



Is Leadership Acting?

One person's reflection of the journey

By **Dr. Maravene Loeschke**, President, Mansfield University

Recently I was asked to reflect on my journey through leadership to participants in the Pennsylvania Leadership Program (RULE), an extraordinary program for professionals in Pennsylvania. Being asked to address such a group led to reflection on my personal road from theatre to university president. Several years ago, I portrayed Eleanor of Aquitaine in the play *Lion in Winter* by William Goldman and I have often thought of Eleanor's words, "How from where we started did we ever reach this day?"

Five decades ago I was sitting in a college freshmen orientation having just declared myself a theater major and hoping to be cast in the first play. A life in leadership had certainly not occurred to me, except for the fact that I was a bossy child and seemed to make things happen. I always seemed to be put in charge or took

charge to make sure something was done.

Acting and Leadership

I am often struck by how much fine acting and fine leadership have in common. These two arenas – acting and leadership – are places where change can be accomplished so long as truth and honesty are carrying the message. Acting is not about showing off, deception, trickery, special effects, manipulation or ego. It is about transforming people's thinking and feelings by a performance so honest that the truth of the human spirit has been captured. In an honest performance, the essence of the human condition is reflected to the audience: as Hamlet says, "As 'twere a mirror up to nature."

Leadership is much the same. Through honest reflection of the human condition by those in leadership positions, feelings, thoughts, beliefs and behavior are

embraced to create positive action. Effective leadership is not about showing off, deception, trickery, manipulation or ego. It is about service – service that produces positive change in one's work, family, community, country, the world and most importantly, within one's self. A theatre performance that moves us to laughter, tears or contemplation does so because a core of honesty within the actor has been tapped and communicated by the actor. Likewise, effective leadership usually results when the leader has built initiative from an intuitive core deep within himself. This is where ethics lives.

Mansfield University, a small liberal arts based institution in rural Pennsylvania, is focused on the development of ethical leadership in each student. With academic and non-academic experiences, each student has the opportunity to build professional and personal

leadership on the sound base of a liberal arts education. Whether these leadership skills are later applied to one's profession or family, the development promulgates the ability to guide positive change.

Mansfield University students have opportunities to acquire practical skills such as problem solving, strategic planning, decision-making, conflict resolution, communication, time management, vision development, etc. They are encouraged to hone analytical, critical and creative thinking skills. They are required to develop written and oral communication, technology and quantitative abilities.

The students are also encouraged to engage in those leadership skills that are more ephemeral and difficult to define. They are intuitive and they come from the heart and soul. Some people may be surprised at what the "heart and soul" pieces include and what they have in common with theatre.

Humility

Transformational leadership and effective acting share a common element, and that is humility. This notion does not negate the importance of self-esteem and self-confidence in leadership. A good play, even a one-person show, is seldom about the brilliance of one actor. The best actors understand that they are a part of a whole that is aimed at a collective good - a successful play. Humility in leadership refers to the ability to recognize and honor the fact that the best results are not about the brilliance of the leader. Rather, the best leaders work invisibly because the leader is not in need of being credited with the success.

Ego

Often, one's perception of theatre and actors is that it is ego central on steroids; the world of leadership



POWER OF SUGGESTION Until we understand how the ability to open hearts, to share positive energy, to reinforce others, to be happy for the success of others, and to engage in emotional intelligence and empathy, leadership will continue to be in crisis

is often perceived the same way. Both are cultures where too often the ego is being fed, grows too large and inevitably becomes the driver of decision-making. The gluttony makes the world sick. At this point integrity and ethical authenticity is lost. Emotional intelligence is lost. One's life of service is lost.

At Mansfield University we strive to instill values and ethics in our leadership development of students, faculty and staff. We want our students to understand the importance of identifying and shaping their personal moral compasses. Without a moral compass, it does not much matter what practical leadership skills students learn, because one is lost on the journey.

