Voices of Women in the Field: Blue Chair Moments of Leadership

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Where does leadership begin and where did we ever get the idea that someone would follow us? I have been reflecting on this question a great deal lately, in light of the mountains of books and articles I have accumulated. Apparently, there are many people asking questions about leadership and many more who want to know the answers. Are leaders born or developed? How do great leaders transform failing schools and businesses into successful, thriving operations? What are the magic steps to becoming a great leader? You can read books on many different styles of leadership with promises that guarantee success if you only follow the correct model.

Although these books provide useful and even inspiring information about leadership and on becoming an effective leader, they fail to answer the fundamental question of where leadership begins. That is because we are the only person who can reflect on a series of events in our lives and determine where leadership had its first sparks, which eventually led to an ignited passion that finds us where we are in our leadership roles today.

In his book, Flashpoints (2002), Stephen Arterburn refers to these kinds of moments as “flashpoints” that can result in changing everything that follows. A small fire—a dream, a hope, a desire—smoldering quietly within the confines of your heart, begins to edge toward the flashover temperature. You begin to feel the heat, and as your passion grows, so do your inspiration, motivations, and determination. Suddenly, status quo is no longer satisfactory. You must take actions. You will not be content until the flame of your spirit kindles a wildfire in your soul, transforming your life and the lives of others. The flashpoint occurs when you are compelled to make a change—or make a difference—no matter what the cost (p. 2).

By reflecting on these types of moments in our own lives, we can identify the points along the road of leadership that have served in some way to propel or compel us to where we are today. Maybe we’re satisfied with where we are and maybe we’re not. Nevertheless, either way, we can understand more fully how we have arrived here. We can also begin to create opportunities for others to ignite their own passions and translate those into actions that will move them toward a desired destination. In The Other 90%: How to Unlock Your Vast Untapped Potential for Leadership and Life (2001), Robert Cooper explains the difference between the world we imagine and the fulfillment and living of that imagined life. “It is through taking new actions that we learn to awaken and apply our hidden capacity” (p. 7). This
brings us back to the question: What were those first beginning actions that made us believe we were leaders? I have come to call these moments of emerging leadership “blue chair” moments.

The earliest leadership role I can remember was in Mrs. James’s second grade classroom. She was called out of the classroom for some reason, and I was asked to step in and lead the class momentarily. What was this awesome role of responsibility that was thrust upon me in a moment of greatness? It was to sit on the blue chair at the front of the classroom and read aloud to the other students. It doesn’t sound like any extraordinary calling, but you must understand this particular blue chair was special because it was the teacher’s chair; it was slightly elevated in comparison to the standard chairs used at the desks and tables in the room. It was rather “throne-like” in its level of coveted occupation. The book about Johnny the squirrel was placed in my hands, and I began reading as the teacher left the room. An immediate sense of importance and authority coursed through my veins, and I knew that the sole responsibility for finishing that book and managing the classroom was placed squarely in my hands. An exaggeration? Maybe, but I know that moment was where I first caught hold of the idea that someone believed I was capable of leading, and I chose to believe it myself and take action. The action made the difference. Positive behaviors are the drivers of positive attitudes, not the other way around (Cooper, 2001). However, what that experience also did was create a hunger for more opportunities that would allow me to take action.

I believe leaders become hungry for opportunities to display leadership in numerous areas, to grow leadership skills that enhance performance and practice, and to step into new situations that extend their leadership to influence more people and create new realities within an organization and within themselves. In Good To Great: Why Some Companies Make the
Leap... And Others Don’t (2001), Jim Collins refers to this type of understanding of passion, ability, and success as the Hedgehog Concept. As his wife experienced this “flashpoint,” (Arterburn, 2002) she believed she could win an Iron man competition. But she understood that she could, that it was in the realm of possibility, and that she was not living in a delusion. That distinction makes all the difference. It is a distinction that those who want to go from good to great must grasp, and one that those who fail to become great so often never do (Collins, 2001, p. 117).

Recently, I was watching the movie, The Lord of the Rings (Jackson, 2003). There is a scene where the main character, Frodo, approaches a foreboding looking cave, and he is visibly afraid to enter. The evil character with him, Gollum, says, “It’s the only way! Go in or go back.” He stares at the cave and says, “I cannot go back.” He enters the cave to find a completely new set of problems and barriers, but he knows if he doesn’t go in, he will never arrive at his destination. I think this analogy parallels our experiences in leadership as we move from one challenge to the next. By taking action as each leadership opportunity arises, we are further ahead in the journey, and it is impossible to go backwards. “It simply means that, despite their realistic assessment of present challenges, they nonetheless believe that they have what it takes to overcome these challenges and forge ahead” (Buckingham, 2005, p. 66).

When I started teaching, I aspired to be a principal, but now that I am in that role, it is difficult to envision ever returning to the classroom. I am sure that many superintendents would say the same thing about previous principalships. It seems that as our sphere of leadership grows, it is difficult to consider returning to a previous state. However, had we never stepped into the unknown, our perception of our own ability to lead would have never grown to the place where we believe we are capable of more. For me, it started with the blue chair and I had many more blue chair moments, but the important thing is I think I knew they were opportunities, and I wanted more. “People must behave their way into new ideas and skills, not just think their way into them” (Fullan, 1993, p. 15).

So from where you are sitting now, do you want more? Do you aspire to more than you are now in some area of leadership? Does the thought of more “flashpoint” moments excite you? “At your flashpoint moment, when the illuminating idea first enters your brain, open your mind and embrace the opportunity. Start by clarifying the vision: Picture yourself doing or being what you would like to do or be. Visualize what you want to accomplish” (Arterburn, 2002, p. 129). Just as importantly, are we creating blue chair moments for students, for teachers, and for our colleagues?

As you continue down this journey of leadership, look for opportunities, both great and small, to identify and to act on those things that drive you forward. Expand, grow, and invite others to do the same. “With a journey, there’s no predetermined destination or time frame and your everyday life is part of the trip. The focus is more on what you do along the way” (Brooks, Stark, & Caverhill, 2004, p. 18).
References


