

Rockbridge County High School Leadership Summit
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Keynote Address by Dr. Thomas Shields

Introduction

My comments today are not about being a leader or about the power or authority that you develop as a leader. My comments are not on how you should practice seven habits or traits to make you the best you can be. My comments are on the nature of a very complex word – leadership.

The word leadership has been studied for many, many years. One leading scholar has stated that the term leadership is one of the most misunderstood phenomena on earth. It is a term that is rife with meaning and complexity. However, what I hope that you will learn from my talk today is that leadership is about your own learning and your own perspectives and your own capacities. Although I teach at a leadership school and have studied the word I have no greater sense of the term than you do. That is because leadership is a very personal concept based on our own individual norms, values and experiences.

I would first like to start by contrasting the word leader with that of leadership. A leader is one person - a singular figure that has certain traits, such as great hair or a good speaking voice or a way of energizing a crowd. A leader also has actions or behaviors that we observe and that we talk about. A leader is a person behind a podium or in front of thousands of people speaking on a great topic.

Leadership is a much more dynamic word. It includes a leader, but also must include followers. It must include the interactions or behaviors of both leaders and followers. It always includes a situation or the circumstances that the leaders and the followers find themselves in. Leadership involves ethical or unethical behavior by the leader and the followers. It involves value interpretations and misunderstandings.

By definition, it is a process of people coming together to act toward a commonly held belief or possibly a goal. It is that process and that action of people coming together that I view is the essence of leadership.

I want to talk to you about the various ways that leadership is a journey, but I also want you to reflect on how your life and your experiences will prepare you for leadership in the future.

To think of leadership as a journey helps us realize how it is a process. To examine leadership as an action of people coming together helps us realize that we all practice the concept. It is not an idea reserved for presidents, superintendents, mayors, or CEO's of companies. We all practice leadership, every day.

Leadership as a Journey

I know many of you are thinking of the summer days that are quickly approaching. You are daydreaming of trips to the beaches or hikes to your favorite swimming holes. If you were like me during high school, your days are spent scheming and planning on what you

will do during when school gets out. With summer just around the corner, I thought it would be appropriate to discuss the nature of leadership as a journey.

Think of a journey that you have been on – maybe a family vacation, maybe a class outing, or a trip with friends. What did it feel like to participate in this trip? What did you sense while you were on this outing? What were the motives for your journey? Did you reach your final destination? Did you enjoy your stay or were you dissatisfied?

To examine this concept of leadership as a journey, I want to utilize the book *Journey to the East* by Herman Hesse. Maybe some of you have read Hesse in your English classes. Hesse was a German author who wrote many novels, such as *Demian*, *Siddhartha*, *Beneath the Wheel*, and *Narcissus and Goldmund*. It was *Journey to the East*, which was a reflection of Hesse's life, where we see the notion of what it means to examine a lived life.

In *Journey to the East* there is a narrator, H.H., who joins a group called the League. The League is a group of individuals who have banded together to travel through space and time. They depart on their journey with each member of the group having different interpretations and notions of what they hope to achieve out of their travels. As they move along their journey they experience the camaraderie and joy of being part of something exciting.

There is a character named Leo who accompanies the group as a servant. Leo is described by Hesse as a very admirable and likable individual. He is humble, yet very

knowledgeable. At one point, the group awakes and realizes that Leo, their servant, has left them. He is no longer with them. With Leo's absence the group begins to quarrel and fight among themselves and eventually they go their separate ways. Obviously, they could not continue without the servant Leo.

H.H is distraught at the collapse of the journey and he doesn't know what he is to do with his life. He struggles to find out what the journey meant and why they were traveling. He also desperately needs to find Leo to ask him why he left the group. After much searching, he finds Leo, but Leo is no longer a servant. Leo is a leader. In fact, he is the great leader of this society, the League, which had sponsored the journey that H.H. was on. Leo no longer wears the trappings of a servant but sits on a high throne and is dressed in beautiful clothes. Leo's appearance is very different from what H.H. remembered, but his actions and behaviors have not changed. He still is very humble, caring and sincere. I want you to remember this character Leo and remember the importance of the journey that H.H. and Leo went on. Throughout my talk I will come back to the story.

Like all journeys the first and most important piece is the planning stage. You cannot have an enjoyable trip if you do not plan and make sure that you have comfortable accommodations and the correct travel arrangements and connections. This is the same with leadership – planning and understanding the nature of where you are going is so very important. However, what one individual believes is important – such as the places to visit, the hotels to stay in, the museums to see, -- might not be important to the next person.

