

Encouraging Ethical & Authentic Leadership: An Interview with Nance Lucas

By Nance Lucas

Recently, Leslie M. Schwartz interviewed well-known leadership researcher and scholar, Nance Lucas, about her personal and professional experiences in higher education. Lucas' focus on leadership as a relational process based on ethics and values poses many implications for recognizing and encouraging the spiritual dimension of leadership within higher education. Her call for leaders to become more self-aware and to model this type of authentic leadership from a strengths-based perspective provides a compelling argument for our institutions to foster this new paradigm of leadership within our campus communities.

Describe how you became interested in work relating to leadership in higher education. What specific experiences, opportunities, and individuals shaped your professional path?

My first formal involvement in leadership development was as an undergraduate at Penn State University where I was exposed to leadership studies in my coursework in industrial psychology, which peaked my interest in this area. As a young person, I was involved in various informal and formal leadership roles, but it wasn't until I was studying these concepts in this academic setting that I really saw the intersection of leadership theories and their practical application. My formal learning experiences on leadership inside the classroom inspired me to deeply reflect upon the practice of leadership.

In my first full-time job in higher education at Ohio University in the mid-eighties, I helped develop a new undergraduate program in leadership that focused more on skill-building competencies such as how to motivate others and assertiveness training; unlike today, these topics were common in most leadership programs. Yet my students came to me with their own personal challenges around ethical issues and dilemmas they faced in their leadership roles around competing values and unethical behaviors.

While there was research on moral development at that time, there was not much that connected these ethical concerns to student development on the undergraduate level. As a result, I began to focus more formally on developing curricula, workshops, and programs – and even my own writing – around these issues, which has now become my life's work.

In my various positions within higher education, I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to study leadership processes, theories, and behaviors as I have served in leadership roles and worked with student leaders. I was involved in student affairs for the first ten years of my professional life and then transitioned into academic affairs to study leadership at the University of Maryland, College Park where I focused on ethics in leadership studies. This experience added an interdisciplinary focus to my research and teaching on leadership.

Currently, I serve as the Associate Dean of New Century College (NCC) at George Mason University – a college that connects the classroom to the world through an integrative studies curriculum and focus on experiential learning. NCC faculty and students have diverse disciplinary and academic interests and backgrounds, which has enhanced my understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of leadership.

I also have been blessed with having many professional mentors and role models in my life who have influenced my philosophy of leadership and my own core values. I was greatly influenced in the mid-to late 80s by then current Ohio University president, Charles Ping, who led the campus with a strong leadership focus to create a sense of community, as well as Joel Rudy, the Dean of Students, who was student-centered and who led with compassion and conviction.

Finally, a person who influenced my leadership philosophy while serving as an exemplar to me is the late Don Clifton. As the former CEO and President of the Gallup Organization, Don was a pioneer of the positive psychology movement. As an important mentor of mine, his research on talent development and strengths changed the way I conceive, practice, and teach about leadership. To emphasize what is right and good about people – instead of focusing on recognizing and overcoming their weaknesses that so often happens in leadership and management – is a pivotal component of this perspective. In my leadership now, I focus on working to position people to do what they are best at doing to bring out their talents and strengths in order to foster a greater sense of leadership development.

This philosophy of talents and strengths is also a philosophy about leadership, and is a subset of the greater understanding of spirituality within positive psychology that focuses on promoting authenticity; if people are able to do what they are best at doing everyday in their organizational lives, they are going to find greater meaning and reach greater levels transcendence in their lives, finding more joy, satisfaction, and congruency in their work which will directly increase their productivity. Creating these communities of talent and strength on our college campuses is so important because students are socialized to think about their weaknesses and focus on these areas; but think about what life would be like if institutions were fostering the type of leadership development that emphasized individuals' strengths to help them do what they do best every day.

This view on leadership is inspirational and has given me opportunities to discover ways in which my own spirituality influences my outlook and actions. I'm most inspired by the vast amount of talent that I'm surrounded by everyday through my encounters with diverse students, faculty, staff, alumni, family members, and friends.

How would you define leadership? Describe the spiritual implications of leadership development based on this definition.

My definition of leadership is highlighted in my *Exploring Leadership*, which I co-authored with Susan Komives and Tim McMahon, where we define leadership as a relational and ethical process of people together attempting to accomplish positive change (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2007, p. 41). This definition resonates with me because it is about connection and collaboration, about people working together – it is not “leader-centric.” Rather, it is very intentional, focusing on authentic, transformative leadership that occurs through interaction.

