleague Dean Gama Perruci identifies as a “nexus” between liberal arts and Leadership Studies.⁴ Leadership programs must focus upon the complexity of human experience and not seek to provide quick and easy formulaic answers to multidimensional

⁴ Gama Perruci, “General Education as the Nexus between Liberal Arts and Leadership Studies,” in J. Thomas Wren, Ronald E. Riggio, and Michael A. Genovese’s *Leadership and the Liberal Arts: Achieving the Promise of a Liberal Education* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009) 67-80.

problems. Programs such as the one proposed here must also concentrate on knowledge before action so that the students are informed about various approaches to the leadership phenomenon. The moral development and ethos of such a program must be paramount so that students are not simply given the sophistic tools to lead effectively, but also encouraged to make ethical decisions and consider the moral implications of their decisions when placed in positions of leadership. Such programs should seek to develop several core competencies such as critical thinking, oral communication skills, writing skills, problem solving skills, and cross-cultural understanding in an effort to create engaged leaders capable of addressing the challenges they face.

Upon reflecting on my time spent in the field of Leadership Studies, I am reminded of John W. Gardner's cry for leadership in which he comments upon the field's detractors who say "Leaders are born not made." To which he replies "Nonsense! Most of what leaders have that enables them to lead is learned. Leadership is not a mysterious activity. It is possible to describe the tasks that leaders perform. And the capacity to perform those tasks is widely distributed in the population. . . Most men and women go through their lives using no more than a fraction . . . of the potentialities within them."⁵ After teaching in the McDonough program, I am inclined to agree with Professor Gardner. In this time of global upheaval, it is incumbent upon us as scholars and educators to train leaders in the study and praxis of leadership to take us to that next place in our evolution as a global community. If we do not take the training of leaders seriously, I am afraid that we will get what we deserve, which is simply more of what we have previously received.

⁵ John W. *Gardner On Leadership* (New York: The Free Press, 1990). Also published in J. Thomas Wren's *The Leader's Companion: Insights on Leadership Through the Ages* (New York: The Free Press, 1995) 3-7.