

Leading as a Spiritual Endeavor: Living, Leading, and Developing Community with Vocation

By Larry A. Braskamp

Braskamp introduces the notion of “inside-out leadership” that is inner-based and outer-focused and relates to many spiritual principles, such as vocation, self-reflection, and strengths-based intra and interpersonal development, among others. Through a series of guided exercises that allow readers to apply this new conception of leadership to their personal and professional lives and experiences, Braskamp illustrates how leading is a lifelong spiritual endeavor that involves building and sustaining collaborative relationships with others.

INTRODUCTION

Leading is a deeply human endeavor. To be an effective leader one must know oneself – and be that unique oneself – in relation to others. Yet, leading is not a mental activity done in isolation; rather it requires one to be simultaneously thinking, feeling, and relating to others. Therefore, leading is *holistic* in nature and purpose – not mechanical or strictly behavioral – and takes place in an *institutional* context. While leadership starts with the person leading – with the inner life of the person – it involves others. Because of this, persons who lead engage in two interdependent activities: They discover their own voice – an *intrapersonal* activity – and also give voice to others – an *interpersonal* activity.

As such, leadership is first and foremost a spiritual – emotional, inner-focused, feeling, affective, thinking – activity. The core theme of the conception of leadership is this: *leading is inner-based and outer-focused, not outer-based and inner-focused*. Thus, leadership is more than some informal authority trying to persuade followers. Everyone has both the opportunity and the responsibility to take on leadership roles, whether formally or informally, and to become “leaders in place” (Wergin, 2007). The choice to do so is anchored by *vocation*, a sense of calling to a higher purpose. Vocation begins with an understanding and feeling of being called in life, a very rich and lifelong psychological and spiritual process. For this reason, vocation is deeply personal – a process of going into the silence and creating a space that will allow us to listen to ourselves and to others in order to practice a type of leadership that is rooted in spirituality.

The following sections of this article invite you to explore leading as a spiritual endeavor based on this idea of vocation. A variety of reflective exercises are also presented to help you conceptualize this philosophy of “inside-out leadership.” The exercises are organized so that you reflect on each of the three sections: living with vocation, leading with vocation, and developing community with vocation. These exercises can be applied when you are working with students as well as professional staff to help you and others reflect on the personal leadership process. Together, these components connect to the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions necessary for understanding the spiritual connections to leadership.

LIVING WITH VOCATION

Living with vocation – the *intrapersonal dimension of leadership* – involves listening to one’s voice within; reflecting on one’s gifts, strengths, and opportunities; and committing to taking a stand. Therefore, finding one’s vocation is a lifelong commitment – a discovery of one’s life purpose. For this reason, finding your vocation is never-ending and dynamic, filled with tensions, conflicts, challenges, and disappointments, but also with joy and fulfillment. It begins with the intrapersonal process of listening, reflecting, and committing.

Listening. Living with vocation begins with listening. These are affections of the heart, spirit, and, as some would call it, the “soul.” Parker Palmer (2000), in his book, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, presents a perspective in which he uses the concepts of the “willful” ego and the “true self” as integral to vocation. He states, “Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about – quite apart from what I would like it to be about – or my life will not represent anything real in the work, no matter how earnest my intentions” (pp. 4-5). Therefore, we cannot truly be ourselves if we follow the wishes of others, or present a public image that is not authentic to our true selves, which is the deepest level of our true feelings. This does not mean that we should not listen to others; having others share their experiences with us enriches our internal landscape and gives us courage to go even deeper in order to understand ourselves.

Reflecting. Living out our vocation also requires that we engage in serious reflection. Neafsey notes, “However we understand it, the sense of vocation is an experience of *someone* or *something* which speaks to our hearts in a compelling way that calls for us to *listen* and *follow*. This requires, first of all, a capacity to hear the voice as it speaks within ourselves or through our life experiences. Once we have heard the call, we then face the challenge of making intelligent and discerning and courageous choices to follow where it is leading” (2004, p. 4). The question, “Who am I?” is one of self-identity and self-identification. We need to get to know ourselves – our talents, goals, skills, intelligences, and strengths (Clifton, Anderson, and Schriener, 2006). In answering this question several propositions based on positive psychology thinking and, more specifically, on the work in the Gallup Organization, are made about the efficacy of our getting to discover, develop, and apply our strengths in our life and work (Clifton, Anderson, and Schriener, 2006; Rath, 2007; Braskamp, 2008).

