

## REVIEW OF RESEARCH

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# SPIRITUALITY AND LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL TRENDS

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*Leaders have assumed their positions of power in a variety of ways: through election, designation, inheritance, and coincidental timing or stealth. Regardless of the means of ascent into power, a leader's endorsement is well regarded. The research findings of Covey (1989), Bennis (1989), Greenleaf (1973), Deming (1986), Drucker (1996), Bolman and Deal (1991), Fox (1995), and others support a strong correlation between leadership and the success or failure of a community, business, or organization. Hence, because these two elements appear to be inextricably tied to one another, it is paramount to the group's welfare that the leader be one who is capable and trustworthy of promoting the communal mission. The sweeping changes in our country's social, political, and economic climate at the end of the 20th century brought with them a pervasive mistrust in leaders of government, businesses, and other institutions including schools. In reviewing the trends in leadership and effective schools, this study concerned the traits of effective leaders and the emerging perception of the importance of spirituality to leadership. This article, reviewing the most recent scholarly and popular literature on leadership, is the first in a series of articles based on a current study of leadership and spirituality.*

A leader is best  
 When people hardly know he exists,  
 Not so good  
 When people obey him and acclaim him,  
 Worse when they despise him.  
 But of a good leader  
 Who talks little  
 When his work is done, his aim fulfilled,  
 They will say  
 We did it ourselves.

—Lao Tzu (Spears, 1995, p. 242)

## COMMUNITIES

Historical accounts of the earliest civilizations demonstrate that people congregate into interdependent groups that reflect their shared values and common interests. Precursors to formal organizations, these groups or communities have typically reflected the religious, political, cultural, and social norms of their members. Gardner (1990) cited Cicero's classic essay *De Re Publica* to illustrate the purpose of communities: "a people is not just any collection of human beings...they are associated in an agreement with respect to justice, in a partnership for the common good" (p. 113). Palmer (1993) reflected upon the importance of reviving a sense of community. In order to better promote the welfare of a group, its values and mission must be insulated and preserved.

## GREAT LEADERS

In order to maintain homeostasis within their communities, people have historically relied upon leaders to "define reality, interpret rules, generate policies, and dictate behavioral norms" (Fairholm, 1998, p. 6). A leader is one who symbolizes the meaning of a community, one who must strike the vision, set the tone, and reinforce the group's collective values. Vanier (1993) depicted leaders as guardians of unity.

In his thoughtful examination, Jennings (1960) characterized leaders as those who by definition are superior individuals; a leader is one who is bold, righteous, pure, and benevolent; who is courageous and stands up against evil. As he traced leadership throughout history, Jennings pointed out that the early Greek leaders were regarded as "idea beginners" (p. 3), suggesting that the historical precepts of Greek rulers have transcended time. In a rather simplistic characterization, Jennings noted that successful leaders combined the traits of supermen (destroyers of evil), heroes (those of noble causes), and princes (regal dominators). Citing the famous historian Thomas Carlyle, Jennings concluded "great men, not events, shape history...the history of mankind is merely a sequential biography of the world's greatest leaders" (p. 77). Hawley (1993) referred to leaders as the moral architects of an organization.

DuPree (1989) described leaders as humane, gentle, vital, caring people. He characterized their leadership style as artful rather than scientific, citing storytelling as an important leadership activity. Leaders celebrate an organization's history and bridge the past with the present and the future. As DuPree noted,

The genius of a leader is [his ability to] articulate a vision which is simple enough to evoke a commitment and credible enough to be accepted as realistic and attainable...whether or not people commit (to a leader) depends on their freedom and trust. (p. 273)



Persuasive examinations on the qualities of great leaders have resulted in the recognition of the traits of historical figures. Fairholm (1997) underscored the powerful significance of great leaders by depicting leadership as "the world's oldest profession" (p. 3). Citing Jesus as the "one individual who has had the greatest, [singular] influence over Western culture" (p. 173), Fairholm provided an illuminating digest of the world's most famous and effective leaders.

Wills (1994) posed the quintessential question "Why should one person do another's will?" (p. 11). As he traced the evolution of leadership, Wills characterized the relationship between leaders and followers as a shifting composite between "who we [personally] lead and who we [personally] follow...leaders who are great have answered a certain inner call...[leaders have] an essence of greatness [that] remains a mystery" (p. 270).

