Caring, Character, and Community: Leadership in Times of Crisis

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Abstract

To prepare the next generation to become caring and effectively engaged citizens requires a multi-faceted approach. It includes a focus on personal development, professional development, program development and implementation, and systems change [1]. To deepen our understanding of how leadership integrates these values into practice, this paper presents a thematic analysis of how leaders of PK-12 schools, higher education institutions, and leaders of community-based organisations integrate an ethic of caring, a focus on their own and others' character development, and a commitment to serving the needs of others in order to guide and inform their leadership in times of crisis. We interviewed thirteen leaders who responded to the question, "How have you integrated caring, character, and commitment into your leadership style while managing crises?" Four of the leaders work with PK-12 schools, four work in higher education, and five work in youth-serving community based organisations. Some of the leaders have explicit commitments to a focus on character education and/or have a spiritual grounding in their work. Others were more focused on social justice, equity, and system change. All were deeply committed to creating conditions in which youth can flourish. This paper will summarise their thinking about how to use an ethic of caring, a focus on one's own and others' character development, and a commitment to community to create high-quality learning experiences and opportunities for all youth

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Introduction:

The past few years have been replete with challenges for the leaders of youth-serving organizations. In addition to the usual pressures inherent in running such organizations, leaders have faced the repercussions of a pandemic, major political changes, conflicts throughout the world, climate change, and increasing emphasis on the importance of getting equitable access to a high-quality learning experience – even as the definitions of equity and high-quality learning are changing. In thinking about how leaders have been operating through this time of crisis, we were interested to learn about how caring, character, and a commitment to growing and nurturing community among students, faculty, and parents have influenced their thinking and decision-making processes. Our key focus questions were: How does an ethic of care, and being caring, play into leaders' decision-making? Where is it challenged? When they think about "character," what does it mean to them, and how do they see it playing a role in their decision-making? How do leaders manage and balance their commitments to your various constituent groups? How does putting caring, character, and commitment to community first have a positive impact on leaders' work? When does it not work out the way they expect? And finally, what advice would they give their younger selves in thinking about what they have learned about leadership over the course of their careers?

In order to answer the above questions, we reached out to a number of leaders in different contexts: within pre-kindergarten through 12th-grade (PK-12) schools, higher education institutions, and community-based organizations (CBOs). We ultimately interviewed four PK-12 leaders, four higher-education leaders, and five CBO leaders. We met over Zoom, using the above questions as a framework, while also leaving space to pursue interesting ideas with follow-up questions, and for leaders to share stories, information, and insights as they saw fit. A number of themes emerged in our interviewees' answers, across institutions and constituencies, including: servant leadership and leading by example; building relationships and trust; connecting and collaborating; managing

disagreement and conflict; and supporting all stakeholders. We will examine these themes below as they emerged following each of the questions we asked.

Care, Being Caring, and Decision-Making

We asked leaders how being caring, and espousing an ethic of care, plays into their decision-making at the institutional level, as well as how that care is sometimes challenged. In all three types of organizations, leaders endorsed care as a primary motivator in their careers and behavior, and as a guidestar that they use to approach decision-making.

Building Relationships and Trust to Create Community: As they discussed their work through the lens of an ethic of care, leaders talked about the key role of enacting that care in their everyday interactions with the people who populate their institutions. From signing emails with, "Fondly," to walking down the halls to check in with colleagues and students about their lives, to returning calls from constituents promptly and following up if there is no answer, leaders talked about taking the time to engage in the seemingly small acts of care and kindness that are the building blocks of a trusting and caring community. Working in organizations that serve a large number of young people, and, by extension, their families and communities, requires making stakeholders feel welcome and building trust among youth, parents, teachers, staff, community members, and board members that their needs and opinions matter. Because no one person can fill this role for all constituents at all times, leaders talked about using their behavior to create and/or perpetuate cultures of care within their institutions, where seeing one another as whole people, building relationships, listening to one another, and demonstrating care with actions and follow-through are the cornerstones of the trust that they need in order to fulfill their organizations' missions. Building this trust among colleagues, as well as between employees and the people they serve, is critical in discovering and responding to the needs of one's community.

Servant Leadership: A few of our interviewees explicitly invoked "servant leadership" as they talked about how they conceptualize their roles, and all of them discussed being mission-driven in terms of striving to act in the best interests of the populations they serve according to the animating, foundational beliefs of their respective organizations. Three PK-12 leaders who worked as heads of schools all spoke of the trust they felt their communities had invested in them, using words like *privilege, humbling,* and *honor* to describe their attitudes towards working in leadership roles within those organizations. Higher-education leaders discussed parting with the traditional assumptions that they should have all of the answers and that students and employees must always fit themselves to the expectations of the institution, siloed within their individual roles and areas of expertise. Instead, they said, leaders need to show up to listen and model compassion, to make space for disagreement and complexity, and to be responsible for forward movement in terms of serving students and advancing social justice at all levels of the organization. Leaders of CBOs discussed communicating openly and often with constituents, as well as being flexible and responsive, ready to pivot quickly in terms of their plans and roles based on emergent needs. Regardless of their institution type, the leaders we interviewed endorsed approaches that involve being in community with people by getting to know them, taking the time to hear dissenting voices, collaborating with stakeholders to find and enact solutions, and taking responsibility for making difficult (and sometimes ultimately incorrect) decisions.

Challenges: Managing Disagreement, Slowing Down, and Making Time: When asked about instances or arenas within their work in which maintaining an ethic of care was challenged, leaders across organization types discussed or alluded to the atmosphere of uncertainty that shrouded the first two years of the pandemic, as well as the renewed movements for racial equity and social justice in the United States, and the increasing polarization therein, that framed

their responsibilities and their communities' responses. Leaders discussed how operating from an ethic of care did not always result in all constituents' perceptions that they had done so, particularly in the face of disagreements surrounding safety and best practices for serving young people and their families during the various stages of the pandemic. Additionally, operating from a place of caring for the longevity of the institutions themselves, in order that they might continue to serve youth in the future, was sometimes viewed by constituents as a lapse in caring for their needs. Transparency in decision-making was cited as a saving grace even in the face of disagreement, and leaders discussed the worthy challenge of providing as much clarity as possible for their constituents.

Many leaders cited the difficulty of responding to the demands of leadership positions while working to make high-pressure decisions slowly and deliberately. It is important to ensure that stakeholders have had the opportunity to make their voices heard, that leaders are pursuing consensus wherever possible, and that they are being transparent about the processes and reasons behind their decisions. The metaphor of putting out fires came up repeatedly as leaders explained how the urgency in managing a variety of problems simultaneously made them feel pressure to be fast and efficient problem-solvers in the face of so many competing tasks. This pulled leaders away from their "north stars," leading them to become bogged down in details and to work more unilaterally rather than to lead with a focus on their broader missions and the core values of their institutions, and to build the community's capacity to move those forward as well.

The Role of Character: When we asked leaders how they think about character – what it means to them, and how they see it playing a role in their leadership practices – they reliably endorsed the idea that personal character is a critical part of effective leadership. Operating with integrity, and adhering to one's values even in the face of exhaustion and difficult circumstances leads to trust and efficacy within one's role, as well as effective modeling for the populations they are serving.

Compatibility and Building Trust: In organizations that serve young people, personal character seemed to be a driving force in the call to fill leadership positions. As they discussed the work of their organizations and their roles within them, the leaders we interviewed often cited core personal values that made them particularly compatible with their organizations' missions: from integrity, to compassion, to truthfulness, to stewardship, to the pursuit of equity for all. It was clear that a deep belief in the missions of their respective organizations, and a desire to live into their own values, had propelled them into their work and allowed them to do it well. Most discussed the key role consistency of character played in helping them to build trust among their constituent groups. Having character, in our leaders' conceptions, was directly connected to *enacting* the caring and compassionate ethic they described – ensuring that their beliefs were reliably reflected in their actions. Conflicts with constituents had a different tenor and were easier to weather, many leaders asserted, when their personal grounding in principles of character was clear and consistent.

Leading by Example and Setting the Tone: Leaders across institutional types talked about leading by example through the consistency of their personal character: not only in terms of establishing a culture of care, as discussed above, but also in terms of modeling the traits and mindsets they hope their colleagues and the youth they serve will carry forward into their lives. As discussed above, leaders saw their own behavior as key in setting the tone for others in their organizations. Additionally, in the context of a renewed reckoning with race and privilege in the United States, many of the leaders we interviewed were clear about the necessity of having and expressing a stance on these topics, rather than leaving it implicit. Where CBOs are generally founded upon principles of equity and meeting the needs of underserved populations, educational institutions are often challenged to meet the moment, and to institute policies and practices geared towards furthering equity and inclusion within them. The leaders of these institutions who we interviewed, and particularly those in the higher-education space, described feeling the need to be willing to engage people in

genuine, compassionate conversations around controversial issues while also acting in accordance with their own character and values to work towards creating a more just world. Some talked about the tension between inviting dissent and making space for different opinions, while also understanding that institutions are not, cannot be, and should not aim to be value-neutral. As one leader phrased it, "There are two messages there. There's the one that says, *you can come into our house*, but there's the other message, too, that says, *but here's what we're committed to*."

Balancing Commitments to Constituents: In organizations that serve young people, leaders must manage multiple constituencies, including youth, their families, organization staff, and the surrounding community. These groups often have competing priorities, which can complicate the goal of being a leader for everyone; we asked leaders how they balance this tension in their work.

