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Title

Leading by living – a narrative essay on a personal journey towards values and goals-based leadership of self and others.

"It's never about the role – it's about the goal" Lisa Haisha

Introduction

When I set out to write this piece I wanted to reflect on my personal journey to where I am today, both professionally and personally. I was intrigued to see what I would discover if I set myself some time to reflect on the days, months and years leading up to the present day. I am not sure if this was a rather self-indulgent goal in the midst of busy work and home life, but I think it is important to consciously reflect on the journey, in order to have a view to the future. Conor Neill is a leadership writer who advocates for this very approach, stating that *"The best leadership book is not one that you can buy. It is your own life, if well documented"* and recommends recording personal reflections to gain clarity on the future (Neill, 2021). I am acutely aware of the time constraints placed on all of us and the myriad pressures we deal with as professionals every day, but a periodic assessment of where we have been and where we are going provides structure amidst the busyness. This has become particularly important recently, with the disruption and uncertainty of the last two years. I would like to give you an idea of the course of this reflection for me, as someone for whom leadership was much more an evolution, rather than an intention. I would like to provide you with the confidence to reflect on your own journey as a leader, in whatever form that takes, from the accountability that comes from self-leadership to the responsibility that comes from the compassionate leadership of others. I hope to give you an idea of the ups and downs of my journey to 'today' and provide some context for my reflections. I have found Dilts' Logical Levels central to recognising myself as a leader and identifying my values (Dilts 2014).

Background and the evolution of Leadership Theory

Leadership and management theory has evolved dramatically over the last century. In the 1920s leadership theory assumed that an individual's ability to lead came from certain intrinsic qualities or 'traits'– a person was born a leader, or they were not (Bernard, 1926). No clear list of traits was ever identified, leading to further study encompassing the situational aspect to leadership in an attempt to answer why some people lead better in a particular situation than others and what role environmental factors play in their abilities as a leader. Studies conducted by the University of Michigan in the 1940s proposed that a leader could be either person or task focused, i.e. that a leader could be concerned with staff and the relationship element of leadership, or focused on outputs and accomplishment of tasks, but not both. At the same time, Ohio University proposed that, rather than this dichotomous approach, a leader could be both people and task focused at the same time (McGrath and Bates, 2019). Leadership theories have continued to develop and evolve in the intervening years resulting a large amount of material available on the topic. When reading the literature on leadership it is very easy to become overwhelmed by the amount of information and theories proposed. For every situation, there seems to be a different model. McGrath and Bates (2019) recognise the difficulties in navigating the literature. They propose a number of themes which are central to leadership research and theory. Broadly speaking, they propose that a leader needs to create clear vision and goals, within an environment where the values of all staff, including themselves, are recognised. Reward should be given for a 'job well done', and failures should be treated as an opportunity for development, without fear of reprisal. Within these recommendations, each and every one of us can lead, whether that is leading ourselves or others.

Professor Karise Hutchinson refers to John Maxwell's work on creating a Leader*shift* (2019) when discussing modern leadership in a world emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic – the realisation that leaders are not about titles, or roles, but about people and the ability of each of us to lead wherever we are (Hutchinson, 2021). She proposes that we should exercise our 'leadership muscle' by making sustained changes in both the way we conduct our day-to-day work and our mindset around leadership, change and failure.

When reflecting on our experiences, I wonder can we all think of times when we have needed different forms of leadership from others? I have experienced and been very grateful to be in the presence of the 'trait leader' as described by earlier theorem (Bernard, 1926). They have used their intrinsic qualities to make the hard decisions and ensure focus on outcomes, whilst taking the weight of responsibility on their shoulders. We have probably also encountered the leader who is focused on the people within the organization. They will have ensured the relationships with and between staff are functioning well and through collective thinking, have ensured a unified workplace. However, do we even need a leader to be identified as a role? Perhaps we are all leaders in our own way.

Leading others

I remember distinctly the moment when I knew I wanted to be a scientist and researcher. I had carefully located and collected my woodlice, and I gently lowered them into their new home for the next 24 hours. I was 12 years old, and my class was conducting the same experiment as many have done each year all across the UK. My hypothesis stated that I expected that woodlice would prefer damp conditions as opposed to dry and the moment had come to find out if I was right. The analysis of the data gave me such a buzz - I felt totally at home. It helped greatly that my teacher was excited about it too. Using even this simple experiment, they had imparted their love for science and the importance of using robust methods to answer a question. I am sure at the time I didn't articulate to them, or in fact realise myself, the impact they had on me. She led me, and others, without us realising it. I am sure there are many of these situations happening everyday – someone who inspires and guides others to achieve their goals and make a contribution. These situations may cause us to reflect on ourselves – what is our day-to-day impact on others? I have never set out explicitly to lead others, but I have been inspired and humbled by those whose actions cause positive change. One of the most rewarding aspects of my career was the time spent with students in the clinical department. Reflecting on the influence my first-year biology teacher had on me, gave me the motivation to want to impart this to others. This is a passion of mine to this day, and I feel blessed to be able to work with students as a diagnostic radiography lecturer at Ulster University. I sincerely hope that in some way I inspire in them the passion for a job done well, for the benefit of our patients and service users.

