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CHAPTER FOUR

LEARNING TO SUPPORT THE GROWTH OF OTHERS

A central task of leadership is learning to support the growth of others. But growth in and of itself is not always desirable. In a finite world of limited space and resources, supporting everyone's right to grow—if this is defined by having bigger houses, bigger SUVs, more territory, and more possessions—is untenable. Sooner or later something has to give, and when it does it is usually the least powerful members of a community who end up doing the giving. So for us growth, like critical reflection, is always normative, grounded in an ideal of what development entails.

From our point of view, leadership itself is a normative practice focused on the project of increasing people's capacity to be active participants in the life of their communities, movements, and organizations. The purpose of leadership is to sustain the desire of people to go on contributing, as both leaders and followers, to everyone's overall benefit. This may include openly expressing dissent from action taken by some in the organization. Leadership that discourages active involvement in the organization, that leads to withdrawal or silence, would, according to this view, have to be counted as misleadership or antileadership. There may also be times when supporting the growth of the most marginalized means restricting, even opposing, the growth of the most powerful. In the White Supremacist world of post-war South African society, the growth of the most powerful needed to be restricted by the African National Congress (ANC) for true growth (as we define it) to occur. Marcuse (1965), among many others, argued that had the growth of the German Nazi Party been curtailed in the 1930s the world would have avoided the slaughter of millions.

The implications of our argument for the desirability of supporting growth are that people need to feel an integral part of the groups to which they belong, and groups need their members to participate as actively as possible. An organization that invites and supports people to bring all their talents, experiences, and creativity to bear on the challenges faced by the organization is going to be a better-run, healthier place, more likely to be able to serve people well. When people are actively contributing to the welfare of the organization and know their involvement is making a difference, they feel better about themselves and readier to take risks in expanding their horizons. In a word, if such conditions prevail, people are more likely to grow.

Leadership Practices That Support Growth

It has been our experience, supported also by writers such as Greenleaf (1977) and Collins (2005), that when leaders focus on developing their co-workers' abilities the organizations or communities to which they are responsible get more done and are better able to sustain themselves. If their primary mission is supporting the growth of their co-workers, they will put their energy into activities and practices likely to achieve this end. We have learned from organizational theorists such as Margaret Wheatley (2002), from community activists like Myles Horton (Horton and Freire, 1990), and from our own experience that some practices that are particularly helpful in this regard are listening, staying curious about others, asking constructive questions, learning the stories of co-workers, and championing follower goals. Leaders who publicly model their own commitment to, and engagement in, these activities can have a powerful effect on their communities of practice.

Listening

Close, active, attentive listening is the foundation for supporting others' growth and development. Only if we do this can we know what developmental directions will be of greatest benefit

to people. When leaders take the time to listen authentically to their co-workers, they are showing that the experiences of followers matter and that time devoted to listening to what others have to say is time well spent. Leaders who listen come to know their organization or community better; they are able to take a movement's pulse and do things that are responsive to what they hear and learn. Community development (Ledwith, 2006), community action (Smock, 2003), participatory research (Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, and Jackson, 1993), action research (Greenwood and Levin, 2006), and critical teaching (Shor, 1987) are all forms of practice premised on the idea that before action must come prolonged and careful listening. Leaders who listen are better placed to conduct a phenomenography (Marton, 1988) of participants' experiences, to be able to traverse the internal mental and emotional topography of those they serve.

Staying Curious About Others

In a recent book about conversation as the glue that holds communities together, Wheatley (2002) urges us to stay curious about each other. Curiosity for her is keeping the focus on other people's experiences and interests, showing that we are eager to learn from them and to find out who they are and what they think. This holds true for leaders who are striving to support people's growth. Such leaders are genuinely curious about others. When they are in conversation with co-workers, they go beyond the idle chit-chat that passes for so much of the communication between people in organizations. Enthusiastically they seek out more information, are excited to get below the superficial level of exchanging pleasantries with their co-workers, and find ways to probe more deeply without being inappropriate or intrusive. Questioning one's own motivations and conduct of projects out loud is a powerful way leaders can model this kind of curiosity.

Asking Constructive Questions

One of the chief strategies that leaders use to deepen their relationships with others is through questioning. For Horton, asking a good question was worth more than a hundred lectures

by experts. Constructive questioning tries to balance questions that enlighten with questions that challenge. Such questioning demonstrates respect for colleagues, co-workers, and members by showing them the leader believes she has much to learn from them. Questions that ask about the origins of people's beliefs, about their ideas to make things better, about the concerns that support their passions, and about how they can be supported in doing their best work are questions that signify the leader's respect for what she can learn. Leaders trying to foster everyone's growth ask questions to find out more about a co-worker's special strengths and areas of knowledge that will allow him to come forward to help the organization as a whole. They also are adept at asking difficult questions of themselves in public forums and struggling to find the answers.

LEARNING THE STORIES OF CO-WORKERS

Telling stories has become a credible methodology in the fields of narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004) and critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Both these approaches emphasize storytelling and counterstorytelling. Owing to a particularly rich experience in a graduate seminar that was held recently, we have arrived at a new understanding of the role stories play in a true community of learners. Over a four-week period during the summer in which there were relatively few distractions, a group of eleven students working on their dissertations met regularly with two instructors to review their progress on these projects and to compare notes on what they were finding. The more these students met and the more they told their stories about the sense they were making of their topics, the deeper and more substantive their exchanges became. By the end of the four weeks, every member of the group was able to recount in considerable detail the learning trajectory that each dissertator had undergone to produce a dissertation proposal. From this experience we derived a simple principle: the foundation of a learning community is every participant understanding at some deep level the learning/inquiry projects being carried out by all other members of the community. From this, we also concluded that it is important for leaders to develop ways to become aware of the learning paths

of the people with whom they are collaborating. Without that knowledge, it is very difficult to support their growth as workers and as persons.

