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Developing Effective Leadership: the Power of Connection

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“Only connect.” That’s the quote that was on my calendar a few months ago. While I don’t know what E.M. Forster had in mind when he penned this, it struck me as a compelling statement about leadership. Seemingly simple, yet incredibly powerful, the ability to connect is present in every good leader I have ever known. With it comes not only the ability to transform what we do and how well we do it, but also the ability to transform the very environment in which we work.

“Only connect.” That’s the quote that was on my calendar a few months ago. While I don’t know what E.M. Forster had in mind when he penned this, it struck me as a compelling statement about leadership. Seemingly simple, yet incredibly powerful, the ability to connect is present in every good leader I have ever known. With it comes not only the ability to transform what we do and how well we do it, but also the ability to transform the very environment in which we work.

What’s so special about the power of connection?

Let’s face it – work is work! But the quality of our work can be significantly influenced by how well our everyday work relationships function. As leaders, helping to forge connections gives us, and others, staying power – the ability to stay in the conversation, stay in the relationship, and just flat out stay on the job. As we know, more often than not, people leave our organizations because their *connection* to our organization wasn’t strong enough, not because other positions and other organizations are necessarily better.

When we have the determination and follow-through to develop positive connections over time, we have a more robust ability to weather the challenges that work presents, especially the challenges that arise when people hold different points of view. A few years ago, the management team in our office read Robert J. Spitzer’s book [The Spirit of Leadership](#). In it, he writes “We are not negotiating with our enemy—we are trying to improve our organization.” This is a quote that I have kept in mind when there is the potential to feel like I’m negotiating with my enemy. It has helped me think about ways that I can disrupt the feeling that I’m in an adversarial relationship, and it has helped me to recognize that simple steps—such as scheduling an informal meeting over coffee—can soften hard conversations.

To use a banking metaphor, making some connection deposits now can give us a buffer against the inevitable withdrawals that will come later. As Stephen Covey says about our emotional bank account in [The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#), “deposits build a reserve of goodwill and trust... With relationships, it’s vital that you make

continual deposits to sustain a high level of trust.” In a leadership role, it is even more critical to build these reserves.

The good news is that all of us can get better at connecting with others through practice. We don’t need to have a particular personality type or be born with a certain aptitude, but we do need to set out every day with the intention to connect with the people with whom we work.

How do we exercise and improve the power of connection? Here are a few simple ideas.

Tell me more!

It’s easy to make assumptions about other people that break our connection with them. But if we ask “can you tell me more?” we may discover where our own assumptions are flawed, and we may be able to see a way ahead to common understanding.

Coffee, anyone?

When we are dealing with challenging issues and situations, connecting with others who have different points of view is particularly important. You may be in a meeting where the outcome isn’t what you expected and where it seems like the other side won’t budge. A good approach to a next step might be to meet over coffee. See if you can identify what *is* working or where there *are* shared goals. Noting successes and common desires can build a bridge to span differences and connect future conversations with those who are on the other side. A little coffee and conversation may make the next meeting a little more collegial, even if there are still differences about how issues and situations are approached.

Remember that we feel first, then we think.

Jill Bolte Taylor said “Although many of us think of ourselves as thinking creatures that

feel, biologically we are *feeling* creatures that *think*.” The discoveries in neuroscience make clear that we react emotionally first, and intellectually, second. Bring that knowledge into the world of work, and it’s easier to understand why people act the way they do and easier to bring a big dollop of kindness and understanding into our role as leader – both for others and for ourselves.

Feed the good wolf.

There is a legend about a grandfather talking to his grandson about the two wolves inside of us which are always at war with each other. The one wolf represents good and helpful human qualities; the other represents harmful qualities. The grandson asks which wolf will win, and the grandfather replies, “The one you feed.” As leaders, we need to notice what we are feeding in the office. Are we helping people connect in a positive way? Are we nurturing a spirit of teamwork and trust? Are we telling a positive story about who we are and who we can be?

