

Democracy Is Little “I” Leadership For Every Day At Any Time

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Editor’s Note: The reader is directed to the Dialogues of Leadership Education section of *Scholar–Practitioner Quarterly*, Volume 4, Issue 4, wherein the contributing authors examined the question of priorities of leadership education for a democratic society. Ira Bogotch, in this article, extends that earlier dialogue, and draws into specific relief the language of “leadership” as a central issue to the pedagogical considerations necessary in preparing educational leaders.

There are certain words that educational leadership students see primarily as “university” or “professor” talk. Unfortunately, these words now include “democracy,” “diversity,” and “social justice.” I want to be clear from the beginning; I am not saying that school teachers/administrators are against democracy, diversity, or social justice, but rather that they do not see the direct relevance of these words to their daily practices. In fact, the language educators hear primarily from their superordinates—school board members, superintendents, district administrators, etc., communicate the opposite.

That is, today’s language of school leadership typically begins with standards and ends with accountability. If so, then how might a concerned educational leadership professor introduce democracy, diversity, or social justice into her/his classroom lessons without it sounding like university or professor-talk? What would such lessons look like? That is the topic here.

First, let me tell you what democracy in a lesson can’t look like: it can’t look like a vocabulary lesson requiring aspiring leaders to memorize and use it in a sentence, paragraph, or vision statement. Vocabulary and meanings are very important to education, but school leadership is a practical field where our

behaviors often precede our words. If true, then we need to instill in school leaders certain dispositions and habits that translate into authentic leaderly actions, which should connect ethically and pragmatically to democracy. Every era’s school leaders learn to master a vocabulary; the deeper challenge is to instill democratic practices within schools, if not also to social justice activities outside schools. That is the educational leadership professors’ primary challenge.

In my leadership theory and assessment class, a foundational course in our school leadership program, I introduce democracy through little “l” activities¹. The goal is to bring the meanings of democracy and social justice to the world of experiences and actions. To do so often requires a deliberate change in thoughts and actions, new behaviors that at first are outside of our routines or comfort level. We all become comfortable with the known; comfort is satisfying. How can we ethically ask aspiring leaders to venture into the uncomfortable, the unknown? How do we identify which routines, habits, levels of satisfaction to disrupt? As a professor, I can’t and won’t make that decision for a student, but I will challenge students to decide these questions for themselves.

The typical Big “L” leadership class begins with a discussion of traits and moves progressively to theories related to skills, styles, situations, contingencies, social and political exchanges, ethics, teams, distributions, cross-cultures, transformative actions, and democracy (with a big “D”). In contrast, little “l” leadership begins and stays inside everyday activities before, during, and after work. The latter, too, requires thought—specifically reflections on these everyday activities, on what you did and on the results. Here is one dichotomous view contrasting Big L and little l (Table 1).

Table 1. Big L and little “l”

<i>Big L Leadership</i>	<i>Little “l” leadership activities</i>
Trait Theory—Innate Leadership	Leader–Follower Relationships
Leadership Styles—Democratic to Authoritarian	Building Capacity/Empowerment
Situational and Contingency Theories	Sharing Knowledge/Information for Decision-Making
Transactional to Transformational Theories	Ordinary Resurrections
Frame Theory	Making Connection Across Activities
Distributive /Collaborative Leadership Theories	Redistributing Resources
Instructional Leadership	Creating Equitable Learning Opportunities
Fit: Intelligence, Skills, and Attraction Theories	Serving Others

Big L is inspirational and treats the most important issues facing global societies today. But after years of teaching leadership while relying on Big L words, I’ve come to the conclusion that what is needed in order to create democratic practices within schools are not so many Big Ideas, but rather more humane interactions and our willingness to discuss the pros and cons of our actions. I’ve listed in Table 2 my own reasons for minimizing Big L.

I am not looking to convince anyone to abandon Big L classroom lessons. We all know the limitations of existing leadership theories. We all know that the majority of leaders outside education have never set foot inside a leadership classroom. But, yet, with all this disconfirming evidence, we persist in teaching leadership from abstractions and words. Big idea words are necessary, but we are in need of real actions that we can successfully teach whether in a university classroom or as on-going professional development.

The case for little “I” is compelling and practical. For those looking for theoretical underpinnings, I rely on the 19th Century French linguistics teacher, Francois Gouin (1889) whose “series” method revolutionized language instruction. By sequencing experiences and repeating the daily patterns, he connected words to actions as a habit. In addition, there is the foremost thinker in the U.S. on democracy, John Dewey. His logic of experiences extended our perceptions beyond the words we speak and the actions we take (see Bogotch & Taylor, 1993).

