



WHAT WORKS - AN ESSAY

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

We believe that leadership is a process that is ultimately concerned with fostering **change**. In contrast to the notion of “management,” which suggests preservation or maintenance, “leadership” implies a process where there is movement— from wherever we are now to some future place or condition that is different. Leadership also implies **intentionality**, in the sense that the implied change is not random— “change for change’s sake”— but is rather directed toward some future end or condition which is desired or valued. Accordingly, leadership is a purposive process which is inherently **value-based**.

Consistent with the notion that leadership is concerned with change, we view the “leader” basically as a **change agent**, i.e., “one who fosters change.” Leaders, then, are not necessarily those who merely hold formal “leadership” positions; on the contrary, all people are potential leaders. Furthermore, since the concepts of “leadership” and “leader” imply that there are other people involved, leadership is, by definition, a collective or group **process**.

In short, our conception of leadership comprises the following basic assumptions:

- ◆ Leadership is concerned with fostering change.
- ◆ Leadership is inherently value-based.
- ◆ All people are potential leaders.
- ◆ Leadership is a group process.

These assumptions, in turn, suggest a number of critical questions that must be addressed in any treatise on leadership effectiveness:

- ◆ What values should guide the leadership process?
- ◆ Toward what end(s) is the leadership effort directed?
- ◆ How do individuals initiate change efforts?
- ◆ How are leadership groups formed?
- ◆ How should leadership groups function?
- ◆ What alternatives to the traditional “leader-follower” model are most likely to be effective?
- ◆ What are the most effective means of preparing young people for this kind of leadership?

Alexander W. Astin

Allan M. Carter Professor of Higher Education & Director of the Higher Education Research Institute
University of California, Los Angeles

Helen S. Astin

Professor of Higher Education & Associate Director of the Higher Education Research Institute
University of California, Los Angeles

Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin.
Leadership Reconsidered: Engaging Higher Education in Social Change.
Battle Creek, MI: W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2000. pp. 8-16.
<http://www.wkkf.org/pubs/cct/leadership/pub3368.pdf>



WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

Since this book is specifically about leadership development within higher education in the United States, our basic definitions and assumptions can be further refined to reflect this particular focus:

- ◆ The basic purposes of leadership development within the American higher education system are: (a) to enable and encourage faculty, students, administrators, and other staff to change and transform institutions so that they can more effectively enhance student learning and development, generate new knowledge, and serve the community, and (b) to empower students to become agents of positive social change in the larger society.
- ◆ While some members of the higher education community maintain that higher education should ideally be “value free,” we believe that any form of education, including leadership education, is inherently value-laden. Value considerations thus underlie virtually every educational decision, including criteria for admissions, course requirements, pedagogical techniques, assessment procedures, resource allocation and governance procedures, and hiring and personnel policies. The real issue is *which* values should govern these decisions.
- ◆ Even though there are many opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to serve in formal leadership positions, our conception of leadership argues that *every* member of the academic community is a potential leader (i.e., change agent). The challenge for leadership development in higher education is thus to maximize the number of faculty, students, administrators, and staff who become committed and effective agents of positive social change.
- ◆ Higher education offers many opportunities for the formation of leadership groups involving faculty, students, and staff through its schools, colleges, departments, committees, and various administrative service units. Leadership-development programs and experiences for students can capitalize on the power of the student peer group through the classroom, residential living, and various cocurricular activities.

What is Effective Leadership?

At the outset we want to emphasize that the conception of effective leadership presented here is only one of many possible approaches. We have arrived at these principles on the basis of: (a) our understanding of the best scholarly work in the field; (b) our personal experience with leadership and leadership-development activities in the field of higher education; and (c) our group discussions and debates.

While our conception of effective leadership was developed primarily to serve as a unifying framework for the writing of the various topical chapters (i.e., Chapters 3-6), it should by no means be viewed as some sort of final theory of effective leadership or leadership development. Rather, we regard it as a working framework that is subject to regular revision and refinement based on the experience of those who use it.

Faculty, administrators, student affairs practitioners, and students may well find certain elements in the framework to be more applicable or relevant than others. Moreover, different types of institutions may need to make some modifications in accordance with their institutional missions.

The Values of Leadership

- ◆ In the broadest sense, we see the purposes of leadership as encompassing the following values:
- ◆ To create a supportive environment where people can grow, thrive, and live in peace with one another;
- ◆ To promote harmony with nature and thereby provide sustainability for future generations; and
- ◆ To create communities of reciprocal care and shared responsibility where every person matters and each person’s welfare and dignity is respected and supported.



WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

Leadership values are reflected, first and foremost, in the *ends* toward which any leadership effort is directed: What are we trying to change and why? What is the nature and scope of the intended change, and who will benefit? We believe that the value ends of leadership should be to enhance equity, social justice, and the quality of life; to expand access and opportunity; to encourage respect for difference and diversity; to strengthen democracy, civic life, and civic responsibility; and to promote cultural enrichment, creative expression, intellectual honesty, the advancement of knowledge, and personal freedom coupled with social responsibility.

Values also underlie the leadership *process*. Given our view that leadership is a group process whereby individuals work together in order to foster change and transformation, effective leadership necessarily requires: (a) that the **group** function according to certain principles and values, and (b) that **individual** members of the group exemplify certain qualities and values that contribute to the effective functioning of the group. These group and individual qualities are summarized below:

Group Qualities

- ♦ **Collaboration.** This is the cornerstone of an effective group leadership process. While groups can also function in a “leader-follower” or “command and control” mode, we believe that *collaboration* is a more effective approach because it empowers each individual, engenders trust, and capitalizes on the diverse talents of the group members.
- ♦ **Shared purpose.** This requirement addresses the fundamental goal of the group effort: What are the desired changes or transformation toward which the leadership effort is directed? What needs to be changed and why? The group’s purpose thus reflects the shared aims and values of the group members. In many respects reaching agreement on a common purpose can be the most difficult challenge for any leadership group, and in the early stages of group functioning a good deal of time and effort may be consumed in pursuit of this goal.
- ♦ **Disagreement with respect.** This principle recognizes that differences in viewpoint among individual group members are both inevitable and desirable, but that such differences must be engaged civilly in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust.

- ♦ **Division of labor.** Any collaborative effort requires that each member of the group make a significant contribution to the overall effort, and that all members be clear not only about their individual responsibilities but also about the responsibilities and contributions of the other individual members.
- ♦ **A learning environment.** The most effective group leadership effort is the one that can serve as a collaborative learning environment for its members. Members come to see the group as a place where they can not only learn about each other, themselves, and the leadership effort, but also acquire the shared knowledge, interpersonal competencies, and technical skills that the group will require to function effectively.

Individual Qualities

- ♦ **Self-knowledge.** This quality means being aware of the beliefs, values, attitudes, and emotions that motivate one to seek change and transformation. It also implies an awareness of the particular talents and strengths, together with the personal limitations, that one brings to the leadership effort.
- ♦ **Authenticity/integrity.** This quality requires that one’s actions be consistent with one’s most deeply felt values and beliefs. It is perhaps the most critical factor in building trust within the leadership group.



WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

- ♦ **Commitment.** This quality implies passion, intensity, and persistence. It supplies the psychic and physical energy that motivates the individual to serve, that drives the collective effort, and that sustains that effort during difficult times.
- ♦ **Empathy/understanding of others.** The capacity to “put yourself in the other person’s place” is critical to effective *collaboration*, building trust and resolving differences in viewpoint. It also requires the cultivation and use of what is probably our most neglected communication skill: *listening*.
- ♦ **Competence.** In the context of any group leadership activity, *competence* refers to the knowledge, skill, and technical expertise required for successful completion of the transformation effort.

Integrating Individual and Group Qualities

An important aspect of the ten individual and group qualities described above is that they are interactive and, therefore, mutually reinforcing. Indeed, the quality of any group leadership activity will be enhanced if every member understands that ***each of the ten qualities reinforces every other quality***. In this section we discuss how and why these interactions contribute to the overall leadership effort. Since there are many different two-way interactions that are possible (45, in fact), we will select only some of the more critical ones for discussion.

Interactions Among Group Qualities

Collaboration, which means working together in a common change effort, clearly requires that the members of the leadership group agree on a ***shared purpose***. And genuine collaboration is obviously most likely to occur if there is a clear-cut ***division of labor*** involving every member of the group. (By the same token, it will be easier to devise a meaningful division of labor if there is a clearly defined purpose and a collaborative spirit within the group.)

Disagreement with respect is also most likely to be encouraged in a collaborative framework and when a common purpose has been identified. It should also be noted here that disagreement (controversy, conflict, confrontation) can often lead to creative new solutions to problems, particularly if it occurs in an atmosphere of respect, collaboration, and shared purpose. Finally, the capacity of the group to arrive at a common purpose and to effect a meaningful division of labor will be greatly strengthened if the group comes to see itself as a collaborative *learning environment*.

Individual and Group Qualities of Transformative Leadership

Individual	Group
Self-knowledge	Collaboration
Authenticity	Shared purpose
Empathy	Division of labor
Commitment	Disagreement with respect
Competence	Learning environment

Interactions Among Individual Qualities

Self-knowledge obviously enhances ***authenticity***, since it is difficult to be honest and open with others— to be true to your most deeply felt beliefs and values— if you are not clear about what these beliefs and values really are. **Empathy** is similarly enhanced by self-knowledge, since understanding of others ordinarily requires some understanding of oneself.

At the same time, neither self-knowledge, authenticity, empathy, nor competence is of much value without ***commitment***, the quality that motivates the individual and supplies the energy and passion to sustain the collective effort. Finally, ***competence*** reinforces commitment, since it is easier to commit to a cause if you also feel that you can make a real contribution.

Individual Qualities Reinforce Group Qualities

More specifically: the ***collaborative*** group leadership process is facilitated when the individual participants are ***self-aware, competent, empathic, and committed***, and behave ***authentically***, i.e., in ways that are congruent with their personal values. **Self-knowledge** (or ***self-awareness***), of course, is a critical ingredient in forging a ***shared purpose*** for the leadership group: What, then, are our shared values and purposes? And what ***competencies*** do we possess that might be brought to bear on the transformation effort?



WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

Similarly, the *division of labor* that is so basic to true collaboration requires *self-knowledge*— an understanding of one’s special competencies and limitations. It is also much easier to devise a meaningful division of labor when the individual group members possess the relevant *competencies* needed for the transformation effort.

Likewise, the kind of *respectful disagreement* that can often lead to innovative solutions requires both *authenticity/integrity*— that individuals be willing to share their views with others even when there is a good chance that others may hold contrary views— and *commitment*: a willingness to “stick to it” in the face of disagreement and controversy.

Empathy/understanding of others also makes it much easier to disagree with others respectfully. Finally, the capacity of the group to serve as a *learning environment* is greatly enhanced when the individual members are *self-aware, committed*, and willing to be *authentic* with each other.

Group Qualities Reinforce Individual Qualities

More specifically: the individual’s experience with the leadership group is most likely to enhance *self-awareness, commitment, empathy*, and *authenticity* when the group operates *collaboratively* with a *common purpose* and clear *division of labor* and when it treats dissenting points of view respectfully. For example, an individual’s *self-awareness* and *competence* are more likely to be enhanced when critical feedback from the group is presented with respect and *civility*.

It is also much easier for an individual to “hear” critical commentary and to develop *empathic* skills when *disagreements* are aired in a *collaborative* and *respectful* (rather than competitive or hierarchical) context. Similarly, when the individual is a member of a collaborative group that has identified a *shared purpose*, it is much easier (“safer”) to behave with *authenticity*.

Collaboration with a *shared purpose* also enhances the individual’s *commitment* because it serves as a reinforcer: like-minded people working together toward a common goal strengthen each other’s individual commitment toward that goal. Finally, the creation of a *collaborative learning environment*, where individuals can acquire needed knowledge and skills and learn about themselves and other group members, facilitates the development of *competence, self-knowledge*, and *empathy*.

Values in Action: The Goals and Aims of Transformative Leadership

The final step is to link the ten group and individual qualities of effective leadership to the value-based goals of the leadership effort: Is the effort succeeding? Are the observed changes consistent with the group’s shared values? Is the institution (or system) becoming more equitable, more just, and more democratic?

Are we strengthening our capacity to promote creativity, *collaboration*, citizenship, service to others, cultural enrichment, intellectual honesty and *integrity*, the advancement of knowledge, *empathy* and respect for diversity and difference, personal freedom, and social responsibility? Are we becoming more effective in promoting these same qualities in our faculty, staff, and students?

Our view of effective leadership assumes that these or similar values would be embodied in the leadership group’s *shared purpose*. Further, the group’s capacity to realize such values through its efforts at transformation will depend in part on its individual members’ levels of *selfknowledge* and *competence* and on their ability to function *collaboratively*, with *authenticity* and *empathy*, and to express *disagreement*, criticism, and controversy with *respect*.

Conversely, the leadership group will find it very difficult to fulfill such value aims if it functions competitively, if it cannot decide on a *shared purpose*, if it fails to effect a meaningful *division of labor*, or if its members disagree with each other disrespectfully. At the same time, if the group enjoys some initial success in its transformation effort (i.e., if positive change occurs), *collaboration, commitment*, and *shared purpose* are reinforced. ■