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A Model of Leadership in the New Normal: Part 3

This three-part series of articles on leadership proposes the leadership style and practice in the new normal. I contend that the most effective leadership in higher education (in fact in all areas) will need to be Servant Leadership.

Adapted from Robert Greenleaf's initial essay, "*The Servant as Leader*" (1970), my understanding of Servant Leadership is ". . . 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 rather than authority and administrative structure. Servant Leadership is characterized by listening, empathy, stewardship and the commitment to the growth of all people in the community. Servant Leadership centers on communication and collaboration. It requires transparency with behaviors much more than the important than words. Servant leaders rebuild trust, a sense of ownership and a shared focus on the institution's mission, goals and values.

I have entitled this series, "A Model of Leadership in the New Normal." But as I write these three articles, observe the ever-changing landscape of higher education, and reflect upon effective leadership, I think a more appropriate title would be, "A Model of Leadership in the NEXT Normal." Why? Because things will keep changing in higher ed as we respond to the external factors beyond our control, and the evolving needs of our students. We need to be prepared to lead in whatever challenges are NEXT.

Servant Leadership can and will provide a constant. Regardless of the changes in the world and the impact on our institutions . . . regardless of whether your institution is able to grow or needs to consider some form of restructuring . . . regardless of the challenges that demand changes in programs, services, personnel or facilities . . . Servant Leadership will be the stable force that leads in all situations and in all environments. Servant Leadership will serve you well and will serve all those in your community going forward.

I have already shared the theory. What follows then are some of the most 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 learn about additional explanations and examples.

Communication

Communication is the most important application of Servant Leadership in the Next Normal. You must communicate as often as possible and to all constituents. There is no such thing as too much information in the environment of disequilibrium, mistrust, fear, etc. Communication must be timely, complete and factual. This is not the time for obscure rhetoric or platitudes. People still need to be affirmed, encouraged and inspired. But most of all, they need to know. And they need to hear it from you.

Since I wrote Part 2 of this series, I have read about three votes of “No Confidence” and I wonder if other disgruntled constituencies just didn’t make the news. My contention is that the root cause of these actions is a failure to communicate. Votes of No Confidence are built upon the feelings of anger and mistrust. I believe that open and honest communication can and will make a difference.

Moreover, as much as possible, communication needs to be face-to-face, not written. We prefer to send out e-mails and letters because we can take our time, edit ourselves before communicating and avoid confrontation. But in this time of disequilibrium and discontent, in this time of fear and frustration, people need to hear it directly from you, in your voice and with visible evidence of your emotional connection with them. Communication needs to be personal and engaging. You need to take questions and listen to their ideas, reactions and comments. Some will need to vent. Some will need to air their thoughts publicly. Therefore, this cannot be a speech from you. It needs to be more of a dialogue.

You also need to take time to engage in small group meetings. The realities of the size of your community may require large group communication events, whether virtual or in person. But these must be followed by a series of small group opportunities so that all people can have their voice, not just passively listen.

This will take time ...perhaps you think it will take too much of your time. But it is well worth it. And it is essential to leadership and building community. All constituents need to feel their importance within the community. This level of commitment to communication will rebuild trust and restore a shared focus on the institution’s mission, goals and values.

Planning

I have shared my views on planning in previous articles. But in the Next Normal and true to Servant Leadership, planning needs to be continuous, collaborative and communicative. In the same timeframe that I learned about votes of No Confidence, more institutions have moved from in-person to hybrid or from hybrid to all online. In other words, they changed their plans.

I suggest that you create an emergency or short-term planning committee. If your governance structure includes a planning committee, I would build upon that, but assure that you have every constituency represented and the right people involved. It may seem to be too large and somewhat unwieldy, but it will provide good shared leadership. Members can share constituent

ideas, concerns, etc. Ultimately, you and/or your Board may need to make the decision rather than committee voting, but as long as that is clear from the start, people will engage in the planning process. And more importantly, they will share ownership in the plan.

Decision Making

In Servant Leadership in the Next Normal, decisions need to come from a leadership team, not from a dictatorial president or Board. You may use your senior staff or cabinet as a decision-making body. But I would recommend that you establish a different group for leadership requiring decisions and actions that are broader.

I would build upon your cabinet by adding faculty, staff and student leaders as representatives. These may be easily identified by your governance structure. If not, you will know who has seniority, respect and trust. If possible, this group should include Trustee/Board representatives, alumni/ae representatives and even representatives from the broader community.

Again, the goal is broader input and dialogue BEFORE decisions are made, and effective communication about the why and when of decisions. I communicate regularly with a group of representatives from colleges I know. These are students (undergraduate and graduate), faculty, staff and alumni/ae. The most common thing they tell me is, “I heard that ...”

They usually “heard” it second or third hand, and it’s not accurate or true. A decision-making body, even with more voice than vote, provides constant avenues of accurate communication and accessible sources.

Constituencies

It is important in Servant Leadership to be inclusive. You need to consciously and intentionally include EVERY constituency. I used to keep a laminated list on my desk so that I could easily check to see if I had communicated appropriately and in a timely way with all of them.

The constituencies included students, parents, faculty [full time, part-time, adjuncts], staff [employees and contracted], alumni/ae, board members (trustees, alumni/ae, advisory, etc.), community members, partners (including contracted services), and the media.

You will know whom to contact and why. But they should hear from you regularly, even if there’s just an update that all goes well, or important dates or events, etc.

Celebrations

Finally, but not least importantly, you need to bring people together (on-campus or virtually), to socialize. A college administrator told me recently how other employees who were single and lived alone, desperately needed opportunities to interact with other people in ways other than

business-related. For those who have families and regular contact with friends, this may be less of an issue. But beyond human interaction, you need to take the time to celebrate success, demonstrate your appreciation, and provide opportunities for laughing, eating and sharing. You need to encourage your direct reports to schedule and lead these events. You don't need to actively participate in every celebration. But your presence, if only a brief appearance to say "thank you" and to acknowledge their importance to the institution, is critical.

Hanging in my office (and now my home office) was always a quotation by Lao Tzu that was used by Robert Greenleaf in describing Servant Leadership:

"A leader is best when people barely know he (or she) exists, when his (or her) work is done, his (or her) aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves."

Your institution will survive COVID-19. Moreover, I predict that your institution will thrive. It will achieve this success because of your leadership. The words of Lao Tzu have never been more applicable. Your leadership will empower and enable your entire campus community and they will take the credit. And that's the way it should be. Good luck!

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