When my wife and I plan a trip, it is always the planning stage where we get into heated discussions over what we will do and where we will go. She loves the mountains, while I like the water. We struggle over which one we would enjoy more – the mountains or the beaches. Sometimes the planning stage can be the most difficult because of these different opinions and viewpoints on where to go, where to stay, and what places to visit. To ensure that it is a good trip, conversations will need to occur and a consensus will need to be reached.

This leads to a very important component of leadership, which is dialogue. Leadership does not happen in a vacuum. Leaders need followers. Let me repeat that again, leaders need followers. All too often we view leadership in a singular fashion with focus on the traits and characteristics of the leader. Nothing can be further from the truth. Leadership is not about the leader, but about the leader's interactions with followers. This is called a dialectic, or dialogue, or consensus building. If we have leaders that tell us what to do, or direct us without listening to what we believe is important, that is not leadership. This is called ruling or manipulating or directing – it is not leading.

As teenagers, you know how difficult it is when somebody – your parent or teacher or coach or even a friend – tells you what to do without asking for your opinion. They don't accept who you are or accept your ideas. Now imagine if all our leaders told us what to do. What if no leader listened to us or asked us what we had to say? As you know, that would not be enjoyable. Therefore, for leadership to occur we must have leaders that are

to listen to us as followers and to understand what we would like to achieve. Leadership must be filled with conversations, discussions, and a dialogue between leaders and followers.

When you plan your vacation, you begin to examine various travel brochures and websites -- to envision what your vacation will be like. You look for pictures of the hotel, you check out the beaches, or you download information on the ski slopes. This leads to the next important piece of leadership – creating a vision with followers and the situation in mind.

After the character H.H. from *Journey to the East* leaves his group, he becomes disillusioned. The visions he had of his journey became distorted. Visioning is very important to leadership because it involves others. A vision that is based solely on what you want to achieve as an individual is not leadership. Visions of fame and glory or of large homes and fancy cars are also not leadership. Visions of assisting others to be the best they can be and to help followers with their wants, aspirations, and needs is leadership. When it involves what you will do to help others – that is when it becomes leadership.

The next important piece of a trip is getting to your destination and experiencing the various sites. Once you arrive you become a tourist. You begin to experience the visions of what you had planned for so long. You begin to see the sites that you had witnessed in the travel brochures and on websites. You also begin to enjoy the company of your

family and friends while visiting the attractions that your wonderful destination has to offer.

Leadership is similar in that after the planning process is the implementation of the idea. The action of implementing a plan is where you see if all your hard work will be successful. If you have done all the necessary preparation and you have consulted with the desires of everyone than your trip should be wonderful. However, if your parents did not ask you where you wanted to go or the sites that you wanted to see where not on the itinerary than you will not be interested or enjoy the vacation. The implementation needs to involve as many ideas and thoughts as possible.

Being a tourist also requires that you respect the place that you are visiting and that you respect those who you are traveling with. In *Journey to the East* the band of travelers respected the desires and thoughts of each of the participants. They realized that each was on the journey for their own reasons. It wasn't until Leo left the group did they have a falling out and begin to fight and quarrel with each other. By practicing service, Leo was the glue that held the group together. He helped each participant on the journey realize the notion of why they were there and where they were going. Once he vanished, this service to them was no longer available.

One of the most difficult aspects of a journey is to realize that it will eventually end. In your life, you will generate your own memories and pictures to remember the trips and to discuss these with your family and friends. Leadership has the same ends – to create the

memories and to instill those stories and narratives in each one of us. Leadership should help us remember the problems that we have faced and the obstacles that we have overcome. It should also help us remember our success and our victories. The consolation during the difficult hours and the celebrations at times of joy are what makes for true leadership.

People Coming Together: Relationships of Leadership

Obviously, planning and going on a trip is difficult work. It requires a great deal of time and effort. It is a process that involves many people and various thoughts on what would make a great vacation. The vacations where everyone comes together and decides on a destination are usually the most successful and enjoyed by all.

It is the second component of the definition of leadership that I would like to focus on – the act of people coming together. Leadership at its basis is relational. This means that relationships form the foundation of all leading. Without people coming together and acting in a way that encourages trust and respect than there is no leadership. For leadership to occur there needs to be human connectivity and face-to-face interaction.