Supporting All Stakeholders: When asked about how they conceptualize making choices in the face of competing pressures, the leaders we interviewed reliably held up their primary commitment as being the one to the youth whom they seek to serve – but they contextualized that commitment by discussing their responsibility to hold space for, and show compassion to, *all* of their constituents. Difficult choices make conflict and disagreement inevitable, but our interviewees were clear about the fact that, in the long run, the best decisions are made in the context of having integrity, showing empathy, and acting in accordance with their values and their organizations' mission statements. Pursuing the best outcomes for youth often requires figuring out how best to directly support other stakeholders, including families, teachers, and staff, whose commitment and participation is critical in helping to achieve those outcomes. Even when not all stakeholders will be happy with a decision or policy, ensuring that all feel heard and valued is important.

Reactivity and Taking Pause: In thinking about the challenges of multiple constituencies, one PK-12 leader spoke about being sure to "honor [constituents'] first reactions," making space for them to respond to decisions and events according to their own lenses, concerns, fears, and opinions. Many of the leaders we interviewed endorsed the idea that the route to enacting collective wisdom as a leader requires taking the time to gather the information and opinions necessary, and making the space for oneself to make an informed decision that best serves all constituents. This remained true, they said, when constituents expressed their opinions and needs with anger and even hostility When leaders handle disagreement with empathy, slowing down to listen, learn, and integrate different opinions instead of being dismissive in service of moving forward, they model a thinking and decision-making process antithetical to the polarization and increasing impatience in American culture. A higher-education leader echoed this idea as he talked about the role of patience in enacting compassion. He spoke about how, in diverse higher-education spaces in which students care passionately about social justice issues, leaders are often pressured to leap before they look in responding to current events. Part of being compassionate in this context is seeing all parties involved as human beings, encouraging students to take pause to do so as well, and resisting the call to use one's platform immediately to denounce others when one can instead take the time to respond thoughtfully about what the problem is, with an eye towards what needs to be done.

Impact of Committing to Caring, Character, and Community: We asked leaders how prioritizing caring, character, and commitment to their communities has impacted them and their institutions in the last few years. Our interviewees referenced a variety of impacts, centering on maintaining community through crisis, connecting and collaborating with their constituents, and using a process of iterative change to improve their organizations.

Community Through Crisis: Many leaders referenced how important it has been to maintain human connections in their communities during this extended period of crisis. Working as leaders from a deep commitment to caring, character, and community has allowed them to continue to serve young

people and those who surround them during a time when compassion and support have been deeply needed. Holding tightly to their values, our leaders were called to work creatively to discover where resources were needed, and to deliver them flexibly – both helping individuals and strengthening the bonds of community that hold everyone together in crisis.

Connecting and Collaborating: Operating from an ethic of care helped leaders to share responsibility and a sense of agency with others in seeking to fulfill their organizations' missions. Although they bore the heavy burden of finalizing difficult decisions, their commitment to caring and compassion led them to work to understand and reckon with disagreement, and to continue to pursue conversation, consensus, and transparency. As a result, leaders believed that their staff and community members – even those who had initially disagreed with some of their decisions – ultimately continued to feel heard, supported, and valued as a result.

Iterative Change: Leading with a focus on care and community helped leaders to use conflict and upheaval to spur important conversations about how to make change within and beyond their institutions. Some described an iterative process of collaborating, sharing, and learning from mistakes. Prioritizing community and connection also led them to seek opportunities to collaborate with others outside of their organizations, looking for ways that they might be able to expand access and opportunities for their constituents by being flexible to change.

Advice to Younger Selves: To conclude each interview, we asked leaders what advice they would give their younger selves as they first embarked upon their leadership journeys. All described important learnings that fit into three major thematic groups: patience, trust and listening; courage and discomfort; and learning and collaboration.

Patience, Trust, and Listening: Some leaders described having been impatient, both with themselves, and with the change-making process. They advocated for being more patient, less critical of mistakes, and more trusting of the process, while also listening carefully to people's stories, watching leaders closely and forming opinions about their decisions, and learning from experiences and feedback.

Courage and Discomfort: Discussions about courage and discomfort took two different forms. Some expressed the wish that they had been bolder earlier on in their careers, pushing back on the discomfort that stood in the way of their feeling a sense of belonging and agency. Leaders advocated for being authentically themselves, holding to their principles, and taking action. Others talked about wishing they had had the courage to remain longer in the productive discomfort inherent in the process of learning and growing.

Learning and Collaboration: Finally, leaders talked about fostering collaborative relationships: with other leaders, with colleagues, and with young people. Many expressed the wish that they had focused more on learning from others whose experiences and skills complemented their own. In learning how to lead when they were young, many seemed to have felt they needed more answers than they had at the time. They reassured their younger selves, and future generations of leaders, that a lack of knowledge is not always a weakness, because empathy, connection, collaboration, and learning are integral parts of good leadership.

References:
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