Championing Co-Worker Goals

One key aspect of leadership is discovering people's passions. If leaders are aware of the passions of their colleagues, they can divert resources and revise goals to feed those passions and spur the intrinsic desire to go on learning. In his wonderful book *From Outrageous to Inspired: How to Build a Community of Leaders in Our Schools*, David Hagstrom (2004) says that once you know people's passions, you have to "pour it on" to maximize the influence of those passions and make the most of what they can contribute to the common good. Of course, we acknowledge that not all passions are equally deserving of support. We would not want to feed the passion some members felt for establishing their racial superiority. But behind most people's desire to live in humane, decent communities are hidden commitments that contribute to furthering this objective. Discovering and then supporting these commitments is one of the distinctive hallmarks of learning as a way of leading.

The Benefits of Supporting the Growth of Others

Leaders who believe in promoting the growth of others do so not only because it is a good in itself but also because it leads to community renewal. When people are growing, when they continue to learn and see that their efforts are making a difference for others, the overall effect is positive for the entire community. One of our key leadership assumptions is that leaders should strive to remove the barriers and clear the pathways for each person to make the most of her or his talents. It has been our experience that most people are eager to contribute, excited to participate, and keen to try out new ideas. It has also been our experience that, with relatively few exceptions, workplaces tend to inhibit innovation and discourage creativity. We therefore affirm that a major

leadership task is to work to remove the obstructions that limit experimentation, punish risk taking, and curtail exercising the imagination. If such obstructions are removed, people are more satisfied and fulfilled, more motivated to consider a wide range of alternatives, and better equipped to envision new possibilities.

Though there is no doubt that growing individuals lead to a growing community, there is another benefit that emerges when leaders commit themselves to supporting the growth of others. It has something to do with achieving the unexpected, of realizing unseen potential, of reaching an unanticipated height. Growth that continues without limit leads us into unexplored territory and inclines us to accept new challenges. Once the conditions for promoting growth are in place, we are able to face problems and practice finding solutions that were previously unavailable to us. There is no guarantee that we will work through these challenges effectively, but as in almost anything else such practice does tend to breed success. Supporting the growth of others therefore creates the conditions for people to exceed their potential, to try things out and test solutions that can take them to a whole new level of possibility. There is also a selfish pleasure in seeing others learn to exercise agency and become leaders. One of the least acknowledged benefits of leadership is that it allows us to see, and take justifiable pride in, the development in confidence and ability of those we have encouraged.

Developing the capacity to support the growth of others is no easy task, though it helps to have seen it modeled by someone you regard as a mentor. Leaders who seem more interested in your welfare than their own, more intent on drawing you out than impressing you with their accomplishments ... this is the sort of leader we mean. Not surprisingly, one of the first steps in becoming this kind of nurturing, developmental leader is acknowledging that fostering the growth of others comes first. Many leaders simply do not understand the importance of such an acknowledgment. Words are not in themselves sufficient to bring about positive, life-affirming change, but their power should never be underestimated. Until leaders use the language of growth with respect to their followers, the process cannot begin.

But of course, words *are* only the beginning. The real test is the willingness of the leader to use the practice of supporting

others as a chief criterion for judging her or his actions. What do co-workers say about the leader in this regard? What do others say in corresponding positions of leadership? When pressed, what does the leader herself say about her ongoing commitment to this practice? How much time is being taken to listen to co-workers, understand their perspectives, and take action on their behalf? What is being done to remove the barriers that prevent co-workers from doing their best work and from performing creatively? How much does the leader really know about co-worker passions? How familiar are leaders with the learning journeys their followers have embarked on? Asking such questions of oneself and assessing one's effectiveness by the responses are the keys to learning leadership.

Where We Have Seen Supporting the Growth of Others Practiced

In *A Tradition That Has No Name*, Belenky, Bond, and Weinstock (1997) note that leaders who support other people's growth do this most successfully through dialogue—by listening, asking constructive questions, responding appropriately and appreciatively, and finding common ground among community members. Ella Baker, the civil rights activist and original director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, is often referred to as a prototypical developmental leader who rarely voiced her own views but who went to great lengths to get others engaged and involved. She did this by scouring the group for unheard contributions and, whenever possible, enthusiastically bringing these contributions to the attention of others. She did this too by asking probing questions and by making provocative statements that she knew would stimulate conversation. Her focus was on discovering areas of agreement and accentuating commonality of purpose. In helping individuals grow, she wanted to get the group as a whole to exercise leadership.

Septima Clark, another civil rights activist who taught school for many years and eventually became the Highlander Folk School's director of workshops, maintained a similar commitment to supporting the growth of others through dialogue. Her workshops were planned around the idea that instructors are

present to serve participants' needs, and that everything must be done to develop participant knowledge and experience on their own terms. This meant finding out about the participants in depth, exploring the nature of their community challenges, constructing together the content that would be most helpful in addressing their problems, and devoting the last section of the workshop to how participants would use the knowledge they had acquired once they returned to their communities. Clark also believed that workshops must lead to a long-term relationship between the center and participants, and she pledged that she and other Highlander staff would be available with technical advice and other resources to support attainment of their goals.

