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“Retelling Leadership through Unconventional Stories”

By Jeanne Jackson and Kent Andersen

INTRODUCTION

Three innovative ways to teach leadership are presented in the paper. In each of these scenarios we hoped to challenge our students' initial stereotypes and assumptions about leadership. At first, people often think about leadership in terms of authority or position. When Richard Couto of Antioch College asked his Leadership Studies students to draw pictures of leadership, they drew “images of money, power, prestige, and superiority.” We've had similar experiences with our students, who typically draw pictures of the military, clergy, or the White House. Sometimes the leader is depicted as physically larger than others or as more knowledgeable. One image shows the leader at a fork in the road, pointing the way, the tiny followers behind with question marks over their heads. Howard Gardner (1995) calls these “scripts.” He says, “By the age of four or five, most children have constructed a large number of ‘scripts’ or ‘stereotypes’ or ‘scenarios.’” According to Gardner, these scripts “prove surprisingly impervious to change” (p. 28). While most leadership theory has moved beyond this model, it can be difficult to move students—or others who have never examined their assumptions about leadership directly—beyond these ideas. We work to encourage our students to see such assumptions in a new way—to move beyond their scripts.

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Howard Gardner's analysis of leadership in *Leading Minds* served as our framework for developing these lessons and for thinking about them afterwards. For Gardner, stories are central to leadership. He defines leadership as "a process in the minds of individuals in a culture—a process that entails the capacities to create stories, to understand and evaluate these stories, and to appreciate the struggle among stories" (p. 22). Story is a broad term for Gardner: he hopes to "call attention to the fact that leaders present a dynamic perspective to their followers: not just a headline or snapshot, but a drama that unfolds over time, in which they—leader and followers—are the principal characters or heroes... in pursuit of certain goals" (p. 14). Stories become the central part of any leadership scenario and leaders may articulate those stories directly or embody them in their behaviors.

BABE: A BEHAVIORAL APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP

The first story is the film *Babe*, which was used to discuss leadership now with three different groups—second year college students, college professors, and high school students. Because the film highlights the differences between task and relationship behaviors, I use the film as a way of talking about the style or behavioral approach to leadership—the view popularized as the Managerial Grid. If Rex and Fly—the two sheep dogs—are high-task, Babe—the pig who aspires to being a sheep pig—represents the "ideal" type in the style approach: team leadership (high task and high relationship). As Fly points out, Babe treats his constituents as equals—with that comes a great deal of talking and discussing and explaining (building support).

For our purposes, it is important to ask, *How does this story challenge leadership scripts?* For many students, believing that Babe is a leader at all can be difficult. Because Babe acts as his constituents ask him, they think that he does not lead: an interesting and revealing assumption about communication flow in the leadership process. They sometimes suspect that Babe is not a leader at all since his ability to lead is contingent on his friendship with Ma, a sheep that he meets earlier in the film: a revealing assumption about leader and follower relationships. While Babe proves in the final competition to be more effective at herding sheep than any sheepdog, students and faculty often doubt the effectiveness he would have in difficult situations. Often they assume that since he is too "nice" and doesn't "tell people what to do," he would fail. In the film, however, Babe is successful in such situations: in one scene, the sheep are attacked by wild dogs and Babe frightens them off with head butts. Besides, the film complicates the idea that difficult situations require high task behaviors since Rex, the high task leader, fails to rescue sheep from a flood, as we learn in a flashback. Such discussions allow us to complicate assumptions about leadership and, possibly, some of the assumptions in leadership theory. We can ask, for instance, how does Babe's ongoing relationship with the sheep influence the successful use of high task leader behaviors?

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My point is that Babe as a story moves us quickly to some fundamental questions about how leadership happens: who is involved, what they do, what's necessary to make it successful, and so on. It does this because we view it first as a children's film. It's not explicitly about leadership—as a documentary on presidents might be, for instance. In fact, after discussion, my students this term actually understood the film best in terms of assumptions. As one pointed out, our assumptions not only shape the way we deal with people (Rex and Fly think sheep are stupid and treat them accordingly) they affect how we behave as leaders and followers. If we assume that leaders have all the answers and followers are passive, we will behave in accordance with that script. As my student came to understand, that is exactly why assumptions are worth examining.

GLIDE MEMORIAL CHURCH: A SERVICE-LEARNING EXPERIENCE

The second story involves a service learning experience. While we have a number of ongoing service projects at BSC, the core of our program involves the January term projects where students spend approximately three weeks during January providing service in some part of the world. In the past, students have worked in Chile, New York, India, and local Birmingham neighborhoods. Our program is distinct from volunteering because it has an academic or learning component. Three activities facilitate that learning: a semester long preparation prior to the January immersion, frequent journaling, and reflections.

For the last two years, I've participated with a group of students in a project at Glide Memorial Methodist church in San Francisco. Unlike Babe, which doesn't at first appear to be about leadership, most students expect to encounter leadership at Glide.

Again we ask, *how does this story (the story of Glide) challenge scripts about leadership or service in churches?* Two things are significant for answering this question: first Glide's story itself, which we examine in our meetings prior to January, primarily through founding pastor Cecil Williams's biography *No Hiding Place* (1993); and second, the impact that story has on those who hear and experience it.

