Accentuating Servant-Leadership in Singapore Leadership Mentoring

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In the Singapore education system certain features emerge in leadership concepts pertaining to servant-leadership and leadership mentoring. Greenleaf's notions of foresight as the "central ethic of leadership" and conceptualizing as the "prime leadership talent" (Greenleaf, 1970, pp. 16 & 23), as well as the practice of leadership learned through mentoring (Low, 1995; Lim, 2005) have come to the fore in recent years. In our experience the commensurability of these ideas—foresight, conceptualizing, and mentoring—serve as legitimate means toward the end of a more whole and servant-led educational learning environment.

BACKGROUND ON MOVEMENTS OF LEADERSHIP MENTORING IN SINGAPORE EDUCATION

Accentuating aspects of servant-leadership in leadership mentoring in the context of Singapore education quintessentially necessitates locating main historical roots. Leadership development pertaining to mentoring has surfaced in various forms over the past two-and-a-half decades, ranging from pre-service structured or formal form, to unstructured or informal form, to in-service semi-structured form. The Singapore experience has reflected selected mentoring forms, in their broadest sense, in one way or another. Examples include low-profile, fairly formal strategy (Hennecke, 1983); structured formalized mentoring (Moore, 1982; Phillips-Jones, 1983; Geiger-DuMond & Boyle, 1995); facilitated mentoring (Murray & Owen,

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1991); mentoring multiplier (Kaye & Jacobson, 1995); and shared mentorship (Sweeny, 2002). Nomenclature aside, the adoption of such varying emphasis on mentoring through the years in Singapore leadership development is elaborated upon below.

Over a period of more than one-and-a-half decades, from 1983 to 2000, leadership mentoring was the prime aspect of a development strategy for aspiring school principals attending the Diploma in Education (DEA) programme in Singapore. The one-academic-year programme integrated an eight-week leadership mentoring school attachment component with formal instruction given by university faculty members. During the school attachment, each DEA participant was paired with a practising school principal who served as a mentor to the participant protégé. The mentors were carefully selected by the Ministry of Education as worthy role models for aspiring school principals in Singapore. As such, there was a tripartite structure involving the staff as programme developers and mentoring facilitators, school principals as mentors, and participants as protégés.

Thereafter, ad hoc informal and unstructured mentoring was in practice when the innovation model predominated in the subsequent iteration of programming, called Leaders in Education Programme (LEP), starting in 2001. Even now, the distinctive features of co-creation and synergy with schools through the Ministry of Education (Lim, in press) permeate the core of both the DEA and the LEP leadership programmes for aspiring principals. Two-and-a-half decades of in-service experience in leadership preparatory programmes have shown that instead of pervasively discarding the past as obsolete, programme developers can take cognizance of pertinent local distinctive features and capitalize on their strengths, in an attempt to generate the next wave of seascape change in Singapore school leadership development.

Further, in March 2007, a one-year leadership mentoring programme for beginning principals was launched. The latest initiative serves to promote "a culture of school leaders taking responsibility for grooming their peers" (Ho, 2006, p. H6), with "school autonomy," "regular refreshing and

recharging," and the "sharing of expertise" the three factors necessary for building a quality school system.

The nature of leadership in the Singapore school system involves a constant embrace of change itself. With school heads in Singapore rotated on a regular basis, approximately forty percent of Singapore schools have had a change of principals in the past half decade. This approach is deemed positive, as it promotes a communal idea of forming good schools. This is also consistent with local research findings on the systemic impact of DEA-structured leadership mentoring, facilitated by university faculty, that encourages "principals to lead their own learning in collaboration with their peers in the education arena" (Lim, 2005a, p. 92). In this context of change, subsequent evolving forms of mentoring will continue to impact learning, and because of this further research can be helpful in examining assumptions in programme development.

The pertinent developments of mentoring in the Singapore education system also offer an insight into the relevance and significance of relationships that were emphasized in the findings of previous Singapore studies (Lim & Low, 2004). It is evident that "mentoring fosters leadership training in the essential relationship skills" (p. 34). Against the backdrop of leadership mentoring movements in the Singapore education system, the servant-leadership dimension of conceptualizing becomes crucial to leadership mentoring.

BRIDGING CONCEPTUALIZING

The emphasis on conceptualizing was framed by Katz (1975) as increasing in importance as the level of management gets higher. In Greenleaf's elaboration on "conceptualizing—the prime leadership talent" (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 23), it was asserted that "a truly remarkable social, political, and economic transformation, stemmed from one man's conceptual leadership" (p. 25), that of Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig in 19th-century Denmark. Known as the Father of the Danish Folk High Schools, Grundtvig "did not found or operate a Folk High School, although he lec-

tured widely in them" (p. 25). Terms associated with the conceptualizing include "love," "dedication," "faith," and motivation as in the arousal of the "spirit":

> What he gave was his love for the peasants, his clear vision of what they must do for themselves, his long articulate dedication–some of it through very barren years, and his passionately communicated faith in the worth of these people and their strength to raise themselves–*if only their spirit could be aroused.* (p. 25)

