

Post-9/11 America: Intuiting Culturally Sensitive Leadership in Higher Education

Sana R. Mitchell★

Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to identify and address the higher education leadership challenges in facilitating culturally sensitive leadership behaviors and attitudes following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States. The 9/11 attacks set a global precedent of cultural stereotyping of minorities in professional and academic domains. It is imperative that educational and organizational leaders identify marginalization and cultural stereotypes in their professional contexts to mitigate the negative effects impacting students and colleagues in learning and work performance. The findings in this paper have been extracted from the author's dissertation research study. Four key components of effective leadership practice and behavior were identified to assist and enable leaders to perform intuitively and responsibly. This paper also challenges current leadership practices in Higher Education that do not factor in culturally insensitive misappropriations to rise up to the challenge of becoming self-aware and leading from an empathetic and intuitive mode of conduct.

(Based on author's dissertation research study)

Keywords: Higher Education, Educational Leaders, 9/11, Cultural Stereotyping, Culturally Sensitive Leadership, Organizational Leadership, Racism, Bias

Introduction

Traditional ways of leadership and management in higher education are no longer sufficient in current times of cultural and societal complexity. Theories of management and leadership, such as those developed by Frederick Taylor and Max Weber, are not appropriate for contemporary practice (Mintzberg, 1990; Wallin & Ryan, 1994). The sociological structure of colleges in the United States has changed and necessitates a different type of leadership approach (Wallin, 2010). In an unpredictable world, where variables constantly change and alter, educational leaders must possess flexibility and adaptability in leading their institutions (Drew, 2010). Not only should change leaders critically appraise their organizations and the environments they function within but also possess the capacity to manage themselves (Drucker, 1999).

Intuiting Culturally Sensitive Leadership

Leaders are known to be effective when they reflect, perceive, and use their intuitive faculties in culturally diverse contexts (Wallin, 2010). Contemporary leaders build upon their strengths through the insights they gain from environmental, social, and professional situations (McArthur, 2010). Leaders can perceive other people's needs and act out of universal social values of justice and ethical concern as opposed to self-centered fulfillment of individual goals (Wiley & Hilton, 2009). Contemporary college leaders can build meaningful learning communities by creating a culture of inclusion that reflects tolerance, understanding, empathy, and intellectual inquiry (Brennan, 2008). Bennis (1989) stated, "Leadership is first being then doing. Everything a leader does reflect what he or she is" (p. 141). Leaders must assist the organization to view itself for reflective understanding and remain cognizant of the decisions and activities that occur in it (Wheatley, 1999).

★Dr. Sana R. Mitchell, Ed.D
601, Sunset Circle, Nashville, Tennessee, U.S.

As ethnic diversity increases in the U.S. population, educational leaders require continual training and preparation to manage the challenges of encountering complex cultural elements in college environments. Bruner (2008) wrote about the importance of sensitivity in leaders toward understanding different cultures and working with students irrespective of their race, gender, or ethnic background. In Bruner's study (2008), the movie *Crash* (2004) was shown to graduate students who were aspiring and current leaders for the purpose of critical reflection during instruction. A focus on cultural diversity and social justice issues such as racism and gender bias emphasize themes.

The purpose of the activity was to encourage self-reflection in graduate students as they explored and shared their belief systems, experiences, and stereotypes. Bruner's research dealt with reflection, awareness, prevalence of stereotypes, including the role and presence of power. Similarly, Tatlah et al. (2011) investigated the relationship between behaviors of leaders and their commitment to the educational organizations they belong. The study involved data collection from 150 research participants and the results indicated that behavior of leaders and their commitment were positively correlating. According to Tatlah et al. (2011), dynamic leadership is necessary in contemporary educational environments to establish humanistic and inspiring communication patterns with the constituents.

Observed behavior is the product of the interaction between the individual traits of a leader and the characteristics of the situation in which he or she functions (Halpin, 1954). Behaviors leaders display and actions that precede those behaviors are shown as two functions under dimensions (Bass, 1998). Halpin (1966) defined the two functions as initiating structure and consideration. Initiating structure pertains to a leader's behavior that separates his

relationship between members of a group and himself to establish a pattern of organization, communication, and professional conduct.

Consideration is the behavior that implies mutual trust, respect, and friendship in a relationship between the leader and follower. The initiating structure is task-oriented, but the consideration aspect is person-oriented (Halpin, 1966). Similarly, Robbins (2006) wrote about the importance of considering justice, critique, profession, and care within the context of ethical behavior and decision-making in multicultural educational settings. He emphasized developing awareness in educational leaders to practice ethics from a multi-paradigm approach in culturally diverse schools and colleges.

