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Leading Thoughts

In this section, we invite leading educators, scholars, and practitioners to share their thoughts on leadership. The main purpose of this section is to spur new ways of thinking about leadership as they relate to these areas.

As you consider the ideas presented in this section, you may want to take a step further and bring them to the classroom for further discussion. “Leading Thoughts” is designed to open new avenues for dialogue among those interested in deepening their own thinking about the nature of leadership.

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Connective Leadership: Our Last, Great Leadership Hope

Dr. Jean Lipman-Blumen

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The current leadership landscape reveals few leaders who “get it.” Rather than recognizing the urgent need to bring diverse groups together to solve serious mutual problems, our elected leaders, again and again, cling to their own narrow agendas. Where are the noble visions that leaders are supposed to articulate so the rest of us may join in and enhance the world, as well as the meaning of our own lives?

Few leaders have caught on to the fact that we have moved into a new historical moment, the Connective Era. The challenges this new era presents are markedly different from those of the recent past. In the emerging Connective Era, everyone and everything are connected.

Yet, here’s the rub: These connections link people and groups with vastly different identities, histories, and agendas. The Internet provides the perfect metaphor for our times: We can connect to anyone at the click of a mouse, both those we know and those we don’t. Six degrees of separation went out with the historical tides. We live in an age of micro-separation. Social media, with its patterns of “liking” and “following,” only multiplies the effects of our connections to those we know personally, as well as to total strangers.

While that may sound exciting and cozy, these connections link very diverse parties, each with its own identity and agenda. So, while interdependence demands collaboration and acknowledged mutuality, however narrow, diversity moves in the *opposite* direction.

Diversity calls for *independence*, distinctiveness, and frequently solo action. For many groups still struggling to assert their identity, to be recognized for their distinctive goals – be they women, Blacks, immigrants, or

Tea Partiers — this move toward integration is not necessarily easy. Other groups with long-standing identities, like Democrats and Republicans, often energize themselves by celebrating their differences. Without connective leaders, Israelis and Palestinians – despite their ancient interdependent history — find themselves caught up in the same game, set on an even deadlier course.

This is where connective leaders enter the picture. Connective leaders have the know-how to integrate diverse groups for productive interdependence. With their “connective eye,” they see those pockets of mutuality that can serve as starting points for collaboration. Connective leaders are not unrealistic dreamers. Besides, they understand something very important: Compromise is not the answer – and for a very good reason.

Compromise requires both parties to abandon a cause or principle they have long held close to their hearts.

Consequently, as the early management expert Mary Parker Follett understood, the compromisers then come to the negotiating table with a profound sense of loss and grief at what they have been forced to forego to attain some working agreement. Worse yet, they feel a deep disappointment in themselves, born of the shame of self-doubt and hypocrisy that comes from abandoning a long-cherished position simply to “make a deal.”

Instead, connective leaders help conflicting groups to *integrate*, to start at some point of mutuality, even if it focusses on a much less important issue than the large, pulsing ones that divide them. Gradually, connective leaders help conflicting parties enlarge that area of mutual concern. They build trust around other issues that are important to both parties, yet relatively distant from their points of disagreement.

Connective leaders give time and repeated interaction the elbow room to nourish mutual respect, admiration, and sometimes even genuine friendships. At that point, the differences on the big issues seem easier to resolve, if only in bite-size pieces. Not that I am recommending simply bite-size accommodation, but big visions require leaders with “big” character, “big” dedication to causes larger than themselves, and “big” selflessness. Such leaders seem in short supply these days.

For example, pro-choice and pro-life groups disagree about abortion. Yet, for both groups, for different reasons, pornography is abhorrent. A connective leader could bring a small group of pro-choice and pro-life advocates together around their mutual disdain for pornography. In the process, their reciprocal stereotypes would gradually evaporate in the fire of real life interaction focused on a common goal – closing down the local pornography shop. Then, with the resulting trust and, perhaps, new relationships, they could close in on more central issues.

Integrating warring parties is not a “walk in the park.” Nor does it occur in one afternoon over tea or in one evening over scotch. It requires a dedication and steadfastness that connective leaders bring to their tasks.

Integration also demands a higher vision, one to which both parties can lay claim. For example, must Democrats and Republicans maintain their death grip on their separate principles designed to enhance their own positions (mostly, their own re-elections)? Or can they develop a more connective leadership perspective, one that enables both groups to achieve something worthwhile for the larger society? Can the Israelis and Palestinians use a more connective leadership approach to resolve issues that threaten to poison their own future generations and the world around them?