Practice.

A little practice will go a long way, and it doesn’t have to be perfect. You might take a moment in the morning to think about who you will purposely try to connect with. Remember the adage “it’s about progress, not perfection.”

Final thought

There is really no way that we can live our daily lives without connecting with others. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” It’s the quality and intentionality of that connection that can change the journey and result in a more pleasing destiny.



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The Groningen Declaration Today

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The Groningen Declaration, signed in the Netherlands on April 16, 2012, was created by an international group of higher education institutions in light of “the need to establish a more complete and far-reaching delivery of digital student data.” The Declaration states that “digital student data portability and digital student data depositories are becoming increasingly concrete and relevant realities, and in the years to come, they will contribute decisively to the free movement of students and skilled workers on a global scale.” In this article, I want to bring PACRAO readers up to date on the current status and the primary efforts underway. Much of this is based on a conversation, held on August 10, 2016, with Stanford University Registrar Tom Black, who has been involved since the outset.

The Groningen Declaration, signed in the Netherlands on April 16, 2012, was created by an international group of higher education institutions in light of “the need to establish a more complete and far-reaching delivery of digital student data.” The Declaration states that “digital student data portability and digital student data depositories are becoming increasingly concrete and relevant realities, and in the years to come, they will contribute decisively to the free movement of students and skilled workers on a global scale.” The members, steadily growing in number each year, have met annually ever since; there are now 38 agencies, universities and private sector signatories representing a total of 19 countries.[1] They have undertaken and sponsored projects in pursuit of their goal: “We make Digital Student Data Portability happen. Citizens world wide should be able to consult and share their authentic educational data with whomever they want, whenever they want, wherever.”

It has been a broad and open project involving educational institutions from around the world, devoted to cooperation and collaboration, and whose “overriding

principle is to seek convergence rather than to create uniformity.”[2]

In this article, I want to bring PACRAO readers up to date on the current status and the primary efforts underway. Much of this is based on a conversation, held on August 10, 2016, with Stanford University Registrar Tom Black, who has been involved since the outset. The interested reader can find additional information on the history of the Groningen Declaration on its website [<http://www.groningendeclaration.org/>].

The Groningen Declaration Network (GDN), as the group has come to be known, held its most recent meeting in Capetown, South Africa in May 2016; next year’s meeting will be hosted by Australia in Melbourne. What started out as the Groningen Declaration (GD), and which was primarily an appeal to end the exchange of records via paper and move to electronic media, has morphed into conversations about network, both in the sense of international network and in the sense of electronic network. This fortuitous overlap of language underlies the adoption of the GDN moniker.

Internationally, at this time, some of the Nordic countries are looking at a regionalized solution to student data portability. South Africa has been very interested and is attempting to take a continental lead; given the challenges throughout Africa as well as the tremendous opportunities for education, this may be one of the most impactful developments to come out of the GDN. Meanwhile, the French are looking at the idea of a central national depository. And Australia has adopted a student credentials vendor based in Dublin, Ireland, called Digitary, to handle the exchange of records among 47 Australian and New Zealand institutions.

Some of these developments focus attention on the difficult question of how to deal not just with differing data standards, but more so with differing educational cultures to which people hold a very strong bond. An example of this issue arose during discussions on whether the GDN should become an independent organization. Such a move raises questions such as under what jurisdiction should it constitute itself and how would its long-term funding be secured; as an independent organization, the network might be in a better place to advocate and implement. Such a move, however, also raises thorny questions about blending concepts and terminology that can have different meanings and evoke contrasting responses in different parts of the world to even something as simple as the name of an organization, whether it be a “secretariat” or a “commission” or a non-governmental organization (NGO). Whereas in the U.S. a somewhat challenging stance might create buzz and interest, the same approach in other parts of the world might connote a lack of deference to authority and thereby become a hindrance. A secretariat might sound to U.S. ears like centralized control, but an NGO in some parts of the world might sound like foreign intervention.

