

Table conversations

Chapter 3: The (true) nature of pedagogical leadership and school development

By Jasja van den Brink

*Management is doing things right;
leadership is doing the right things.*

Peter F. Drucker, management consultant and author

The second day, about the nature of leadership and school development, started with some inspiring videos and talks with ‘the leaders’ from Laterna Magica, Titus Brandsmacollege en L école Singelijn.

Our discussion opened with the statement that true leadership in schools can be defined by the willingness to share power with others in your school. These leaders talk about ‘our’ school and ‘us’. They really care about their staff and their people. They let their role as principal be defined by the questions and needs of other people. Their inspiration comes from clear values, supported by theory and practice. And, as we could learn from the example of Laterna Magica, they also are in a learning relationship with their inspector.

Leaders who don’t have followers, are managers, was the next statement. They are very strong people, who are all prepared to stand in the fire/ take the hits, so the teachers can do their tasks. Other important qualities are charisma –looking back, I think I missed the Philosopher here, charisma can also be a trademark of people with less good intentions- relationships, empathy, believing in others and their capacity for growth, that people can blossom at any age, and passion. Like Dominique, who was named a ‘teacher-whisperer’, as a variant of ‘horse-whisperer’.

Someone stated that passion is contagious, just like the flu: You get sick when you’re vulnerable. So you can be infected. I really liked that comparison, though I would rather have a more positive word than ‘sick’ as a result of being infected with passion. But what is it that makes people passionate? Is this because of their narrative? And is passion always a good thing? Does passion always stem from love, or is passion fuelled by hate also possible? And shouldn’t we name that differently?

Can anyone learn how to be a good leader? We had some doubts about that. Is it possible to teach the heart like we can teach the head? Someone gave the example of two candidates who applied for the same job. One candidate seemed like the ideal candidate for the job: had a good CV, knew everything, answered every question and also did appear to have a broad theoretical base. The other candidate didn’t have that much experience as the first one. She doubted more, and had lesser theoretical knowledge. But she did have the heart for the job. She loved the kids, the teachers and the school. So they decided to award her with the job, and never regretted it. They could teach her what she didn’t know. Teaching someone how to be passionate about something is more difficult.

Is it impossible to transform a manager into a leader? It’s about the soft skills. You have to know if people are willing to take the risk to be vulnerable, to be open to new ideas which might oppose their current ones. They have courage to do so, and that’s a matter of the heart. There are no tricks

or quick fixes to courage: For passionate people, their engine is their belief. If you do have passion and vision, but not the courage to make your vision happen, your fear of being hurt, let down or fail is more important than the task at stake. Briefly stated: you perceive your wellbeing as more important than the release of your vision. Ego can be a tough thing to deal with.

According to Native Americans, a leader must be able to lead him- or herself first, before they are able to lead a group. In their leadership teachings, which were transferred through the ages, seven concepts are central: *wisdom, honesty, truth, courage, respect, humility and love*¹. And as in Native American languages the word for teacher and leader is the same, these teachings also involve a big challenge for the ways we raise our children and educate our teachers and leaders nowadays.

*If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more,
do more and become more, you are a leader.*

John Quincy Adams (former president of the USA)

¹ Rolf Winters from Down to Earth is currently writing a book about this. Almost finished!