Justice as an ethical paradigm refers to equity, fairness, and equality while practicing explicit rules and policies as well as maintaining implicit understanding of the guidelines to decision-making. Critique plays an important role where leaders take a critical approach to making decisions that do not overlook or take anything for granted. From the critical paradigm, leaders consciously monitor situations for inequity, inconsistencies, and debate to support multiethnic groups.

Developed by Gilligan (1982), the care paradigm, was a reaction to the ethics of justice. The care paradigm concept was initially coined by Kohlberg (1981) as a primarily male-oriented approach to solving ethical issues. Gilligan adopted a feminist approach toward the ethic of justice by integrating, "care, concern, and connection" to solve problems (Robbins, 2006, p. 38). Care consists of questions by the leader who asks what the implications will be of a certain decision. Profession pertains to a self-critical attitude of the educational leader for analyzing one's own personal codes of ethics and professional judgment as experiences increase. The presence of the above-mentioned characteristics in a college leader may ensure effective professional

practice and positive leadership influence on diverse student communities.

Discussions in this research article have been extrapolated from the author's dissertation study within which the author explored the phenomenon of cultural stereotyping from the perspective of higher educational leaders' lived experiences of cultural diversity after 9/11. The purpose of the study was to identify how academic leaders' experiences pertaining to 9/11 were impacting their leadership practice (Rafiq-Mitchell, 2015). During the course of the research the author read, observed, interviewed, and intuited the cognitive and emotional development of human biases toward individuals from unfamiliar cultures (which broadly encompasses anyone who may be different in religion, appearance, or ethnicity from one's self).

An interesting observation that stood out was the absence of diversity in modern leadership practice. This does not pertain to the active presence of multi-ethnic individuals employed in positions of leadership but the actual practice, awareness, and acknowledgement of the diversity present within professional and personal contexts. As if people were choosing to close their eyes and pretend the complex dynamics didn't exist.

The presence of color bias or racism is a very real and sensitive problem in the United States. One would assume that following the legal dissolution of racial segregation, the mindset and behaviors would have evolved. Presumptively yes, but critically no, with the exception of realigning how social and civil rules dictate public behavior. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the U.S. an incredible resurgence of hate crimes, cultural stereotyping, and emotional trauma were experienced by ethnic minorities.

Resulting from an intense exploration of the phenomenon of cultural stereotyping and the

symptoms ailing our leadership behaviors in Academia, the author identified four integral components of leadership practice that may allegedly exist but are operationally ineffective albeit necessary to lead diverse constituents. The four components of effective leadership practice that were identified are reflexive, critical, transformative, and contingent.

Reflexive: Contrary to the concept of reflective thinking, which limits a person to view an incident from a mirrored perspective, reflexive thinking allows a multidimensional evaluation of one's behaviors and actions (Minnici, 2006). Leaders can further develop and hone their leadership skills through the practice of reflexive thinking toward their personal or professional lives. According to Dyke (2009), "Advancement of learning in reflexive modernity can be promoted by nurturing and learning from experience that includes elements of practice, critical reflection, knowledge, and interaction with others" (p. 289).

The emotional and psychological health of a person reflects in his or her actions and behaviors. College leaders can strengthen self-understanding through the interpretation of feelings by identifying the cause of the emergence of their emotions. Reconciliation of emotional differences toward formal feelings and personal values during engagement with society, family, or friends in a meaningful manner can result in emotional harmony (Brownlie, 2011). Integration of reflexivity in professional practice can help others understand the origins of leaders' actions from their environments and interactions with people (Gilbert & Slied, 2009).

Critical: The concept of critical thinking is the most recognized but least understood cognitive phenomenon. Paul and Elder (2006) identified characteristics of critical thinking as (a) justice, (b) ethics, (c) empathy, (d) reflection, and (e) flexibility. Critical thinking facilitates problem-

solving processes and contributes to understanding complex issues in educational environments (Crenshaw et al., 2011).

According to Paul and Elder (2006), rectifying intellectual fallacies without the aid of some form of self-inquiry to locate the mental dissonance is impossible. Educational leaders who aspire to think critically can pose critical and probing questions to themselves to acquire information regarding pertinent dimensions of thought processes. Through a practice of discipline in the application of such questions, leaders may prevent the occurrence of bias, generalization, prejudice, stereotyping, and self-deception. A sample of questions follows below:

1. What is the purpose of my thinking?
2. What is the question at issue? Is the question clear and precisely stated?
3. Within what point of view am I thinking?
4. What information am I using and where did I obtain this information?
5. What concepts or ideas are central to my interpretation?
6. What assumptions am I making? Are they valid?
7. What conclusions have I drawn? Are they logically sound?
8. If I accept the conclusions, what are the implications? (Paul & Elder, 2006, p.22)

Transformative: Self-awareness and interaction with others improve when leaders read, write, and dialogue about their personal and others' cultural and social group identities. The use of transformative narratives with reflective writing can decode attitudes, beliefs, biases, and assumptions of leaders "as they operate in systems of privilege" (Hyater-Adams, 2010, p. 208). If leaders want to create inclusive environments, they should focus on the social and economic structure of that

organization, policies, and practices regarding work execution and management (Buhl, 2008). If the social identity of the team's leading work processes is lacking promotion, support, and appreciation, communication of unspoken messages may reinforce marginalization (Buhl, 2008).

Transformative learning consists of questioning assumptions, beliefs, and unlearning old habits and behaviors that have not been subject to examination. Transformative learning can counter the challenges of contemporary leadership issues; the competencies that define transformative learning consist of becoming open, reflective, discriminating, inclusive, and possessing emotional-readiness toward change (Ciporen, 2009). Ciporen's (2009) study explored how executive leaders who attended a month-long leadership development program experienced deep change and returned to their personal and professional duties with new understanding.

Contingent: Contingency theory operates from the premise that a singular correct way of doing things does not exist (Amiri, Amiri, & Alireza, 2010). The ability of a leader to make decisions is contingent on situational factors, for instance, the needs of the followers (Vroom & Jago, 2007). A contingent approach toward making decisions and other professional actions is a suitable leadership behavior because what works in one situation may not work in another (Drath, 2008). Inherent in the contingency theory are the characteristics of flexibility, foresight, empathy, and critical thinking in leaders (Vroom & Jago, 2007). Effective leadership is reliant on compatibility of leadership style with situational variables like maturity, competence levels of constituents, need for involvement, and level of authority (Dambe & Moorad, 2008).

Conclusion

Research studies have documented evidence that strong positive educational leadership is reflected

in the culture of educational institutions, student behavior, and academic achievement (Wise & Wright, 2012). Educational leadership can also have a beneficial effect on job satisfaction, student turnover rates, and the organizational culture of a learning institution (Wise & Wright, 2012). Effective educational leaders cannot rely on pre-selected solutions because the problems encountered are situational, dynamic, affected by power-politics, social injustices, and economic disparities.

Leadership practices described as autocratic, hierarchical, and bureaucratic in structure and function are obsolete and produce minimal transformational results toward the beneficiaries of such a system. From a post-modernistic perspective, knowledge is situational and dependent on the social and political conditions in which individuals discover it. According to Bourgeois (2011), educational leaders must assume a critical pragmatic stance to identify historical and power relations among organizational structures and cultural characteristic of societies so that social paradigms and tacit motives are understood.

The challenging demands of contemporary society cannot be dealt with traditional leadership behaviors, but requires effective leaders who can combine educational theory and practice commensurate with an understanding of social complexities (Marcellino, 2012). The educational leader as a social realist may observe that facts retained by natural scientists are not exempt from theoretical assumptions because facts only exist when a theory has propositioned its existence (Bourgeois, 2011). Social realism enables educational practitioners to rely successfully upon and integrate theory in all levels of educational practice.

When a scholar-practitioner leader has successfully assumed a critical position, he or she can effectively explore cultural and social patterns of educational systems within their communities (Bourgeois, 2011).

The leader, as a scholar-practitioner and critical thinker, then refuses to succumb under the weight of political power traps, which influence students, teachers, schools, and societies, marginalizing them in categories of economic, racial, or gender groups. Jenlink (2001) asserted scholar-practitioner criticality develops leadership behavior by creating a philosophical, theoretical, and critical perspective influencing the thoughts and feelings of a leader within his or her context.

References

- Amiri, M., Amiri, M., & Alireza, P. A. (2010). A dynamic model of contingency leadership effectiveness. *Clinical Leadership & Management Review*, 24(2), 1-10. Retrieved from <http://www.clma.org>
- Bass, B. (1998). *Transformational leadership: Industrial, military, and educational impact*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bennis, W. (1989). *On becoming a leader*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Brennan, J. (2008). Higher education and social change. *Higher Education*, 56(3), 381-393. doi:10.1007/s10734-008-9126-4
- Brownlie, J. (2011). "Being there": Multidimensionality, reflexivity and the study of emotional lives. *British Journal of Sociology*, 62(3), 462-481. doi:10.1111/j.1468-4446.2011.01374.x
- Bruner, D. Y. (2008). Aspiring and practicing leaders addressing issues of diversity and social justice. *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, 11(4), 483-500. doi:10.1080/13613320802479059
- Bourgeois, N. (2011). An epistemology of leadership perspective: Examining the fit for a critical pragmatic approach. *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly*, 5(4), 371-384. Retrieved from

- <http://www.questia.com/library/p99933/scholar-practitionerquarterly>
- Buhl, L. (2008). *Renewing struggles for social justice: A primer for transformative leaders*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ciporen, R. (2009). The role of personally transformative learning in leadership development. *Academy of Management Annual Meeting Proceedings*,(1), 1-6. doi:10.5465/AMBPP.2009.44244573
- Crash. (2004). Crash film. Retrieved from <http://www.crashfilm.com>
- Crenshaw, P., Hale, E., & Harper, S. L. (2011). Producing intellectual labor in the classroom: The utilization of a critical thinking model to help students take command of their thinking. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning*, 8(7), 13-26. Retrieved from <http://journals.cluteonline.com/index.php/TLC>
- Dambe, M. M., & Moorad, F. F. (2008). From power to empowerment: A paradigm shift in leadership. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 22(3), 575-587.
- Drath, W. H. (2008). Issues & observations: Leadership beyond leaders and followers. *Leadership in Action*, 28(5), 20-24. doi:10.1002/lia.1265.
- Drew, G. (2010). Issues and challenges in higher education leadership: Engaging for change. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 37(3), 57-76. Retrieved from <http://www.aare.edu.au/aer/about.htm>.
- Drucker, P. F. (1999). *Management challenges for the 21st century*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Dyke, M. (2009). An enabling framework for reflexive learning: Experiential learning and reflexivity in contemporary modernity. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 28(3), 289-310. doi:10.1080/02601370902798913
- Gilbert, A., & Slied, Y. (2009). Reflexivity in the practice of social action: From self-to inter-relational reflexivity. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 39(4), 468-479. Retrieved from http://www.journals.co.za/ej/ejour_sapsyc.html
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Halpin, A.W. (1954). The leadership behavior and combat performance of airplane commanders. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 49(1), 19-22. doi:10.1037/h0055910.
- Hyater-Adams, Y. A. (2010). Learning diversity and leadership skills through transformative narratives. *TAMARA: Journal of Critical Postmodern Organization Science*, 8(4), 208-232. Retrieved from <http://tamarajournal.com>.
- Jenlink, P. M. (2001, April). Scholar-practitioner leadership: A critical analysis of preparation and practice. Paper presented at the 2001 Annual Meeting of the *American Educational Research Association*, Session, 39.55, Seattle, Washington.
- Kohlberg, L. (1981). *The philosophy of moral development: Moral stages and the idea of justice* (Vol. 1). San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row.
- Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2006). *Critical thinking: Tools for taking charge of your learning and your life* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall.

- Rafiq-Mitchell, S. (2015). *Phenomenological study of higher educational leaders' lived experiences of cultural diversity after 9/11* (Order No. 3730822). Available from Dissertations & Theses @ University of Phoenix; Ethnic NewsWatch; ProQuest Central; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1733679170).
- Marcellino, P. (2012). Preparing educational leaders for social justice, action-learning, and democratic activism. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 7(3), 1-11. Retrieved from <http://editlib.org/j/>
- McArthur, J. (2010). Achieving social justice within and through higher education: The challenge for critical pedagogy. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15(5), 493-504. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2010.491906
- Minnici, A.M. (2006). Dimensions of reflexive thinking in social foundations pedagogy: Complicating student responses for theoretic understandings. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. (AAT3250961)
- Mintzberg, H. (1990). The manager's job: Folklore and fact. *Harvard Business Review*, 1-13. Retrieved from <http://hbr.org/>
- Robbins, S. A. (2006). Ethical decision making by educational leaders: The need for a cultural multiparadigm approach. *International Schools Journal*, 26(1), 37-43. Retrieved from <http://www.ecis.org/page.cfm?p=335>
- Vroom, V. H., & Jago, A. G. (2007). The role of the situation in leadership. *American Psychologist*, 62(1), 17-24. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.62.1.17
- Wallin, D. L. (2010). Looking to the future: Change leaders for tomorrow's community colleges. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 1(149), 5-12. doi:10.1002/cc.390
- Wallin, D. L., & Ryan, J. R. (1994). Order out of chaos: Leadership for the 21st century. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 18, 527-538.
- Wheatley, M. J. (1999). *Leadership and the new science* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Wiley, D., & Hilton, J. (2009). Openness, dynamic specialization, and the disaggregated future of higher education. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 10(5), 1-14. Retrieved from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl>
- Wise, V., & Wright, T. (2012). Critical absence in the field of educational administration: Framing the (missing) discourse of leadership in early childhood settings. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 7(2). Retrieved from ERIC database. (EJ973803)