Prior to January: The Glide Story

Located on the edge of the Tenderloin, the poorest neighborhood in San Francisco, Glide is the largest social service provider, with over 39 programs, including recovery programs, job training programs, transitional housing, daycare programs for children, and a food program, which serves over 3,000 meals per day, 365 days per year. We spend most of our time in the dining hall.

The defining moment in Glide's formation, according to William's biography and other accounts, came in 1967 when Williams removed the cross from the sanctuary.

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According to Williams, the church was worshipping “death, duty, security, and exclusivity” (p. 2). But Williams wanted to celebrate life and inclusiveness, arguing that “the cross will not save humanity—humanity will redeem the cross” (p. 50). By the 1980s, Glide had become an active part of the Tenderloin neighborhood, opening its doors to all walks of life: gays, straight, black, white, drug addicts, Methodist, atheist, Muslim, agnostic. Its Sunday celebrations—not services—overflowed with people from all backgrounds. As *Life* magazine notes, “No church in the nation walks its walk quite the way Reverend Williams’s does” (p. 45).

Glide’s inclusiveness leads to action: as Williams articulates in his biography: “I try to help people understand it isn’t so much what you say about Jesus and what the Bible says that matters; what is important is if you believe that the message of Jesus is addressed to you. ... How are you going to live your life and take action?” (p. 29). Glide takes action, principally through its recovery and outreach programs. In response to crack in the 1980s, Glide established recovery circles to help addicts in the Tenderloin who were not being helped by traditional recovery programs. In response to AIDS, Glide established a health clinic devoted to reducing people’s risk of contracting the virus. This two pronged approach—inclusion and action—asks members of the Glide family to “be authentic”—a common admonition from Williams in the pulpit. Being authentic at Glide means knowing who you are and taking action to help others learn who they are. Once we arrive, the students realize that Glide’s inclusiveness and its commitment to action is real. We become members of the Glide family.

Reflections: The Impact of the Glide Story

Glide’s challenge to be socially and politically active makes my students squirm because it forces them to rethink what it means to “do good” through service.

Just to give you a taste of how this open and active community affects students and their thinking about church leadership, let me provide two relevant comments from student journals: The first concerns a piece of legislation, referred to here as “care not cash,” that San Franciscans were about to vote on: “I also read an article in the Coalition for the Homeless newspaper titled ‘Proposition N—How many ways can we screw homeless people?’ I thought care not cash sounded like a good idea but the homeless people here and places like Glide apparently don’t think so.” I don’t want to detail Proposition N. Instead, I want to highlight the kind of thinking happening here because it became central to many of our reflections. Generally, this student is asking, what role do churches play in political action? For this student, and for many others in our reflections, the political activity of Glide raises uncomfortable questions about what Christians are supposed to do and how they are supposed to behave.

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From a pedagogical standpoint, we were lucky in January 2002 because the windup to the second Gulf War was just beginning. Demonstrators flocked to the streets in protest. Williams and his co-pastor, Pastor Fitch, demanded that the congregation join the protests. As many students noted in our reflections, it was the first time they had ever heard a church leader *directly* oppose government action. True or not, what surprised them was the forcefulness of Pastor Fitch’s remarks. Protest this war, he said. Glide’s activist story pushed students to recognize the potential conflicts between their multiple identities: national identity (I am American), religious identity (I am Christian); other group identities (I am a person committed to service and to “doing good”); and most recently Glide (I am a member of the Glide family). This pitting of identities forces to students to ask, “what role should I play in the drama of leadership?”

The second remark, in fact, reveals a student struggling between self-understanding—“being authentic”—and social acceptance. In her journal she is in the midst of questioning her faith and troubled by her own hesitation to articulate that skepticism to others: “For me, God or whatever shows in the actions at Glide much more than simply being preached about at home. My trigger for not always being honest about my agnostic/ atheistic beliefs is fear. What triggers that fear? Misunderstanding, fear that if they [her classmates] really knew what I believed they wouldn’t like me.” This student is making a crucial first step towards a type of leadership that isn’t interested in simply maintaining the status quo.

The point here is that the experience of Glide—of learning about it, participating in it, and reflecting and journaling about—challenges students’ scripts about leadership and service. As the journals hopefully make clear, the experience jars the students’ expectations, and our reflection on that dislocation can help them move beyond simplistic scripts and assumptions, particularly those scripts that inform our identities. Do we define ourselves or accept others’ definitions of us?

WHAT A GIRL WANTS: THE MEDIA AND LEADERSHIP

Accepting external definitions is precisely the focus of our third example. [As Gardner \(1995\) says](#), not only do we develop scripts based on the people immediately around us, but we “have heard dozens of stories... from the communications media” (p. 46-47). There is no more vivid an example of such influence than the stories presented by the media marketed to teen girls.

In an effort [to](#) encourage 16-year-old girls from across the United States to [question the simplistic](#) Hitler versus Mother Theresa image of leadership [and](#) to comprehend cultural influences in leadership, we use the video “What a Girl Wants,” for an all-female summer high school leadership program, *Student Leaders in Service*. Produced by the Teresa and H. John Heinz III Foundation three years ago, the video

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shows sensual images of women on MTV music videos with commentary by wholesome 11-12 year old girls. The documentary contrasts explicit scenes from music videos by Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, and Mandy Moore as well as tortuous excerpts from the film “Scream” with the innocent responses of these young girls.

The adolescent girls initially appear objective, mature, and analytical – “the stars are like that,” they comment, or “following the leader is the message from the media”... “there is pressure to grow up too soon.” Elsewhere they seem critical of the media’s message: if you are sexy, then boys will like you; you need to be exceedingly thin and wear lots of makeup; plastic surgery and sex at a young age are desirable outcomes.

While seemingly articulate, these views turn out to be standard “scripts.” The disturbing aspect of the video is that the 11-13 year olds who want to be poets, dancers, and zoologists are also heavily influenced by the images portrayed in the videos. The girl’s clothing, memory of song lyrics, and choice of role models reveal how deeply MTV’s story is engrained in their worldview. When asked who their role model is, some respond “all girls want to be Britney Spears.” Rather than being confident in their own looks and abilities, the “girls” want to be thin, sensual, and beautiful.

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On first viewing, the video does not shout out that it has anything to do with leadership. The high school girls are NOT shocked by the suggestive scenes and the violent films – this is their culture and they are comfortable with the images. Using the documentary “What a Girl Wants” for the summer high school leadership program, however, provides an ideal tool for discussing the media’s influence on the drama of leadership: the conflicting roles of women, gender differences in leadership, role models, self-confidence as a leadership trait. The conversation is rowdy, humorous, and amazingly candid.

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We begin the discussion with a recap of the story told in the documentary. The apparent story is that while adolescent girls may recognize the sexual overtones of MTV, they fall into our culture’s subliminal trap – they buy the CD’s, the makeup, hair products, and clothes of their role models. Our students better understand this appeal when they realize how the story appeals to emotions through the simple, repetitive, and fast-paced lyrics and images. On the surface, the videos appear innocuous and thus more desirable. (As it turns out, pornography producers also produce the videos.) As Gardner notes, we usually prefer emotional appeals over logical appeal (p. 48). In fact, in this case the audience—teen girls—is primed for the MTV message, since these images appeal directly to a young girl’s emotions and her insecure sense of identity.

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Once the explicit theme of the video is discussed, the discussion moves to an examination of the values underlying that theme, including the influence American mass culture places on women—telling them who they are and what lifestyle choices they should make. Oddly, because the video appeals so directly to the girls’ emotions, our

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students are immediately engaged in the dissection of the video. Such engagement means they are quicker to realize their assumptions concerning the relationship between the media, power and influence, and, of course, leadership may be more complex than they originally acknowledged. By analyzing the impact of MTV on adolescent girls, the discussion naturally leads to questions about what influences our students, what influences their friends, and an analysis of how they identify themselves. In her 1995 book *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media*, Susan Douglas concludes that “news and entertainment media have had enormous power to set the agenda about how people consider, react to, and accept women’s changing roles and aspirations. “ The idea is to help students see how we often passively accept such cultural stories, despite the negative impact they have on women’s self-perceptions and men’s perceptions of women.

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The final challenge in our discussion with the high school students is to encourage them to “rewrite the story.” If leadership is a drama, what role do women play? We want them to pose more and more complex questions, to begin to see themselves as leaders and active participants in the culture rather than passive observers. In the end, we ask: What, if anything, needs to be changed? How would such change come about? Does mass media lead social change or lag behind it? Are we helpless against the media? Do we censor such images or hide from them? Are women content as physical specimens, surveyed intently by the camera? Is the only way out to burn your bra?

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Their responses are heartening. In the final evaluation, one student wrote that she wants to start a branch of “Gama” girls at her school; another wrote that she hopes to influence younger girls, and a third stated “I will not let males change my views about being a leader and a female.”

Where does this final story leave us? Twenty years after the women’s movement, MTV still bombards young girls with the message to enlarge their breasts and stop eating. Women are caught, Susan Douglas explains, between “two voices” – one insisting we are equal and the other insisting we are subordinate.” Through this discussion of media and leadership, we ultimately hope to pit such scripts against each other: “I am equal” versus “I should look like this.” The result is that by the end of the week-long all-women’s summer leadership program, the students are asking more questions and avoiding simple answers.

CONCLUSION

One thing unites our three approaches: disorientation. Babe disorients because it doesn’t appear to be about leadership. Glide disorients because it jars students to action and social understanding, not just volunteerism. The documentary on media images disorients because it pits self-perception against social perception. It disorients because

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these perceptions are emotionally volatile. Disorientation (followed by discussion) is how we challenge scripts. Our intent, of course, is not to simply replace these scripts with new ones, but to encourage our students to continue to challenge their assumptions about the world. As Stephen Brookfield notes in his discussion of critical thinking, critical thinking isn't a product, it's a process that involves the continual "identifying and challenging [of] assumptions." Think critically. That's what we want our students to do.

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