


5-15-2017

Generative Leadership: A Thematic Book Review

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Recommended Citation

Monroe, Rebecca S. (2017) "Generative Leadership: A Thematic Book Review," *Wisdom in Education*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/wie/vol7/iss1/5>

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Generative Leadership: A Thematic Book Review

Abstract

This thematic book review looks at how four texts interweave the topic of generative leadership into a cohesive structure so the reader can bring about change in our educational system. The authors of these texts begin by defining generative leadership and complexity, then move on to discuss mirror neurons and empathy, relationships and the importance of feeling a part of something, and how experience equals learning, which in turns sculpts the brain physically. As you think of the leadership style you want to emulate as you build your own and your staff's capacity, these resources may easily sum this up for you.

Keywords

generative leadership, change, complexity, mirror neurons, empathy

Author Statement

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As you consider growing and making changes in yourself as a leader, and for your team, you may want to consider using the following four resources: *Generative leadership: Shaping new futures for today's schools* by Karl Klimek, Elsie Ritzenheim and Kathryn Sullivan (2008); *Attachment based teaching: Creating a tribal classroom* by Louis Cozolino (2014); *Complexity and the Nexus of Leadership: Leveraging Nonlinear Science to Create Ecologies of Innovation* by Jeffrey Goldstein, James Hazy, & Benyamin Lichtenstein (2010); and *The Integrative Mind: Transformative Education For a World On Fire* by Tobin Hart (2014).

While each of these texts addresses leadership from a slightly different perspective, the themes they cover overlap and interweave in such a way as to bring the reader full circle. The authors of these texts begin by defining generative leadership and complexity, then move on to discuss mirror neurons and empathy, relationships and the importance of feeling a part of something, and how experience equals learning, which in turns sculpts the brain physically. As you think of the leadership style you want to emulate as you build your own and your staff's capacity, these resources may assist and inspire you.

The first theme covered by these four texts is that of generative leadership and complexity. Generative leadership is defined as “an approach to leading within

organizations...that recognizes and taps the collective intelligence and energy within an organization to generate productive growth and effective solutions” (Klimek, Ritzenheim, & Sullivan, 2008, p 2).

As a society, we are changing and evolving, always facing uncertainty, and we never really know what we will have to deal with even just five years down the road. It has been said that we are preparing students for jobs that have not yet been created. Because of this, we need to be ready to deal with any and every new situation that can and will arise. This will only be possible if we are looking toward the future with a creative and generative eye that can anticipate what may lie ahead.

We need to draw on the strengths of all our employees, pool their creative resources, and when making changes, question our existing assumptions and presuppositions. As a leader, one of the most important things we can do is to “foster and sustain a culture that is wide open to information, welcoming to new ideas, and safe for individual creativity” (Klimek et al., 2008, p. 51).

Goldstein, Hazy, & Lichtenstein (2010) recommend that leadership take advantage of networking within the organization (p. 171), which is a far cry from the assembly line factory worker mentality on which many corporations were founded and a necessary change for survival in

today's world. With the old way of doing things, you had one job to do and you did it, no questions asked. As our world changes, how we approach business must also change. We must listen to others, bring in new voices, and network with people we might not have considered working with before. When facing critical situations, "companies that were able to question their most deeply held assumptions and find ways to tap the knowledge and creativity of all their associates were the ones that survived and thrived" according to Klimek et al., (2008 p. 13).

Mirror neurons and empathy is the second over-arching theme outlined by our authors. Cozolino (2014) defines a tribe as "a group of individuals that are tied together by shared time, familiarity, affection, and common purpose" (p 4). He goes on to describe the tribe as a super organism and its unity as self-sacrificing (p. 4). He ascribes this to mirror neurons which "allow us to get a sense of what is in the heart of another person by simulating in our bodies through what we see, hear, and feel them communicating to us across the social synapse" (p. 138). When applied to the classroom or work place, this indicates a common purpose and a sense of unity that is often felt or sensed, rather than stated. The points Cozolino (2014) made about the empathic mind were echoed in the other texts. Klimek et al. (2008) describe the empathic mind as follows:

Specialized neurons and pathways in the brain underlie the human urge to connect with others and our capacity for rapport and empathy. Operating below the level of conscious awareness, these "interpersonal radar" circuits (Goleman, 2006) process several times faster than conscious thoughts. They allow us to understand the messages contained in other people's body language, gestures, and actions without conscious thought. They are vital to our survival (pp. 38-39).

