Grassroots Leadership Models: A Conceptual History of Thought and Practice

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Elements of Grassroots Leadership that can be Transferred to Educational Leadership

One of the reasons why there is merit in examining grassroots leadership is that such an examination can shed light on those attributes and qualities of grassroots leaders that enable them to gain influence, despite their lack of role authority. This could help produce educational leadership that is more "effectual and trustworthy" (English & Ehrich, 2012, p. 86) than leadership that is tied to position or rank. English and Ehrich (2012) point out that, absent leadership skills or qualities, grassroots leaders would have no followers because they possess no formal role with the accompanying power that produces ready followership. They note that "much can be gained by being aware of the tactics and strategies used by grassroots leaders who depend on influence as opposed to power" (2012, pp. 86–87).

While extant theories of leadership provide quite useful guidance for leaders and those involved in leadership preparation programs, there is merit in giving particular attention to those theoretical dimensions that overlap with theories of grassroots leadership. Some examples of these areas of overlap are cited here. Transformational leadership models point to the importance of building capacity in others, a strategy which is ultimately dependent on the relational trust that is so essential for grassroots leaders. Greenleaf's (2002) views of servant leaders as those who are attentive to the needs of others, and who, through being alert to such requirements, become followers themselves, evoke the grassroots leader's dependence on influence and trust

over power and authority. Grassroots leadership's focus on civic responsibility and community engagement is also reflected in models of authentic leadership, defined by Begley as

> a genuine kind of leadership –a hopeful, open-ended, visionary and creative response to social circumstances, as opposed to the more traditional dualistic portrayal of management and leadership practices characteristic of now obsolete and superseded research literature on effective principal practices. (2003, p. 1)

Distributive leadership's focus on collective wisdom and shared authority reflects the grassroots leader's focus on the democratization of decision-making and distribution of leadership.

The lessons from grassroots leadership cited earlier in this chapter regarding conflict, trust, and shared power and influence are all relevant to school leadership.

• As has been noted previously, productive nonviolent conflict has a legitimate role in creating social and institutional change, and school leaders would benefit from an improved focus on conflict in leadership preparation programs (English & Ehrich, 2012; Hughes & Davidson, 2020a, b).
• Trust "binds organizational participants to one another" (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 18) and, as reported by Shirley, school-community trust can be an outcome of effective grassroots leadership (2009, p. 177).
• Shared power reflects an implicit recognition that true power lies in a common vision, collective wisdom, and a joint cause. Influence gained through authentic actions intended to correct an injustice produces genuine moral authority that far surpasses the authority associated with position.

The moral leadership that is reflected in grassroots leadership points to the need for a substantial shift in leadership preparation programs toward issues of equity and social justice. This chapter has provided examples of leaders driven by a commitment to address an injustice. Leadership coursework must be carefully scrutinized to ensure that essential conversations on historical and contemporary injustices are not crowded out by overly technocratic content (Crow, Day, & Møller, 2017). Leadership preparation programs have a role to play in developing leaders that are ready and willing to challenge existing injustices. Shirley writes that,

> The consequences of neglectful policies and values injurious to children spill over into schools and communities on a daily basis and suggest that educators have a civic responsibility, as part of their vocation, to remedy the most egregious forms of social injustice that afflict the most vulnerable members of their schools and communities. (Shirley, 2009, p. 182)

School leaders are being tested today as never before, as they cope with the effects of the global pandemic that has required school closures and an abrupt transition to universal online schooling. Given all of the challenges they face, including and beyond a global pandemic, their ability to address these challenges

will require a significant expansion of their already-extensive engagement with their communities. As Shirley notes, they will need novel approaches

> to network not only with one another but also to reach out to community members to confront common problems, to share expertise, and to slowly but surely transform schools from islands of bureaucracy to centers of civic engagement. The interdependent relationship between democracy and education may remain fractious and demanding, but it also remains indispensable. (Shirley, 2009, p. 183)

Cross-References

► Curriculum Leadership

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