

August 27, 2020

A Model of Leadership in the New Normal: Part 2

The first article I wrote regarding leadership in the new normal was submitted for publication on August 13, 2020. As I prepare to submit this follow-up article, it is now late August. My introduction in Part 1 summarized the status of Fall semester instruction as of mid-August.

Now two weeks later, all of the data collected by Davidson College in their report, “Crisis College Initiative” or “C2i,” required updating. The major shift is the necessary movement from in-person instruction, fully and hybrid, to totally online instruction.

National news has featured accounts of institutions, including the University of North Carolina, sending their students home after they moved on campus, and Notre Dame deciding abruptly that all classes would be online at least for a few weeks. Apparently, neither Carolina Blue nor religious affiliation correlate with 18-22-year old students obeying rules regarding masks and social distancing. And every day, more institutions face the same challenges with student behavior and positive results with COVID-19 tests. Is this really a surprise to anyone?

And while the focus of national attention has been placed primarily on COVID-19 and student behavior, my questions relate more to the processes used to make these sudden decision and major changes Who was consulted? What is the impact on faculty, staff, parents, etc.? This is why I believe that leadership is critical now more than ever. And the leadership style needs to be appropriate in the current pandemic and (hopefully) post-pandemic worlds we will be experiencing for years to come.

Let me start with the leadership foundation I propose and recommend. I will explain what it is and why I think it is necessary and will work. As a preview, a Part 3 will be forthcoming with specific applications.

I believe strongly that the current and future environments require a commitment to and a demonstration of Servant Leadership. I respect and admire other styles of leadership. But the culture that has been produced by this virus, and the changes that will challenge effective leadership, are significant. They are real and they will not go away quickly. Hopefully, we will soon recover physically from this virus, but its impact will be long lasting.

There is a lack of trust in and around college communities that increases every day, and this lack of trust exists more and more daily with faculty, staff, and especially students. Two examples follow. In a recent study summarized in *Inside Higher Ed*, it was reported that “more than half of students lack trust in their college or university to protect them and faculty members from the coronavirus.” And *the Washington Post* published an opinion piece written by a University of North Carolina senior ... as she packed up to go home. It was entitled, “*My university botched the pandemic. What does that say about how it sees its students and community?*” She further elaborated, “*...there is also anger with the sadness. I feel betrayed. The university has hurt, almost unforgivably, two populations it should be serving first foremost: the students and the*

residents of the town of Chapel Hill. Its grandiose plans to reopen campus, resume football games and provide at least some sort of first-year experience was, at best, based on outdated information and wishful thinking. The plan was built on a flimsy foundation of predictions from early summer, when it was still possible to believe that infection rates would be lower and a second wave would only arrive after Thanksgiving.” At least UNC gets high grades for teaching writing!

My strong belief is that this heightened sense of disequilibrium will get worse before it gets better over the coming months and years...unless we lead well. Mistrust, impatience and a lack of focus will result in anger and increased concern about ourselves, our families and our friends ...unless we lead well.

I propose that the best remedy is Servant Leadership. A great deal has been written and adapted from Robert Greenleaf's initial essay, *“The Servant as Leader”* (1970). Here's how I understand and teach Servant Leadership. To quote Greenleaf, “. . . a new moral principal is emerging which holds that the only authority deserving one's allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader.”

Servant Leadership requires a focus on the institution's mission and values not authority and administrative structure. The characteristics of Servant Leadership are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of all people and building community.

Servant Leadership centers on communication and collaboration. It requires transparency with behaviors being much more important than words. Servant leaders focus on enabling and empowering all members of the community. Servant leaders influence, they do not dictate. Servant leaders admit that they were wrong, apologize if necessary, and ask for help. Servant leaders share power and authority willingly and openly. Servant leaders rebuild trust, a sense of ownership and a shared focus on the institution's mission, goals and values. Servant leaders help everyone become better servants and they recognize and celebrate this culture.

Once when I was teaching the concept of Servant Leadership to a group of senior administrators, I noticed that several of my students were becoming more and more agitated. When I asked why, they said that what I was describing would lead to chaos. They had missed the central points (or possibly I was a bad teacher that night!). Servant leaders say “no” and make hard decisions. But when they do, people understand why and their voices have been heard.

I think it is critical that those in leadership positions consciously, realistically and quickly assess their current leadership styles and identify how they can move more fully to a servant leader model. I know it is effective. I believe that it is essential now more than ever. More importantly, I know that it will help your community ... all members of your community ... to navigate effectively through the current and future pandemic environments.

Servant Leadership may not necessarily solve your enrollment and financial problems quickly. But this culture will allow you to more clearly and effectively focus on the academic mission. This is what Greenleaf describes as “purposing”: “... *that continuous stream of actions by an organization’s formal leadership which has the effect of inducing clarity, consensus and commitment regarding the organization’s basic purposes.*”

In the next and final article on “*Leadership in the New Normal,*” I will move from theory to practice. If this leadership style or model makes sense to you, the final article on this topic will suggest important applications of Servant Leadership. This will include communication, planning, decision making and important constituencies. As always, please feel free to contact me if you want to discuss this model or I can help you in any way.

Winston Churchill said, “We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.” Higher education is my life, and yours. Let’s work together to serve our noble profession.

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