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Reaching the Heart of Leadership

The heart is a muscle, and you strengthen muscles by using them. The more I lead with my heart, the stronger it gets.

(Miller, 2013)

Metaphorically, the heart represents the central organ of the human body and is seen as a major source of emotions, humane feelings, and positive personal attributes. It exemplifies sincerity, bravery, audacity, and zeal. It represents the core. Indeed, in many cultures and religions, the heart symbolizes moral courage—a theme that runs throughout this book.

Leaders want to be successful in their roles. Organizations are investing heavily in leadership development in order to foster the qualities that make a difference. They are fully aware of those qualities that are a recipe for failure. This includes leaders who are heartless and lacking in courage, kindness, enthusiasm, generosity, or magnanimity. If organizations are to be effective, and if we are to build public

confidence in our institutions, individuals exhibiting these deficits must be excluded from or counseled out of leadership roles.

The heart of leadership is about reaching the core and tapping into what moves and motivates people toward the achievement of goals that make a difference in people's lives. It is grounded in a leader's courageous and unwavering commitment to doing what's right and to being motivated by a moral imperative. It is about taking seriously the needs and aspirations of people who do the work required each day for the organization to succeed.

In education, it is about ensuring the centrality of the needs of the student, as the learner, in all decisions. It is about ensuring that every student succeeds, regardless of his or her race, gender, socio-economic status, or other personal characteristics or life circumstances. It is about disaggregating the data to ensure that students receive appropriate interventions and supports. It is about paying assiduous attention to the needs of individual students and the groups to which they belong.

In education, being a strong advocate for students is at the heart of effective leadership. Ensuring that the workplace is devoid of fear and that teachers and principals are supported to do their best work is another essential component. Making sure that parents and the public have a voice in determining the goals and effectiveness of the system counts as well.

When one reaches the heart of leadership, one assumes a new level of stewardship. And that stewardship requires an intense focus on capacity building in order to bring about the changes and to achieve the outcomes that are necessary for new energy, enthusiasm, and vitality to thrive. Reaching the heart unleashes the entrepreneurial spirit and innovative thinking that enables creative decision making to permeate all aspects and levels of the organization.

Reaching the heart is about enhancing life chances and achieving results for students who have not succeeded historically and who have not yet realized their potential, either as individuals or as members of the groups to which they belong. To use the commonly cited phrase, it is about raising the bar for all students and closing

achievement gaps between groups. It is about talking courageous stances—never succumbing to paralysis or inaction but, instead, being blatantly opportunistic in addressing students' needs. As leaders, we must continue to ignite students' intellectual curiosity and encourage an inclusive worldview. For these students, reaching the heart of leadership means that they must become the solution finders who are willing to address issues such as indifference, neutrality, or injustice, wherever they exist.

As educational leaders, one of the privileges of professionalism is that we are entrusted with the lives of students and the responsibility of improving work environments and learning cultures. It is about having high expectations for ourselves, students, and staff; developing a strong commitment to research-informed strategies, holistic approaches, and fidelity to what works; and also influencing educational systems and holding them in trust for future generations. Most important, it is about the ability to demonstrate moral outrage when commonly held universal values are infringed upon.

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Over the years, I have learned that it is necessary to

1. Work assiduously at becoming a truly reflective leader—one who is increasingly aware of and demonstrates respect for the needs of the people we serve.

2. Acknowledge that all people have biases and prejudices that have surreptitiously crept into their consciousness over the years. What is important is a willingness to work to address those biases.

3. Demonstrate empathy for employees, whenever possible, and have a strong commitment to address their needs in the workplace.

4. Recognize that "whenever there is unequal distribution of power, the relationship becomes a moral one," (Sergiovanni, 2001) and adhere to a moral imperative in the way we treat those we lead.

5. Think critically about the decisions we make in terms of our own motivations and intentions, but, more important, in terms of the impact they have on others.

● ● ● ● ● ACTION STEPS FOR REACHING THE HEART OF LEADERSHIP

To reach the heart, it is necessary to

1. Seek every opportunity to read alternative perspectives that will elucidate issues related to how we use power and privilege.

2. Access programs related to sensitivity training, antiracism, and the prohibited grounds covered by human rights codes—for example, regarding avoiding discrimination based on race, gender, and religion, among others.

3. Ensure that issues such as poverty do not determine destiny, recognizing that socioeconomic biases, though not a part of these codes, are a very important consideration in education.

4. Through deep reflection and training, work at dislodging any prejudices or biases that we may have absorbed over the years and learn how to become more effective in working with people from diverse groups.

5. Identify formally and informally a few trusted employees at different levels of the organization—for example, a secretary, custodian, parent, or student leader—and empower them to give you feedback on how you use position power and on your behaviors and attitudes that may be inconsistent with what you preach or the values of the organization.

6. Work collaboratively with a team to establish norms of reflective practice, ensuring that open, honest, and direct feedback is an expectation.

7. Seek every opportunity to gather information on, talk about, and improve the interpersonal dynamics within your organization.

8. Provide human relations and interpersonal skills development, as well as assertiveness training, at all levels of your system. Include student leaders in these initiatives.

9. Create a culture devoid of a fear of reprisals in which everyone, regardless of where they are on the organization ladder, has the responsibility to point out to others when they are not being respectful.

10. Disseminate questionnaires with specific questions about your leadership style, attitudes, behaviors, and interpersonal competences. These should be anonymous and sent to a trusted employee identified beforehand, whose role is to summarize these comments and present the summary to the leader, who should share the findings unaltered in an honest and nondefensive manner with colleagues. This process should include a plan on how these comments will be addressed.

11. Encourage staff to do the same feedback exercise with their students. This exercise will be helpful only if it is conducted in a climate of trust and congeniality.

12. In Chapter 2, we will review Kovach's (1987) research on what motivates employees. Following this model, work with employees to identify the relationship and culture-related variables that are important in your organization. Ask employees to rank these variables in order of importance and ask senior administrators to rank them as well. Discuss the rankings; try to arrive at a consensus of what is needed to take your organization to new levels of performance effectiveness. Devise a plan of action for improvement.