

Teaching Leadership to All

The Educational Challenge of Our Times

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hundred years ago, if we had asked a group of competent and talented educators whether any child — regardless of race, class, or gender — could one day learn to read Shakespeare, write scientific papers, or do algebraic math, all but the most visionary would have answered, “No.” Only a small segment of the population was deemed capable of scaling such educational heights, while the rest were steered towards vocational programs or out of school altogether.

Through the combination of three elements — the changing needs of society, beliefs about what all children can do, and outstanding pedagogy — our answer has turned 180 degrees. The clear “no” has become a resounding “yes.”

I mention this point, because I have been thinking a lot about historical perspective. Since 2005, I have been integrally involved with an institute that has hitched itself to an idea that, until recently, was philosophically debatable, much like a political point of view. But I have come to believe that the same three converging factors listed above compel us to dramatically recast our beliefs and our educational practice in an area of vital concern. The institute in question is the Gardner Carney Leadership Institute (gcLi). And the area of concern, which you have no doubt discerned from the title, is leadership. Specifically, whether leadership can — and should — be taught.

The Changing Needs of Society

Human societies have always needed good leaders, of course, but our times are unique. We live in an age of mounting pressures posed by a confluence of factors never before seen: global warming, rising populations, staggering social inequities, the widespread use of toxic chemicals, deeply polarized politics, and a financial system so interdependent that a bad decision by a small group in one corner of the globe can unleash disastrous effects upon economies everywhere. These factors have effectively shrunk our world. At no other point in our history have the choices we’ve made had the potential to create such a deep and lasting imprint upon so many others, or cause so much harm. In such a world, developing good leaders has never mattered more.

This is what Jim Carney, chair of Carney, Sandoe and Associates — a teacher

recruitment, executive search, and consulting firm — glimpsed in the midst of personal tragedy. He and his wife, Laurie, had suffered through an unfathomable loss: their son Gardner, an expert kayaker, had died in an accident on a river during his senior year of college. “We had to do something to create meaning out of the madness,” says Carney. At first, they established a fund for the development of teacher leadership at the Fountain Valley School of Colorado, where Gardner had thrived. But after a year, a bigger idea struck. “Looking out into the world, with our crumbling institutions and our devastating challenges,” Carney recalls, “we realized that the only way these challenges were going to be met was through leadership. Yet, if you look at the world today, the possibility for a young person to learn leadership is actually less than it was when I was growing up. Back then, we had civics courses, and neighborhoods and community centers. Where is a child going to learn leadership skills today?”

The answer: schools. “The teacher and the school are the last stand,” Carney says. “So, we decided to focus on an area where no one was working: teaching teachers to teach leadership.”

The idea evolved into an institute devoted solely to research, publishing, and teacher training on “the pedagogy of leadership.”

Beliefs About What Children Can Do

Because it requires a new way of thinking, “the pedagogy of leadership” begins, first and foremost, with a rewiring of beliefs — specifically about what is possible for children to do. When we think about extraordinary leaders, we tend to think of luminaries like Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, or Jane Goodall. Perhaps, like me, you had the fortune to be schooled by an extraordinary head of school. The problem is, when the word “leader” calls such figures to mind, they are necessarily different from the rest of us — paragons of rare greatness.

Take my high school headmaster. Mr. Finney stood six-feet, three-inches. He had been the only three-sport College All-American since the legendary Jim Brown. Tales of his physical and moral stature were mythic at my school. How could the rest of us be like him?

This is where a combination of a strategic definition of “leadership” and contemporary brain research enter the picture. Beginning with Daniel Goleman’s [*Emotional Intelligence*](#) and continuing with the work of modern neurobiologists like Rebecca Saxe of MIT, the last two decades have seen a proliferation of research that converges upon one outstanding and essential idea: virtually any human skill can be taught, including the realms that used to be assigned solely to personality and genetics.

