

A 'Vocational Vision for Student Development Leaders

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Christian Greetings! Grace and peace to you.

I come to you today to encourage you in your leadership role of Christian character formation in students whom you service on campus.

Several questions will be asked. A thesis stated. Some assumptions made. However, exploring with you three 'vocational' vision implications and affirmations in these questions, thesis, and assumptions for you and your leadership role on campus will consume most of my time with you. I welcome your responses to my "hunches" regarding student leaders in a distinctively Christian university.

First, the questions:

Who are **your** leadership role models?

What are the **character qualities** and **values** you admire **most** in these individuals?

How did these "heroes" exemplify for you ethical behavior?

I'm passionate about my thesis. It is this:

You can become, for the students for whom you are responsible, **leadership role models** who exemplify, in word and deed, the very character qualities and values you most admire in others.

Stated differently, I believe intensely that you can become leadership "heroes" for students with whom you live and work, similar to the way your role models were for you.

This thesis is built on several assumptions:

1. You are committed to serving "graduates to be."
2. You are committed to nurturing these students as "leaders to be."
3. You are committed to much more than meeting your basic responsibilities; rather, your "big picture" for the students for whom you are responsible is their lifelong service to Christ and His Kingdom.

In other words, "student-friendly as you may be, you are more driven by the development of Christian character and values in these "graduates and leaders to be."

This passion, grounded in these assumptions, set you apart from most of your counterparts in secular institutions. For you, these “driving forces,” embedded in a ‘vocational’ vision, will hold you steady when pressures mount and student expectations rise. Because of this passion and perspective, you belong at the leadership “table” along side administrators and faculty when student development and leadership character issues are discussed.

I’m convinced that this emerging vocational vision will impact you profoundly as you seek to increase your leadership effectiveness with students. The motivation for serving students will be deeply theological. You are developing “graduates and leaders to be,” for lifelong service to Christ and His Kingdom.

And, in the process, these students with whom you work will “pass on” to others what has been modeled before them! They, in turn, will become leadership role models for others as you were to them, and as others were to you!

This is what you “see” theologically when you work with the students for whom you are responsible on campus.

For this to happen, in the context of the minutia of your work on campus, what leverage-producing insights,” or “driving forces,” must be at work within you? What “vocational” affirmations must you make or theological vision must you “see” regarding the students with whom you work? I think there are at least three:

1. The PROOF of leading . . . is in the qualitative growth of the led, as individuals and as a community.
2. The PURPOSE of leading . . . is to nurture good and godly character (*II Peter 3:11-12*) in the “graduates and leaders to be.”
3. The PROCESS of leading . . . is in modeling before students what it is we seek to “pass on” to them.

I want to explore with you more fully these “affirmations.”

Affirmation #1:

The Proof of Leading . . . is in the qualitative growth of the led -- as individuals and as a community of faith.

The late Dr. Harold Reed, in his excellent book, *The Dynamics of Leadership*, stated,

“Leadership is known by the personalities it enriches, not by those it dominates or captivates. Leadership is not a process of exploitation of others for extraneous ends. It is a process of helping others to discover themselves in the achieving of aims, which have become intrusive to them. The proof of leading is in the qualitative growth of the led as individuals and as group members.”

“Your care for others is your measure of greatness.” What a profound concept! Again, “your care for others is your measure of greatness.”

Who are **your** leadership heroes? I surmise that, what other qualities the individuals possessed, those individuals “enriched” you. You felt better when you left their presence. Stronger. More confident. Assured you could do what was asked of you.

Why is it that we feel very “small” when we leave the presence of some persons; and very “big” when we leave the presence of others? I want to lead and interact with others so that the latter characterizes me.

The late Robert Greenleaf, in his classic text, *Servant Leadership*, asks the difficult question: “do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?”

Greenleaf and Reed prods us to explore the rich relationship between the leader and the led. Particularly, these men are passionate about values, goals, and attitudes necessary for a leader to exemplify in order to bring out the best in those served, and equip them to grow as persons, more likely themselves to become servants. The question for those of us who work with students is this: How can we lead and work with students in such a way that they grow in their faith and mature in this process?

My definition of leadership, in part, affirms that:

“leadership is humble service to others...for the purpose of enabling them, through teaching and example...to live their lives under the Leadership of Christ, to understand, accept, and fulfill their ministry to each other, their vocation (calling) and responsibility in their assignment, and their mission to the world.”

Kouzer and Posner state that “Leadership is an affair of the heart, not of the head.”

