

The Journal of Values-Based Leadership

Manuscript 1468

"Shaped but Not Fixed" -- The Gift of Leadership

Joseph P. Hester

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl>



Part of the [Business Commons](#)

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Business at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Values-Based Leadership by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.

“Shaped but Not Fixed” — The Gift of Leadership

**JOSEPH P. HESTER, PH.D.
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR**

I begin this editorial with a simple statement: “Leadership is a learned behavior.” It comes as a gift from parents and teachers, mentors and what we learn in the milieu of our culture. This does not mean that you and I do not participate in our own edification. As a matter of fact, we do. We are responsible for a great deal of our learning and for much of our leadership development. But this is not to discount the role of our parents, teachers, and mentors who are extremely important in setting the stage for our intellectual and functional development. Theirs is a gift that keeps on giving throughout the life span of our lives.

“Sometimes the words ‘centering’ and ‘grounding’ are used interchangeably. ‘Centering’ usually refers to our mental and physical state of mind. It’s the place we know we have to get back to when we’re not feeling like ourselves. When we’re not centered, we might feel lost or out of touch with ourselves. When we center ourselves, we bring calm to our emotions. We do so by slowing down our breathing so that we ‘feel’ more of what’s going on around us. Becoming centered is a way to find peace within the chaos that might be surrounding us. It’s about being ‘in check’ with what’s going on. Individuals who are centered are typically calm and peaceful.”— Diana Raab Ph.D., *The Empowerment Diary*, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-empowerment-diary/202002/what-is-centering-what-is-grounding>

Yet, nebulous are the grey areas in this conclusion as life unfolds in many un-prescribed and un-predictable ways. We are indeed shaped by cultural influences, but not completely fixed as the ability to adapt and change lies at our feet. Of course, some refuse to change as they become adults. They seek security in past patterns that have provided the wherewithal of their makeup, success, and values. Being sensitive to this observation, one can understand why the political turbulence of the last five to ten years has caused a “centering” or re-centering of values in the American heartland polarizing views

about ethics and morals, about democracy itself.

Understandably, the habit of leadership is planted early in life requiring repetition, some successes and failures, and consistent support. Thus, leadership development must be tilled carefully and with intention without which much of what has been accomplished or nearly accomplished will and can deteriorate, perhaps fading into the background of solidified attitudes and behaviors reinforcing the old adage: “You reap what you sow.” Leadership is about authenticity and not authority, which underscores the importance of fairness, and accountability in values-based leadership. Therefore, care should be taken, for, frequently, when discouraged by parents and teachers or others in their environs, are countless youngsters encouraged to surrender their impulse to lead. Overt criticism, when used as a hammer, erodes respect and stifles leadership propensity (Ward, 2023).

It is important to leadership development that youngsters be introduced to the skills of critical thinking and immersed in problem solving activities. This is important to the maturity of independent thinking that will be needed later in life. Many, who graduate from high school or even later from college, go forward to lead productive working and professional lives, but are deficient in these skills. Thus, they are easily manipulated and, more often than not, remain within the narrow structures set up by the rules and teachings of others. Many will find success, but fear of failure will be their nemesis hampering their creativity and friendship with new ideas. Like some from working class families, including me, who were instructed to listen to their elders and their bosses, to do what they are told and without question, learning to lead is a life-time effort of searching for role-models, of trial-and-error, and of summoning the courage to step forward when circumstances call for it.

For me, breaking free from these structures came with the assistance of mentors many of whom were my college professors. An early role model was Stewart Newman about whom I have written:

At Southeastern Seminary I discovered Stewart Newman, a Texas born and highly educated liberal theologian. Newman always dressed in a black suit with cowboy boots and a Stetson hat perched Texas-like on his head. He was 6'3', an imposing figure, but as about as down to earth as one can get. In 1964-65, when Southeastern was taken over by the fundamentalists, Newman was on leave researching a new book in the substantial religious holdings of the library at Rochester University in upstate New York. Newman was active in the North Carolina ecumenical movement and in the push to integrate all areas of North Carolina society, including its schools and seminaries. He became my mentor and close friend. By 1968 he had left the seminary, failing to become its second president, and now headed the philosophy department at Campbell University. In 1972, he hired me to teach logic, epistemology, and contemporary philosophy at Campbell. For this I am grateful.