In sum, leaders have assumed positions of power in various ways, some by birthright or electorate choice, some via war or revolution, others as a result of a religious calling. Owing to the fact, however, that not all leaders are good and effective, Stephen Covey (1991) cautions that a leader's true validation occurs outside wealth, politics, religion, or force.

Drucker's (1996) examination of leadership posited that a truly good leader has an innate ability which cannot be prompted or taught. Wills (1994) noted that great leaders seem to gravitate naturally to these positions; that they have universally common characteristics that set them apart from others. Although difficult to measure, Wills maintained that these individuals have a certain charisma "[they seem to] stand outside the realm of authority...they are like kings...they evoke tremendous arousal from their followers by their charismatic manner" (p. 106).

Bennis (1989) contended that "leaders are by no means ordinary people.... As diverse as they are in terms of background, age, [and] occupations,...leaders...are made more by themselves than by external means" (p. 5). Bennis clarified the leadership profile by noting that "leaders have no interest in proving themselves" (p. 5), rather they are adept at expressing themselves. Bennis noted that good leaders evolve over time, changing and developing skills that assist them in influencing others. While they may have an ability to act on instinct, they are not necessarily born into a leadership role.

Gardner (1990) ascribed to the leader the "most important task [of one who keeps] hope alive" (p. 195). Gardner also underscored the connection between leadership and a sense of community in the workplace. "Limited participation in communal activities [has led] to social disintegration...in its healthiest form, a community espouses shared values and teaches lessons which heal [others]" (p. 113). Indeed, according to Covey (1991), the more a leader is deemed honorable, "is respected and genuinely regarded by others, the more legitimate power he will have" (p. 107).

## HISTORICAL TRENDS IN 20TH-CENTURY LEADERSHIP

The United States, as a national community, established its fundamental beliefs in the hard-won tenets of truth, freedom, and justice for all of its people. Following its initial inception as a constitutional entity, the historical evolution of U.S. leadership was most notably influenced by two 20th-century eras: the industrial revolution and the civil rights movement. The technological advances and burgeoning population of the 1940s and 1950s allowed U.S. corporations and institutions to develop into large, autonomous, and powerful bureaucracies. Leadership effectiveness was tied to corporate productivity and financial gain. Success was reflected less by the well-being and satisfaction of individuals than by large-scale, conglomerate economics.

This sociological transformation caused social scientists to rethink this shift in values. In thoughtful reflection upon this issue, Palmer (1993) noted "we have celebrated the powers of the human mind in our century, reveled in the far reaching advances of science. But now we begin to wonder where all this knowledge is taking us. We worry about the ecological consequences of technology, about the power of applied social science to manipulate human behavior" (p. 6). He also directed us to reconsider our core values, to seek the truth and meaning supporting our existence, and to strengthen our bonds with one another.

Facing a pervasive loss in social cohesion, the U.S. public began to question the motives of its leaders and the definition of effectiveness. Leaders in government, business, religion, and other groups struggled to maintain a sense of community in their respective organizations. By mid-century, despite its reputation as a superpower, U.S. citizens had lost faith in their leaders. Warren Bennis, Stephen Covey, Robert Greenleaf, W. E. Deming, Ken Blanchard, Norman Peale, and many other noteworthy scientists and theorists took leaders and organizations to task for their failure to lead their respective constituencies effectively. Their separate but compelling findings challenged, if not changed forever, the criterion for judging the success and failure of American institutions and their leaders. Gardner (1990) noted a slow but broad deterioration in the structure of America's communities, reasoning that as we had become a more industrialized, cosmopolitan nation we had lost our social cohesion. Bennis concluded that by the 1980s, "American organizations had been overmanaged and underled" (as cited in Peters & Austin, 1986, p. xvii). Complacent with its scientific and technological accomplishments, the U.S. corporate infrastructure was in disarray.



## CHANGES IN THE DEFINITION OF LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

In his influential essay *Servant Leadership*, Greenleaf (1977) identified a misuse of power by leaders and chief executives in all varieties and sizes of work environments. Challenging their top-down, pyramid-shaped organizational model, Greenleaf forged a shift in power away from leaders to followers. His original precept of leaders as servants has been a seminal influence in numerous other investigations that examined organizational and leadership effectiveness.

