

WHY TEACH UNDERGRADUATE LEADERSHIP?

“Leadership is intentional influence. It isn’t about holding an office or a title. Today every single human being will encounter opportunities to lead, to impact, to change the world.”

by David K. Ferguson

THE BIG QUESTION

A few months ago, the Catalyst One Day leadership conference came to Chicago. I had come to trust Catalyst from years of attending their two-day events. Now they would be in my backyard in a format I could afford. The best news? The organization’s most gifted communicator would be a focal part of the day. I began plotting my trip and planned to take some of my students with me. I pitched the idea to the other faculty members of the School of Education’s Department of Leadership & Educational Administration and we decided it would make a great outing. While I was a little nervous about whether my colleagues would enjoy the contemporary music or find the lectures academic enough, once we were sitting in the hosting Illinois mega-church, and the students I’d brought along were furiously scribbling notes, I relaxed a little. Soon, I was immersed in my own notes.

A benefit of organizing this excursion came in the form of two tickets to a luncheon. There, just 50 guests could interact with the two featured speakers. I invited Matt Master, a sophomore in the leadership program, to join me. While we ate the sandwiches and chips

provided, Matt drank in the opportunity to sit just a few feet away from leadership gurus as they answered questions from a small stage in the front of the room. The discussion focused mainly on the church environment, so I decided to shift toward something a little more applicable to my young friend. I began raising my hand between questions, wondering if I had waited too long as I sensed the session winding down. Finally, they pointed at me and announced my question would be the last.

Caught a little off guard, I gave the background of having recently started a leadership program for undergraduate students at Andrews University. Then, I asked my question. “In that context, could you tell us a leadership lesson you wish you had learned earlier in life?” I was pleased the individual I most wanted to hear from seemed anxious to respond first. But what he said absolutely stunned me. “When I hear about things like this, I think it’s a waste of time. I really don’t believe you can teach leadership to undergraduate students. I don’t think they get it.” And with that, the session was over.

I felt the heat of extra blood rushing to my head. My jaw may have visibly dropped. I turned to notice the confused look on Matt’s

face. Questions, thoughts and responses shot through my brain. Was this speaker suggesting that the same students we teach to be doctors, lawyers and every other manner of professional somehow couldn’t grasp the simple, meaningful leadership truths he would discuss through the course of the day? I accept that experience creates the context for fully understanding most leadership concepts. But does that mean there is no benefit to learning these truths at an earlier age? The suggestion seemed akin to insisting that a soldier can only understand concepts on successful evasive maneuvering or troop positioning after coming under live enemy fire. Did he really believe those of us who are older—and more prone to being set in our ways and stuck in our ruts—are more capable of handling the change required to act upon leadership lessons? This seemed nonsensical and counter-intuitive to me. Besides, if this accurately portrayed the feelings of his organization, why did they sell tickets to this very training event at a student rate for those in college?

The afternoon sessions resumed and my students continued their note taking with great focus. Matt quickly shrugged off the insult and hungrily dove back into learning.

I, however, was distracted and couldn't let go of this brief conversation. I admire this gentleman greatly for the many leadership lessons he has taught over the years. Surely he must have misunderstood my question. Could he and I be in that much disagreement? His comment further bothered me since it echoed so many of the recent discussions and arguments I've heard, and pointed out the need to state a clear case addressing the most common objections and misunderstandings to teaching leadership to young people.

SETTING THE STAGE

For the past eight years I have been involved in developing curriculum for and teaching leadership to high school and college students. My interest was fueled by a simple realization: During my mid-thirties I and a handful of colleagues stumbled into some great leadership development opportunities. We found the growth painful. With regularity, we questioned ourselves: "Why couldn't this be taught in formal educational settings at a younger age, before the need for such challenging deconstruction?" We hatched a pilot program to teach fundamental leadership principles on a secondary level. In our opinion it was a smashing success. Students mastered the materials and actively demonstrated the principles in their daily living. This past year I started a leadership program at Andrews University on the undergraduate level. This has led to numerous discussions about what can and cannot be taught regarding leadership.

Disagreement about whether or not leadership can be taught may come down to something as basic as the way we define leadership. In our undergraduate program, we define it as "intentional influence." While circumstance, traits and genetics do lend themselves to the development of leaders, everyone possesses leadership skills to some degree and can improve on them, increasing their influence.

There may also be a difference in the relative value of certain traits over others depending on the context of their use. For instance, fluency of speech may be a prized leadership quality for the purpose of motivating the masses. But when influencing individual interpersonal relationships, listening skills may be even more important.

All functioning humans possess both skills to some degree. Whether our genetics predispose us to high or low functionality in one trait over the other, we believe growth is possible in both. In this regard, we side closely with the belief leadership behaviors can be learned and developed.

Our program seeks to provide leadership development opportunities to college undergrads on an "every man" basis. This is not tied to a leadership position, high grade point average or personality type. The important question is not whether a person is a leader, but whether they are maximizing their leadership opportunities.

COMMON OBJECTIONS TO LEADERSHIP TRAINING

I vividly remember a frustrating conversation with an institutional board member who shared, "Why should we be putting such emphasis on leadership when it is only relevant to a few students? My daughter isn't a leader." Many people misconceive that in order to be a leader, you must have certain stereotypical characteristics. The problems with this thinking are manifold.

First, it is nearly impossible to accurately predict which students are going to develop into our best, most visible leaders. Aren't we routinely surprised at class reunions when some people we assumed would make a big splash have done little while others we wrote off became highly respected leaders? I don't think a father can rightly say what his daughter "is" yet. She is still developing. Could it be that when we make these claims and behave on these assumptions we tempt our young people to live down to our expectations? The best leaders of the future might be living incognito among us at these young ages. In which case, it would be best to educate them all toward growth. But this response doesn't go far enough. If leadership is truly intentional influence, then we can propose every thinking human being begins attempting to lead from birth, attempting to influence the world as they wish to experience it. Is it flawed to assess and label leaders based on the volume or depth of leadership impact? Most tend to do this. If it appears you are visibly influencing enough

people to break over an unnamed threshold, you are labeled a leader. If you stay under that volume threshold, you are not.

Think of it this way. We can all likely accept Abraham Lincoln was a leader. Let's pretend we could ask, "Abe, who had the greatest influence in your life?" Let's say his response was his stepmother, Sarah, who never held an office, wrote a book or likely never cracked anyone else's list of leaders. Suppose he is so engrossed in talking about his stepmother, he never even mentions anyone else. He finishes by saying explicitly, "All I am, or can be, I owe to my angel mother." Shouldn't Sarah Bush Lincoln receive credit for the leadership her son displayed? Or put this way: What if she hadn't influenced him in some of the ways she did and he never became the leader he did? Would that not in some way be her fault? If there is an undergraduate college student out there who will be the mother or father of the next Lincoln, and we could teach that person valuable leadership qualities and practices ensuring the leadership impact of their progeny, wouldn't that be worth it?

Under many circumstances, the one who appears to be leading from superficial observation is often less influential if you delve a layer under the surface. In truth, most leadership is exerted from somewhere in the middle rather than in the classical model from the top down. One might even suggest we make every bit the societal impact by growing a person's leadership capabilities from a 2 to a 4 on a scale of 1 to 10 as we do moving someone from an 8 to a 9, even though the first person may never be labeled a "leader" while the second is likely to be. For all these reasons it seems most profitable to teach leadership—without discrimination—on an undergraduate level.

Some suggest it is better to wait to teach leadership until a person has the context of experience to understand it. They have

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a point. Some leadership lessons make little sense until you have the opportunity to put them into practice. However, if we wait to teach leadership lessons until ignorance and bad habits have calcified, what could have been easy to include and ingrain in our leadership practices becomes nearly impossible. It reminds me of a piece of pumpkin pie I once had as a guest in someone's house. To her embarrassment, the hostess had forgotten to add sugar before putting the pie in the oven. It tasted horrible. Even though she passed sugar, urging us to dump it on our pies, it couldn't salvage the flavor. Timing matters. Just like the sugar, the best leadership training should be baked in at a time that doesn't require disassembly for the desired effect.

WHAT ABOUT MATT?

Just the other day, Matt came into my office. In the days following our trip to Catalyst, he had been preoccupied with what he learned about maintaining momentum in organizations. Matt is a student leader in an ongoing, popular campus event. But he said, "Pastor Dave, I am worried we've lost momentum." He listed the evidence and described how he is using the principles he learned to address the problem. As he left I found myself wondering if any of my colleagues or I had so successfully integrated these principles in our current leadership contexts. I thought again how silly a notion it is that undergrad students aren't capable of "getting it."

Truly, leadership learning is a lifelong process. It is ignorant to suppose we can graduate students who are complete as leaders. In fact, the balance of what gets started in their leadership development is likely more important than what gets finished. However, I believe any student who embarks on leadership development at the undergraduate level has an exponential advantage against the person they otherwise would have been when it comes to impact, influence and making a difference in the world.

¹ Josiah G. Holland, *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, p. 23.

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