“An interesting body of research has underscored the notion that there are some people who embrace challenges and disappointments as opportunities to re-focus their thinking. These are folks with a “growth mindset.” Then, there are other people who see failure as... well... as a complete failure. They believe that they never had the talent or skill anyway, and they probably never will. These are folks with a “fixed mindset.” These individuals embrace the belief that you are either born with talent, or you’re not. In short, you’re either in one group or the other. *Atychiphobia* is not a word that pops up in many conversations around the water cooler at work. Yet fear of failure is a common condition that frequently stops creativity in its tracks and prevents us from moving forward in our lives.”
– Fredericks, Anthony D. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/za/blog/creative-insights/202112/why-failing-is-necessary-creativity#:~:text=Failure%20is%20inevitable%E2%80%94as%20such%2C%20it%20can%20also%20be,prevents%20us%20from%20moving%20forward%20in%20our%20lives.>

Of course, life is an imperfect web of relationships where much can go wrong and sometimes does. We often fail to listen and, therefore, fail to learn. Patterns of ego development are various, learned early in life, possibly leading adversely to the harassment and maltreatment of others and to erosion in social development. Of course, the contrary is also true. We are apt to become creative and productive as we are “yes” women and men. Nothing is ever completely fixed. And although we cannot truly divide individuals into “leaders” and “followers,” it does, at time, seem so. Nothing is predictable as the social and psychological development of young people testify. Life is a delicate balance of discipline and value adjustments, of walking a tight rope of narcissistic individualism and a benevolent attitude toward others, but this we seldom acknowledge.

Perhaps the greatest sin of parents and schools is suffocating children (and students) and not providing them a diversity of experiences and perspectives, of not letting them grow at their own speed, guiding and counseling them when necessary, instilling within them the habit of discovery, and letting them fail in order to learn. Banning books, limiting exposure to ideas, not offering discipline through positive interaction, and saying “no” too many times often can destroy a young person’s leadership development. Also, leadership defeating is not being able to discuss controversial ideas and issues at home and/or in school for gaining insight and understanding. Such suffocation seals us off from others, from experiences, from life itself, and condenses our chances for future success. Children, as well as students and adults need room to room to grow in order to air their differences, their ideas, and discuss them without the pressure to conform to some preconceived point of view. Here they can learn and grow, mature, and develop the human relation skills needed for life’s advancements.

Here is something I wrote in 1995 for a speech at the Torrance Center at the University of Georgia on the subject of “creativity.” I think it apropos to leadership development:

Special attention is given to the men and women who are able to withstand the pressures to conform and maintain their creativity and creative instincts throughout their lives. These are more often than not men and women of ambition, aspiration, and tenacity. For people of purpose, to put it plainly, it all adds up to a life well-lived with a fully operational sense of perspective. Although daily pressures may cause us to lose our focus as stress and anxiety creep in, with time, dealing with pressure becomes a normal way of life and the ability to sustain purpose strengthens. Nothing seems to perplex those who understand the meaning and direction of their lives; their behavior conveys reassurance. Their creative and intuitional qualities speak of this gift – how they discover it, and how they maintain a steady path over a lifetime.

Looking back, as I witnessed the role models in my hometown, I began to get a glimpse of the vision and purpose that would sustain me through a lifetime of work and personal growth. I watched and listened to how people were treated at the places where I worked: by the caddy master at our local golf course, by managers in the grocery store where I worked, and by teachers and coaches at school. I was also aware of my parents’ values and what they expected of me. I had been disciplined and taught the value of hard work, and was never put on a pedestal as something special. By age 13, I was allowed to find my own way into the world of work outside the home. This included starting my own lawn mowing business and later caddying at our local country club. What I was learning at an early age would impact my life in ways unknown to me then. Entering college and then seminary, I continued to observe those I thought were effective leaders and mentally, perhaps unconsciously, catalogued their habits and words many of which I can still remember. Learning to lead never ends; it’s an ongoing adventure of stops and starts, successes and failures; it entails growth in moral and leadership wisdom.