Discovering our strengths is a part of identity formation. As we progress through life, we are on a journey of becoming our *true self* – a journey of self-authorship and authenticity. Developing our strengths, rather than our weaknesses, will result in a more productive and meaningful life. Each of us can find joy, meaning and success in using our talents and strengths in our lives and our work. Strengths are developed when talents are combined with knowledge and practice. Developing strengths requires an investment of our energy, time, and talents. Building on one's strengths is motivating. It builds self-confidence and provides an intrinsic motivation for personally investing one's own strengths. In short, discovering and developing one's strengths based on one's talents is a holistic endeavor, incorporating one's thinking, feeling, and behaving (Braskamp, 2007).

Committing. The third major element in the interactive process of finding and living a life anchored by vocation is making a commitment to act upon that vocation – to have the personal courage to take a stand in the cause of a purpose larger than oneself (Kouzes and Posner, 2004). This third element of living with vocation is based on an intention to act upon one's sense of purpose: Upon listening and reflecting, the leader with vocation has determined what he or she truly stands for and is willing to make a commitment to act upon those values and beliefs.

Related Exercises

Describe a time when you talked with others about your innermost ambitions, thoughts, dreams, and lifelong goals. What were the circumstances surrounding this conversation? What was the impact of the conversation on you and those around you? With this experience in mind, reflect on the following questions about living with vocation:

Listening

- Do you feel you have an “inner voice”? Why or why not?
- How much confidence do you have in your “inner voice”?
- Think of a time when you listened to others' dreams, goals and aspirations. What did you learn?

Reflecting

- What insights have you gained from discussing your life with your colleagues, family, friends, loved ones, and children?
- What are some reasonable options and opportunities for you at this time?
- Do you often imagine yourself participating in causes beyond yourself? If so, what are those causes?

Committing

- How often do you think about making a difference on others' lives?
- Think of a time when you were willing to take a stand that had an impact on the lives of those around you. What happened?
- How willing are you to take a stand now?

LEADING WITH VOCATION

Leadership is the consequential part of commitment. While the first (intrapersonal) element stresses one's inner strength that is highly related to one's sense of vocation, the second (interpersonal) is the act of leading others based on vocation and related spiritual principles. Persons who lead are special in the sense that in order for them to lead, someone else needs to follow. As Jim Collins argues, leaders have followers who follow on their own volition: "True leadership only exists if people follow when they have the freedom not to" (Collins, 2005, p.13). In this way, leading is based on interpersonal relationships; albeit a very special relationship between leaders and followers, one in which the relationships are personal and highly interactive. Therefore, leading with vocation requires three activities: giving voice to others, building relationships, and recognizing and rewarding contributions of others.

Giving voice to others. Leading with vocation requires that leaders not only discover their own vocation, but also "inspire others to find theirs" (Covey, 2004, p. 5). Leadership, whether someone is a formal leader or not, requires a commitment to helping others find *their* voices as well. By giving away assumed authority, one fosters credibility and becomes more influential as a leader. By helping others find their own voices, leaders play a special role in the lives of their colleagues.

Building relationships. Effective leadership at any level is all about relationships. Leaders need to create supportive and positive environments where relationships can be developed and strengthened (Avolio and Luthans, 2005). The most effective environment helps participants draw out their inner talents and potential strengths. Research has found that if managers (i.e., leaders) ignore their workers, the chance of these workers being actively disengaged in their work is 40%, whereas if managers focus on their workers' strengths, the chances are only 1% (Rath, 2007, p. iv). Thus, intentionally building effective relationships based on strengths helps to foster and sustain an environment where leadership can flourish.

Recognizing and rewarding contributions. Leaders are keenly aware that the contributions of followers are a key determinant of the success of their own leadership. Because of this awareness, they recognize the work of others continuously and with care. In his classic book *Leadership is an Art*, Max DePree proposes that the first step necessary to turn ideals about relationships into reality is, simply, to respect people:

[Respect] begins with an understanding of the diversity of their gifts. Understanding the diversity of these gifts enables us to begin taking the crucial step of trusting each other. It also enables us to begin to think in a new way about the strengths of others. Everyone comes with certain gifts – but not the same gifts. True participation and enlightened leadership allow these gifts to be expressed in different ways and at different times (2004, pp. 25-26).