How We and Others Have Lived This Supporting the Growth of Others

As teachers and as members of communities, we have tried to keep the focus on others, to give people control over their own learning. We have done so by keeping our own participation to a minimum, by encouraging people to interact with each other, by using questions to deepen these interactions, and by trying to create a space for participants to tell their stories. Whenever we teach or meet with people in a variety of other settings, we take time for people to talk about themselves, share pivotal events, and reveal some activity or practice about which they are passionate. We also introduce opportunities for participants to engage in some kind of inquiry project and share the progress being made. As we have indicated, supporting the growth of others requires us to know something about them, to have a feel for their stories and how they unfold over time. We also think it important that all members of a community become familiar with everyone else's story and play an active role in supporting each person's learning journey. We try to model asking good questions that help people think more deeply about their stories, and we bring attention to those issues and experiences that the group in some way holds in common. When we reveal something about ourselves or turn the light on our experiences, we do so, without exception, to provoke further

conversation, foster the involvement of reluctant participants, and in general offer incentives for deepening learning.

People Steve P has worked with sometimes comment that they still do not know where he himself stands on some of the controversial issues being discussed. Although he often has strong opinions about many of these issues and occasionally expresses them, he tries to delay the moment he volunteers his perspective. He does this for two primary reasons. First, introducing his own views can bias the rest of the participants and, despite his best efforts, lead some of them to think that they should adopt his point of view. Second, and perhaps more important, all of his efforts are focused on creating conditions for students' growth. He has found that voicing his views is usually an act of ego, an irresistible desire to highlight his position that does little to advance the conversation or support learning. If the goal truly is to develop students' capacities to learn, converse, think critically, and take informed action, then he feels where he stands on a particular issue is irrelevant.

Stephen B differs in emphasis on this matter. He admits that he may be more egotistical (Steve P has often commented how in Stephen B's world it is always about himself), but for him holding back his opinion too long makes it appear as if he is unwilling to model what he is asking others to do. Stephen B's position is that one usually *should* give one's view early on but should then model a vigorous critique of it and invite others to participate in that critique. Otherwise people are left wondering what the leader is thinking and start to second-guess what they think they should say to gain his approval. Stephen B also believes, like Herbert Marcuse, that sometimes he needs to throw his weight—any credibility or authority he has—behind the expression of an unpopular view. This has particularly been the case with his efforts to help White members of groups become aware of their own racial microaggressions (Solorzano, 1998)—that is, the numerous small behaviors and actions (who one makes eye contact with, who one encourages to speak, how one reacts to comments of people of different racial identities, and so on) that accumulate to marginalize people of color. Like Marcuse, he is concerned that the idea of democratic discussion sometimes mistakenly means

leaders are reluctant to point out the ideologically skewed nature of particular contributions, let alone say someone is wrong.

WHAT BLOCKS OR PREVENTS THE PRACTICE OF SUPPORTING THE GROWTH OF OTHERS?

There is so much cultural baggage associated with the concept of leadership that it is easy to fall prey to the idea that leaders command and followers comply. Leaders employ the command-and-control model in part because it is the only model they have ever experienced and also because it yields financial reward, recognition, and power over others. Everyday we hear about another CEO or another political operative who has negotiated some outrageous pay package involving millions of dollars in salary and perquisites. Being a highly visible and overtly powerful administrator pays. But it is not necessarily leadership.

The flip side of the paradigm entails the expectations of followers and co-workers. Because of cultural indoctrination, self-effacing and facilitating leaders who want to support other people's growth are frequently viewed as weak, waffling administrators who cannot make up their mind. In political campaigns a way to defeat opposing candidates is to portray them as flip-flopping on the issues, as if changing one's mind is a sign of fragility. Jimmy Carter and John Kerry are two presidential candidates who suffered from this accusation. Overcoming this prejudice is one of the greatest challenges learning leaders face. Leadership designed to let others lead is neither trusted nor understood, at least at first. In the face of this resistance, a few simple virtues are needed. Patience stands out, along with the willingness to listen actively and keep a meaningful conversation going.

WHAT ARE THE PERILS AND PITFALLS OF PRACTICING SUPPORTING THE GROWTH OF OTHERS?

As has been suggested, one of the problems associated with the practice of supporting the growth of others is appearing to be weak and indecisive. When you are serious about encouraging people

to claim control over the decisions that affect their lives, there are always going to be some who see this as surrendering your responsibility to make the decisions for them. There are others who are going to see such leaders as aimless and directionless. Somehow leaders intent on supporting the growth of others must communicate to people how they are taking action consistently to achieve this. A combination of rhetoric and behavior is needed from the outset.

Two other pitfalls come to mind in following through on this practice of supporting others. One is the appearance of favoring some people over others. The other is neglecting oneself. Even the most well-meaning leader is going to like, admire, and be drawn to some people more than others. The impulse to reward those one admires is understandable, and even in some cases desirable. But we must always remember that those who most need your support are likely to be those you are most likely to neglect. Work hard to avoid this trap. Pay special attention to those who seem to be most challenged, and go out of your way to recognize them for their efforts. Engage them in conversation, get to know them, familiarize yourself with their stories. The goodwill you accumulate and the possibilities you will learn about more than make up for the extra time you take in doing this.

Finally, don't forget yourself. It is easy to do so when you are trying to be a developmental leader. One of the subtlest ways hegemony works is to encourage people to think of their work as vocation. The concept of leadership as vocation—of answering a calling and being in service to members, co-workers, and colleagues—opens leaders to the possibility of exploitation and manipulation. Vocation becomes hegemonic when it is used to justify leaders taking on responsibilities and duties that far exceed their energy or capacities and that destroy their health and personal relationships. In effect their self-destruction serves to keep a system going that is being increasingly starved of resources. If leaders will kill themselves taking on more and more work in response to budgets being cut, and if they learn to take pride in this apparently selfless devotion to community or to organization members, then the system is strengthened. Money can be channeled into corporate tax breaks and war expenditure as leaders gladly give more and more for less and less.