I never envisioned myself as especially creative – only a persistent hard worker – but I did discover my purpose early and have tried to follow it during my 84 years. Of course, this is something others will have to judge. Following a path of purpose, defined early in my life and consummating in middle age, has enriched me tremendously. A lesson learned early on was that to be an effective leader – parent, teacher, supervisor, etc. – one does not have to motivate others through fear, guilt, rudeness, shame, or anger. Leadership is less about giving orders and shouting, about chest-thumping and personal charisma, and more about

preparation, hard work, being an ethical and dependable person, and taking care of those for whom you are responsible.

I tried to practice this as a parent and in my own work as a teacher and public school administrator. For example, in 1992, my wife, a 2nd grade teacher, encouraged me to investigate programs that enhanced the education of bright, primary age children. This I did and discovered a few educators engaged in such research. I then worked with my staff, New York publisher (Trillium Press), and the Department of Education at Lenoir-Rhyne University to develop and sponsor a conference giving attention to young, minority gifted children. Our departmental budget provided the funding and I offered advice, but my staff and the professors in the Department of Education at Lenoir-Rhyne organized and planned the sessions and constantly were in front of people with introductions and the like. The scholars accepting my invitation to share their research (from the Universities of North Carolina, Connecticut, Cincinnati, Georgia, and Lamar University in Texas) always took center stage. It was a three-day conference and attendees came from over 14 states.

Later, Leanna Traill – a whole-language specialist from New Zealand – was traveling America promoting her work and I was fortunate to bring her into our school system for a day or two as our teachers (K-12) were using her classroom materials and needed the motivation a world-class author could bring. In our meetings and gatherings, my staff and other school administrators planned the work sessions and over-saw the general arrangements. This gave my staff leadership experience and confidence. It also sent a message: these conferences and meetings were not about me. As the only Ph.D. in our school system, I was cautious and sensitive about my role and avoided being over-bearing. Leadership does not always mean being in front of people giving orders or directions. Often it means providing opportunities so others can utilize their talents and learn to lead.

Servant leadership is a leadership style that prioritizes the growth, well-being, and empowerment of employees. It aims to foster an inclusive environment that enables everyone in the organization to thrive as their authentic self. Whereas traditional leadership focuses on the success of the company or organization, servant leadership puts employees first to grow the organization through their commitment and engagement. When implemented correctly, servant leadership can help foster trust, accountability, growth, and inclusion in the workplace. — Sarah K. White, “What Is Servant Leadership? A Philosophy for People-First Leadership.”

<https://www.shrm.org/executive/resources/articles/pages/servant-leadership.aspx>

The recognition of one’s purpose and leadership ability also requires the courage to develop fresh ideas and improve one’s abilities, the creative directions of one’s life, and give yourself permission to change—in midstream if need be—and move off in new and different directions. Life can be frustrating, but it is all we have so why not make it a purposeful adventure. But, I sense there is a distinctive cultural drift flowing through our society in which those who espouse their individualism have conformed and are conforming to the values instilled and institutionalized by others revealing a dearth of values-based leaders. Unaware, many are recurrently being manipulated by social forces (friends, colleagues, authorities, the media, etc.) and, in fear, succumb to a herd mentality believing safety is found in numbers. This is a pathological condition found in our time, something that is no doubt universal and timeless and I am wordless about how to correct it.

Looking back, experience teaches us even when we are unaware of its message and influence. Overcoming old habits and beliefs is terribly difficult and perhaps never fully achieved. Gaining perspective about one's life and ability isn't easy. When I was thirteen, I became a caddy at our local country club and became friends with many African-American kids in the years 1952-1954. Having grown up in an all-white neighborhood and attending an all-white school and church and having heard about the so-called evils of "integration," this was a new cultural experience for me. For the golf pro, there was no discrimination in the way caddies were chosen — it was always first come, first to go out on the course. This was truly a learning experience. At church, the minister talked about the sinful nature of race-mixing quoting selected Scripture verses, one after another. Little was mentioned about the "inhumanity" of treating people of color as less than human or that Jesus and the Hebrews of his day were also people of color.