The elements of "love," "dedication," and "faith" featured in servant-leadership are similarly featured in mentoring. We believe the conceptualization of the core of powerful mentoring depicts "unconditional loving relationships, nurtured and led by the mentor, which feature aspects of altruism, care and faith" (Lim, 2005b, p. 108). Data on mentoring from protégés indicated the surfacing of "unlimited love" (Okawa, 2002, p. 81) as an element offered by mentors, establishing a trust connection based on mutual self-disclosure and sharing. This is consistent with what other writers have maintained (for example, Linehan & Walsh, 1999; Sim, 2002). Altruism, care, and faith appear to emerge as motivational forces that could propel mentors to serve beyond their call of duty (Lim, 2005b, 109), with "faith" that the protégé possesses a potential or the potential. Such remarkably similar features in two established leadership paradigms could signify inclusiveness in both.

Closely linked to "faith" in protégés is the element of trust. Research on leadership mentoring in Singapore (Lim, 2005a, p. 40) indicates that protégés learned from their mentors' trusting of subordinates and giving them substantial authority to make decisions in their areas of work, as exemplified by the following quote:

> Middle management would be my heads of department. In empowerment, there must be trust; there must be accountability. So like in areas of their department work, I give them the freedom to come up with their proposals. Sometimes when they want to review, to change certain

things, they themselves would discuss it openly with the staff. They would invite suggestions from their department staff, and then they proceed.

As in servant-leadership, mentoring behaviors include faith in the worth of the protégé, and this has to be communicated. Protégés who had the opportunity to experience quality leadership mentoring learned from their mentors the practice of promoting trust. Behaviors showing communication integrity formed a bond of trust and genuineness in relating with people. In Lim's study, trust in leading, exemplified through relating well with people, encompassed congruency in belief, action, and speech, as illustrated below:

> You want to establish trust, you must make sure that you are helping. You have to act what you believe, what you say. Say what you believe, act what you say. Saying is not important, you have to supplement or complement with action. People will say, "Ya! This is what you really are going to do, what you say, and what you believe." All these three must link together. And people from time to time will put these three together, see whether the jigsaw puzzle can match together. If you can't, then you cannot get a complete picture of their trust.

Lim's work revealed that promoting trust also encompassed being "open" in personal and professional matters, with the assurance that revelation of "secrets" or "weaknesses" would not lead to penalties:

> I find that there was openness and trust in the [mentoring] school, and this is something which I am trying very hard to establish here. . . it took time to sink in that this is something I believe in, something I would carry on. . . When I was with the mentoring principal, I shared the same office as her, so she would sit here [laughter] and I, there. So occasionally, teachers with problems would approach her, consult her, and she would give advice, whether professional, even personal—she went to that extent. It was made quite clear to the teachers that we are all developing together, all improving together; by letting us know the secrets, it would not penalise them in any way. I believe many of us are keeping secrets because we are afraid of making mistakes. And in the [mentoring] school

I was in, the teachers realised that by revealing their weaknesses, they were not going to be penalised. I believe my mentoring principal helped people overcome their weaknesses. And here, I am trying very hard to emulate the example [of my mentor]. I think I am successful to some extent.

Similarly, on matters pertaining to choice of mentors, Carruthers (1988) brought forth criteria that included the following: "a person you feel you can trust and who trusts you," "a person you can tell personal and professional problems to without fear of penalty," and "a person you respect and who respects you." The dimension of dedication to service as a feature in Singapore leadership mentoring, congruent with servant-leadership, is presented next.

It was reflected that protégés learned and practiced serving as worthy models in dedication to service (Lim, 2005a). Their personal commitment helped influence others to follow their example. For instance, it necessitated being caring, perceptive and approachable:

> The principal leads by example. . . She also practices care not just for her pupils but for her staff as well. It comes across very well that she is there to help you when you come across any problem, even personal problems. She has been a principal there for many years. . . so they know her very well. I think also, she is very alert and perceptive. If she sees any teacher who may be having some problems—she will approach the teacher and let the teacher know that she's there, if they want to talk. I think she shared with me how she has helped some of the teachers with their personal problems—she counselled them too. . . We shared a lot.
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> Sometimes if we go that extra mile, the teacher will go that 99 percent for the students. This particular teacher who had medical problems. . . probably went to tell others in the staff room. In the end she did not get to see her letter of termination [from the Ministry of Education]. I spent three hours going from place to place [for her]. It's worth it. The teacher was very appreciative.
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> If you are able to show care and concern for the teachers, I think somehow this also rubs off on the teachers, that they must show care and concern to their pupils, you see. It must filter down. So therefore the head

must take the lead to do this, so it can filter down or permeate or perco-late, so to speak.

