

Lao Tzu is quoted in saying, “a leader is best when people know he barely exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves”. Whether this man was merely a mystical being or an accurately depicted historical figure, his impact on politics and leadership is irrefutable. Contemporaries of his time and our popular culture regard him as not only the father of Taoism, but also the wisdom behind challenging the discrepancy between positional-based and action-oriented leadership. In the quote above, Lao Tzu highlights many of the key components of effective leadership: vision (Bennis, 1997), empowerment (Watt, 2007), communication (Bugay, 2001), collaboration (Kellerman, 2009), and in the end, the ability to execute or accomplish the intended results (Kanter, 1999). Lao Tzu’s words are incredibly insightful and his philosophical bearings are inspiring, but the unspoken path that must be journeyed to embody what he has described as *effective leadership* can be challenging, and at times, uncomfortable.

Initially, as I embarked upon the quest to discover leadership, both philosophically and practically, I uncovered a few of my own misconceptions that have impacted my understanding of leading, following, and in the end, would have stifled my potential as a future leader if left unrealized. I had the understanding that leadership is not restricted to positions or titles; and however unclear or vague this conclusion was, I humbly admit I had absolutely no idea what this concept meant in reality or even the legitimacy of leadership being innate to all people (Watt, 2007). If asked how to describe *effective leadership* I would have included catch words or phrases such as vision-setting, empowerment, the leveraging of individual strengths, and job execution, but yet again, would lack a conceptual understanding of how to delineate the difference between what these words or phrases mean, and the systems, beliefs, and level of self-discovery needed to actually implement them. My understanding of what it meant to follow was limited to lacking the “ability to lead” and my perception of followership was tainted as I was unaware of the symbiotic relationship shared between leaders and followers as they are constantly changing and adapting (Wheatley, 1997). The qualities I valued most from leaders would have been found somewhere in the murkiness of what popular culture portrays as being bold, powerful, and at the top, while inadvertently, the emphasis placed upon these values reveal

my limited understanding of what it truly means to lead. Despite being seemingly overlooked, to name a few, the qualities of *effective leadership* include being able to generate and sustain trust (Bennis, 1997), commit to being a life-long learner (Hollander & Offerman, 1997), demonstrate the ability to persevere (Kanter, 1999), authentically seek and engage in with what others believe to be true (Fullan & Scott, 2009), exude a high level of compassion (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002), and develop a deep sense of consciousness (Hoppe, 2001). But if I was never exposed to these foundational components it would have inhibited my ability to be perceived as having authentic leadership potential, and then being ready to arise to the occasion of leading when it presented itself (Seifert, 2001). Obviously, my journey towards *effective leadership* was in it infancy.

The unfortunate reality is that my scope of leadership was prescribed to me by societal conditioning and norms, and I would argue, then perpetuated by the vast majority of leaders I have either worked alongside or followed. These grotesque, but yet common misconceptions defining leadership are decreasing organizations' success as the human potential that resides within them is left untapped (DePree, 2000). Often times, as organizations and institutions face the multiplying complexities innate to the challenges they are confronted by, if they simply look within, they would realize they have access to the very people and ideas needed to resolve their troubles or advance their goals (Lipman-Blumen, 1999).

At this current stage of my journey, while I am certainly still in the beginning, I would describe myself as feeling enlightened. Through my coursework, a dynamic range of leadership-based theories have been illuminated and I have come to realize the practicality of leadership through my investigations and analysis of the courses various case studies. This work has influenced my current role within education as I have become critical of the strengths and imperfections of our leaders, but hopeful for the future, knowing these voids can be filled if the potential of our teachers is wielded.

As leadership relates to education there must be both some areas of significant change and others that merely need to be strengthened and improved. The bureaucratic and hierarchal legacies found within education must be abolished, and there must instead be a push for greater leverage of authentic collaboration, coalitions, partnerships, joint ventures, and community (Lipman-Blumen, 1999) genuinely positioned around lasting student success. School systems must be led in such a way that they advance the social reality of diversity being real, having meaning, and its strengths must be employed to advance academic achievement, while preparing

future generations for the influences of globalization (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002). School leaders must abandon the continual reliance upon external changes such as policy adjustments and the implementation of new structures, and encourage and support the psychological transitions that educators must embrace in order for more meaningful and sustainable changes to occur within education. School leaders must also begin structuring their institutions to more firmly promote social responsibility, justice (Hackney, 2003), and equity (Matusak, 2000) to challenge societal value systems and beliefs to elevate the human condition. Teachers must increase their proficiency in creating more rigorous learning to increase their students' opportunities to engage, find value, and become committed to their education (DePree, 2000). Students must be perceived as a viable asset and readily included in the decision making of the school building. The student viewpoint has often been excluded and therefore some of the most credible perspectives have not been considered in making decisions (Drafth, 2003). In the end, especially considering the extent of education reform that our country is tackling, our school systems must refuse the "quick-fix" methods and begin leveraging the opportunities, skills, and dispositions found within their buildings to truly create a greater impact and more enduring legacy (Wheatley, 1997).

I now find myself in a unique position on my journey towards *effective leadership*. My understanding of leadership in theory has been acutely developed, and this is serving as a compass, both guiding and informing the actual steps that I must now take along my quest. But, while I often separate the philosophical elements from the practicality of leadership to gain my bearings, I am now at the point of knowing I must intertwine the two to boldly begin leveraging my unique strengths as they relate to leadership. Only when that stage emerges will my actual strides towards *effective leadership* not be taken in vain, and instead will be marked progress towards increasing my capacity, along with those who are in my realm of influence.

Because of my more informed understanding of what it entails to lead and follow, I now envision new obstacles and challenges that I will certainly meet along my journey. While I understand the concept of gaining more power by giving it away (Hock, 2000), by maturely looking inward, I recognize the lingering remnants of immaturity as I still struggle with envisioning myself climbing a tiered-hierarchal system to the top of "society's definition of leadership". I understand I should instead be trying to reform and redefine leadership along my journey to increase my success, but the snares set from those who came before me are awfully

enticing. To effectively, morally, and ethically lead requires one to be incredibly selfless, and this is the greatest impediment that I must overcome along my quest. I have always understood leadership as being the individual who was the most intelligent, gave the best orders, and gained the most fame. On the contrary, the realities we face today are far too complex to be addressed by just one individual (Bennis, 1997), and for me to engage in *effective leadership*, I must humbly reposition myself to serve my followers, providing them with what they uniquely require to reach their fullest potential. In the end, the extent of me looking inward or serving personal interests must be determined by its benefits to others.

I have come to realize a few things so far along this adventure of understanding and exercising leadership. It will require just as much learning of informed theories as the abandoning of misconceptions that I have acquired regarding leadership to reach my fullest potential in life. I must become completely comfortable with the notion that leadership can sometimes feel uncomfortable, and be ready to be flexible, adapt, and even at times, I must be willing to surrender myself to those who follow me (Hock, 2000). As much as I will continue to learn and employ regarding leadership, the most valuable actions I may take will be the ones to further discover myself, both gaining the skill to self organize and govern, to merge with competing ideals, perspectives, and human systems. But most importantly, in conclusion, Lao Tzu also said, “the journey of a thousand miles, begins with a single step”—and as I look onward and gaze behind, I acknowledge I have taken quite a few steps forward, but I realize there are certainly many more that lay ahead if I want to one day—*effectively lead*.

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