Connective leadership is “not for sissies.” It has two imperatives: authenticity and accountability.

Authenticity requires, not merely “walking the talk,” but consistent dedication to the *group’s* goals and welfare, rather than to the *leader’s*. Accountability, authenticity’s twin imperative, calls for transparency, explanations, and truth telling.

I admit the demands of connective leadership are non-trivial, but they are certainly worth the effort. More

than that, in our increasingly fragmented, but interdependent and diverse world, it may be our last and only real hope for a future.

Dr. Jean Lipman-Blumen is Co-founding Director of the Drucker School's Institute for Advanced Studies in Leadership. She is the founding and president of the Connective Leadership Institute, Pasadena, California, a leadership development and research firm (<http://connectiveleadership.com>). She is the author of eight books, including *The Connective Edge: Leading in an Interdependent World*, which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. In 2010, she received the International Leadership Association's (ILA) Lifetime Achievement Award, for her "accomplishments in the development and enhancement of the field of leadership over her lifetime." She served as special advisor to the Domestic Policy Staff in the White House under President Jimmy Carter and was a Fellow, Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences.

Being The Most Popular Kid in the Class Doesn't Work Forever...

Dr. Christopher B. Howard

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I can recall vividly the seventh grade student council competition. My social studies teacher dutifully scanned the classroom for volunteers exalting at least one of us to run for office. Never shy to voice my opinion, it was not too difficult for me to accept her charge. "Howie for Student Council" posters joined similarly decorated signs for candidates vying for a coveted position as a representative of the people. More importantly, time drew nearer and nearer to when each candidate was expected to give their campaign speech to students waiting anxiously with open ears and closed minds.

After the fifth candidate finished it was my turn to speak, I was passionate, energetic and interested in helping my fellow students; however my talk was not terribly remarkable. But regardless of my oratory skills, I had something every kid needed to win an election: popularity. Like most other young people that age, I equated popularity with leadership. Not much changed during my successful runs for office through high school and even college but I eventually arrived at positions in the military, Corporate America, non-profits and higher education where by definition, making unpopular decisions represented effective leadership. The desire to be popular had somehow become a liability.

As the president of Hampden-Sydney College, I am impressed each day by young people who figuratively and literally want to change the world. Through their work with clubs, organizations and even their very own 501(c)(3) corporations housed both on and off campus, these young men work diligently for a greater good, leading as best they know how. They support popular causes and not too unlike my seventh grade student council campaign, they remain generally well-liked by all they encounter. But I think it is important to caution this, at times overly-confident generation, as well as the reader, that leadership is not a popularity contest. Moreover, those of us who teach and develop future leaders must educate these apt pupils on what is just around the corner in their often peripatetic lives.

Professor Ronald Heifetz of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University often talks about leadership being a dangerous place. It is even more so for young people if they transition to roles unprepared mentally, emotionally, spiritually and even physically for the daunting tasks at hand. As old-fashioned as it may sound, we need to provide opportunities for emerging leaders to develop toughness or as Dr. Angela Duckworth from the University of Pennsylvania calls GRIT, if they are to survive and thrive in the 21st century. I am not arguing for a Dickensonian, grey world consisting of ritualistic slaps on the wrist just because. However, I am reminding scholars and practitioners of leadership education alike to recall that

no matter how elegant an idea may be it often takes an individual with the courage to endure some degree of deprivation seeing it through to the end. Perhaps the best way of achieving this goal is by intentionally linking character education to leadership development with the appropriate crucible experiences incorporated along the way. Good examples include individuals like Bob McDonald, CEO of Proctor & Gamble, and Colonel Mark Hyatt, Executive Director of the Foundation for Character Development, who sponsor important initiatives that assist with positive character formation. The military calls it the “loneliness of command” while others, describing the quintessential leadership role, the American Presidency, describe it as “the glorious burden.” Whichever title one chooses, leadership is not a seventh grade student council election. We must keep this precept in mind when developing the next generation of leaders.

Dr. Christopher Howard is the President of Hampden-Sydney College, a private, liberal arts college for men in Virginia. Dr. Howard is a graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy, where he earned a BS in political science. A Rhodes Scholar, he earned his Doctorate in politics at Oxford University and an MBA with distinction from the Harvard Business School. Before his appointment as President of Hampden-Sydney College in 2009, Dr. Howard served as Vice President for Leadership & Strategic Initiatives at the University of Oklahoma, where he also served as the Director of the Honors College Leadership Center and a President’s Associates Presidential Professor.

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