

CHAPTER 6

ENGAGED LEADERSHIP

A Cultural Perspective

INTRODUCTION

Is Democracy (Inclusion) Another Dream Deferred?

I pledge allegiance to the flag
to the republic for which it stands,
one nation . . . indivisible . . .
liberty and justice for all.

The Pledge of Allegiance speaks to the premise of Democracy within which our great nation has roots deeply embedded. This premise, when true, causes one to believe that they have the opportunities to dream great dreams and turn them into reality. Yet so many dreams never become reality; so many dreams become nightmares; so many thoughts of the future are now considered by many individuals as mere pipe dreams long forgotten; so many dreams unfulfilled have left turbulent waves of despair; so many dreams unrealized have destroyed families; so many dreams have become living nightmares. Instead of a wheel of fortune, with all positive options, many find themselves spinning the wheel of misfortune, where every stop spells some level of disaster. Most, if not all of us, know of too many people who are spinning this wheel of misfortune, living some version of Langston Hughes' "A Dream Deferred."

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun/
Or fester like a sore –
And then run?
Or crust and sugar over –
Like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

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Those making attempts to describe the United States as the land of opportunity must not know and talk with the same people as I do. They seem to ignore the fact that not everyone has a smooth, clean and clear pathway to the future paved right in front of them. Some roads are full of potholes, steep hills, cloaked cliffs, and huge barriers. For some, the road does not even exist. Why is this still so? We can elect a president considered to be a member of the African-American sector in this country. We now have women running fortune one hundred companies. The Supreme Court is more gender and racially diverse than in any time in our history. Yet is this mere symbolism? Do these stories of success represent mere accommodations? Has the pathway of self determination been cleared? When looking closely at the academic success of students in our public school, it is clear that we will soon see even more barriers towards the pursuit of the American Dream. A true democracy calls for an educated populous. The level of dialogue, the give and take of debates, and the willingness to listen and compromise, require thoughtful folk. Yet the type of engaged and inclusive teaching and learning supporting a true democracy does not exist in most of our public school settings. One wonders why? Educating the next generation of citizens is an essential step towards true democracy (inclusion), with liberty and justice for all.

Parker Palmer provides clarity to this notion of Democracy (Inclusion):

When we choose to engage, not evade, the tension of our differences, we will become better equipped to participate in a government of, by, and for the people as we expand some of our key civic capacities:

- To listen to each other openly and without fear, learning how much we have in common despite our differences
- To deepen our empathy for the alien “other” as we enter imaginatively into the experiences of people whose lives are radically unlike our own
- To hold what we believe and know with conviction and be willing to listen openly to other viewpoints, changing our minds if needed
- To seek out alternative facts and explanations whenever we find reason to doubt our own truth claims or the claims made by others, thus becoming better informed
- To probe, question, explore, and engage in dialogue, developing a fuller, more three-dimensional view of reality in the process
- To enter the conflicted arena of politics, able to hold the dynamics of that complex force field in ways that unite the civic community and empower us to hold government accountable to the will of the people
- To welcome opportunities to participate in collective problem solving and decision making, generating better solutions and making better decisions as we work with competing ideas
- To feel more at home on the face of the earth amid differences of many sorts, better able to enjoy the fruits of diversity (Palmer, 2011, pp. 14–15).

As we broaden this look more globally, how are the changing dynamics in the world impacting our actions towards a true democracy? And do these shifts, primarily

economic in nature; represent the engine that will really lead to the change we seek? Well, let's explore these issues as we ponder the question: Is Democracy (Inclusion) another Dream Deferred?

DISCUSSION

... if inequity has been institutionalized in the theories, norms, and practices of our society, and if researchers and administrators reify inequity and injustice by failing to examine, question, and redress the inequities they see, then there is much to be done. Larson, C. & Murtadha, K. (2003), p. 134.

Premises provide a starting point for thinking about and acting on an idea or concept. These concepts often represent the foundation upon which a person lives their life. Premises help to form an individual's foundation; culture; their way of thinking and living. Presented here is the premise that there are institutionalized beliefs and practices within schools about students, parents, our society, and the educator's responsibilities to the learner that must be re-examined, and changed. This premise is based on the belief that most, if not all, educators want to be a part of highly successful teaching and learning environments and that this is indeed the goal of school leaders. A major area to be addressed here is how we better understand the students that we teach and developing a better understanding of why we think and act the way that we do.