There is a neurological basis for the empathic connection we feel for one another. In *The Integrative Mind*, Hart (2014) devotes an entire chapter to the topic of empathy, and in this chapter he builds on the concept of mirror neurons. Because of our interconnectedness as humans, addressed in detail in both the Hart and Cozolino texts, we are in tune with each other intuitively, often on a level of which we are not even aware. To help us better understand the concept of mirror neurons, consider a room full of babies and toddlers. When one baby starts to cry, they all start to cry. They do not know why the one is crying, and they know they are not hurting; but they are crying none-the-less.

The third over-arching theme of these four texts is that of relationships, unity, and the importance of a shared culture. In the early 1900's, Theodore Roosevelt is credited with saying that people do not care how much you know until

they know how much you care—this is still true today. We as humans are social beings, and as such we need to feel we belong to something greater than ourselves (Cozolino, 2014). This is true for students in a classroom, teachers at a school site, or workers in a factory. One way generative leaders create a sense of belonging among their staff is by making a point of gaining staff input in the decision-making process from beginning to end. Klimek et al. (2008) talk about finding “...ways to tap the knowledge and creativity of all their associates...” if a business is not only going to survive but also thrive (p. 13) and Goldstein et al. (2010) state they need innovation “...among every team member” (p. 140).

Hart (2014) explains that in South Africa instead of “hello” the greeting is *Sawabona*, which translates to “I see you.” This greeting acknowledges our presence and gives us a sense of belonging, which each of us craves.

Cozolino (2014) points out that a sense of belonging will make a difference not only in how a person feels, but it will also make a difference in a person’s job performance (p. 51).

How would this look in the classroom or the office? A generative leader would greet each person by name, make personal connections with each student or employee, recognize the work and accomplishments of each individual or team, and give everyone a voice in the decision-making process. When this is done, each person feels valued, and whether it is in test scores, committee

work, or reaching sales goals, production increases (Cozolino, 2014; Hart, 2014.)

The final theme to be explored is experiential learning and its ability to sculpt and transform the brain. Too often, students in today’s classrooms are told to sit down and be quiet. They are expected to listen to and learn from the teacher who is the “expert” on the topic at hand. Students get bored and then labeled disruptive, lazy, or unmotivated because they act out or refuse to work.

Our authors take a different stance on this subject, saying that children need to be moving in order to be learning. Hart (2014) talks about the embodied mind, saying that we need to be actively involved in our world for true learning to take place. He goes on to emphasize that our thoughts, emotions and senses are integrated in ways we did not understand before, and that they work in a bi-directional fashion, rather than a unidirectional fashion, as we previously thought. This new information should guide our thinking as teachers and leaders. For the first six years of children’s lives, they learn through play. Why does this stop?

Cozolino (2014) tells us, “The development of the brain is based on the stimulation of the body and the senses in interaction with the world and other people” (p. 163). For adults, this interaction should continue as well. In the business world, it could be interactive decision-making or positive deviance as

describe in Goldstein et al. (2010, p. 40 and p. 121, respectively).

Klimek et al. (2008) state that, “Generative leaders recognize that every person in their school or organization is actually learning all the time... They recognize that learning is not merely an intellectual task but a process that always involves the entire brain, including its primal emotions and social functions” (p. 42).

As we continually learn and grow, especially as leaders, we want our staff to learn and grow as well, and we want the best for them and of them. We need to ensure that we are

empowering leaders to be empathetic, who are effective in building strong relationships, and who are able to enhance the contributions of every team member. As you consider your next steps in this growth process, consider a book study using one—or all—of these resources on leadership: *Generative Leadership* by Klimek, Ritzenhein, & Sullivan (2008); *Attachment-Based Teaching* by Cozolino (2014); *Complexity and the Nexus of Leadership* by Goldstein, Hazy, & Lichtenstein (2010); and *The Integrative Mind* by Hart (2014).

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