It also includes a dimension of ethics in the definition. While there are thousands of formal definitions on leadership, probably less than fifty formally address the role of ethics and values within the concept of leadership. In a formal setting, we can't teach ethics, but we can teach *about* ethics and its relationship to the leadership process. Our most powerful way to teach ethics and leadership is by doing it ourselves. In my 23 years in leadership education, I always have seen a strong interest from students to learn more about leadership and ethics. I disagree with comments I hear about college students that lead us to believe young people today only care about themselves and will go to any length to obtain success. The majority of students I work with inside and outside of the classroom are motivated to make a positive difference in their communities.

As I study ethical leadership and development, there are strong parallels and profound connections with spirituality; and while they are not the same, they are highly interrelated. You cannot, in my mind, practice spiritual leadership without being ethical because spiritual leadership has ethics at its core. One of the highest expectations people have of leaders is that they are honest. Values like honesty, compassion, caring, reciprocity, and integrity show up in the literature as core leadership values that have no cultural boundaries. These same values also are *spiritual values* and are tied to ethical leadership and decision-making. These values are highly related to spiritual leadership and also are *essential* in ethical leadership.

Within the last five to seven years, research on the ethical and spiritual implications of leadership has become more robust. This transition of research focus is changing our definitions and views of leadership. There has been a shift in leadership theory from an individual-centric focus to a *relational focus*, which has raised key questions about the influence of spirituality on leadership. Theories such as Greenleaf's servant leadership theory and Burns' focus on transformational leadership tie directly to this relational conception of leadership. These two theories in particular have led to newer concepts in the current literature about spirituality and leadership.

While some researchers and scholars purport that one can provide spiritual leadership without being spiritual oneself, I disagree. To be truly *authentic* in practicing spiritual leadership, these principles should be congruent with one's personal beliefs and core values. Just as leadership development is a lifelong journey, so is spiritual development, which occurs through reflective practice and self and other awareness. I think the leadership challenge is being and staying authentic and compassionate with others throughout the leadership process.

Describe the current work you are involved in and how it connects to the intersection of leadership and spirituality.

One of my commitments is to continue to be a student of leadership and I do that by teaching undergraduate and graduate courses at New Century College. Because I believe that ethics and values are central in the leadership process, I include those components in my courses. Students are eager to participate in these conversations as they learn more about themselves and others. These conversations become more complex when I include spirituality because immediately students assume we're talking about religion or religious beliefs. One of the tenets of the learning community we work to achieve in these courses is to be open to diverse ideas, perspectives, and beliefs. That openness is critical as we explore the connections between leadership and spirituality.

New Century College offers a number of courses on leadership and also on spirituality and transformation. Most of these courses include experiential learning opportunities so that students can apply what they're learning in practical situations. Our Center for Leadership and Community Engagement hosts a wide range of service-learning activities, which has proven to be a powerful approach to expose students to these concepts. They learn at a deeper level about the concepts of reciprocity, servant leadership, transformation, spirituality, and integrity from these experiences. We can explore these themes in the classroom, but we have a greater impact on students when they are integrating their learning in settings outside the classroom.

Recently at George Mason University, we launched a campus-wide leadership steering committee that unites students, faculty, staff, student affairs professionals, and alumni with the goal of creating opportunities for our community members to learn about leadership and to develop leadership competencies. This collaborative effort will result in the development of a number of ways individuals can study and practice leadership. The University Provost and Vice President of University Life are supporting this effort, which sends a message on our campus that the study and practice of leadership is valued and matters.

How do these thoughts and reflections on spirituality and leaderships connect to the work of campus faculty, administrators, and staff? What is needed to facilitate this type of leadership among higher education professionals?

We are beginning to see a greater awareness about the idea that we bring our *whole selves* to our workplaces, learning spaces, residence halls, and offices. Because of this

outlook, there is more willingness to explore the personal and emotional connections where people can achieve greater meaning, purpose, harmony, and connections with others in their organizations. I think we need to continue to influence innovations in academic credited programs and co-curricular initiatives that foster this holistic perspective. My dream is that every college and university in the world will have these types of opportunities for students, faculty, and staff. To accomplish this, we need to start small with those who are committed to advancing leadership movements in higher education.

All of this work has to happen on multiple levels within higher education. The focus on leadership development needs to shift to a more relational philosophy in order to achieve greater levels of self-awareness, transcendence, creativity, resilience, and commitment to ethical processes for individuals and their organizations. We need to find uncommon ways to impact students' leadership development, while preparing them to make transitions from what might be an idealized view of leadership to how leadership is practiced in corporations, the armed services, non-profit organizations, and governmental agencies, to name a few.