Goleman, for example, has shown that business managers can make enormous changes in their self-awareness, communication styles, and understanding about how their actions affect others. The work has become so familiar to us that it is

tempting to forget how radical it is; even adults with thousands of hours of repetition of certain behaviors can comprehensively rewire how they behave. Destructive managers can become constructive. Isolationists can learn to be team players. What sort of implications might this pose for children — eminently more adaptable, with even more plasticity in their brains?

This is where the gcli perceived an opening. Melding the literature of emotional intelligence with leadership theory, group dynamics, and neurological science, the institute proposed that leadership is not some abstract, elusive quality, but rather a set of brain-based capabilities that — given the right environment, sufficient hours of practice, and precisely trained teachers — virtually any child can learn.

Internationally acclaimed lecturer and brain researcher Dr. JoAnn Deak, who has served as the Institute Scholar at gcli since its inception, affirms this view. “For almost any human being, any kind of skill set is improvable — and often vastly improvable,” Deak says. “Almost anyone can improve tremendously in his or her capacity to be a leader.”

The key is practice. “You have to have the information that gets you to understand what leadership is all about in all its permutations,” Deak continues. “But once that happens, the output is most critical for change. That’s what gives the most stretch in becoming a leader. I can think about leadership. I can know a lot about leadership. I can even write about it and have great discussions. But the key is the magic of doing.... I need to be in a position where I practice and make missteps, and someone is there to guide me and help me grow.”

It is a revolutionary shift in thought. For if the concept of leadership is identified with extraordinary, finished products — the Gandhis and Goodalls of the world — the bar is set so high, the exercise of skill so refined, it places the whole field beyond our reach. But as soon as we say that leadership is composed of a set of common, human skills, the matter is turned on its head. Leadership capacity becomes like literacy capacity, or art, or athletics, or any of the activities that have been successfully taught in our schools. Developing the leadership competencies of our students becomes a question of finding — and applying — the proper pedagogy.

Outstanding Pedagogy

Outstanding pedagogy, every teacher knows, begins by carefully breaking down activities into their parts. In the realm of leadership, there have been countless efforts to come up with a comprehensive definition, but none of them work. The concept is too big to be pinned down by words. But in many of the best attempts, three components appear: the moral, the active, and the relational.

When we talk about leaders, whether we are talking about Martin Luther King, Jr. marching on Washington, or Aung San Suu Kyi writing letters from her home in Burma where she was under house arrest for 15 years, we see, first, that leaders are imbued with a moral conscience and awareness. They have empathy for those

around them, and it is on the basis of this empathy that they take courageous action. Finally, their efforts are always connected with others. Leaders have discovered the magical formula — how to pass the vision that they see, or the conviction that they feel, or the need that burns like fire in their chest, to others. They are masters at moving individuals and groups.

These three strands define a simple map for how we can teach leadership in our schools:

- Leadership is *concerned with taking courageous action*, so students need practice taking risks and making mistakes.
- Leadership is *tied to caring and the betterment of others*, so students need practice understanding the emotions of others and developing empathy.
- And leadership is inherently involved with the *functioning of groups*, so students need practice developing their emotional intelligence and facility in managing groups.

The question is: put against the test of real life, do these principles actually work?

Stories from the Field

For Gordon McNeil, a graduate of gcli's inaugural Leadership Lab in 2005, a summer intensive program where the pedagogy of leadership is taught, there is no question about the answer. "Absolutely," he says.

And then he proceeds to explain, with energy and conviction, the culture that has been built at Sage Hill School (California), where for the last two years he has been the head.

"At Sage Hill," he says, "We have an expression: 'The world is run in small groups.'" By that, he means that, at whatever level of society one looks, key decisions affecting the whole are made by small groups of people meeting and working together.

"So we put kids in those decision-making positions all the time." He outlines a school in which, from the first day, there is an expectation that all students will lead something, "whether that's leading an advisory discussion, or a class, or a club." The seniors set the

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tone for all students. They either lead freshman orientation, advising groups, and retreats by themselves, or they do so in conjunction with faculty. All-school meetings are scheduled and run by students.