Vocation becomes especially hegemonic when filtered through patriarchy, as is evident in predominantly female professions such as teaching. Again and again, in our time as university teachers we have seen female faculty internalizing the ethic of vocation, and being held to a higher standard regarding its realization than is the case with their male counterparts. Women professors in departments often become cast as the nurturers, known by students for their excellent teaching and advisement. Translated into academic reality, this means that women professors are willing to spend time working with students rather than locking themselves away in their office to write articles and books in an effort to gain tenure. Because dominant ideology presumes men to be less relational, less prone to an ethic of care and compassion (in short, less moved by a sense of vocational calling), they receive less opprobrium for being unavailable to students.

So part of leadership is learning to take care of yourself—learning when to say no, when to draw boundaries, when to insist on decent treatment and adequate resources, and when to take time for your own renewal. Find time to read, exercise, reflect, consider, and reconsider your priorities as a leader. As a leader, you should look for help from everyone in enhancing the workings of the organization or community. But do not expect recognition and do not go looking for it. If you are truly committed to developing the growth of others, it may be a long time before you get the extrinsic recognition you deserve. You have to console yourself with the knowledge that what you are doing is truly what is best for others. This knowledge has to be its own reward.

SEPTIMA CLARK: LEARNING TO SUPPORT THE GROWTH OF OTHERS

As the leader emblematic of learning to support the growth of others, we choose Septima Clark, the lead organizer of the Citizenship schools, created to secure voting rights for disenfranchised African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement. We are not alone in this choice. Charles Payne (1995), in his great book about the Mississippi organizing tradition *I've Got the Light of Freedom*,

puts special emphasis on Clark's contribution to the Civil Rights Movement. Payne says that Clark (as well as Ella Baker and Myles Horton) led with great effectiveness by virtue of her collaborative, developmental style of leadership, which "espoused a non-bureaucratic style of work, focusing on local problems, sensitive to the social structure of local communities, appreciative of the culture of those communities" (p. 68). Hers was a relational, collaborative style of leadership that sought to instill "efficacy in those most affected by a problem" by helping them see how their own experience, knowledge, and skill were the most important resources in their struggle for equality.

In Clark's view, new knowledge and deepened understanding were constructed most effectively and lastingly in collaborative groups. She labored tirelessly to ensure that groups were as inclusive and participatory as possible. As Payne (1995) notes, Clark's leadership was "guided by the belief that the oppressed themselves, collectively, already have much of the knowledge needed to produce change" (p. 70). Her view was that "creative leadership is present in any community and only awaits discovery and development" (p. 75). Payne argues that Clark's legacy as a developmental leader was her demonstration of the idea that "ordinary people who learn to believe in themselves are capable of extraordinary acts, or better, acts that seem extraordinary to us precisely because we have such an impoverished sense of the capabilities of ordinary people" (p. 5).

Clark, like Baker and Horton, was a radical democrat by virtue of her insistence on the right of "people to have a voice in the decisions affecting their lives" (Payne, 1995, p. 101), her confidence in the capacity of ordinary men and women to develop a strong and meaningful voice, and her rejection of hierarchically structured organizations in which attention-starved leaders too often held sway. She and her colleagues believed that democracy could not flourish until people have the space to exercise their talents, and that a priority of leadership committed to supporting growth entailed providing such opportunities. Furthermore, like Baker and Horton, Clark held strong beliefs and took strong stands, but remained surprisingly "open to learning from new experiences" (p. 101) and from the wisdom of those both older and younger than she. She was a leader who led effectively because of her

complete commitment to her own learning and to creating those conditions necessary to support everyone's continuous growth.

HIGHLANDER AND THE CITIZENSHIP SCHOOLS

Septima Clark joined Highlander in 1956 after being fired from her South Carolina teaching post for refusing to remain quiet about her active membership of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Upon hearing this, Myles Horton immediately appointed her the director of workshops, an appointment that soon led to creation of the Citizenship Education Project and one of the Civil Rights Movement's most memorable achievements.

The idea for the Citizen Education Project first emerged when Clark invited Esau Jenkins, one of the pillars of a tiny island community in South Carolina, to a Highlander workshop. At the workshop he painted a powerful picture of the need for effective literacy instruction on Johns Island that would enable islanders to pass the written voter registration test. Highlander offered some financing and technical assistance but most importantly gave Clark, an old friend, the job of working directly with Esau Jenkins.

One of the first things Clark did was to make arrangements for selecting a teacher. She sought someone who was respected and had leadership potential but who was not a professional teacher. Ideally, it would be an instructor open to new methods and strategies and unconstrained by old, ingrained habits. Bernice Robinson, a beautician and dressmaker, was chosen. She had a high school education, was active in the Charleston NAACP, and understood Highlander's approach to adult education. At first Robinson declined, citing her lack of teaching experience. But Clark persisted and convinced her that she had the capacity to inspire the trust of the islanders and encourage them to speak openly about their concerns and needs.

On January 7, 1957, fourteen Johns Island adults showed up outside a building that appeared to be nothing more than a grocery store. Bernice Robinson conducted them into the grocery's back rooms and commenced instruction in reading and writing. The first citizenship school had quietly and unceremoniously

begun. Robinson turned to these students and asked them what they wanted to learn. As John Glen (1988) has said in his history of the Highlander Folk School, "It was an inspired question, for the subsequent success of Highlander's Citizenship School program stemmed from its ability to respond to the expressed needs of its students" (p. 162). What the islanders most wanted was to be able to write their names. They sought next to gain the skills to read the newspaper and the Bible, and those portions of the South Carolina constitution that must be decoded to qualify for voter registration. They also asked to learn how to fill out mail-order catalogue forms and money orders. A few of the men requested instruction in arithmetic. Finally, Robinson herself proposed that by the end of their two months together the students would be able to read and understand the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, which she had tacked up on the wall of their classroom (Horton, 1989).