Of course, that is part of the challenge and excitement of a worldwide approach to solving the problem of student data portability. In the short and medium term, most of the efforts are regional or country-specific. This has the strength of solving immediate and discernible problems, as well as discovering what works best. This approach models the GDN’s core commitment, as mentioned above “to seek convergence rather than to create uniformity.” The convergence approach is designed to create successes upon which to build further successes while avoiding an over-reach that might stymie further efforts.

A big part of the convergence involves the interplay of nonprofits and for-profit companies. Where a nonprofit typically may judge its success by a clients-served metric, a for-profit has to keep an eye on the bottom line whether right now or down the road. As above, different parts of the world tend to favor one over the other. Where the U.S. and Australia may look less favorably upon nonprofits and government agencies, some Asian nations may be more guarded about private companies. There are no hard and fast rules here, and we have to keep in mind that this is about change. All that said, the private sector is very interested in this space: Parchment, Digitary, CollegeNet, CV Trust, and IMS Global have all signed the Groningen Declaration.

One signal case of interleaving the for-profit and nonprofit is the success of the project to send verified Chinese records data electronically to the United States. CollegeNet, a private company, developed the infrastructure to port electronic data from the Chinese government agencies CHESICC (China Higher Education Student Information and Career Center, which sends records from source institutions) and CDGDC (China Academic Degrees and Graduate

Education Development Center, which is charged with certifying degrees). Given past serious problems with fraud in this sector, this is a game-changing development.

At the most recent conference, there was a demonstration of the possibility of attaching a credential evaluator organization to the network. This innovation could facilitate accessing multiple evaluators or interpreters of credentials until a universal standard is established over time.

One notable problem is the lack of involvement of some large nations whose absence would limit the scope for implementation of changes. In particular, countries including Indonesia, Mexico, and Brazil are not yet involved; indeed, there are no South American countries in the GDN. It will be a critical challenge for the GDN to involve these large nations and areas of the world.

The GDN has demonstrably changed the worldwide environment for student data portability in its short existence through efforts such as the Chinese electronic records project and the Australia-New Zealand-

Digitary project. In the next years, it will continue to experiment and involve, to champion convergence and collaboration. It may do so in its present form or as an independent organization, while continuing to convene annually, advocating and working with standards bodies to create universal data standards that can talk to consuming stakeholders. Every move towards convergence in the higher education data portability arena empowers students worldwide to learn and grow and succeed. That, at its core, is the Groningen Declaration.

[1] See <http://www.groningendeclaration.org/signatories> for the latest list of Groningen Declaration signatories.

[2] All quoted material in these first two paragraphs is from the original Groningen Declaration and the goal statement available at <http://www.groningendeclaration.org/>.



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The Youngest Person in the Room

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A successful leader of the admissions office, office of the registrar, or the enrollment team is usually a master of many arts: equal parts sociologist, counselor, coach, organizational wizard, motivation mastermind, business process analyst, and technologist. It should come as no surprise then that to do really well in a leadership role in an enrollment management office, one has to muster talent, continuing education, hard work, and a good deal of experience. In a perfect world, every leader under the enrollment management umbrella would have ideal mixes of all of these skills. In addition, each leader would have had plenty of “experiential runway” to sharpen skills and perspectives and the opportunity to make critical mistakes that enable learning and growth through paradigm shifts before being asked to make critical decisions for an organization.

The focus of this article will be those leaders who ascend to significant leadership roles before “their time,” when their age is below, sometimes well below, the average age of their colleagues in like positions at like institutions. The young leaders in question will consistently be in meetings in which they are expected to be key contributors but are amongst the youngest folks around the table. They will supervise teams whose average member is sometimes significantly older than they are.