When I ask for dramatic stories about leadership, McNeill tells me of a student who organized a group of peers to build a computer application for the Apple store that facilitates making targeted donations to communities ravaged by catastrophe. But he cautions, “I think it’s the small leadership opportunities that people don’t see that are the most meaningful. You have the kid who is the student government president, and that’s an incredible experience. But I would argue that just as valuable is the kid who is in the classroom leading small group discussions, leading a group through a conversation and coming out the other end with deeper understanding. Because really that’s how the world works — in small groups.” The key to success, he says, is making sure that the school gives kids those opportunities all the time.

Fred Roberts, the leadership coordinator at St. Gregory School (Arizona), articulates exactly the same points. When I ask him what the key to teaching leadership is, he responds, “You have to put students out there. You have to put them on the line in some sort of leadership situation. Then you give them feedback. Accountability is key. Then, you put them out there again.”

With a long background in outdoor education, Roberts favors providing leadership opportunities in ropes courses, with group challenges, and on backpacking trips in the outdoors. “It’s amazing what happens to students,” he says, “when they know they are leaders.”

He describes an all-city initiative in which 60 middle school students from 20 schools will be coming to his campus, and his senior leaders will guide the groups. But then he adds, “Students can learn leadership anywhere. The opportunities are happening all the time. When a student is giving a speech, in that moment, she could be learning about leadership. The class is hers. But so many of those moments pass, because nobody points it out to them.”

At The Rivers School (Massachusetts), the desire to take advantage of every leadership moment has taken on a life of its own. According to head of school Tom Olverson, “This whole thing [around leadership] was teacher-led. The only thing that came from me was when I said to the faculty, ‘Hey folks, in our mission statement, we talk about wanting to graduate good human beings, and what exactly are we doing?’

“So we sent Sam off to gcli. She came back and gave a presentation that was just fantastic. And more of our teachers began to see the importance of leadership, not only as a mechanism for us to graduate good human beings, but also in helping them to be better teachers — and we got them trained. It was Sam’s presentation that ignited interest.”

The Sam in question is Samantha Brennan, a former school counselor who now holds the title of director of upper school leadership. Although everyone I speak with at the school insists that they are still young on the path, it is clear that they are building a leadership culture. Students feel permission to initiate change because they know they will be heard — like the senior who suggested to his advisor that he become her teaching assistant in freshman math. The teaching assistant program has since spread to every math class in the freshman year and will be piloted in French classes.

But it is the broad leadership orientation that captures my attention. Brennan explains, “Before the year begins, we hold a two-day intensive overnight for more than 50 students who will hold formal leadership roles. There are group challenges, where students are pushed to test their leadership and receive feedback from their peers; they set goals for their organizations; and we discuss what we believe about leadership here at Rivers.”

“We do this,” she continues, “because we often elect student leaders but don’t give them the skills or the knowledge to lead. At Rivers, we decided that they should be responsible for a lot of things that we adults can’t provide for our community. So, it’s important for us to invest in them.”

It’s important for us to invest in them. For me, the phrase resonates deeply. I think of the students in the school where I teach and try to envision what the world is going to require of them in 10 or 20 years, and I pause. I believe that the way I teach English will serve my students well, but at times, I have doubts. How people communicate, learn, and develop professional expertise is shifting so rapidly, it is difficult to know how to keep pace.

But of one thing I am sure. The days when the development of leadership was relegated to destiny or mystery are gone. You may not agree with everything posed by the gcli. Yet, you would be hard-pressed to ignore the sea of evidence that shows that leadership competencies can be taught. With the right kind of practice, sufficient repetition, and effective mentoring, human beings can become substantially better at virtually any skill. In a world desperately in need of good leaders, why *wouldn’t* every school make a strategic and intentional plan to develop young leaders today for the challenge of global leadership tomorrow? It seems like a timely investment to me.

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