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The Perils and Joys of Exercising Your VOICE for Advocacy and Social Justice

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The Perils and Joys of Exercising Your VOICE for Advocacy and Social Justice

Leadership is not for the wimpy, the superficial, the simplistic thinker or the do-gooder. Leadership is hard; leadership is messy; and leadership always demands that you find ways to learn, grow and improve your skills.

Service learning is a wonderful way to develop your leadership. We need students who are willing to serve, lead and create their world. But service learning is not easy either. When you are serving to learn, you are challenging your world views. You put yourself into settings that have no easy answers, no simple solutions. You understand immediately that service learning means more than giving an hour of your time. It means giving your whole self- and it changes the way you live your life.

You might wonder, then, why you are thinking about leadership and service learning? Why put yourself into an uncomfortable spot where there are no answers, there are only more and more questions? Why move from your contented life to an experience that changes the way you live? You select this opportunity because you know you can and must make the world a better place.

At its heart, leadership is an adventure into the unknown that changes the world and changes each person for the better. Effective leaders are chemicals that start a reaction and even as they transform the world, they themselves are changed. It is an adventure worth taking, but like all great adventures, you must be prepared with the mindset, equipment and perspective you will need to succeed.

The foundation pieces of your leadership packing are the Columbia College 4 C’s: courage, commitment, confidence and competence. As you immerse yourself in service learning, in leading change, in making a difference, you will find that the way is not always easy, the challenges not always pure and the solutions not always pretty. You will learn how to probe why leadership- and particularly leadership in the areas of advocacy and social change- is so hard. I’ll suggest a few things I’ve learned from my

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leadership journey in social change arenas. You will add others as you gather and reflect on your experience.

(1) The issues are ugly, complex, and intertwined. Poverty, homelessness, illness, domestic violence, gang activity, teen pregnancy, low graduation rates, illiteracy, etc. are complicated issues. They do not have easy solutions- or we would have solved them already. So if you get involved, you cannot be wimpy; you have to have a strong heart.

- a heart that has courage to envision yourself as a leader
- a heart that has commitment to keep working even when things get hard
- a heart that has the confidence to believe in herself
- a heart that has the competence to make things happen

(2) There are many people working in isolation trying to fix something that is broken. Like the blind women feeling an elephant, often people only see one part of an issue. They cannot imagine the whole. And they see themselves in competition with each other. So if you get involved, you cannot be superficial; you must bring a collaborative spirit

- a spirit that has the courage to research and understand the whole problem
- a spirit that has the commitment to work with those who are different from you
- a spirit that has the confidence to speak out as an advocate for change
- a spirit that has the competence to organize yourself and others to complete a task

(3) People believe that there is a simple “FIX” to all social justice issues and their fix usually involves outlining what “those people” should do- not what we can do together. Leaders develop a critical thinking mind to understand the issues and to communicate the urgency of our involvement. So if you get involved in this adventure, you must develop your critical thinking brain.

- a brain that has the courage to believe that we can make a difference together
- a brain that has the commitment to try again even when we fail
- a brain that has the confidence to communicate with clarity and passion
- a brain that has the competence to motivate ourselves and others to action
People believe that social change can be attained if we all “do good”. I believe that social change requires us to do good by acting locally, thinking politically, and engaging the whole system in global (international and wide reaching) change. One act- putting one nail in the Habitat house is nice; building a whole house is better; helping find funds for nails and lumber so others can build more houses is better; lobbying for neighborhood restriction changes so we can build more houses is better; taking our ideas from habitat overseas is better. So if you want to get involved in this adventure, you must have skilled hands and an effective voice.

- Hands and voices with the courage to act
- Hands and voices with the commitment to achieve
- Hands and voices with the confidence that others will listen
- Hands and voices with the competence to do what must be done

Just as an athlete or an artist must practice her craft to develop excellence, so must students practice leadership. And to practice leadership, you must practice more than the traditional leadership skills. I have used the term “VOICE” several times. When I think of effective leaders, I see people who practice using their VOICE daily - not in the way you might think. They are not assertive advocates every day. They know how to be assertive advocates, but their power is built on a different kind of voice, a voice I encourage leaders to practice in my role at the Leadership Institute at Columbia College.

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Vulnerable
Optimistic
Innovative
Collaborative
Excellent

**Vulnerable.** Effective leaders practice vulnerability. They understand that until they are open to the pain of leadership, the realities of leadership and the struggles of leadership, they cannot be effective. They do not assume more power than they have. They do not project more expertise than they have. They do not believe that they are the most important part of the puzzle. They understand their strengths and are committed to using those strengths. The also understand their vulnerabilities, the things they do not do well and the things they cannot change. And in an amazing transformation, being vulnerable makes them powerful. The genuine person comes
through- and we want to be a part of genuine change. But vulnerability must be practiced. Without practice, leaders become convinced that they are right. When that happens, the genuine light that made them special dims.

**Optimistic:** Despite the complex realities that work against leadership for social change, effective leaders practice optimism. They refuse to be doom and gloom people. They believe that one step in the right direction is a good thing. They trust in the power of right to win eventually. They understand that it might not happen when and where they want it to, but they know deep in their hearts that it will happen. Like the little engine that could in the children’s book, effective leaders practice telling themselves and others that we know we can, we KNOW we can, and we will because we must. Practicing optimism is often difficult. There are many forces in the world that work against optimism. You will sometimes feel foolish as an optimist- like a child in a grown up world. Without practice, leaders begin to trade their optimism for cynicism. When that happens, the energy that made us want to be a part of their dream fades.

**Innovative:** Effective leaders practice innovation. They realize that doing the same thing we’ve always done and bumping into the same walls we’ve always hit will not create change. It will create hard heads and doubt and pessimism. So effective leaders, like the Queen in Alice in Wonderland, practice “believing at least six impossible things before breakfast.” It seems so easy to practice being innovative. Everyone says we should be innovative. But leaders often find that while people say they want innovation, they are afraid to really think about old problems in new ways. They want leaders to be creative in doing the same things a different way rather than doing new things. Practice in thinking beyond what is. When leaders stop practicing innovation, their ideas become comfortable and easy and have less impact.

**Collaborative:** Effective leaders live collaboratively. It is a part of their every day life- like breathing in and breathing out. So why do leaders need to practice collaboration? Because too often we forget to breathe deeply. We begin to do shallow breathing. And it gets us through the day faster, but it does not give us the oxygen we need to be fully healthy. True collaboration like deep breathing requires conscious choice. Choose to listen to those who disagree. Choose to connect with those who see the problem differently. Choose to build coalitions of people to work together for social change. When leaders do shallow collaboration, they work with those they already know rather than expanding the base of people and really leading change.

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Excellent: Leaders practice excellence. Period.

As I work with CEO’s and community leaders and students ready to take on the challenges of leadership, I remind them that the best way to make a difference is to get into the fray. Service learning gets you into the fray. It places you at the heart of true learning- about yourself, the problems of the world, the political realities of change and the mandate for change. Leadership springs from that understanding. And social change is the result of effective leadership.

I cannot wait to hear about your challenges, your learnings and your celebrations. I cannot wait to hear your voice in this journal.