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Grace Hindman

The College of William & Mary

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Diversifying Leadership: Intertwining Multicultural Principles and Servant Leadership in Higher Education

Grace M. Hindman

On the tip of everyone's tongue is the role diversity plays in everyday life—how it benefits, challenges and impacts lives. In the last four decades, the numbers of minority students enrolling in higher education have increased as the numbers of white students have decreased (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). With college campuses' racial makeup changing yearly and evolving with the student body composition, it is crucial that leaders and administrators develop leadership styles that not only utilize frameworks that are beneficial, but also utilize principles that are better suited to their increasingly diverse student body. Servant leadership is an excellent approach to leadership that not only utilizes many multicultural leadership strategies, but also has the flexibility to allow for further incorporation of diverse student bodies.

Servant leadership was developed by Robert Greenleaf (1970) as an inverse triangle approach to leadership, with the leader at the bottom point of the triangle supporting managers who support employees and so

forth. Greenleaf described the servant leader as making “sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served,” ensuring that “they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants” (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 15). The servant leader's role is to support those around him or her, to help develop the leadership capacity of others, and to take an interest in the impact that his or her leadership has on society around them and work to ensure that that impact is for the greater good. When executed correctly, servant leadership not only improves the outcomes of an organization, it improves follower performance, increases followers' capacity to lead, and has a positive impact on the society around it. Spears (2010) identified and described 10 characteristics of servant leadership: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community.

In Juana Bordas' (2012) book, *Salsa, Soul, and Spirit: Leadership for a Multicultural Age*, she presented nine principles of leadership from minority communities in the United States, utilizing traditional leadership styles of African American, American Indian and Latino communities. While many of these nine are relevant to Greenleaf's servant leadership, three will be discussed directly: leaders as community stewards, a leader among equals, and “I to we.”

Leaders as Community Stewards

Bordas' (2012) principle of Leaders as Community Stewards is directly applicable to the aspect of servant leadership that focuses on the improvement of society as a whole.

Bordas (2012) described leadership under this principle as something that is accepted—not pursued—by individuals as a “conscious choice” (p. 120). This conscious choice is similar to the stewardship of servant leadership described by Northouse (2016), whereby an individual takes “responsibility for the leadership role entrusted to the leader” (p. 228). Leaders in this way are not striving to be leaders for their own personal gain, but are chosen by their communities and accept this role as a sign of their dedication to the common cause.

What minority leaders do with this principle is uplift their communities and the individuals who are a part of them for the benefit of all. Leadership is not something that is meant to better the individual; it is a tool to improve the lives of all in the community. Leaders in this capacity not only work as advocates for their communities; they help others develop their own capacity to lead. Much of what leaders as community stewards do is empower the community and work to gain consensus and a shared vision. The principle of leaders as community stewards emphasizes the societal impact of servant leadership. By focusing on leadership as a community service, individuals are better able to build partnerships within a community. Leaders are better able to build coalitions and empower individuals from multicultural communities who are more inclined to work from a grassroots perspective.

A Leader Among Equals

Bordas’ (2012) principle of A Leader Among Equals discussed the collectivist nature of many minority cultures and how leaders in these cultures

are facilitators rather than leaders. The Latino characteristic of *personalismo* reminds individuals that “no matter how ‘important’ a leader becomes, she or he must be willing to do the hard work needed for community progress” (Bordas, 2012, p. 89). The idea that all persons, both leader and followers, are working together towards a common goal not only improves morale, but speaks to the character and quality of the leader.

Leaders who utilize “A Leader Among Equals” (Bordas, 2012) as well as servant leadership have a greater capacity to conceptualize goals and priorities of an institution or division and do the work to ensure that that vision is accomplished. Incorporating *personalismo* also helps to level the field in terms of the emotional well-being of both servants and leaders. The community investment in the leader helps to remind the leader that he or she has achieved this status not of his or her own volition but through the support of countless others. As the leader it is therefore only right to reciprocate that support by remaining grounded and working to ensure that those who helped him or her are likewise invested in as individuals and a society. Additionally, there is a greater ability for a leader to have a sense of empathy for followers and to step back and ensure that the emotional wellbeing of followers is being taken care of.

I to We

Bordas’ (2012) principle of I to We addressed the difference between the individualistic perspectives of Anglo America compared to the collectivist identity of minority cultures. In this collectivist culture, “the family, community, or tribe takes precedence

over the individual, whose identity flows from the collective” (Bordas, 2012, p. 48-49). This collective identity follows the building community aspect of servant leadership, which defines a community as essential and a “group in which the liability of each for the other and all for one is unlimited” (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 21). This shared interest in each other allows for a safe and encouraging environment for the improvement of individuals, students, and institutions.

When a leader incorporates the I to We principle in servant leadership, he or she is more inclined to support his or her followers first. This sense of community in an institution enables individuals to feel comfortable reaching out for assistance when needed, but also to come forward with their own ideas. When a common goal is clearly defined and individuals feel as though they are supported in reaching it, followers become more confident and self-sufficient. Individuals who utilize this principle create a balance of their own individual success with communal success. Their goals as leaders go hand in hand with the vision of the department, division or institution. By focusing more on the “we,” a leader has the capacity to change perspectives on priorities and conceptualize a greater mission in partnership with the larger group.

Conclusion

Bordas (2012) stated “leadership in communities of color is grounded in spiritual responsibility: leaders attend to

people’s material and social needs, as well as provide inspiration and hope” (p. 20). This grounding directly reflects the core tenets of servant leadership put forth by Greenleaf (1970). If an institution and a leader are to succeed, they must put the needs and well-being of others first, whether it be the needs of a follower, a student, or the community the institution impacts.

Student populations in higher education are changing with every semester. If universities and colleges seek to develop their students effectively, they must understand the cultural backgrounds and values of the students they seek to serve. Higher education leaders are chosen by a university to serve the needs of students. With this responsibility, leaders must not only work to support their followers in their divisions or offices, they must empower their followers to further support the students of the institution. Additionally, they must work to ensure that the institution is not a detriment to the surrounding community, but rather a source of positive influence and change. By incorporating Bordas’ (2012) principles into the idea of servant leadership, institutions are better prepared to not only support their institutions but to also support those of multicultural backgrounds who seek the spiritual and cultural leadership Bordas put forth.

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About the Author

Grace Hindman (B.A., The College of William & Mary; M.L.S., University of South Carolina) is a doctoral student in the Educational Policy, Planning & Leadership program at The College of William & Mary, with a concentration in Higher Education Administration. She is currently the transfer credit coordinator at William & Mary, and her research interests include college student spiritual development and student success of minorities and legacies.