BRIDGING FORESIGHT

According to Greenleaf (1970, p. 16), foresight refers to "a better than average guess about *what* is going to happen *when* in the future," and is deemed "the central ethic of leadership." This is elaborated upon as follows:

> The failure (or refusal) of a leader to foresee may be viewed as an ethical failure; because a serious ethical compromise today (when the usual judgment on ethical inadequacy is made) is sometimes the result of a failure to make the effort at an earlier date to foresee today's events and take the right actions when there was freedom for initiative to act. (p. 18)

Can foresight be learned? Literature on management learning reveals the existence of competence-based learning of content (cerebral or cogni-tive) knowledge and skills (or behaviour), as well as meta-competence-based learning which could incorporate learning from experience. Of rele-vance is Brown's (1994) suggestion that distinctions be drawn among man-agerial processes. Managerial processes could be competence-based (skills plus their accompanying knowledge for application). There are also those which are based on meta-competencies (the higher order abilities which have to do with being able to learn, adapt, anticipate and create). It was expressed that knowledge merges with experience at two levels. At the level of competency, management education may equip participants with specific work-content skills. On the other hand, with reference to meta-competencies, management education must rely more on learning from experience. Meta-competencies can be learned, but cannot be explicitly taught. It was further suggested that meta-competencies are a prerequisite for the development of capacities such as judgement, intuition and acumen. Foresight, then, is aligned with meta-competencies in learning and practice.

Further, with regard to foresight, a practicing leader develops "a high level of intuitive insight about the whole gamut of events from the indefinite past, through the present moment, to the indefinite future. One is at once, in every moment of time, historian, contemporary analyst, and prophet" (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 17). In the Singapore context, it is apt that a focus on foresight at this time be linked to the background on movements of leadership mentoring in Singapore education presented at the beginning of this article. Knowledge and understanding of the past facilitate appropriate selective decision-making for the future. As such, forms may differ, but the core of co-creation and synergy remains. On a similar note, existing forms deemed inappropriate for the present or near future could be adopted or modified for value in the distant future.

Research on leadership mentoring in Singapore provides evidence of foresight in learning and practice. For instance, on matters of helping staff develop, the practice of learning from the mentor the ability to foresee probable serious mistakes and take the right actions becomes a part of the process.

> [I learned] how to "move" and mobilise HODs [Heads of Department] into action. . . I see the Heads of Department as being in a transitional stage. They should move on and move up. I moved them out of their comfort zone. . . gave some responsibilities in terms of school management . . . covered duties [for the principal]; but I did it step by step. . . Slowly, they saw that I was handholding them. Until such time that I could see and I could feel they were confident, then I let go. . . I watch them very closely. But I try not to interfere. If I interfere too much, it stifles them; then you sort of tie their hands and legs and they cannot move. . . They can afford to make mistakes, it's OK. From mistakes, they learn what not to do, if not what to do. . . We are not so wise as to make every good decision all the time. . . No one is perfect. If I see that they are stepping into a big hole [laughter], I will make sure that they don't put their foot in, in the first place. (Lim, 2005a, p. 48)

Foresight and its relevance in mentoring are further elaborated upon here. A review of mentoring literature on the notion of mentor (Lim & Low,

2004, p. 34) reveals that "other than the fairly consistent presentation of the origin of the word 'mentor' itself, it would appear that the word could mean anybody whose presence or contribution, formal or otherwise, is of some positive significance to somebody." But the quality of the dynamic learning relationship between mentor and protégé is often very much dependent on the quality of the mentor. A mentor with the pertinent disposition, experience and meta-competencies is more likely to facilitate the development of capacities such as intuition and insight. To emphasise the value of mentoring, Noller (1982) adopted a phrase from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "The Friend"(1828), in which Coleridge notes that "a dwarf sees farther than the giant when he has the giant's shoulder to mount on." Similarly, Shea (1992) professed that the word "mentor" could be regarded as synonymous with "trusted adviser" and "wise person"; mentors offer special insight, understanding and information that are beyond the normal channels or training in an increasingly complex environment.

CONCLUSION

Research on and the practice of leadership mentoring in Singapore have invariably omitted the probable contributions of servant-leadership as an integral component. This article explores the dimensions of conceptualizing and foresight as they appear in servant-leadership and leadership mentoring, and reveals connections that support greater agreement than dissension. It is apparent that these leadership approaches—mentoring and servant-leadership—are not mutually exclusive. This relationship may provide the basis for future research related to the explicit incorporation of servant-leadership into leadership mentoring. Future research on leadership mentoring is also needed in order to examine the practice of servant-leadership by effective school leaders who have opportunities to learn from their former mentors in education.

With change as the undeniable constant in life, and change often referred to as synonymous with progress at work, a significant sense of connection with the past becomes vital, as well as connection to the now

and to the future on matters pertaining to program development. With fore-sight and conceptualizing, school leadership program developers at the ter-tiary level can help to bridge the past and the future in research while maximizing their presence in the present. This can promote the unique and paradoxical notion of wise abandonment with distinct discretion while embracing or creating change itself

Program facilitators play a substantial role in shaping education in Sin-gapore at the school headship level; and are akin to Grundtvig, who did not operate any of the founding schools, but lectured widely in facilitating the transformation from conception to concrete reality. As programs evolve positively, a continual development and retention of committed facilitators occurs, so that whatever retreats we face along the evolutionary scale of program development can eventually lead to genuine advancement in pre-empting the lament of foresight upon hindsight.

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