Moreover, once these gifts and strengths are identified, they need to be nurtured and developed. This requires an investment of time, dedication, and hard work. The Gallup Organization, based in its years of research on developing people within organizations,

has concluded that peers, particularly those in a supervisory role, play an important role in developing people. In their search for environmental factors that influence employee motivation and engagement in their place of employment, persons who responded affirmatively to these two questions, “In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress” and “This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow” showed the most engagement in their work (Wagner and Harter, 2007, p. xii). In short, leaders know how to recognize and reward the unique contributions of whom they are leading.

Related Exercises

Think of a time when you felt empowered by someone else to find and use your voice. Describe the setting, what the other person said or did, how you felt, how you responded, what the consequences were. How did this experience affect your relationships with others? How were your contributions recognized? Based on this experience, connect your reflections to the following questions about leading with vocation:

Giving voice

- How do you communicate your voice (i.e. your values, priorities, sense of purpose in life, etc.) to others?
- In what ways do you value, honor, and encourage differences of opinion?
- In what ways do you create power by giving up power?

Building relationships

- How do you encourage dialogue to flourish among your colleagues?
- How do you nurture “invisible” leaders?
- How do you build relationships that are mutually reinforcing?

Recognizing and rewarding contributions

- How do you help followers to be leaders?
- How do you draw out the talents and contributions of others?
- How do you recognize progress along the way and celebrate the work of others?

DEVELOPING COMMUNITY WITH VOCATION

Leadership practices that transcend individual relationships are focused on the organization as a whole. Leaders lead from within, but keep their leadership efforts focused on something outside of them, such as the institution, a cause, or a program in which they are engaged. Hence, *leading is inner-based and outer-focused, not outer-based and inner-focused.*

Creating purpose and hope. Creating a shared purpose, like creating good working relationships, is a matter of carefully negotiating diverse voices. The inside-out leader will have to balance individual and organizational needs. If the leader has built and nurtured relationships, and given explicit and deliberate attention to organizational motivation, fellow members will have found its common cause and the leader's task will be to make that cause explicit and to build on it. Recently, scholars in positive psychology have advocated that *hope* is an important factor in motivating and sustaining goal-directed behavior, both individually and institutionally. That is, persons with hope tend to be more secure, are willing to take risks, and persist in periods of challenge (Lopez, 2006). Again, this illustrates how understanding and developing the interior of the leader is important.

Developing group consciousness. The inside-out leader helps others find an awareness of both who they are and of the larger community of which they are contributing members. Yet balancing individual with collective interests is not the only artful task facing the inside-out leader. Leadership demands that other tensions be recognized as well, all of which relate to a single common phenomenon: a healthy balance between *challenge* and *support*. First suggested by Nevitt Sanford (1969) relating to student development, later by Mihály Csikszentmihályi (1997) as part of his theory of "flow," and again applied by Sharon Parks (2000) in her work on young adult development, this notion of "challenge and support" means that people have the greatest amount of intrinsic motivation when these two components are in balance – or more precisely, when the perceived challenge of a task is just *barely* beyond one's own resources. Dissonance is created, leading to aspiration and energy. In a study of ten colleges, we found that the most effective colleges in fostering holistic student development are able to simultaneously challenge and support their students in appropriate ways to help foster their development while in college (Braskamp, Trautvetter, and Ward, 2006).

Reflecting on results. This conception of the inside-out leadership insists that how well an institution or program is functioning is critical to its health and well being – not on how well the leader is having control, power, or success within the organization. Inside-out leaders want the group to reflect critically on its work and commit as a group to learning from what it is doing. In higher education settings, leaders must insist that the focus is on what and how students learn and develop, and not on how successful the teachers and leaders wish to become.

Related Exercises

Think of a time when, as a member of a community or institution, you have been struck by the way in which the community has been effectively mobilized to achieve an important result. Describe how a sense of shared purpose was created, how a balance between support and challenge was achieved, and how the community was able to monitor attainment of results. Use the following questions as a way to reflect on developing community with vocation:

Creating purpose and hope

- How do you share your vision of the institution with others so that they own your vision?
- To what extent do you see your role as providing inspiration and excitement to your colleagues?
- Do you define your work, and that of others, in service of a common goal?