Introduction

A successful leader of the admissions office, office of the registrar, or the enrollment team is usually a master of many arts: equal parts sociologist, counselor, coach, organizational wizard, motivation mastermind, business process analyst, and technologist. It should come as no surprise then that to do really well in a leadership role in an enrollment management office, one has to muster talent, continuing education, hard work, and a good deal of experience. In a perfect world, every leader under the enrollment management umbrella would have ideal mixes of all of these skills. In addition, each leader would have had plenty of “experiential runway” to sharpen skills and perspectives and the opportunity to make critical mistakes that enable learning and growth through

paradigm shifts before being asked to make critical decisions for an organization.

Of course, as we all know, the ideal alluded to above is rarely achieved. In our higher education universe, leaders are very rarely brought up intentionally to be leaders. Few chief enrollment officers, directors of admissions, and registrars can point back to a linear progression in which they, in collaboration with their mentors, chose a sensible pathway to department or divisional leadership. In this context, a leader who has had plenty of on-the-ground professional experience already faces an uphill challenge in managing our very complex work.

The focus of this brief article will be those leaders who ascend to significant leadership roles[1] before “their time,” when their age is

below, sometimes well below, the average age of their colleagues in like positions at like institutions. The young leaders in question will consistently be in meetings in which they are expected to be key contributors but are amongst the youngest folks around the table. They will supervise teams whose average member is sometimes significantly older than they are.

Why This Matters

This topic matters for two major reasons. First, every institution will at some point need to promote a young leader into a significant leadership position. This promotion could be because of staff turnover, budgetary concerns that limit recruitment for a leadership position, or an appraisal of that young leader's abilities that indicate the young leader is "ready for primetime." Second, the U.S. workforce is aging. Members of the workforce that comprise the Baby Boomer and early Gen X generations are either quickly nearing retirement or are much closer to retirement than mid-career. In fact, a fulsome 43% of the workforce is over the age of 45 ("Demographics (CPS)," 2016). In higher education, the situation is even more dramatic.

The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) reports that 55% of individuals in the registrar profession have 20 or more years of experience in higher education (AACRAO, 2015). Napkin math indicates that the percentage of folks in enrollment management over 45-plus years of age could be as much as 10% higher than the general workforce. Over the coming years, retirements from the profession will lead to young leaders being increasingly called upon to serve their institutions as key decision makers.

The need to prepare to accelerate young leaders through the traditional learning curve will be pressing as the expected retirement boom takes hold in the coming years. It's important that leaders of organizations ask themselves what pathways exist for young leaders to fast track through the growth process. It is also important for young leaders and those who are new in the profession with aspirations for leadership to start the process, empowered by their supervisors, of developing their leadership toolkits so that our organizations are prepared to move the next wave of do-it-all super humans into leadership roles.

A Framework for (Re) Thinking about Young Leaders

History is filled with examples of young leaders who have made a tremendous difference in their work and causes. John F. Kennedy was only 42 when elected President of the United States, nearly 13 years younger than the average elected age of presidents throughout history (O'Brien, 2005). George Washington Carver revolutionized agriculture in the United States. He became the first African American Professor at Iowa State University at 34 and was the head of the Tuskegee Institute's Department of Agriculture by age 36 (Hersey, 2011). Mark Zuckerberg was only 20 when he launched Facebook from his Harvard dorm room; by age 23, he had earned his first billion (Kirkpatrick, 2011).

These are just a few famous examples to support the idea that a much-younger-than-average leader can be more than a stopgap or a backup plan. Young leaders in your organization can bring about new ways of thinking, provide a much needed creative spark for a team that lacks inspiration, and provide motivation for other early-career professionals on your team who may be

working toward a larger role within your organization.

Understanding how we should think about young leaders starts by reframing the premise that experience is always useful. In order to explore this idea, let's explore two widely understood and accepted factors that can help us predict whether someone will be successful in a particular role. The first factor is experience. Experience in this example is inclusive of time spent in related work, demonstrated excellence in particular areas of performance, and educational background. The second factor is aptitude. Aptitude is literally defined as a natural ability to do something. In our model let's think of aptitude as potential for excellence in a variety of skillsets related to the work we anticipate a role fulfilling.