As described by McGrath and Bates we should be mindful of the impact that our values and backgrounds have on how we lead others. A shift to leadership tactics, over the more dated management theory (Maxwell, 2019) allows us to use our life experiences and background to be more authentic leaders and therefore potentially more relatable to those who we work with (Kovach, 2018). Our attitudes to failure and learning from our mistakes are central to this. My road to radiography was not without challenges. I could even go so far as to say that it was rather unintentional and came about as a result of a situation I perceived as failure. I left school, after doing science A-levels and went to study Pharmacy in England. I was so determined to be independent. After a homesick four months, I needed a change. I took a year out and decided that I needed to assess what I really loved to do. I wanted to do something involving physics, biology and helping people – no small ask, but diagnostic radiography fitted the profile. Although, even after this

soul-searching, I still felt like a quitter, a failure and far from the strong young woman I thought I was, but I worked hard on building my resilience and got on with it. Our experiences – positive or negative – make us the person we will become. In the words of Vince Lombardi, the influential American Football coach 'Leaders are made, not born'. I feel strongly that this has been the case with me. Based on this, we may be most useful to others and to the organisation when we embrace, rather than suppress, our life experiences and backgrounds. For me, my values begin at home. My identity as a wife, mother, sister, daughter and friend remains unchanged and I feel that holding true to this improves my focus on my overall purpose – to care for, help and serve others.

"In my opinion, there is nothing that's worth a check, nothing that you could sacrifice or gain that is worth a check. Being so deeply truly yourself, as a non-negotiable, is the answer to everything." - Arlan Hamilton, Managing Partner CEO and Cofounder Backstage Capital

Leading self

Whilst the aim of leadership is to influence others, this process begins with ourselves in a number of different ways. Self-accountability ensures that the leader is assessing their own practice based on their own values and beliefs, and this therefore should promote ethical, responsible leadership (Ghanem and Castelli, 2019; Dhiman et al, 2018). Self-accountability also will allow us to learn from our experiences and mistakes, to develop and nurture a growth mindset. A growth mindset allows the individual to view a challenge or a situation which has not gone the way they would have liked it to as an opportunity (Yeager et al, 2019). I found that my slightly circuitous route to radiography has humbled me, as have many other experiences since and I hope this has made me more compassionate and helpful to others in similar situations. I have submitted papers which have come back with a number of requests for revisions, and although it is not always easy, I have tried to learn from this and become better as a result. Failure should be treated as only part of the journey and not the destination!

I got married while in my final year at university and secured a position as a general radiographer in a regional orthopaedics centre when I graduated in July 2005. I then moved to a smaller hospital closer to home, where we bought a house and had three children. It was busy – work and home were hectic and my dreams of becoming a researcher dimmed as I happily identified myself as a wife and mother. Life continued, days weeks and years passed, and I was content and happy at work and home, but I struggled to dismiss the little voice in my head urging me to do something more. I am now 40 years old, and I am writing this on a sunny day, in a small seaside town in Northern Ireland, with my children doing their homework at the kitchen table. I work full time, I am doing a PhD, forever learning! Some days are long – I get up early in the morning to make a start on some research, before the children get up, and my dining room table has not been used to eat off in quite some time! I have to initiate strong self-leadership and self-accountability in these moments. I remind myself of my goals and values – what is driving me to do the early mornings and evenings. I visualise my aim, and hope that someday my research in human-centred artificial intelligence in healthcare will make a difference. Gaining insight again from Professor Karise Hutchinson, who proposes that leadership is like a muscle and should be exercised in much the same way. She explains the importance of initiating the intention in the brain – the conscious choice of what you are going to do and then to make a plan to stick to it and develop it into a habit (Hutchinson, 2020). However, she also emphasises the importance of rest and work-life balance – a skill I might not have yet mastered!

Conclusion

Management and leadership theory has evolved a great deal over the last 100 years, from the thinking that you were either a born leader, or not, to an awareness of us all being leaders in our own lives and individual situations. As radiographers we have a responsibility to be the best we can be for our patients, our colleagues and ourselves. Through the pandemic, many unlikely leaders have taken centre stage and inspired us, while at times, those who are in traditional positions of leadership sadly, have not. We are all leaders. Whether that be leaders of large clinical departments, responsible for making difficult decisions which will affect many people, or leaders of one patient at a time. As we tentatively emerge from the pandemic, people are inspired to choose careers in healthcare, led by the unspoken example of those who risked their health and lives to help those in need (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), 2022). As we go about our day-to-day lives and care for our patients, our students and our colleagues, how will the way we live out our unique values impact them?

If I could leave you with one thought it would be to lead yourself first, according to your values and beliefs, whatever they may be. Consider that what you do when you are being yourself and showing your passion might impact others in ways you never thought possible. Whether you are a leader of others, yourself, your home or of a single patient at any one time, lead kindly, consistently and with authenticity - you just might not realise the impact and power of your unique purpose.

"Strive not to be a success, but rather to be of value" Albert Einstein

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