At age 16, I took a job driving a dray truck for a local grocery store. I mainly delivered groceries in the African-American community. Many did not own cars. Some were just too old to drive. So, I took their orders by phone and delivered their groceries often taking time to put them in their kitchens and in their cabinets. Here I made many friends with those segregation had marginalized. I was able to personalize this experience enabling me to respond to my customers as individuals without labels and the stigma of racial prejudice. This changed my thinking and ultimately the very soul of my values. I was young, but serious. I asked: "Am I different from these people?" Their houses are no different than mine? "Why have we pushed these people to the edges of the city and to the backwaters of life itself?" I wanted some answers. My parents and teachers never *completely* provided answers for me. Today, I questioned their moral courage but am aware they too were trapped in the presuppositional habits and pressures of a segregated society; fear as well as prejudice are controlling forces in our lives.

I entered Southeastern Seminary at Wake Forest in the fall of 1961. That year, about a year and a half after the Greensboro sit-ins at Woolworths, Southeastern assigned me to a federal low-income housing community on Freeman Mill Road in Greensboro, about fifty miles west of Wake Forest. I was charged with establishing a church in the recreation center situated at the heart of the project. On Saturdays and Sunday afternoons, I knocked on doors, made friends with as many residents as I could, and kept records of my visits. It took some time to build trust and friendships in this multiracial community. I had to overcome the distrust of these people and this took some time. I tried to respond to each person as an individual and not as some socially generalized stereotype. They soon began responding to me in the same way. What I had learned at home and in the various jobs I had when younger served me well.

When I was reassigned by the seminary in the summer of 1962 the community church in the projects on Freeman Mill Road had an integrated congregation of over 75 adults and children attending on a regular basis. Why the local churches in Greensboro had not done this I questioned. This reinforced my negative vision of the church. Perhaps "white guilt" (Steele, 2007) was the reason the seminary sent me there or that the churches in Greensboro requested outside assistance; I'm not sure. In Greensboro I reaped the benefit of my experiences as a caddy, delivering groceries back in my home town, and my intermingling with friends of color. Here my values began to mature. One can never discount experience. Experience teaches, but we must be careful because some experiences are negative and reactionary rather than positive and moral.

The months I spent in Greensboro were indeed an adventure in both faith and learning. I think, looking back on those days, my leadership ability was strengthened more by the people I met, here and back at home, than the formal schooling I was receiving. They taught me more than a young man of 22 taught them. It must have stuck with me because of my actions during that school year. Two African students enrolled in seminary, sent from Nigeria by one of our missionaries, were not allowed to stay in the campus dormitories because of their race. Also, they were not permitted to join or attend the First Baptist Church which was located on the seminary campus. The irony is palpable.

I was working part time at Stevens' Book Store – the first “new & used” book store in North Carolina – across the street from the seminary campus and, on the weekends, in Greensboro. Dick Stevens was a seminary graduate and a great counselor for me. As students came into the book store, the fate of the Nigerians was always a hot topic for discussion. Under Dick's advice I began talking with them about going to the school administrators and insisting on housing those students on campus. We did but nothing happened. We then – and I don't know whose idea it was, but a small group of us was always brainstorming ways to do things—decided to go to the campus church and see what we could do there. We (students) were members of the church because of our seminary enrollment; the church was a part of the seminary campus and student community. So, we just went to the next monthly business meeting during which time – when the minister asked if there was any new business to come before the congregation – we made our motion to include these students in the church body, called for the vote, and voted (that's the way Southern Baptists do things) them into the membership of the church. We outnumbered the regular members two or three to one at that mid-week evening service, so the vote was easy, but not without some shouting and putdowns. These students were later allowed to live in the seminary dorms, eat in the seminary cafeteria, and use the seminary's facilities. What I learned in 1961-1962 is that vision is our capacity to translate ideas into reality but is often a messy business.