It is generally true in work and in life, if not axiomatic, that:

high aptitude for a type of work + lots of experience = high potential to succeed in role.

A great example of the experience plus aptitude model is Malcolm Gladwell's oft cited ten-thousand-hour rule. Truly elite or phenomenal^[2] performers start with a high aptitude for a particular skill or skillset and then find ways to build upon that skillset. When the two come together at around ten thousand hours of practice, we generally find that the truly elite emerge (Gladwell, 2008). With the accepted wisdom that lots of talent and lots of practice combine for the best of all possible worlds, let's take apart the mythology of experience. It's not axiomatic that experience *guarantees* by itself the ability to be successful. In the case of our young leaders, they will all fail the experience test when examined under strict scrutiny of years on the job.

The question becomes: what other demonstrative points can be used to identify those who may be a bit short on the experience side but may have significant potential for success in leadership roles? Can you identify young leaders who have demonstrated high-level work, excellent communication skills, the beginnings of expertise, and a high degree of accountability and then substitute those qualities for the pure experience that would normally be desired in a candidate for a leadership role?

Developing Young Leaders

When a youngest person in the room has been identified within your organization and assigned to carry out a leadership role, a plan must be put in place to help that leader grow in three major areas which we will explore with more detail in a moment. The plan for developing your young leaders needs to touch three major areas.

Coaching and Mentorship

Who will serve as a coach for this young leader? Every organization has explicit and implicit rules for its leaders; someone must be responsible for explaining those rules to the young leader. Who will help the young leader figure out her leadership identity? A leader must develop a personal style that reflects the values of your organization for everything from how to run a staff meeting to the way priorities and accountabilities are organized within a team construct.

On-the-Job Training

As your young leader takes the reins for the first time, someone or a group of someones must be made accountable to train the young leader on the work for which he will be responsible and how that work fits into the big picture. Assuming that your young leader hasn't had organic, on-the-job training from a previous role, this is information that will

either be learned through intentional training or through repeated mistakes as the leader stumbles about the organization trying to figure out what is going on.

Affirmation and Challenge

Every person who is asked to take on a new role in your organization, but particularly your younger leaders, must hear two messages from the department head or division head. First, “You were hired into this role because” An intentional affirmation of what qualities you think the young leader brings to bear is essential to helping that person further develop what you think is great about what she does. Second, “The items I need you to develop, in order for you to be successful in this role, are” It is crucial to send a clear signal to your young leader that he needs to develop in particular areas and that you *expect* that development with support from you and other mentors from the team.

The most important thing to understand is that when you have hired someone who will have a steeper learning curve than someone who has had years of on-the-job learning, you must structure the learning environment to accelerate the paradigm shift. It simply is not enough to reward a talented person with a promotion and a raise. If time and effort are not invested in helping that person learn, the risk is high that the results of the person’s performance will be below your expectations. With that in mind, let’s move on to the three major areas in which a youngest person in the room will need to develop and grow in order to thrive.

The Three Qualities a Young Leader Must Develop

Magnanimity

Magnanimity can be generally described as a sense of generosity, forgiveness, altruism,

and unselfishness. In addition to those characteristics, there is another lens that is worth considering that comes from outside higher education. This lens is derived from the work of a Jesuit priest named Dean Brackley.

After entering the priesthood, Father Dean Brackley, S.J. taught at Fordham University and served as a community organizer in the South Bronx. In 1989, in the heat of the civil war in El Salvador, six Jesuit priests were assassinated at the University of Central America^[3] through what turned out to be coordinated action by the Salvadorian military in collusion with the government in power. Following that event, Father Brackley put his name forward as a replacement for those fallen priests.

Amongst many other accomplishments, Brackley (2004) developed a concept of magnanimity that is relevant for any professional. Simply put, magnanimity involves the following attributes.