Little “I” operates on the level of actions. The first task is to identify what we can control (i.e., our own private routines). We have to reassess why we do the things we do. When we do the same things over and over again, they become habits that we continue to do mindlessly. The first leadership activity is to bring *mindfulness* to our daily routines. We tend to follow a daily routine from the time we awake to the time we arrive at work. Should these routines change? Maybe. Do we use these activities wisely, productively? Think about the drive/commute to work? Think about your entrance into the building, whom you greet, what

Table 2. Why Not Big L Leadership Theories

8 REASONS WHY NOT RELY SOLELY ON BIG L LEADERSHIP THEORIES

1. The Scholastic Fallacy—Educators Do Not Apply Theories To Practice
 2. They Are Unwieldy and Impractical
 3. They Are Complicated, Imposing, and Privileged
 4. They Come With No Guarantees
 5. They Are Not Predictable
 6. They Are Not For Everyone or Every Situation
 7. They Are Intractable
 8. Big L Sounds Good, Reads Well, and Substitutes WORDS IN PLACE OF ACTIONS
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you say, where you walk. Might there be a better, more leaderly routine, one that brings you to new people and places? What if we took the time to explore and engage others (strangeness and strangers)? How difficult would it be to expand our perceptions and still stay on task? Might our interacting with different people change the way we see and do our work? Have we ignored certain people, fawned over others? Are there identifiable patterns in the way we treat superordinates differently from the way treat peers, subordinates? It is time to look for patterns in the activities below (Table 3).

Little “I” leadership operates on the level of actions (routines, decisions, norms) and relationships. The latter is what makes leadership a social activity. Without trying, some relationships feel easy and natural; others strained and forced. Some people are optimistic, friendly, and polite; others border on cynicism, impersonal, and can seem to be rude. We tend to want to be around the former who become our Best Preferred Co-Workers (BPCW); the latter become our Least Preferred Co-Workers (LPCW), people we seek to avoid if given a choice. But as I have stated above, leaders don’t have that choice: They must be everyone’s leader.

While Table 2 listed the limitations of Big L leadership theories, Table 4 depicts the qualities of little “I” which make it very appealing as both theory and practice.

In the next to last table (Table 5), I want to connect little “I” with Big “L” so that you can see explicitly the transitions I am calling for. In other words, the time you spend teaching little “I” sets the table for teaching more abstract concepts with deeper meanings. Big L remains heuristic, intellectually stimulating, and inspiring. For these reasons, the table has one column, not two.

If Table 5 is viewed as a course outline, the syllabus, then what is left for me to add are the specific activities to be taught as leadership preparation/professional development. Table 6 is a fairly comprehensive list of leadership activities that you can find in any practical textbook or case book on leadership.

Table 3. Re-Connecting to the Everyday

Connecting to the Everyday

The Day Before

The “To-Do” List

The Drive To and From Work

Parking and Entering the School Building

Meeting and Greeting Colleagues

Mucking Around: Always Discovering New People and Places

Working on Relationships: LPCW and BFCW

Table 4. Why little “I”

7 Reasons Why little “I” activities work

1. Manageable
2. Doable
3. Practical
4. Adaptable/Flexible
5. Meaningful
6. Operates on the Level of Active: The DOING of Leadership
7. You Can Begin With Anyone, Anywhere, and at Any Time

Concluding Remarks

As professors of educational leadership, we’ve cut our teeth on Big L leadership theories. But what have we learned from experiences as professors and researchers? How can the theories taught to us in graduate school decades ago be the cutting edge theories needed today? Dewey (1916/1966) argued against *a priori* theories and against democracy as an institution. What he discovered was the human ability to learn from experiences, the power to modify actions, the power to develop dispositions, all leading to the acquisition of new habits (p. 44). University classrooms as well as schools are often barriers to learning the deeper sense of democracy—that is, a deliberate effort to extend experiences beyond the individual, beyond local customs and traditions, and beyond one’s race and class (p. 87)—toward a continuous disposition of learning for leading and leading for learning. The future of democracy and leadership has to be found in new ideas and practices as yet undiscovered, but grounded in experiences. I would be interested in hearing from readers who adapt little “I” into their leadership theory classes.

Table 5. Meshing little “I” with Big L

Meshing little “I” with Big L

- The Day Before/PLANNING AND ORGANIZING
- The “To-Do” List/AGENDA AND VISION
- The Drive To and From Work/REFLECTING ON ACTIONS
- Parking and Entering the School Building/REFRAMING
- Meeting and Greeting Colleagues/STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS
- Mucking Around: Always Discovering New People and Places/BUILDING LEADERSHIP CAPACITY
- Working on Relationships: LPCW and BFCW/PEOPLE AND TASKS

Table 6. Little “I” Leadership Activities for Classroom and Workplace Practice

Observe	Take Calculated/Strategic Risks
Listen Actively	Access Consequences
Be Open-Minded	Accept Responsibility
Ask Questions	Be Honest and Admit Mistakes
Begin By Trusting Others	Learn From Mistakes
Don't Speak or Act Condescendingly	Develop a Thicker Skin
Deliberately Reach Out to Others Who Are Different, Ignored, Marginalized, Stigmatized, Non-Fits, and Misfits	Grow From Your Wounds
Be Personal and Upbeat	Act and Leave the Stage with NO REGRETS

Notes

1. The distinction between little “I” and Big L is not intended to demean everyday people doing everyday activities. Just the opposite: if leadership, like democracy, is about shared experiences, then we need to live it as ordinary men and women and not think of either leadership or democracy as extra-ordinary.

References

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About the Author

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