**The moral life, at best, is an exposed and uncluttered avenue—a thoroughfare of open dialogue, service, care, and compassion for others which we all are challenged to travel. It can be transformational in which both mind and spirit are changed. This is a powerful moral energy and is always completing (becoming) itself in our relationships with others. It is a learned experience.
— Joe Hester**

Throughout our lives much is added to our collective knowledge. From the memories and experiences forming the foundation of our identity, leadership ability becomes the combination of collective insight permeated by our encounter with others. Our own creative ability to signify, dream, think about the future, and build within us houses of wisdom adds to our collective nature, our spiritual individuality, and our morally connective relationships. For me, this is perhaps more of a goal than a reality, but it's a vision to which I have dedicated my life. Following it has been a unifying experience amid the ups and downs of my life.

As I look back and reflect on my own experiences, I have reached a conclusion, no longer tentative, about values-based leadership and about myself—

We give birth to ourselves in our relationships with others.

My leadership vision is thus concerned with not only what we ought to do, but with what is “valuable in itself,” “what we should aspire to be,” and “how we should aspire to live our lives”

(Taylor, 1989). Undoubtedly, there is a moral “ought” flowing naturally through the natural “isness” of our lives validated most effectively by our behaviors, not simply our words, and this gives me hope. Stuart Chase (1948) has remarked, “Habits of a lifetime are not lightly thrown aside” and I know this is true. But there are those who tend to tune out any voice that doesn’t echo their own traditions and beliefs. Some are only interested in proclaiming or condemning and converting – in listening to the echo of their own ideas, biases, and assumptions.

Often unaware, we are guided on a course not of our own choosing, perhaps an imposition of history and culture, upbringing and formal education making our biases and assumptions the sieve through which we think. These fundamental suppositions and conjectures we don’t often think about simply because we are always thinking with them. Enslaved by the beliefs of others, including our institutions, perspective-seeking is a difficult and foreboding task. As I wrote in 2021:

There is a dearth of self-examination in our society. It is our inability to reconsider our common values and unleash our inner moral capacities. This is a “surface fog” deeply entrenched and separating us from others, even ourselves. Peering through this fog in self-reflection is a difficulty many choose to avoid. Consequently, as we squint at reality and view our own decision-making as practicality based on common sense, we have reduced “reason” to “being reasonable,” which is another way of defining “rationalization.” So, from a rational point of view, we are caught in an untenable web of attempting to make our decision-making logical when, in fact, it is illogical, based on instinct and habit, prejudice and sentiment.

Sliding along the surface of life, out of fear and anxiety, we mask our content, but listening to what many are saying and some are doing, I know we’re not. We live in the realities of the present, difficult to understand but impossible to dismiss. Thus, our moral awareness will always be socially and culturally situated, discovered, interpreted, and reinterpreted, over and over again. In this “againness,” we are able to discover our grounding and reconstitute our moral propensity. It is through our challenges that we learn and grow.

We have inherited a historical narrative which seems puzzling and about which we are challenged to figure out, explain, and live. Unused, our moral proclivity will gather the dust of a thousand excuses and crumble amidst the stereotypical words, “thoughts and prayers.” Therefore, moral or values-based leadership will be far-reaching for some and completely neglected by others. Little thought will be given to the “moral oughtness” in the “existential isness” of life enabling connection with others and providing the leadership sorely needed in our world today.

— Joseph P. Hester, Ph.D., Claremont, North Carolina, USA

References

- Chase, Stuart (1948) *The Proper Study of Mankind*. Harper & Brothers.
- Hester, Joseph P. (2021). Perspectives on Authentic Leadership, Seeking Something Greater Than Self. *Journal of Values-Based Leadership*, Volume XIV, Issue II, Summer/Fall.
- Steele, Shelby (2007). *White Guilt*, Harper Perennial; Reprint edition.
- Taylor, Charles (1989) *The Sources of The Self*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Ward, Jon (2023) *Inside the Evangelical Movement That Failed a Generation – Testimony*. Grand Rapids, MI, Brazos Publishing Group.