Educational leaders are expected to develop learning communities, build the professional capacity of teachers, take advice from parents, engage in collaborative and consultative decision making, resolve conflicts, engage in effective instructional leadership, and attend respectfully, immediately, and appropriately to the needs and requests of families with diverse cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Shields (2004), p. 109.

Inequity has indeed been institutionalized in just about every aspect of our lives. In other words, the way we think about ourselves and other individuals has been framed by a set of societal norms purposely designed to think that different means less than. The answers to the questionnaire below, if given honestly, will confirm this statement.

THINKING ABOUT CULTURE QUESTIONNAIRE

Please fill each blank with the name of a group that you have heard about.

1. _____ are more likely to listen to rap music.
2. _____ can usually assume that national heroes, successful political and business leaders and other figures held up for general admiration will be representative of their group.
3. _____ are more likely to drop out of high school.

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4. _____ are more likely to have a baby as a teenager.
5. _____ are more likely to rob a small convenience store.
6. _____ are more likely to cheat on their taxes.
7. _____ are more likely to be given early opportunities to show what they can do at work.
8. _____ are more likely to prefer multiple sex partners.
9. _____ are more likely to be considered athletes on campus.
10. _____ are more likely to become president of the United States.
11. _____ is less likely to worry about the “glass ceiling” impeding their opportunities for advancement.
12. _____ are more likely to support Affirmative Action.
13. _____ are more likely to be discriminated against because who they choose to love.
14. _____ are more likely to align themselves with the Republican Party.
15. _____ are more likely to be ignored by the police when driving a very expensive vehicle.
16. _____ are more likely to pray for someone who has treated them poorly.
17. _____ are lazy and would prefer to live off of welfare payments.
18. _____ are more likely to have six or more children.
19. _____ are more likely to enjoy classical music and art museums.
20. _____ are more likely to be members of a country club.
21. _____ are more likely to attend church activities at least three times a week.
22. _____ are more likely to be a CEO of a fortune five hundred business.
23. _____ are more likely to have children who have traveled abroad.
24. _____ are more likely to enroll their children in inner-city public schools.
25. _____ are more likely to be employed to clean the country club.
26. _____ are more likely to wear bright colored clothing and talk very loudly, with profanity, while walking around in the mall.
27. _____ are more likely to come from in a single parent home.
28. _____ are more likely to major in math while in college.

It is suggested here that leaders find ways to diminish the impact of the overly generalized and negative perceptions of difference. It is imperative that leaders find ways to create a culture of inclusion. In this discussion, we are talking about a school culture focused on identifying and utilizing the gifts of all involved. Review the two examples of school culture below and think about how each helps us prepare the next generation for life in a true democracy.

SCHOOL CULTURE – SCENARIO ONE

I believe that the primary goal that schools must embrace is to become a teaching and learning environment dedicated to efforts resulting in learners developing the ability to learn how to learn for themselves. For example, learners will progressively demonstrate the ability to take questions presented to them and conduct research to seek needed answers. Learners will also demonstrate the ability to develop new questions to expand the base of knowledge. Within this teaching and learning environment it is understood that all are both teachers and learners. There exist a high level of excitement about learning, reflecting on knowledge and new questions, and creating new and clearer ways to know.

My role as principal is very important to the successful accomplishment of this goal. I model the results of this goal by visiting classrooms and becoming actively engaged in the teaching and learning that is taking place. I have conversations with teachers, individually and in groups, focused on finding meaning, answers, and new concepts, etc. Similar conversations take place with staff, students, and parents. We have established two “new ideas” resource rooms, one for faculty and staff and the other for students. Learning resources are continually updated in each room. Through self and small group research, we actually create new ways of teaching and learning in these resource rooms. We often discover new ways of thinking and learning about particular topics.

Our campus loves to try new techniques. We celebrate our successes and hold funerals for our failures. In this atmosphere trying new ideas and concepts are encouraged. What a great environment for teaching and learning! I have gained enough cache with district administrators, trustees and community leaders, giving me the ability to interview and select teachers and staff that want to embrace our approach to teaching and learning. State mandated testing takes care of itself resulting in outstanding success. This demonstration of success and the continued student success when they leave us has created a buffer between our school and district mandates. We adhere to all requirements. However, these requirements are taken as baseline activities. We take teaching and learning far beyond what the district curriculum calls for. Our students continue to push the envelop, challenging teachers each day.