Taking a cue from Greenleaf's theory on servant leadership, Spears' 1998 text challenged the traditional guideposts for judging leadership effectiveness. Spears states:

There is a deep hunger in our society for a world where people truly care for one another, where people are treated humanely and helped in their personal growth, where workers and customers are treated fairly, where our leaders can be trusted to serve the needs based on teamwork, community, and ethical caring behavior. We seek involvement in decision making to enhance our personal growth, while improving the caring and quality of our organizations. (p. 11)

Greenleaf summarized this problem by noting, "we are becoming a nation dominated by large institutions which are not serving us well...we have made gross errors in choosing our leaders...our entire structures, the process, and ideals [of organizations] are at risk" (as cited in Spears, 1998, p. 11). Debunking the traditionalist viewpoint on management, Greenleaf is remembered for preserving a sense of humanitarianism and brotherhood. He asserted that true leaders have abilities which defy measurement and formal training.

Kouzes and Posner (1987) challenged the traditional model of leadership by shifting attention away from a unilateral style of management to a workplace that valued individual contributions and encouraged empowerment of all workers. Kouzes and Posner prefaced their text by challenging their readers to move their thinking away from the traditional model of autocratic leadership into a new realm whereby leaders are expected to cultivate the personal best of the individuals under their direction. A successful organization is grounded in the success of its employees. Following an extensive research project in 1983, they distilled five essential leadership practices. Truly successful leaders "challenged the process, inspired by a shared vision, enabled others, modeled the way, and encouraged the heart" (p. 8).

It was perhaps Deming (1986) who changed forever our definition of organizational effectiveness. In his persuasive critique of American corporations, Deming galvanized the country's shift from top-down management to

a new workplace where employees at all levels make decisions about their company. His theory, Total Quality Management, infused the concepts of empowerment, shared decision making, and participatory management into all sectors of the business world. A series of many more illuminating investigations that would reconstruct the template of leadership effectiveness followed.

In their persuasive examination of leadership, Blanchard and Peale (1988) raised the bar for leaders in their emphasis on the importance of time-honored virtues such as trust, faith, and integrity in the partnership between leaders and followers. To their credit, Blanchard and Peale were some of the first theorists to suggest that a leader's credibility and success were outcomes of seemingly intangible but nevertheless real qualities.

Following this line of thought, Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989), won universal acclaim for his illumination of the beliefs, actions, and styles of individuals who were perceived as effective leaders. Covey's assumption about win-win relationships between leaders and their employees has established a new benchmark for effective leadership. In further exploring the relationship between leaders and their community of followers, Covey proposed a core group of characteristics that signified what he termed as principle-centered leaders. Citing Mahatma Gandhi as an inspiration for this concept, Covey encouraged leaders to remain in synchrony with the group's communal mission, discounting the influences of social and political forces. Citing "conscience, character, morality, and sacrifice" (1991, pp. 87-92), Covey forged the essential character traits of an effective, principle-centered leader.

In line with Covey's findings, two personalized books on effective leadership were authored by the CEOs of successful, family-oriented businesses. Addressing the organization-leadership equation, Chappell (1993) and DuPree (1989) offered first-hand accounts of the transformation of their respective enterprises. In promoting the importance of empowerment of employees and the ensuing personal connection between leaders and followers, DuPree and Chappell echoed a resounding theme. Any corporate or institutional leader must establish a sense of communal belonging in everyone involved. DuPree's characterization of leadership as an art rather than a science suggests a different set of characteristics necessary for leaders. Of importance is his insistence upon the qualities of humanness, gentleness, and caring. DuPree also suggests that great leaders are indeed great storytellers, noting that these individuals use this method to bridge the lessons of history in the context of current events.

These groundbreaking studies forged a new benchmark for determining effective leadership. Returning to the notion that leadership is tied to the communal values and beliefs of people in a given organization, America began to search for new leaders, individuals with the ability to transform a



business or organization in a way that was good for people and would revitalize a sense of community and shared values.

Leadership is integral to a community's or an organization's success or demise. Having evolved through several decades of societal unrest, the U.S. has come to expect a redefinition of effective leadership. The sweeping changes in our country's political and economic climate brought with them a widespread mistrust and apathy toward those leadership positions.

This researcher's opinion is that prior empirical investigations into this topic have overlooked the key components of an effective leader. These key constructs are grounded in the theory that leaders must reflect the shared values and norms of the community that they are empowered to lead. In the articles which follow in this series, this researcher will explore the relationship and influence of spirituality on effective leadership as it manifests itself in educational communities.

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