

On Life and Meaning

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Episode 35 – Dave Newell – Transition to Impact

Foundations of Leadership

And now a personal word,

Dave Newell is shaping the future one student at a time. He is sharing his thoughts about leadership in close session with forty-eight students who are part of the Chidsey Center for Leadership Development program at Davidson College. He shares ideas about effecting change and asks questions for insight to emerge. His students attend one of the most highly competitive liberal arts colleges in the nation and expect to change the world.

Dave and I are in the same line of work. I teach leadership courses at Johnson & Wales University. The students I teach represent a much broader range of student preparedness and ambition. Some of my students would excel at Davidson. Other students of mine lack basic skills of reading and writing and arithmetic. All of my students want to make more of their lives.

Both Dave and I are privileged to prepare young women and men for the world we know and for scenarios we cannot predict. One way we go about it is to confront how much we don't know. We pose questions that do not have certain answers: Who am I capable of being? What does the world need? What matters most today and tomorrow? We work to develop the understanding and skills that will help students live with greater intention and lead more effectively.

What is leadership? As Dave noted in our discussion, there are so many definitions. Every leadership textbook has one. They range from leadership is calling people to shared purpose to effect real change to leadership is creating settings that empower people to achieve a desired future state. Leadership definitions are highly dependent on who is leading and the context in which leadership is happening. The definition that I like is a simple one: leadership is reminding people what we're trying to accomplish. Leadership is an invitational act. An act of imagination. An act of emulation. It begins with describing the world as it is. Giving voice to what it could be. And calling people into the work of possibility.

The textbook I use in the classroom is entitled *Practicing Leadership: Principles and Applications* by Dave and Art Shriberg. It's an uncomplicated book that offers this thesis: leadership in the twenty-first century rests on two pillars: ethics and inclusion.

Ethical leaders work to create positive outcomes informed by moral values, such as honesty, integrity, and fairness. Inclusive leaders engage people who are different across dimensions in a global society, empowering collaborators from diverse cultures to solve problems and to thrive.

Here are some of the subjects we study in leadership class: intelligence and personality models, understanding how we are intelligent and how we affect others in different ways; motivations theories, understanding what drives us to act and what gives us resilience to continue; communication concepts, how we might craft, deliver, and decode messages that are meaningful and effective; management versus leadership, how managing process differs from leading people; power and influence, how to get it, use it, and keep from losing it; and risk and reward, what we might lose and what we might gain.

Like any discipline, the trick is to bring ideas to life. That's the work that comes next as students pursue leadership opportunities. There are the classic routes: starting organizations, signing up for internships, working at a job off-campus. But there is another way to practice leadership: the intention students can bring to every moment. There are two questions everyone can ask: What does this moment need? How can I serve? As Dave noted, we are leading all the time, either poorly or well.

One question I asked Dave was whether leadership education is failing. A case can be made that leadership across all domains of society is less than what it could be: so many people with responsibility and in positions of authority in politics, government, business, and culture are selfish and divisive, morally compromised, imposing ill-considered approaches to complex problems bringing more and more chaos into the world. Bad leadership is all around us. But so is good leadership. All we have to do is look to the left and to the right and see citizens of every age and type who are doing their jobs well, who care about their fellow person and community, who are devoting their time and talent in simple and profound ways to leave their time and place better than they found it.

The challenge for anyone teaching leadership is to model what is being taught. That's the part that can keep us up at night. It's the part of the job that exposes our imperfections. I bear the responsibility of leading my class, sharing what I know, developing skills, being creative, taking chances, listening intently, honoring the person in front of me. Some days are better than others.

Here is what I sense about Dave Newell: he has fully embraced the role of making a positive difference in the lives of his students. He is interested in the human condition and the patterns we create. He is modeling a life of leadership and service.