Every voice in this teaching and learning environment is important. We all play a significant role in the on-going activities and direction of the school. We have a great school culture.

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SCHOOL CULTURE – SCENARIO TWO

The district provides each principal with a set of guidelines to be utilized and strictly followed. These guidelines provide a step by step approach for running the day to day operations of the school. Leading my school in this way brings uniformity to the district. It allows for a very fair and consistent district wide evaluation process. The curriculum provided by district officials, which was purchased from one of the national textbook companies, is designed to prepare students to master the state mandated test. This curriculum also provides lessons that emphasizes the development of proper morals. Citizenships and sportsmanship lessons are also included for most, if not all, grade levels. Students progress from year to year kind of in an assembly line fashion. At each stop, grade level, new information is downloaded into he minds of student.

We model the behaviors that we want students to embrace. I set the agenda of fairness by the way I interact with teachers. Making full use of the district's guidelines in chapter eleven. Chapter four in the book of guidelines for teachers provides a step by step blueprint for interacting with students in the classroom. Similar chapters address parent, staff, and community stakeholder interaction. District guideline provide clear and consistent procedures for running every facet of schooling.

I am especially proud of how well these sets of procedures work. We have very few discipline issues with our students. When we do, our zero tolerance for just about every negative behavior results in students transferring to our alternative school site for a minimum of one semester. Faculty and staff know evaluation procedures because every step is scripted and must be followed.

District policies and guidelines provide an excellent blueprint leading to the kind of school culture that, in our opinion, maximizes each student's level of success on state mandated test. Guidelines also tell us how to behave. This makes my job much easier. I simply refer to the guidelines and follow the steps provided to address any issues that might emerge. Each set of guidelines, for me, teachers, students, and parents, provides step by step directions to address just about every imaginable situation. We have a great school culture.

When comparing these two scenarios, which leader is positioned better, philosophically, to create and sustain the kind of teaching and learning environment of inclusion that will prepare learners for life in a true democracy? I think that you can successfully answer this question. Engaged leaders welcome discussions, debates, varying viewpoints. They understand and value different perspectives. Engaged leaders believe that more informed decisions emerge from the kind of environment that promotes the inclusion of all voices.

Therefore, it is suggested here that a process of on-going conscious reflection is needed for those who aspire to become effective engaged leaders. Reflections should compare thoughts, actions and outcomes, especially as they relate to one's ability to lead effectively. One question that deserves reflection from those considered to be

effective engaged leaders is: How does my personal culture impact my actions as a leader?

How can a leader effectively explore the filters (culture) through which she/he views and lives her/his life? These filters (education, parents/family, media, religion, friends, etc.) influence who we are, how we think, what we believe to be right and good, and how we act out on these sets of premises; filters; our own personal culture. Giroux (1997) suggest, “how we understand and come to know ourselves cannot be separated from how we are represented and how we imagine ourselves” (p. 15).

You will note that I talk about culture as an individual phenomenon. Most literature describes culture from a group perspective. These descriptions have as a basic premise that culture consist of behaviors, beliefs, morals, art, customs and other characteristics that determine a person’s status in a society. However, since culture represents those perspectives within one’s life experiences; and since each individual’s experiences are unique; it is suggested here that the individual interpretations of experiences and how they impact one’s beliefs and actions makes culture not a group but rather an individual phenomenon. Groups of people may have similar foundational ideologies from which culture emerges. However personal experiences often impact individuals in unique ways, resulting in a culture of one.

Embracing this concept of culture clears the pathway for engaged leaders who value the gifts of each member of the organization. This concept of culture moves leaders away from generalizes beliefs about people to more of an individualized approach. The approach results less in enabling groups within the organizations and more towards empowering individuals in ways that increase positive outcomes, both for the organization and the individual.

One way to address this question in a way that brings clarity to answers is by analyzing one’s philosophy of leadership as it relates to the culture of the organization. The following questionnaire can be used to help leaders see where they are from this perspective.

What is Your Philosophy of Leadership: as it Relates to the Culture of the Organization?

Please check the answer under each item that best reflects your current thinking.

1. What should be the atmosphere within a diverse community?
 - A. All people, regardless of their identity, striving to work and live together.
 - B. All striving to learn more about and gain a greater respect for the groups within our community.
 - C. All striving to embrace traditional values that lead all to common goals.
 - D. All striving to learn from each other and using this knowledge to help our community.