They continue,

“We suspect the best kept secret of successful leaders is love: being in love with leading, with the people who do the work, with what their organizations produce, and with those who honor the organizations by using it’s work. Leadership is an affair of the heart, not of the head.” (*The Leadership Challenge*, 1995)

Over the years, I have been influenced in my understanding of leadership by the late Roman Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen. In his book entitled, *Compassion*, he talks about caring for others. His words are instructive to us as leaders.

The word “care” finds its root in the Celtic term “kara,” which means lament. The basic meaning of care is “to grieve, to experience sorrow, to cry out with.” I am struck by the background of the word “care” because we tend to look at caring of the strong toward the weak, of the powerful toward the powerless, of the “haves” toward the “have-nots.”

I am coming to understand that compassion is not a skill in which we acquire. Rather, it is a quality of the human heart which must be revealed.

Nouwen often stated that you cannot get a Ph.D. in caring. He helped me to realize that when we see the other person and discover in that person gentleness, tenderness, and other beautiful gifts, which he or she is not able to see, then our compassionate heart is revealed!

What a profound thought! Our compassionate heart is revealed as we enable others to see what they have not, nor cannot, see in themselves!

Nouwen also opened my eyes to the rich practice of hospitality as a way of life fundamental to Christian tradition for seventeen hundred years of the Christian church. It is a concept which has the potential of transforming relationships with those with whom we live and work.

Traditionally, the term “hospitality” is not limited to receiving a stranger into our homes – although it surely includes this dimension. Fundamentally, it is a core attitude toward others, which can be expressed by a great variety of behaviors. Hospitality, biblically understood, challenges us to relate to others as if we were relating to Christ Himself.

“Hospitality” means primarily the “creation of free space” – making room where the strange and the stranger can enter and become a friend. It is being to others with whom you live and work, a “living witness of the risen Christ.” The gift of hospitality is the opportunity we provide for the guest, the stranger, the friend or co-worker to find his or her own way, even in the context of differences of thought or behavior that may exist.

With this perspective, the attitude of hospitality helps us to make room or create space for those with whom we live and work. It often provides the opportunity for those individuals to enter into deeper contact with himself, or herself, with others, and with God. The result is often a healing relationship and the creation of a community of workers.

As we cultivate the leadership art of hospitality, biblically and theologically understood, we often serve “angels of God” without even knowing it. It is an art we need to nurture.

Former pro basketball star James Worthy affirmed, regarding his University of North Carolina basketball coach, Dean Smith, “My development as a person was as important to him as my development as a player.” Again, Reed reminds us, “Leadership is known by the personalities it enriches, not by those it dominates or captivates.” The proof of leading is reflected in the qualitative growth of the led -- individually and as group members.

Affirmation #2:

The Purpose of Leading . . . is to nurture good and godly character (II Peter 3:11-12) in the “graduates and leaders to be.”

In the New Testament, Peter asks the character question: “What sort of people ought we to be?” (*II Peter 3:11-12*) He is quick to give his answer: “Men and women of good and godly character.”

D. L. Moody once wrote, “If I take care of my character, my reputation will take care of itself.” Character is different from reputation. Listen to William Davis discuss the difference:

Reputation is what you are supposed to be;
character is what you are....
Reputation is what you have when you come to a new community;
character is what you have when you go away.
Reputation is made in a moment;
character is built in a lifetime....
Reputation makes you rich or makes you poor;
character makes you happy or makes you miserable....
Reputation is what men say about you on your tombstone;
character is what the angels say about you before the throne of God.

Character does count! Character is who we are when no one else is around and who we are in the pressure times of our lives. Character is the sum total of our values, priorities, commitments and decisions. Character springs from the core values by which we build our lives. Character captures what it is we most want our children to inherit from us. Character is always the wellspring and foundation of our outward actions.

Peter identifies the character qualities he believes are necessary for us to be effective in our work and to become leaders of “good and godly character.” He mentions the qualities of faith, goodness, knowledge (or discernment), self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love. (*II Peter 1:5-9*)

This list parallels another list in Ephesians 4:2 – “humility, gentleness, patience and kindness.”

The Old Testament prophet Micah (6:8) asked, “And what does the Lord require of you but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

These character qualities characterize us at our best and convict us at our worst.

Too often, I’m afraid people around us see or hear the opposite of the above mentioned character qualities. I am convicted when my colleagues hear or see from me a cynical tongue, a judgmental spirit, a negative attitude, a condescending demeanor, manipulation, lying, cheating, or immorality.

These negative attitudes and behaviors, if we do not guard against them, can eat us – and our co-workers – alive!

Dr. Francis Hesselbein, executive editor of *Leader to Leader* publication, stated recently at a conference I attended, “Leadership is about who you are, not what you do.” Have you identified **your** personal foundational values by which you desire to live your lives?

