



Seminar Leadership¹

Ted Ward

The style of leadership in the seminar is crucial. The seminar, as a face-to-face learning experience, has a powerful effect on the way participants will use the ideas and materials that they are gaining. The leader's procedures, treatment of people, and general approach to teaching—whether emphasizing his/her superior knowledge and adequate answers or emphasizing his/her own quest for better understanding—tend to produce the same style in the participants.

Especially in seminars that are expected to contribute to the education of leaders, the style used by the seminar leader will be reflected in the styles of leadership used by the participants in their own roles as leaders. Thus even more important than the “content” and cognitive learnings being discussed is the leadership style being demonstrated.

If the emphasis is on the importance of information, the participants will be inclined to emphasize the importance of their own knowledge as they lead others. If the emphasis is on relationships among people and upon living out the precepts of relationship that are basic in the community, then the participants are more apt to reflect their concern for relationships as they develop their own roles as leaders.

The tendency to copy patterns or models of leadership results from several forces: first, the most obvious, learners are affected subconsciously by the examples that they see and experience; what is *done* by a leader is more powerful than what he/she says. Second, learners quite often seek to apply what they learn without thoroughly digesting it. The need to take shortcuts to become “competent” in a hurry causes people to accept what they see status-oriented leaders do without sufficient critical examination. Beginners often choose to copy what “authorities” do even when it violates what the authorities are saying!

Third, beyond the subconscious effect and the conscious but shallowly examined choices, is simple deprivation. Until a person has been in an effective learning environment, he/she has little concept of what it would be like. The learners are limited by what they have seen and experienced. Since authoritarian methods of imparting information are so much more common in schooling, the learners' experiences may have given them few if any tastes of real joy of learning and applying learning as a way of life.

At the close of a leadership seminar recently, the participants were asked to reflect on the activities (behaviors) of the facilitator (leader) and the activities of the participants that had contributed to the learning effectiveness of the experience. Not all participants listed the same factors, but there was a high degree of agreement, particularly about those actions of the facilitator that contrasted with the ordinary didactic professorial behavior. They also identified participant behaviors that were assertive and independent, contrasting with the accustomed subservience expected of learners in subjection to an authority figure.

¹ Ted Ward. Seminar Leadership. Post-Seminar Reflection, Michigan State University, 1974