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2. What should be the role of primary leadership in working within a diverse community?
 - A. Consistent with our demographics, leadership should develop an appreciation for differences.
 - B. Leadership should, based on traditional standardized measures, promote common values and goals.
 - C. Leadership should actively work with the various groups that make up the community.
 - D. Leadership should wisely use the strengths of the individuals that make up the community.

3. What foundational premise best guides your thoughts about our changing demographics?
 - A. We should do all we can to assimilate every citizen.
 - B. We should find ways for each identity group to express a presence in the society.
 - C. We should become familiar with each group and their cultural perspectives.
 - D. We should include all individuals as members of and positive contributors to the society.

4. What is the role of education in a diverse community?
 - A. Learn truth, which is absolute, universal, and unchanging.
 - B. Learn about other identity groups within the content of course work.
 - C. Learn to accept other ways of thinking and living.
 - D. Empower each individual to learn how to learn for themselves.

5. How should we make our environment accessible for the physically challenged?
 - A. Based on available funds and within the overall budgetary priorities of the campus community.
 - B. Develop special programs to meet the needs of and create a better awareness about the physically challenged
 - C. Meeting federal standards in the most cost-effective way.
 - D. Utilize the gifts and abilities of the physically challenged as a way to define and envision community.

6. What foundational premise best guides your thoughts about religion?
 - A. We are a nation built on Christian values. These are our guiding principles.
 - B. We should not condemn those who are not Christians.
 - C. We should actively utilize the values and insights from the many different religions to enhance clarity and understanding.
 - D. We should acknowledge and respect many religions.

7. What foundational premise best guides your thoughts about race?
 - A. Race is a socially constructed phenomenon that is embraced by individuals in various ways.
 - B. People represent different groups that should be understood.
 - C. Race is biologically based, making certain attributes superior to others.
 - D. Acceptance for each race is important in building a diverse society.
8. What foundational premise best guides your thoughts about sexual orientations?
 - A. Homosexuals are sinners
 - B. We should inform learners about sexual orientations.
 - C. The complexities of sexual orientations are expressed in different ways, from individual to individual.
 - D. We should acknowledge biological and other components in identity and personal choice.
9. What foundational premise best guides your thoughts about the poor?
 - A. It is the natural way of things.
 - B. Represents a group of people in most societies.
 - C. One of numerous characteristics that a person might include as part of their identity at some point in time.
 - D. The poor are people too.
10. What foundational premise best guides your thoughts about the contributions of each gender?
 - A. Men are the breadwinners of the family.
 - B. Men and women have unique gifts that should be wisely used for success.
 - C. We should allow women opportunities to lead.
 - D. Men and women have unique gifts that we should understand and respect.

(Adapted from Glickman: What Is Your Philosophy of Supervision)

The following four descriptions are used to score the questionnaire. It helps us better understand why we think and act in certain ways.

Assimilation/Essentialism Perspective

The practice of categorizing a group based on an artificial social construction that imparts an “essence” of that group, which homogenizes the group and effaced individuality and differences. This perspective implies that we are forming conclusions, relationships, and other cultural ties based only on the essential elements as determined by “us”. It also implies that there are some minimal levels of understanding that is applied to groups.

The concept as described here assumes that there is one best way to do and/or think about something. In some instances one could find support for this assumption. For example, most, if not all, of us would agree that there would be fewer accidents if all drivers followed the rules of the road. Our cities would be safer if we all agreed that hurting others is something we never do.

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- Certain words and phrases come to mind when thinking about this description.
Standardize – to make, cause, or adopt to fit a certain standard.
- Traditional Values – time honored practices, a set of highly valued customs passed on from one generation to the next.
- Conservative – the preservation of the existing order, to resist or oppose change or innovation.
- Myopic – shortsightedness, lack of discernment in thinking or looking towards the future.
- Myths – the belief that groups of people are all the same.

TOLERANCE PERSPECTIVE

There is an acceptance and open-mindedness of different practices, attitudes, and cultures but does not necessarily mean agreement with the differences. The word implies an acknowledgement, or an acceptance. However the word does not necessarily acknowledge an appreciate of differences and usually consists of only surface level information and commitment. The concept of tolerance described here expresses an acceptance of differences, but not a deep understanding or valuing of them.