Leadership as Self Discovery

The journey of leadership begins with self-discovery. It begins with the knowledge of who we are and who we want to become. It is a faith-filled journey, because to be a leader requires faith in our selves and in the people that we are leading. H.H. lost faith in himself. He lost faith in who he was and what the journey meant to him and to his fellow

travelers. In fact, at the end of the book when Leo reveals himself as a great leader he asks H.H. why he lost faith in what he was doing. Leo never lost faith in who he was or what they were doing on the journey.

On your journey of life never lose faith in yourself. Trust in what you are doing. Trust in who you are as a person. Yes, we all have our bad days, weeks or even months where nothing is going our way. We all live roller coaster lives. However, those who persevere are those who believe in themselves. They are the fighters. They do not wither and decay, nor are they transitory, the belief in themselves and what they are doing. They believe that their visions and actions will outlast all the bad news and the problems.

Service and Leadership

If you believe in your self and what you are doing should benefit more than just yourself, than you are acting for a higher order. Leadership is about service to others. In fact, in the story Leo says to H.H., “He who wishes to live long must serve, but he who wishes to rule does not live long.” Individuals who try to rule us and try to tell us what to do without respecting us are rulers. Rulers are not leaders. If you will recall from the story, the character Leo was a servant first. It was not until the very end of the story that he reveals himself to H.H. as a great leader. Servant leadership requires that we serve others first before we serve the interests of ourselves. Practicing service and leadership means that we look out for the common or community’s interest before we try to protect our self interest. As servant leaders we believe the needs of others are more important than the needs of ourselves.

Martin Luther King, Mahatma Ghandi, and Mother Teresa were great leaders who served their followers. These leaders knew that they were on a journey with their followers that required that they listen and that they dialogue with them about the issues and troubles that they were facing. They served the people who they were working to free. King served both blacks and whites realize the injustice of segregation; Ghandi served the people of India under the tyranny of British rule; and Mother Teresa served the poor of Calcutta and others across the world.

In fact, there is a story of Mother Teresa in her old age assisting a volunteer in lifting a patient onto a bed. The patient was in the bed sheets and was about to be moved onto the bed when she looked down into the frail eyes of the patient and said trust in God. It was the same advice that Leo gave to H.H. as he stood in front of him – trust in your self and trust in me. As a servant leader, Leo realized that it was his duty to serve his followers and to be kind to them. He realized that he needed to uplift them and show them what they journey really meant.

This type of service occurs everyday and everywhere. It is what your teachers practice. It is what your parents practice. It is what my wife practices as a social worker at the Medical College of Virginia. My wife helps the patients on the 11th floor who have been severely injured in car crashes and motorcycle accidents. She assists families who are struggling with family members who have suffered strokes and brain injuries. Everyday families and patients look to her for advice on what to do next. We often think that it is

the surgeons and doctors who are the ones healing people and making sure that everyone is doing well. I'll tell you that it is really the social workers and nurses who make sure that the patients and the families are the ones who really matter. They do not get the credit or the big salaries, but are practicing leadership day in and day out.

When you look for leadership – don't always look for what would be typically be categorized as the leader. Don't look for the person behind the podium or the person shouting at us on the television. Look for the person who is appreciative of the journey and who is acting as a servant first. Those who act as a leader first are not practicing true leadership. Yes, they may be successful and accomplish goals, but at what cost to themselves and to the individuals they are working with. Are they the true prophets? Or, are the individuals who are servants and practice service, the real leaders?

I want to leave you with some parting thoughts on how you may begin to practice service and leadership:

- 1) Develop the skills and knowledge that are necessary to take sustained and just action. Proper change is not explosive, but is incremental and cumulative;
- 2) Envision how you might create moral change in yourself and ethical change in a community. Good leadership has positive moral actions and consequences practiced by individuals and ethical structures that support strong organizations and societies;
- 3) Practice self-respect. Self-respect is not self-promotion. Self-respect is believing in your ideas and believing in who you are as a human. Never underestimate the humanistic qualities of leadership;

4) Seek out benevolence toward others. Realize that to be a leader means that you cannot act alone. Further it means that your actions must be trusting and caring of others;

5) Finally, develop critical thinking skills. The ability to participate in a dialectic involving the needs of a community, not the needs of an individual, means that you will need to be able to express your ideas and your thoughts.

Leadership is leaving behind the self-interest for a focus on the common interest. It is focusing on the “we” and not the “I.” By doing this, you will realize what it means to live with “the other.” To know what it means to travel a mile in someone else’s shoes.

Most of all, remember to enjoy the journey. Thank you.