

creative
grace
purpose
wisdom
hope
mission
truth
active
trust
prudence
patience
love God
share
mind-body-soul
reverence
joy
devotion
courage
kindness
confident
freedom
understanding prayer
passion
friend
spirit
peace
discipline
respect
believer
reason
faith
fruitful
knowledge
serve
humility
compassion

fully
alive

VOL 6, NO 1, FALL 2021

NEWSJOURNAL OF THE RELIGIOUS AND MORAL EDUCATION COUNCIL

Balancing the Leadership Boat in Faith-Based Schools

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Being a leader in a faith-based school requires finding the right balance of leadership styles while navigating the calm and turbulent waters that school communities encounter. Faith-based leaders often gravitate naturally toward a servant-leadership model because it fits well with religious beliefs and values. However, they should note the darker, stormier side of this approach: it can dangerously encourage a hero-model leadership style that focuses on being “like Jesus,” but can easily neglect the relational aspect necessary to build effective learning communities. The captain or leader can easily sink the boat because they aren’t listening to or asking for help from the crew members when danger arises. Leaders may attempt to lead with humility, trying to save everyone from drowning. As a result, they might fail to set personal limits and boundaries, and subsequently lose their perceived managerial authority, while taking on water when trying to save others. Greater balance is needed in a relational leadership model that focuses on building community, and to help balance the leadership boat so it doesn’t sink during the journey.

The idea of servant-leadership is attributed to Robert K Greenleaf, who wrote from a secular point of view. For him, it is no mistake that the term *servant-leader* is hyphenated, because a leader is first a servant and second a leader. Greenleaf (1970) received his inspiration and based the idea of servant-leader from Hermann Hesse’s book *Journey to the East*. For Greenleaf, a great leader is one who understands himself as a servant first “and begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve” (2002, 27). Although

Greenleaf didn’t carefully work out the connection between leadership characteristics and service, his disciple Larry Spears identified several characteristics for servant-leadership.

Spears’s (2010) characteristics of servant-leadership are applicable in faith-based settings, but can create so much focus on the role of leaders that not enough emphasis is placed on building relational capacity. *Listening and understanding* involves leaders listening before responding. This encourages others to have a voice and be heard, and asks leaders to act accordingly. *Empathy* entails connecting with others at the human level and is a core factor in building relationships. Leaders can convince others through *persuasion*, as opposed to the “do and tell” culture that is dominant in society (Schein and Schein 2021) and, sadly, can be seen in religious spaces. These “heroic” characteristics may be achievable by leaders, but they run the risk of overemphasizing the ability of leaders and neglect relational aspects within communities.

For Christians, Jesus Christ is the “captain” and often upheld as the ultimate example of servant-leader; however, faith-based leaders should not exclusively commit to this model, as surprising as that may sound. During the Last Supper, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and stated, “Anyone who wants to be great among you must be a slave to all.”² This model presents a challenge to the hierarchal structure of leadership in biblical and in current educational settings. Does Christ expect leaders to walk on water? Or if they tried, would they sink like his disciple Peter? Earlier in my career as a band

teacher, I assumed full responsibility for the band's performance instead of recognizing the students' contributions. Once when a performance ended and I was cleaning up, the band started playing one of their favourite pieces without me. This was a shocker. The band's success didn't revolve around me! Focusing solely on a leader's or "captain's" ability to do heroic things, like saving the boat from sinking, is potentially dangerous, if leaders ashamedly try to dissect what they did wrong with a "zeal for instant perfection" (Greenleaf 2002, 25). *Improving a leader's relational capacity with the crew members and passengers—the school community—would be more effective.*

Bringing Balance to Servant-Leadership Is Possible

Balancing servant-leadership with relational leadership attributes strengthens and builds community. Branson, Marra and Buchanan (2019) talk about Jesus being a member of the "in-group" because he attended and participated in celebrations and other events to build trust in the community and enhance interpersonal skills, collegiality, cooperation and teamwork. He was an active member in the Jewish community and was the "champion" within the group because he had a deep understanding of what was happening and defended the vulnerable. I have found, as a band teacher and glee club director, that having a hands-on approach with students has increased my relational capacity and effectiveness as a teacher. *Relationships in the community are what keep the leadership boat sailing.*

Leading with humility is the most desirable characteristic of servant-leadership but needs to be balanced by setting personal limitations. Jesus taught, "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."³ Blanchard and Hodges (2016) describe humility as "God grounded confidence" (p 78) in which a leader knows their limitations and seeks God's assistance because they know *who they are and whose they are* (p 79). As a first-year teacher, I would do anything asked of me and sign up for every extracurricular activity possible in addition to working until the late hours of the evening. I was on the brink of drowning! But, I thought, isn't that being humble? Yes, we are committed to serve, but taking care of our own needs is just as important.

Humility is not being a "doormat" to others, but allows for listening and understanding, empathy, and awareness to serve others in ways that strengthen relational capacity.

Servant-leadership can encourage leaders to give up managerial authority, but this can be balanced by maintaining a different kind of authority. Leading with benevolence creates trust and achieves balance (Hoy and Tschannen-Moran 2007). Can you imagine what would have happened to the disciples if Jesus hadn't taken charge during the storm? Peter became afraid and would have sunk if Jesus hadn't been there to pull him out—and the boat would have succumbed to the storm. Effective leaders inspire and influence the actions of those entrusted to their care through persuasion, instead of ordering and demanding (Rohr 2018), because they have their best interests at heart. Jesus persuaded his disciples to take courage because he knew they would be safe if they had faith in him. This increases ownership and freedom, not subservience, within a group. In my current teaching setting, I have the privilege of working with an administrator who doesn't order things to be done, but encourages team collaboration and decision making. There are no department heads because every staff member has an equal voice and shares responsibility; some may even find this radical. Religious celebrations are not only the music teacher's responsibility, but all staff are involved in some way. *This model has been successful in inspiring leaders within the school community because of the achieved balance of authority created through trusting relationships.*

The servant-leader model is easily adopted in faith-based settings, but should be used with caution. Building relational capacity in the educational setting is essential for fostering effective communities. Leading with humility is favourable, but it is important to set limits, which come from a faith-based leader's "God-grounded confidence" (Blanchard and Hodges 2016). Although servant-leadership requires a shift in authority, it does not imply a means to an end. Rather, it means leading with authority and benevolence to create trust. As much as faith-based leaders want to imitate Christ, the ultimate captain, we can't walk on water! However, when we inevitably do sink, like Peter, Jesus's hand will be reaching out to pull us through the stormy waters and keep the leadership boat sailing.

Notes

1. A definition of moral injury offered by Litz et al includes “perpetuating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations” (2009, 700). Moral injury is characterized by dissonance between a person’s beliefs about how a person or the world should function and the actual experience. While we cannot equate our suffering as educators to the moral injury suffered by war veterans or Indigenous people themselves, we do share feelings of guilt, shame, anger and a betrayal of trust. Understanding moral distress and moral injury can help us to deepen our commitment to faith and Christian values, rather than abandoning our faith because of the difficult realities of sin, suffering and evil in the world.

2. Mark 10:43-44 (NIV)

3. Matt 23:12 (NIV)

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