Clark worked closely with Bernice Robinson, though their wisest course of action was in keeping the curriculum open enough for the learners to shape it themselves. As Aimee Horton (1989) has noted in her history of Highlander, "the curriculum for this first Citizenship School came about almost entirely from its fourteen adult students" (p. 223). The most intense activity, at least at first, entailed learning to write their signatures. At Clark's suggestion, Robinson had them do this kinesthetically, tracing prepared signatures again and again until they could write their names in cursive without a prompt (see Clark, 1962). Using many of the ideas that Clark had developed forty years earlier during her first years as a teacher on Johns Island, Robinson also had the islanders write stories about their daily routines, which they then read aloud back to the whole group. The words that caused difficulty were set aside for further practice and were also used to teach spelling (Clark, 1962). Robinson also found newspaper advertisements that could be used to supplement reading instruction and teach simple arithmetic.

The first test of the program's effectiveness was the ability of the students to become registered voters. All of them, without exception, passed that test with great success. They read the required passages and signed their names so flawlessly that they could hardly be denied their registration certificates. They "were

so happy about it that they came back to school fairly shouting" (Clark, 1962, p. 153). It was a great triumph for Clark and Robinson and a landmark in the history of the Civil Rights Movement. It was also a testament to how empowering it can be to learners when leaders and teachers keep their focus on supporting the growth of others.

What stood out for Clark and Robinson, however, was how much they themselves had learned from the experience. Robinson commented enthusiastically how eagerly the students learned and how satisfying it was, given their thirst for knowledge, to teach them. Working with adults in this way became Robinson's new career path. Clark noted that the students themselves must guide what is learned. "You don't tell people what to do," Clark observed. "You let them tell you what they want done" (Wigginton, 1991, p. 243). The experience reaffirmed one of Clark's lifelong convictions: that a good teacher is, above all, a good listener, intent on "always learning herself" (1962, p. 152). One of the hard-won results of all this learning and listening and assertive action was a fourfold increase in the number of Johns Island residents registered to vote by the early 1960s.

THE SCLC AND THE CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION PROJECT

The success at Johns Island spawned many new citizenship schools, first on other islands along the South Carolina coast and later in communities such as Huntsville, Alabama; Savannah, Georgia; and Somerville, Tennessee. In time, Clark spearheaded the effort to transfer responsibility for the project from Highlander to Martin Luther King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Clark's chief responsibility was training the teachers who would then fan out to a variety of communities to teach literacy, excite political awareness, and spur organized action. Most of the workshops to conduct this training were held in Liberty County, Georgia, at the Dorchester Cooperative Community Center, which was associated with the United Church of Christ. Andrew Young, who had ties to this church, made the arrangements for securing the center and was responsible for overseeing the Citizen Education Project (CEP), but he deferred to Clark as the center's "undisputed schoolmistress" (Branch,

1988, p. 576). It should be pointed out that although this work of preparing teachers was usually referred to as "training," Clark saw it as drawing out teachers' latent abilities and supporting them in developing talents that the teachers themselves, as well as the "trainers," saw were needed.

The workshops that Clark led tended to follow a format similar to the one she had learned at Highlander. Clark, Young, and their colleague Dorothy Cotton carefully recruited people to spend four weekdays and an evening at the Dorchester Center. On the opening evening, time was spent getting acquainted and figuring out how the workshop could best serve the needs of those in attendance. The following day teaching sessions began in earnest. Music was used to warm up the participants and enliven the proceedings, and then a variety of strategies for teaching reading and introducing basic math were explored. As Taylor Branch (1988) has noted, Clark "taught her pupils how to figure out seed and fertilizer allotments," and when focusing on literacy "worked upward from street signs and newspapers to the portions of the state constitutions required for voter registration" (p. 576). According to Carl Tjerandsen (1980), Clark also used the Socratic method effectively. She asked numerous questions, painstakingly tracked responses that seemed contradictory, and patiently used the colloquy that ensued to impart skills and to deepen understanding of the CEP's larger implications. It was not enough for her that participants learn the processes for teaching literacy and arithmetic; they must also increase their political awareness, learn to think more critically, and gain appreciation for the new leadership role they would be assuming in their communities.

But Clark's real gift, as Branch has also pointed out, was in "recognizing natural leaders among the poorly educated yeomanry" (1988, p. 576) and passing on to them the skills, confidence, and leadership they would need to be effective back in their home communities. Clark always insisted that workshops end with participants demonstrating in specific ways how they proposed to use the knowledge they had gained to make a difference back home. Like Myles Horton, Clark believed that workshop participants should not return to their community without a clear sense of what they had learned and what they intended to do with it.

Despite Clark's best efforts, however, many people felt that the citizenship schools had lost something in the transfer from Highlander to the SCLC. Apparently, King and the other male leaders never fully appreciated the impact of the Citizenship Education Movement. The SCLC failed to supply the funding that Clark always believed was necessary to fully capitalize on the value of the workshops. The number of trainees to be accommodated continued to balloon and sessions were frequently cut short, leaving little time for the all-important "What will we do back home" sessions. Additionally, procedures for following up with participants on problems and successes of their community efforts were never clearly established. Clark also believed that because the CEP was run largely by women, it never got the respect it deserved. She has said quite bluntly that the men on the executive staff of the SCLC "didn't have any faith in women, none whatsoever" (Brown, 1990, p. 77). Reverend Ralph Abernathy repeatedly complained about the presence of Clark on the SCLC's executive council, and Clark felt King himself never took Clark as seriously as she would have liked.

Despite the CEP's limitations, it nevertheless accomplished a great deal. By 1967, the SCLC had trained at least three thousand citizenship teachers. Clark estimated that these teachers taught at least forty-two thousand others. As result of the SCLC programs, voter registration more than doubled in Alabama, and in Clark's native Charleston it more than tripled by 1967 (Tjerandsen, 1980). The impact on voting and on law and social policy was incalculable. Clark was able to retire in 1970 knowing that her contribution to the struggle for social justice had been enormous.

CLARK AS DEVELOPMENTAL LEADER

Septima Clark stood out as a developmental leader if we define the term as one committed first and foremost to supporting the growth of others. What she demonstrated during the many residential workshops at Highlander was that Blacks themselves had the capacity to bring about transformation of their own communities. Highlander could give them a taste of the emancipatory possibilities inherent in every local community and offer a few human and financial resources to begin to foster change back home.

Clark added to this a talent for identifying and encouraging potential leaders, particularly those who had never thought of themselves in this way. Her willingness to open herself up to the wisdom of others also sensitized her to what ordinary people could teach her and what they might need from her to develop their potential as leaders. The relationship she cultivated with workshop participants was thus thoroughly mutual. She had much to learn from them just as they had a great deal to learn from her. But Clark's faith in their ability, in their unique capacity to exert the leadership in their own local communities, formed the basis for everything else that transpired between them. Unlike SCLC leaders such as King and Abernathy, who often showed little faith in her ability or in the value of the programs she proposed, her own faith in the people she worked with was unbounded, often allowing them to accomplish things they thought were beyond their capabilities.

Clark's brand of developmental leadership is similar to what Robert Greenleaf (1977) has called servant leadership. Greenleaf stresses that one of the defining qualities of a servant leader is to be a listener first. Certainly, Septima Clark met this criterion. She gradually realized, as she traveled through eleven southern states trying to impart basic reading and writing skills to simple working people, that "I could say nothing ... and no teacher as a rule could speak to them. We had to let them talk to us and say to us whatever they wanted to say" (quoted in Robnett, 1997, p. 90). She learned that the more she listened and understood what different groups were going through, the more she earned the right to speak up and introduce some new ideas worth hearing. Her attentive patience increased the chances that her response would help the people she was working with realize their potential. But her turn to speak had to be earned, built on an authentic desire to listen and learn from those around her.

Servant leaders, of course, are willing to do almost anything to serve their constituents better. Clark as a young teacher on Johns Island collected dry cleaner bags so that she would have a writing surface on which to record her students' stories and compile their key words. Somewhat later, while attempting to overturn the South Carolina ban on Black teachers being employed in public schools, she almost single-handedly gathered twenty thousand

signatures for petitions supporting a new, more progressive statute. As the chief organizer of Highlander's citizenships schools, Clark never hesitated to do whatever was necessary to support Bernice Robinson and other teachers in achieving success. If this meant ordering needed supplies, she would take care of it. If it meant distracting Whites who were suspicious of what was going on in the back of a grocery store on Johns Island, she would do that too. Her goal was always to further the movement for civil rights, never to go out of her way to make herself look good.

Author Belinda Robnett (1997) writes about Clark as an important bridge leader, a view of leadership closely aligned with developmental leadership. By bridge leader Robnett means someone who led quietly and informally in the "unclaimed spaces" of an organization before it had been fully organized. Robnett has also said that bridge leaders, who tended to be women, went largely unrecognized because of a "social construct of exclusion" (p. 20) upheld by many male-dominated groups. But bridge leaders played an absolutely crucial role by bridging the divide between "the public life of the movement's organization and the private spheres of adherents and potential constituents" (p. 19).

Robnett particularly highlights Clark's work with the CEP and her ability to connect with the rural Black masses. When institutional networks failed and national associations performed poorly in attracting the working poor to the Civil Rights Movement, Clark and others used their interpersonal skills and their direct knowledge of local communities to awaken broad interest in literacy, the franchise, and civil rights. Clark's ability as a bridge leader to translate the somewhat erudite goals of Martin Luther King's SCLC into language and practices that made sense to rural and working class Blacks went unheralded but was a key to the movement's success.

A bridge leader is, in Gramsci's terms (1971), an organic intellectual, a leader from the masses who understands their needs and aspirations but who is also familiar with dominant culture. Such a leader has a big picture view of the need for revolutionary change but is able to translate this view in terms that people who are caught within the tight parameters of their own lives can understand. Clark's organic leadership gave people who sought literacy instruction readable accounts of Civil Rights

Movement activity and of the laws that posed barriers for her students. Along with teaching reading and writing, she talked with people honestly and directly about the need for them to give time and effort to a movement that she believed would enhance their freedom and strengthen their rights. As a bridge leader, Clark's initial efforts to further Black literacy and thus fortify Black voting power are even more remarkable for being carried out largely on her own, with little or no support from national organizations or broad social movements. The CEP, which eventually gained renown as an arm of the SCLC, linked ordinary people struggling to secure their basic rights with a well-funded national movement. Clark's leadership made that connection possible.

In the end, Septima Clark was the kind of leader who, as she herself said, completely identified "with the people in the localities where they live and work" (1962, p. 238). Over time, she developed a commitment to democracy that was reflected in everything she did as a teacher and leader, because she defined democracy as a system that allows people to make the most of their talents. This was not simply an espoused commitment but one she struggled to enact in every aspect of her professional and personal life. The conclusion of the statement that she wrote about her faith in democracy while in residence at Highlander is a fitting way to end this chapter. Clark (1962) wrote: "An army of democracy deeply rooted in the lives, struggles and traditions of the American people must be created. By broadening the scope of democracy to include everyone, and deepening the concept to include every relationship, the army of democracy would be so vast and so determined that nothing undemocratic could stand in its way" (p. 198).

CHAPTER FIVE

LEARNING COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Collective leadership directly challenges the individualized model of leadership we believe is most typical in American culture. When leadership is collectively exercised, three things typically happen. First, and most commonly, a group engages in a period of debate and analysis before deciding on a course of action that the majority of its members support. Second, when it comes to selecting who is to speak on its behalf, the group—and not some external authority—decides who that shall be. Third, whoever is selected as a temporary spokesperson can be recalled and replaced at any time; indeed, many groups exercising collective leadership introduce a rotating system in which everyone takes a turn at representing the group in any wider negotiations that take place.

Collective leadership directly counters the traditional concept of leadership we critiqued in Chapter One. Collective leadership challenges the most enduring of American myths: the self-made man and strong, self-sufficient pioneer woman, facing wilderness and danger with only their own fortitude and intelligence to call on, eventually triumphing against insuperable odds and carving out a piece of the world for themselves. Add the power of this myth to the socialistic connotations the word *collective* has for many people (collectivizing the countryside means taking hard-earned goods, services, and property away from the peasantry and destroying private ownership and individual enterprise) and you have a powerful one-two ideological punch ensuring that anything collective is viewed as somehow un-American. Parenthetically, the pharmaceutical, insurance, and medical establishment has successfully demonized socialized medicine as some sort of

communistic plot to take health care away from ordinary people, when its whole point is to put decisions back in the hands of citizens rather than in the budget committees of HMOs. In Britain, the prime ministership (some would say presidency) of Margaret Thatcher and then Tony Blair destroyed the idea of collective cabinet responsibility—in other words, of a decision argued, fought over, made, and then publicly defended by a whole group. It is perhaps not surprising that the notion of collective leadership has such a hard time establishing itself when union membership has declined precipitously and where the most successful corporation of all—Wal-Mart—is known for its union-busting practices.

When collective leadership is being authentically practiced, all group members are committed to creating and implementing a shared vision. All assume some leadership responsibility. All have an opportunity to play a leadership role. All are willing to subordinate themselves to the group's goals and interests. When collective leadership prevails, there is no one person everyone else depends on. Rather, work is done interdependently so that everyone is seen as being necessary to the group's success. It should be noted, as Joseph Raelin (2003) has pointed out in *Creating Leaderful Organizations: How to Bring out Leadership in Everyone*, that some people have used the adjective *leaderless* to describe situations where collective leadership is practiced. Raelin argues this term is a misnomer; collective leadership more accurately refers to those contexts where everyone is a leader and is thus better characterized as "leaderful."

Individuals in leaderful groups must alternately learn to lead and follow, must understand when to push things forward and when to wait for others to exert healthy pressure on the group. Such leaders know that everyone cannot lead at once, that there are times to voice a strong opinion or take a strong stand and other times to defer quietly and respectfully to others. In collective leadership, everyone accepts responsibility for outcomes and does everything possible to keep moving the community in a productive and mutually engaging direction. Although there are always going to be disagreements and dissent about what the group is trying to accomplish, collective leadership models do oblige individuals, for the most part, to put self-interest aside and align with the group's sense of the common good.

More than any other model of leadership, collective leadership asks community members to abandon their own individual ambitions in favor of the group's jointly arrived-at aspirations. In this process, half measures are not workable. It is unreasonable to ask community members to give up their own ambitions and support group goals if they have not had significant input into the construction of those goals. Only when the group's aims and decisions are constructed through a process to which everyone has made a contribution can individuals be expected to set aside their self-interest to support the group's communal yearnings and take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. It is critical, then, that groups seeking to lead collectively also ensure that visioning, goal setting, and prioritizing are consciously and conscientiously shared. This is at the heart of Jürgen Habermas's (1996) discourse theory of democracy, which argues that people will commit to decisions that have been arrived at only after full, democratic, public to-ing and fro-ing.

Most of us have had some limited experience with collective leadership in which no one person in a group dominates or pulls rank and everyone actively and freely participates. So-called brainstorming sessions are an example for many people. In these situations, ideas are judged by their intrinsic value, not by who voices them. Position and reputation matter little as participants unselfishly add to the group's thinking and listen closely to what others have to say. Our penchant for individual recognition and reward is happily supplanted by the sense of shared satisfaction that accompanies the process of leading collectively.

Collective leadership is a shared commitment to a set of ideals that are unattainable unless everyone's efforts are included, appreciated, and felt. Because all believe strongly that what the group is striving for transcends individual accomplishment, and because the power of the shared vision demands that each person's contribution be fully supported, there is no designated leader other than the group itself. Functioning as the leader, the group is everyone together doing their best, most selfless work on behalf of a cause that matters deeply to its members. In fact, history shows that collective leadership is most likely to be successfully practiced when the cause is great and people come together to achieve transforming results. The Civil Rights Movement and the United Farm

Workers movement particularly come to mind. Although there were outstanding and well-known leaders associated with these movements, the bulk of the work was done by quiet, self-effacing, behind-the-scenes activists who were satisfied to put their individual identities aside for the sake of a vision of a more humane, inclusive, and just society for everyone. As Martin Luther King reflected after being jailed for leading the illegal Montgomery bus boycott, "The movement couldn't be stopped. Its links were too well bound together in a powerfully effective chain. There is amazing power in unity. When there is true unity, every effort to disunite only serves to strengthen the unity" (1998, p. 88).

THE BENEFITS OF COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Collective leadership rests on the assumption that everyone can and should lead. If this is accepted and practiced, then individual members can innovate without waiting for permission from a designated leader, and the group as a whole can move forward without worrying about a person in authority looking over their shoulder. Collective leadership expresses the notion that people are freed to think, plan, and execute together in an environment where anyone with a good idea can be heard and taken seriously. Under collective leadership, the community opens itself up to the panoply of untapped perspectives that can be found in any group, particularly when those perspectives are meant to help the group attain its mutually arrived-at goals.

