

All Aboard the LeaderShip

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Reflections on Goals and Catchphrases

By Alfie Kohn

If you're going to lead a school or other organization, it might be smart to give some thought to what it means to be a good leader. But that fact doesn't explain why some schools proudly announce that they train their students – every last one of them – in the art of leadership. What's up with that?

I'd suggest three possible explanations. The first is that leadership, like a lot of other terms that show up in mission statements (transformational, responsible, good citizens, 21st-century as an adjective), is just a rhetorical flourish – something we're not supposed to think about too carefully. No one is likely to stand up and say, "Hey, wait just a minute! Exactly which characteristics does this school regard as admirable in the 21st century that it didn't value in, say, 1995?"

Similarly, you're not expected to ask how it's possible for everyone to be a leader. You're just supposed to smile and nod. Leadership good.

Possibility number 2 is that the term does have a specific meaning – a meaning that's actually rather disturbing in this context. "When colleges promise to make their students leaders, they're telling

them they're going to be in charge," William Deresiewicz wrote in the September issue of Harper's magazine. In fact, that pact with the privileged begins well before college. The message, if made explicit, would sound something like this: "No, of course everyone can't be a leader. The elite are far more likely to attain that status. So buy your kids an education here and we'll equip them to be part of that elite." [1]

It's a shrewd selling point for a selective school, granted. And it explains why, as someone observed recently, you don't find many institutions that refer to themselves as "followership academies."

The relatively benign word leadership may be a way to mute the objectionable implications of grooming certain students to run the world. It's not unlike how adults try to make themselves feel better about punishing children by referring to what they're doing as "imposing a consequence."

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When I mused about this issue on Twitter a few weeks ago, wondering whether appeals to leadership implicitly endorsed a competitive hierarchy, my post produced a bushel of responses that made me consider possibility number 3: Maybe leadership, like a lot of other words, just means whatever the hell you want it to mean.

One person pointed me to a website about being a "servant/leader" – a phrase with religious roots, I discovered. The site, which had the feel of a late-night TV commercial, offered materials to promote both "personal development" and an "entrepreneurial mindset."

Here, reproduced verbatim, are a few of the other replies I received:

* Leadership requires that we lead ourselves first. Part of being a great leader is being a good follower too

* Students can lead in 4 directions- leading up, leading peers, leading down, and leading self

** Everyone can be a leader, everyone can be a servant, and everyone can treat others w/ respect*

** Some leadership actually comes from the followers within a group*

** Lead from YOUR passion. All can.*

** [I] always interpreted "teaching leadership" to mean recognizing/owning our gifts & challenges, and learning what we can do with them*

One reasonable reaction to all these declarations would be: "Huh?" The dictionary says a leader is "one who is in charge or command of others." The leader's style doesn't have to be (and ideally wouldn't be) heavy-handed or authoritarian. But that doesn't mean the word can be redefined to signify anything we choose, such that the inherent power differential between leaders and followers is magically erased. To deny that feature, or to claim that leadership can refer to being a good follower, stretches the word beyond all usefulness. Likewise for the blithe reassurance that everyone can be a leader, which recalls Debbie Meier's marvelous analogy: It's like telling children to line up for lunch, then adding, "And I want all of you to be in the front half of the line!"

In a political context, it makes sense to discuss how to prevent leaders from abusing their power. But if our focus is on education or child rearing, then I'm not sure why we're promoting a hierarchical arrangement. And teaching kids to "follow as well as lead" doesn't address this concern any more than the harm caused by having a punitive parent is rectified by having another parent who's permissive.

It's fine to hope that those children who do eventually end up in leadership positions will act with kindness and skill. But, again, why frame education in these terms? Why not promote characteristics that apply to everyone (just by virtue of being human) and are relevant to children as well as adults: compassion, skepticism, self-awareness, curiosity, and so on? Why not emphasize the value of being part of a well-functioning team, of treating everyone with

respect within a model that's fundamentally collaborative and democratic? At best, a focus on leadership distracts us from helping people decide things together; at worst, it inures us to a social order that consists of those who tell and those who are told.

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Alongside my substantive objection to an emphasis on leadership (as the word is actually defined) I will confess to some irritation with the more general tendency to be unconstrained by how words are actually defined. This temptation presents itself with respect to all sorts of terms, and even people with admirable views give in to it. Faced with an objection to a certain idea or practice, the response is likely to be, in effect, "No, no. I use that label to mean only good things."

Thus: "I reject your criticisms of the flipped classroom [making students watch lecture videos as homework and do what's more commonly assigned as homework during class] because when I talk about flipped classrooms, I mean those that include wonderful student-designed projects."

*Or: "Why would someone who's progressive raise concerns about the idea of a **growth mindset** [attributing outcomes to effort rather than to fixed ability]? The way I use that term, it includes a rejection of grades and other traditional pedagogical practices." [2]*

We've disappeared through the looking glass here, finding ourselves in a reality where, as Lewis Carroll had Humpty Dumpty put it, "a word...means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less." [3] Like Carroll, I think it's fine to argue that x is consistent with things you already like (if you can defend that proposition), but it's not fine to defend x by redefining it however you see fit.

After all, that's something a good leader would never permit.

NOTES

1. Of course, a disproportionate number of the children who are dispatched to – and admitted by – those schools have parents who are already part of the elite. Hence the late James Moffett’s mordant slogan: “Send us winners and we’ll make winners out of them.”

2. In some cases, I suspect a kind of cognitive dissonance may be at work: Someone who approves of various progressive principles, but also has developed a strong professional investment in a certain idea (such as the flipped classroom or growth mindset), may resolve a potential conflict by reconstituting the latter idea until it includes the principles they value. Thus, any objections to the favored idea must be due to its having been misunderstood or implemented incorrectly.

3. I had occasion to recall that sentence not long ago while writing about the related phenomenon of affixing progressive labels to traditional practices.

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