The second of three foundational values for Mount Vernon Nazarene University affirms:

We respect others. Therefore, we value and stand for...

1. A Magnanimous Spirit
2. A Servant Mentality
3. A Trustworthy Character
4. A Positive Influence
5. A Courteous Response
6. A Giving Motivation
7. An Appreciative Attitude

These are leadership character qualities, and again, characterize us at our best and convict us at our worst. They express some core values if we want to grow personally and professionally and if we want to help our colleagues to grow.

Character springs from the core values by which we build our lives and nurture others. At our best and when we are truest to our leadership purpose, leadership character development in ourselves and in those around us is the heart and soul – the driving force and passion – of leading at Mount Vernon Nazarene University.

Affirmation #3:

The Process of Leading . . . is in modeling before our students what it is we seek to “pass on” to them.

With this affirmation, we are confronted with communicating a lifestyle that is self-giving to the core. But how do you communicate to future leaders a lifestyle? How do you teach commitments, priorities, values, and disciplines? How do you “pass on” a leadership lifestyle that reflects a passion for the qualitative growth of the led and a pursuit for character development in the leaders and also the led? How do you teach a lifestyle?

Whatever else it means, it demands taking seriously the principle of imitation, or modeling, before the led what it is we seek to pass on to them.

Gandhi said, “**We** must be the **change** we seek to **produce** in **others**.”

What is it about ourselves as leaders do we want our students, colleagues and co-workers to catch from us? We want our people to catch a servant spirit, committed to motivating, equipping and enabling them to serve others in the name and place of Jesus. This is success for the Christian servant leader.

And it is more **caught** than taught!

Modeling or “exemplifying” is related to mentoring. Mentoring, according to Bob Beihl in his book, *Mentoring*, “is a lifelong relationship in which a mentor helps his protégé reach her or his God-given potential.” A mentor communicates in word and deed that **character** is more important than comfort. Mentors communicate more by example than by words the truth that those whom I serve need me to be available to them, not to prove how valuable I am to them. We can be known as individuals who go around doing good.

Five questions I ask myself frequently in my personal lifelong pursuit of leadership character development:

1. Will this action strengthen me spiritually?
2. Would I want my wife, my son, or my best friend to copy this action of mine?
3. Does this action violate a biblical principle?
4. Does this action strengthen the body of Christ?
5. Would an unbelieving friend be attracted to Christ and the Christian faith by my behavior?

I like to ask these basic mentoring questions to individuals or groups with whom I work:

What kind of future do you envision for your ministry assignment?

What are your dreams for yourself or for the group of individuals for which you are responsible?

How are you doing, personally?

How are you progressing in your ministry assignment?

How can I help you?

Questions I ask periodically to the leadership team at MVNU (to whom I feel a keen mentoring responsibility) are:

1. Has your faith been strengthened or weakened as a result of your work at MVNU?
2. In what ways do your spiritual gifts match the responsibilities assigned to you?
3. With which of the MVNU core values (see booklet, “*For This We Stand*”) do you agree with most? Least? Which one needs strengthened or eliminated?
4. What questions do you have for me?
5. How may I help you?

Mentoring agendas differ vastly according to need, purpose, time, money and personnel. Be proactive; not reactive.

Modeling is the primary method or process by which student leaders “pass on” the fundamental character qualities and values needed in future leaders.

CONCLUSION:

I conclude by restating my thesis:

You can become, for the students for whom you are responsible, leadership role models who exemplify, in word and deed, the very character qualities and values you most admire in others.

Student-friendly as you may be, you are more driven by the development of Christian character and values in these “graduates and leaders to be.”

This passion sets you apart from your counterparts in secular institutions. Your “vocational vision” contains the driving forces within you that will hold you steady when pressure mounts and when discussions take place regarding student development and leadership character.

Three theological affirmations were explored with you:

1. The PROOF of leading . . . is in the qualitative growth of the led -- individually and as group members.
2. The PURPOSE of leading . . . is to nurture good and godly character (*II Peter 3:11-12*) in the “graduates and leaders to be.”
3. The PROCESS of leading . . . is in modeling before students what it is we seek to “pass on” to them.

These leverage-producing concepts and driving forces within us will characterize us as leaders at our best, and convict us at our worst.

In the midst of your weariness, never forget that your motivation for working with the students at MVNU must be deeply theological. You are developing “graduates and leaders to be,” for lifelong service to Christ and His Kingdom.

Please receive this blessing from me:

Grace to you. Grace to you.
May grace abound in all you do.
Grace to do the will of the Father,
Grace, grace to you. Amen.