Certain words and phrases come to mind when thinking about is description.

- Impersonal – to be distant, disconnected, remote, uncommitted.
- Political Correctness – to be polite, courteous, civil, deferential, well-mannered.

MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

The practice of acknowledging and respecting the various cultures, religions, races, ethnicities, attitudes and opinions within an environment. The word does not imply that there is any intentionality occurring and primarily works from a group, versus individual, orientation. The concept of multiculturalism described here focuses on group representation. It fails to see the individual. It also does little to move from a generalized understanding of differences to actions that embrace and include others as individuals.

Certain words and phrases come to mind when thinking about this description.

- Group Representation – people are understood using group identifiers. It is a form of dehumanization because the individual is ignored, invisible.
- Enable – to permit, help but not allow to become self-empowered.
- Stereotype – to reinforce existing generalizations about groups of people.
- Respect – to relate and/or acknowledge concern for groups (not individuals) of people.

INCLUSION PERSPECTIVE

The practice of emphasizing our uniqueness in promoting the reality that each voice, when valued, respected and expected to, will provide positive contributions to the community. We become actively engaged in getting to know the person.

Certain words come to mind when thinking about this description.

Empower – we value the individual and work to diminish perceptual and real barriers that impede full community membership.

- Voice – all voices in the community bring synergy to discussions which lead to better informed decisions.
- Individual – we see each person as a unique person, full of positive potential and worthy of equal membership.

Let’s take a look at question number one: What should be the atmosphere within a diverse community?

- All people striving to embrace traditional values that lead all to share common goals = Assimilation.
- All people, regardless of their identity, striving to work and live together = Tolerance.
- All people striving to learn more about and gain a greater respect for the groups within our community = Multiculturalism.
- All people striving to learn from each other and using this knowledge to help our community achieve collaboratively developed goals = Inclusiveness.

One of the first steps towards effective change is the realization of the need for it. The answers to this questionnaire will assist individuals who want to see a need for change. The chart below provides the answers to the questionnaire.

Please check the answer under each item that best reflects your current thinking.

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3. What foundational premise best guides your thoughts about our changing demographics?
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 - D. Men and women have unique gifts that we should understand and respect.

Assimilation

Tolerance

Multiculturalism

Inclusion

Translations

Members of a learning community that expects everyone to think and act alike are practicing Assimilation.

Members of a learning community that merely accommodates one or two individuals who are different from the rest of the group, but never allows full membership, as they are, are practicing Tolerance.

Members of a learning community that interacts with “others” based on some set of predetermined generalized group characteristics are practicing Multiculturalism.

Members of a learning community that are actively broadening their perspectives about differences, actively seeking to get to know individuals, and actively including all members of the community are practicing Inclusion.

How did we forget that our differences are among our most valuable assets? What happened to “we have nothing to fear but fear itself?” When will we learn that violence in the long run creates at least as many problems as it solves? Why do we not value life, every life, no matter whose or where? Or understand that the measure of national greatness is not only how successful the strong can be but how well we support the weak? (Palmer, 2011, pg. 2).

Leaders in today’s school environments, and other organizations, must continue to listen, learn and better utilize the knowledge and skills of other stakeholders. These leaders must be able to function in an ever evolving teaching and learning environment. Similar to the ethos of engaged pedagogy, engaged leadership assumes that every stakeholder has valuable contributions to make that will improve the organization. The engaged leader inspires participation, encourages meaningful working relationships between stakeholders, and is enthusiastic about the possibilities that emerge from this type of dynamic, interactive, inclusive process. The proposition here is that leadership must be inclusive of the voices of all stakeholders.

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But democracy itself is still a means. And it is a means for the flowering of individuality. Why do I see it this way? Because I stand fundamentally on the profoundly Christian notion that we are each made equal in the eyes of God. That Rockefeller has the same status as a peasant in Alabama. And that peasant in Alabama has the same right to human flourishing as any other human being regardless of race, regardless of religion, regardless of nation, regardless of gender. It is a deep, spiritually based notion of equality. Doesn't mean that we have the same natural capacities. Doesn't mean that we have the same natural talents. But we ought to have the same opportunities. We ought to have the same chances (West, 1993, 0.63).

It is suggested here that in order to be an engaged leader, one must also practice democracy (inclusion). It is further suggested here that organizations increase productivity when inclusion best describes the work environment.

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