The first and most powerful way to do this is by modeling spirituality and leadership ourselves in the academy. In my own leadership, I am committed to modeling positive, authentic, spiritual leadership with the idea that it will inspire others to greater levels of harmony and connectedness to each other, the organization's mission, and to greater levels of self-awareness by being transparent. And if I don't model this myself, why should anyone else think about these approaches in their own lives? Being and staying authentic and open in our leadership, raising the big questions, being honest and positive, seeing the goodness in people and situations – this is the kind of leadership that people do resonate with and respond to, setting a tone within an organization so people are able to find greater meaning and satisfaction in what they are doing.

The second powerful way is through informal and formal educational outreach with our students, faculty, and staff teams. There is a language of spirituality and leadership that can resonate with most people no matter what personal religious beliefs and convictions they hold. These ideas and concepts that are imbedded in relational and spiritual leadership are teachable; you can learn how to listen for meaning, how to achieve a greater self-awareness to find deeper purpose in your life, and how to respond to a higher calling within your leadership. Thus, designing educational programs that address these critical issues is an important opportunity to further this work.

Our challenge – and our opportunity – is to educate our colleagues and students about the formal and growing body of knowledge on leadership, including the influence of spirituality on leadership and on leader development. This is also a major focus within the scholarship of leadership. For example, the Academy of Management has organized a special interest group around management, spirituality, and religion that has over 500 members. This is important because it brings *legitimacy* to the topic of spirituality and leadership on college campuses. Additional studies that highlight these connections need to be discussed and applied to our practices in order to best support the authentic development of leadership within higher education.

What future work do you feel should be undertaken within higher education to explore this connection further?

The current empirical data on the connection between spirituality and undergraduate student development and faculty focus allows us to have conversations on our campuses that have been more difficult in the absence of a more formalized body of knowledge and research on these topics. Yet, we have only begun this important agenda around spirituality and leadership and understanding the connections. My hope is that we'll continue seeing more research on this connection that will lead to a greater integrative theory on leadership that includes the critical themes of spirituality, ethics, and values.

Within the formal literature on spirituality and leadership, we're running into the same problems we ran into thirty years ago when we tried to develop formal definitions of leadership. Research in the last two decades has allowed us to become more sophisticated and precise in developing leadership definitions that can be measured. However, when you look at the literature on spiritual leadership, there are definitional problems; we don't know yet what we mean when we say "spiritual leadership."

And while it's not so important that we identify one universal definition – which I think would be a mistake – we do need more formal definitions that can be operationalized and measured. This research is still in its infancy, and as more empirical studies are conducted on spiritual leadership, we will also see a greater understanding of these definitions that are rooted in stronger research.

If we really want to develop spiritual leadership in ourselves and our students, the biggest challenge for us is to check our egos at the door. Leaders are humans; they have their own agendas while wanting to achieve and be recognized. But at its core, this idea of practicing spiritual leadership means that we really need to refocus on the higher good of people and organizations in order to cultivate a greater sense of integrative awareness that will lead to a higher purpose in our own leadership. And this is not easy for leaders to do; it is something we have to be conscious of and work on every day as we interact with others. We have to ask ourselves the central question: *"What is the purpose of my leadership?"*

Let me close with sentiments I share with my students: *There is nothing more dangerous in leadership than arrogance and nothing more rewarding than gratitude and humility. Discover the goodness and talents in each person you encounter. Love what you're doing and remember that happiness is a journey, not a destination.*

Nance Lucas is the Associate Dean and Associate Professor of New Century College and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at George Mason University. Lucas is also an Adjunct Faculty member with The Gallup Organization and an Affiliate Faculty member of the Robert Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland. She received a Ph.D. in College Student Personnel with a concentration in Leadership Studies and Ethics at the University of Maryland; a master's degree in College Student Personnel Administration, and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Industrial Psychology both from The Pennsylvania State University. Her teaching and scholarship interests focus on ethics and leadership. Lucas also is the co-author of the book Exploring Leadership: For College Students Who Want To Make A Difference (1st and 2nd editions) and author of chapters in edited books. She was the co-editor of the Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies for special issues and a member of the Journal's Editorial Board, and was a contributing author of Leadership Reconsidered and The Social Change Model of Leadership Development. Lucas has served as the creator and convener of the 1997 Global Leadership Week Program (a world-wide leadership program initiative that spanned five continents), co-founder of the National Leadership Symposium, co-founder of the National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs, and a past chair of the National InterAssociation Leadership Project. She served on the W. K. Kellogg Foundation Leadership Studies Project Ethics Focus Group, W. K. Kellogg Foundation College Age Youth Leadership Program Review Team and the Kellogg Forum on Higher Education National Dialogue Series Planning Team.

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