I suggest that the place of humility in effective leadership is too frequently unexplored or undervalued. Humility appears soft in leadership programs that stress the importance of charisma, tough decision-making, power and financial success. I suggest that humility has two critical components that, if missing, will diminish, even

sabotage, the leader's work. I do not come to this idea from any religious premise; I come from the premise that leadership is in a worldwide crisis because of a void that cannot be filled with practical skills alone.

The first key component of humility is love: the ability to find love in our work, in others and in ourselves. All plays are about love in some form or another. Leadership is as well. You will not hear much about love in leadership seminars, but I suggest that until we understand how the ability to open hearts, to share positive energy, to reinforce others, to be happy for the success of others, and to engage in emotional intelligence and empathy, leadership will continue to be in crisis. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend."

The second component of humility is forgiveness: the ability to allow oneself and others to learn from mistakes and move forward after conflict and failure, the ability to "let it go," the ability to forgo the
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need to be right, the ability not to be offended or incensed or demoralized by the actions of others. These are reactions an effective leader cannot afford to engage in for long. It is amazing what can be accomplished when the need to punish is eliminated. Replacing the need to punish with the desire to solve the problem usually places the energies surrounding conflict on track for resolution.

Today's troubled world is starving because of a lack of a balanced diet in leadership. Doing the right thing is too often not on the menu at all. Ethics is far too foreign a notion in family, community and world leadership. The result of better balancing practical skills and knowledge with the values of "heart and soul" is a strong ethical base.

I grew up in a lower middle class row house neighborhood in Baltimore. None of our parents went to college. We were not taught ethics at home or in school. Some of our places of worship touched on right and wrong; some did not. We were simply expected to understand the difference between right and wrong, and we were punished when our actions said we did not. We learned these values in two practical learning labs: the family dinner table and the alley. Each evening, precisely at 5:30, all of us children were called in from our play to eat dinner at the kitchen or dining room table. All family members were present because if you were not, there was no dinner heated later in a microwave. At the table, the family talked about the day and argued about allowances and curfews. There was not a thought of having the television on. That was a

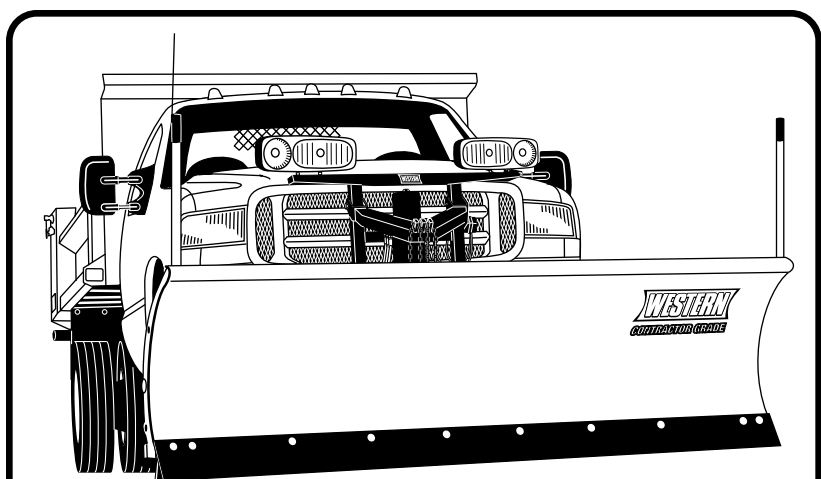
separate family activity for later in the evening.

The second learning lab for row house kids was the alley. It was where the dynamics of fair play, leadership and followship were learned. The family dinner table barely exists today and the alley has become a treacherous lab indeed. Their absence leaves a void not filled by microwaves, fast food, text messaging and twitter.

Leadership is not politics, and

service is not what we do for free. Leadership, humility and ethics are an intertwined trinity on which the health of our society rests. The trinity is grounded in a blended base of practical skill, love and forgiveness. Then the table is set for service. The process begins in each of us, one thought, one action, one sacrifice at a time. **(B)**

Adapted from a speech given to the RULE leadership program at Penn College.



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