Developing group consciousness

- How do you recognize and communicate to others that neither problems nor solutions are easily defined?
- How do you take risks to anticipate shifts in the environment?
- How do you balance challenge and support?

Reflecting on results

- How do you create mutual responsibility and accountability among your colleagues? How do you take responsibility and accountability for your own actions?
- What institutional and program results and indicators do you use in this judging progress?
- Do you accept responsibility to do whatever it takes to ensure the success of the institution?

CONCLUSION

An inside-out leader, *by definition*, recognizes a calling to exert leadership in a given situation or context. Whether one is formally given the title or position of a leader is not the critical factor in being an inside-out leader. Rather, a leader engages in intrapersonal reflection, develops a sense of personal commitment, and transcends oneself by entering into relationships with others in ways that galvanize their commitment to a common purpose. Leaders first need to know themselves in order to find their voice, and then, in turn, help others find their own voices as well so they will be able to lead from an inner-commitment.

This process begins with oneself, but never stays there. Instead, it is an inside-out, synergetic relationship between who one *is* and what one *does* in relationship to others. In short, leaders invest their strengths to bring out the strengths and contributions of others for the good of an organization or cause. In this way, true leadership is a spiritual endeavor – a process that requires self-reflection and an inner-awareness in order to form deeper relationships with others and work together with followers to accomplish a common purpose for the greater collective good.

Larry A. Braskamp is currently a Senior Fellow at the American Association of Colleges and Universities and a Senior Scientist at The Gallup Organization. He received his B.A. from Central College in Pella, Iowa and M.A. and Ph.D. in educational psychology from the University of Iowa. He has served as a faculty member and Assistant to the Chancellor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Acting Dean of the College of Applied Life Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), Dean of the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), Executive Director of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at Loyola University Chicago. He is the co-author of Putting Students First: How Colleges Develop Students Purposefully, Assessing Faculty Work, and the Global Perspective Inventory.

References

Avolio, B. J. & Luthans, F. (2005). *The high impact leader*. New York: McGraw-Hill

Braskamp, L.A. (2008). StrengthsQuest on the college campus: From concept to implementation. *Princeton: The Gallup Organization*. Retrieved from <https://www.strengthsquest.com/library/documents/MS+SQSNDImplementationGuideENUS011508.pdf>.

Braskamp, L.A. (2007, Fall). Three "Central" questions worth asking. *Journal of College and Character*. Retrieved from <http://www.collegevalues.org/pdfs/Braskampthreecentralquestions.pdf>

Braskamp, L.A., Trautvetter, L.C., & Ward, K. (2006). Putting students first: How colleges develop students purposefully. *San Francisco: Jossey Bass*

Braskamp, L. A. and J. F. Wergin (2008, Winter). *Inside-out leadership*. *Liberal Learning, AAC&U, 30-35*.

Clifton, D.O, Anderson. E. & Schriener, L. (2006). *StrengthsQuest: Discover and develop your strengths in academics, career, and beyond*. Washington, D.C: The Gallup Organization.

Collins, J. (2005). *From good to great and the social sectors*. Boulder, CO: Jim Collins.

Covey, S.R. (2004). *The 8th habit: From effectiveness to greatness*. New York: Free Press.

Csikszentmihályi, M. (1997). *Finding flow*. New York: Basic Books.

DePree, M. (2004). *Leadership is an art*. New York, NY: Currency Doubleday.

Kegan, R. (1994) *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Krouzes, J. M. & Posner, B. Z. (2002). *Leadership challenge*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lopez, S. (2006). Naming & nurturing. E-newsletter of the Positive Psychology of The American Psychological Association's Counseling Psychology Division. Summer (17).
- Neafsey, J.P. (2004). Psychological dimensions of the discernment of vocation. In John C. Haughey, S.J.(Ed.). *Revisiting the idea of vocation: Theological explorations*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Palmer, P. (2000). *Let your life speak: listening for the voice of vocation*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass
- Parks, S.D. (2000). *Big questions, worthy dreams*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass
- Rath, T. (2007). *StrengthsFinder 2.0*. New York: Gallup Press.
- Sanford, N. (1969). *Where colleges fail: A study of the student as a person*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Wagner, R. & Harter, J.K. (2007). *The 12 elements of great managing*. New York: Gallup Press.
- Wergin, J.F. (Ed.) (2007). *Leadership in place: How academic professionals can find their leadership voice*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass