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Moral Purpose Writ Large

The pressing goal is to infuse spiritual force into all educators

BY MICHAEL FULLAN

The expanding interest in moral and spiritual leadership in education is an alluring but complex phenomenon. People can be automatically attracted to or repelled by the emphasis on the spiritual.



First, an explanation of the terminology. Both terms—"moral purpose" and "spiritual leadership"—have problems. Defined literally, moral purpose is too narrow. Webster's defines moral as "of or related to principles of right and wrong behavior." Spirituality has religious connotations for many, although Webster's definition is "a life-giving force." I am going to use the somewhat cumbersome phrase "moral purpose writ large" to indicate we are talking about principled behavior connected to something greater than ourselves that relates to human and social development.

We need two things: (1) a clearer and less-mysterious idea of what we are talking about, and (2) an accessible and achievable goal for the cultivation of most leaders, not just a few.

Removing the Mystery

We need to take the mystery (but not the complexity) out of moral purpose writ large. The leadership in schools that we need for the future must be recast in more fundamental terms. This is also the key to deeper and more sustainable reform.

In a recent article titled “The Change Leader,” which appeared in *Educational Leadership*, I critiqued the narrow conception of principal as instructional leader. The latter has taken us an important but short distance toward improving schools. It is not to denigrate the accomplishments in improving literacy and numeracy, for example, by also saying these improvements in the bigger scheme of things are “skin deep.”

The building blocks may start with instructional improvement, but they must go far beyond. Let me suggest a series of ever-increasing accomplishments that are required for deeper and more lasting reform. In point form, there are four aspects of leadership:

1. making a difference in the lives of students;
2. committing to reducing the gap between high and low performers within your school or district;
3. contributing to reducing the gap in the larger environment; and
4. transforming the working (or learning conditions) of others so that growth, commitment, engagement, and constant spawning of leadership in others are being fostered.

The First Order

Making a difference in the lives of students is the first order of moral/spiritual leadership and the one we most readily think of. Instructional leaders are devoted to this goal.

The next level involves leadership that focuses on reducing the gap between high and low performers. As assessment literacy evolves, effective principals disaggregate data to address the needs of all subgroups within the school. They constantly cultivate analysis, pursue action, and monitor all aspects of the school population.

The third level represents a qualitative shift in what we normally think of as leadership. At first blush, it may seem naïve to say that school leaders must be almost as concerned about the success of other schools (in their district or elsewhere) as they are in their own. This is moral purpose writ larger and is the key to sustainability. I call this leadership that helps develop “the social/moral environment.”

As I stated recently in my Educational Leadership article: “Those concerned about the depletion of resources in the physical environment were the first to discuss the issue of sustainability. Our concern is the depletion of resources in the social and moral environment. In the social and moral environment of the school, we need the resources to close the achievement gap between high and low performers, to develop all schools in the system, and to connect schools to the strength of democracy in society. Further, if school leaders do not concern themselves with the development of the social and moral environment of the entire district (in addition to the development of the environment within their own school), then not only will the school system deteriorate, but eventually their own schools will also fail.”

Leaders who are most effective in their own organizations and beyond are those who can connect to the bigger picture. They do not have tunnel vision. They do much better at connecting the dots—what I have called coherence-making. They also know that reducing the performance gap across all schools in the nation (and beyond) is the key to social cohesion in society, health and well-being of citizens and economic performance. The betterment of humankind as not an abstract goal for moral/spiritual leadership. It is part and parcel of leadership for a higher purpose.

Fourth, you cannot accomplish the previous three levels of leadership without the transformative powers of creating growth-oriented learning conditions of others in the organization. In our evaluation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy in England, we found that although literacy and numeracy achievement scores went up in the 1997-2002 period, the morale of teachers, if anything, declined in that same period. Raising achievement scores is one thing, creating a dynamic-engaged teaching profession is another. We are now working with the British to determine what policies would transform the working conditions of teachers. Such transformation requires passion, commitment, and sustained energy. In short, you need many leaders working with moral/spiritual force.

Other studies are pointing in the same direction. Jim Collins, in his recent book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't*, analyzed in detail 11 companies that experienced sustained economic performance over a minimum of 15 years and compared them to other companies that had short-term growth. He makes precisely the same distinction I just made in reference to the England study.

Collins distinguishes between the Level 4 "Effective Leader" who "catalyzes commitment to and vigorous pursuit of a clear and compelling vision, stimulating higher performance standards" (read "increased achievement scores") with Level 5 "Executive Leader" who "builds enduring greatness" in the organization (read "transforms the learning conditions for all").

In brief, the next phase of leadership in education goes far beyond instructional advancement into growth experiences for students and teachers alike that are truly spiritual in the life-giving sense.

Unattainability

Little of the above will happen if we idealize spiritual leadership. For one thing, charismatic, visionary leadership is the wrong conception for getting the job done. Second, only a few exceptional people meet this idealized standard. Again recent studies bear out a more accessible, humble image of leaders at many levels.

Collins, in his book, found that charismatic leaders were negatively associated with sustainable performance. The 11 leaders who built enduring greatness were not high-profile flashy performers but rather "individuals who blend extreme personal humility with intense professional will."

Joseph Badaracco, in his 2002 book *Leading Quietly*, makes a similar case. Leaders who do the right thing lead quietly. They are at all levels of the organization and do not necessarily stand out. They are not spiritual in terms of God-like purity, but are all too human as they recognize "mixed motives" in themselves. They don't try to "save the world," or "buy time" (especially when problems are complex), nor do they "bend the rules" and "craft compromises," according to Badaracco, a professor at the Harvard Business School. These leaders exemplify what he calls "three quiet virtues"—restraint, modesty and tenacity.

Richard Farson and Ralph Keyes provide a similar portrayal in *Whoever Makes the Most Mistakes Wins*. Such leaders are not preoccupied by looking good, but rather by learning from efforts to solve complex problems. Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, co-authors of *Leadership on the Line*, also give a more realistic image of “staying alive through the dangers of leading.” Their last chapter is titled “Sacred Heart” in which three virtues are discussed—innocence, curiosity and compassion. These virtues tap into our deeper sense of purpose, but not in a high-falutin way. Once again spirituality plays itself out in humble, messy circumstances.

Defining leadership in these terms invites everyone to be a moral/spiritual contributor. My argument is that it is essential for spiritual leadership to be taken off its high horse and instead be seen as occurring in a thousand small ways through everyday behavior.

Transforming a Field

Finally, let me be clear that I am not suggesting that spiritual leadership be left to chance. On the contrary, this is where we link the last level of leadership in the previous section about transforming the working conditions to the question of what strategies will get us there. Two ideas are crucial—learning in context and producing leaders at many levels.

Recruiting top-performing principals is important, but not as important as systematically learning on the job. Learning in context occurs when people interact to learn and solve problems they face. Learning out of context takes place when principals go to a workshop or conference. Such learning can be valuable for further development, but it is not the kind of applied learning that makes a difference. Learning in context has the greatest potential payoff because it is more specific, situational and social (it develops shared and collective knowledge and commitments). Of course, it depends on what is being learned, which in our case is essentially the four aspects of leadership discussed earlier.

Leaders at many levels must be cultivated as people learn in context. An organization cannot flourish—at least, not for long—on the actions of the top leader alone. Schools and districts need many leaders at many levels. Learning in context helps produce such leaders. Further, for leaders to be able to deal with complex problems, they need many years of experience and professional development on the job. To some extent, a school leader’s effectiveness in creating a culture of sustained change will be determined by the leaders he or she leaves behind.

In a real sense we are talking about transforming the teaching profession. We will not have a large pool of quality principals until we have a large pool of quality teachers. We will only get quality principals when we have quality teachers in numbers.

To me, spiritual leadership represents a paradox. It sounds lofty, but it must be accomplished on the ground through the actions of many.

The key to the next phase of developing education systems is to realize that spiritual leadership and long-term accountability are intimately related. What better motivation than to rediscover and galvanize in its modern form the intrinsic interests of teachers to do good work. Only this time, it can't be an individual phenomenon unevenly dispersed, but rather a system characteristic deliberately fostered by many leaders with moral purpose writ large.

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