1. A willingness to shed false humility. If you have gifts to share, ideas to put forward, or contributions you know you can make, you are obligated to find a way to share yourself with the organization in which you work. Holding back your gifts because it’s the “humble” thing to do is in fact a selfish act.
2. To be a generous colleague, you must be able to acknowledge and appreciate your gifts and the gifts of those with whom you work.
3. Finally, and most important, resentment and grudges will derail your personal and professional equilibrium severely.

It seems that there is a good deal of wisdom in simply stating that leadership and

magnanimity should be dependent variables. Help young leaders see that their contributions must be shared lest they hold the organization back, that appreciation of their gifts and the gifts of others is critical, and that their world cannot be driven by political gaming based upon resentments and grudges. Additionally, encouraging young leaders to see that their ultimate role is to serve those that they lead (Lencioni, 2010) will help center the principles of leadership where they need to be centered.

Grit

Grit in psychology is a positive, non-cognitive trait based upon a leader's passion for a particular long-term goal or objective, coupled with the drive and motivation to achieve that goal or objective. In higher education, we're familiar with the idea of grit as a student attribute that potentially predicts future success. Duckworth's (2016) ongoing work on this topic is notable.

In short, grit is tricky because we're born with a certain degree of grit or lack thereof. However, the idea of resiliency, toughness and determination as a suite of career success attributes can be honed and coached. Coaching in this area is necessary. Every leader could share a chapter's worth of stories in which mettle was tested by an outside influence and required the ability to respond fairly but in a way that put a clear line in the sand. These moments and a leader's reaction to them are what will define a leader, more than anything else perhaps, as a leader who can be trusted to do what is right.

Whether it is responding to criticism, standing up for a team member who has been wronged in some way, or making tough decisions, grit is necessary in leadership.

Leadership Identity

While leadership identity is the last and perhaps hardest quality to quantify, helping a young leader develop a leadership identity is perhaps the key to unlocking the rest of the puzzle. The difficulty in this arena is that examples are rare in higher education in which leaders have been walked through the process of developing a leadership identity.

The following questions can be asked to aid this process.

1. What type of leader(s) do you want to emulate? Why? What leadership practices do those leaders embody that you admire?
2. What kind of communication style do you respond to best? How can you adapt your style for a variety of other styles on your team? What are systems of communication that you can put in place to ensure information keeps flowing?
3. What individuals can serve as off-campus mentors for you? Who can you call when you need to vent and get advice without compromising the internal dynamic?

Youngest people in the room *must* not be left in the lurch when it comes to developing a leadership identity. When failure is not an option for your organization, you must invest the time and resources needed to help young leaders build the foundation on which all leadership work will exist.

Conclusion

If you are a senior leader, make room for youngest people in the room in your organization. Perhaps you already have them contributing on your team. In either case, it is vital for you to consider the ways in which you serve (or do not serve) those young

leaders with their overall development in mind. If *you* are an aspiring youngest person in the room or are already a young leader, take stock of yourself and how you might empower yourself to seek the skills and leadership attributes necessary to become the leader you need to be.

[1] For the purposes of this article, I am defining “significant leadership roles” as roles that encapsulate both the leadership of people *and* responsibility for a portfolio of duties that are critical for institutional functioning and/or strategic goals.

[2] It is worth noting, and germane to the topic at hand, that the ten-thousand-hour rule is one of the most often misrepresented assertions in modern business psychology. Gladwell was not asserting that you need ten thousand hours of practice under your belt to be good at something. He was stating that you need ten thousand hours to be a phenom, to be truly exceptional. The bar for good is somewhere well south of ten thousand hours.

[3] If you are not familiar, it’s well worth it to read the history of El Salvador and its decades-long civil war. El Salvador’s situation provides a historical toolset for understanding foreign policy and its intended and unintended consequences. Joan Didion’s work, *Salvador*, is particularly recommended.

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