When everyone leads and no one dominates, the opportunities for learning are greatly increased. The fears of appearing ignorant or incompetent evaporate in the mix of sharing exciting ideas. The chance to learn from those who have perhaps been reticent in the past is also improved. Questions can be raised, assumptions challenged, errors probed, and new possibilities explored that simply weren't appropriate in an environment dominated by a single leader to whom everyone was expected to defer. When everyone leads, everyone also teaches and learns, meaning that the sites for instruction and enlightenment are enlarged. Whole group instruction is possible, with many people rotating into and out of the role of teacher.

Collective leadership is also a chance for everyone to gain a sense of personal efficacy, to experience what it is like for each person's contribution to make a difference for the whole. There are few things as motivating or as likely to foster ongoing engagement with a community as knowing that one's presence and interaction with others is leaving an indelible impact. It affirms our shared humanity and our continuing commitment to democracy to know that each person is potentially as influential as anyone else.

How Does a Leader Develop the Ability to Practice Collective Leadership?

As with so many of the other discussions in this book, the practice of collective leadership by positional leaders begins with vision and commitment. The vision is one in which everyone contributes substantively to pursuing collectively created goals. The commitment is to the idea that everyone can lead and that each has something valuable to contribute as a leader. Articulating this vision and commitment is the first step toward collective leadership. This is followed by development of dispositions to learn more than teach, listen more than declaim, support more than profess, and focus on the common good more than on individual achievement. Two approaches are productive in developing these dispositions: those in positions of power and authority modeling them publicly for colleagues, and changing an organization's reward structure to embed these dispositions in daily organizational routines.

Where the first of these is concerned, leaders need to pose questions to themselves and to others that heighten people's awareness regarding their interactions within a group. Such questions might include: How much time is set aside for listening, and how actively and attentively do you listen? What have you done recently to contribute to leadership within the group? How are you actively supporting others in being leaders within the group? What is occurring within the group that you are prepared to take responsibility for? For what are you *unwilling* to take responsibility, and what have you done to challenge the direction the group is taking?

What are you willing to abandon personally to pursue the common good? What are the limits on what you are willing to give up in support of the common good? What are some of the things you have recently learned from the group? What are you doing as a teacher or as an expert in some area to support the group's learning?

These questions can then become the basis for job evaluation, performance appraisal, and self-assessment. For example, if a portfolio is being prepared documenting a leader's performance over a period of time it should comprise documented evidence of how she has conducted a careful study of members' concerns, a record of how she has ensured that all had a chance to make their views known in key decisions, examples of how she has stopped a premature rush to judgment to allow the expression of dissenting views, and so on. Particular attention should be paid to how well she seeks to place credit with others rather than claim it herself. In this model, the most effective leaders would be those who claimed the least for themselves—a direct antithesis to most of the performance appraisal systems we know.

WHERE WE HAVE SEEN COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Steve P witnessed a form of collective leadership when he was a teacher in a fairly large social studies department at a junior high school in the early 1970s. (Unfortunately, he wasn't aware of his good fortune until after he had left the institution.) Quietly and effectively, an experienced teacher chaired this department and maintained a particularly strong commitment to discussion-based teaching. He used his skills as a discussion facilitator to promote a shared leadership model within the department. During department meetings, no one teacher, no matter how experienced, dominated the conversation, and each faculty member was able to bring strengths to the table that all the others regarded as beneficial. Occasionally, one colleague would talk about how he used his knowledge of art—an area he loved—to teach world history. During other sessions, a certain member would display his stamp collection and how it facilitated his teaching of American history. Still another would explain how

the questions she posed to her students corresponded to Bloom's taxonomy and strengthened their understanding of economics.

In this setting, each person had a special strength or multiple special strengths, all of which, at one time or another, were brought to bear on the department's discussions about teaching. All shared the goal of making social studies the most stimulating subject that junior high students experienced. No one person ever dominated the group or took an inordinate amount of time to feature his or her interests. But gradually all developed a sense that each person had an area of excellence and expertise that all could respect and learn from. Somehow, it even appeared that if any one of those department members left the group (turnover was very low), the group as a whole would be significantly diminished.

HOW WE AND OTHERS HAVE LIVED COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Collective leadership is founded on Mary Parker Follett's belief in the strength of power *with* others rather than power *over* others. It is paralleled in the union ideal of solidarity, of strength in unity. In working class culture, in tribal cultures across the globe, in the Africentric ideal (to name just a few examples), leadership is framed as something a group exercises together rather than something observable in only a few talented and charismatic individuals. Collective leadership is premised on the idea that people acting together can exert a power far greater than what any individual can generate alone. It is fueled by a mix of individual humility and undiminished faith in the great things to be accomplished by cohesive groups committed to shared goals.

Most of the individuals we profile later in this book practice collective leadership to a greater or lesser degree. Even the most charismatic leaders profess a commitment to this ideal. Think of Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Che Guevara—three iconic leaders whose actions seem to underscore the (now discredited) "Great Man" theory of history in which progress is attributed to the actions of a few powerful men who force the winds of change to blow in the direction they wish. Each of these individuals continuously sought to point out that

their individual fate was meaningless compared to the fate of the movements they came to embody. Two of them, of course, were assassinated, while the other spent the greater part of his adult life in prison. Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) presents numerous examples of how he sublimated his own desires and hopes to the needs of the ANC. To take one at random: "I have always believed that to be a freedom fighter one must suppress many of the personal feelings that make one feel like a separate individual rather than part of a mass movement. One is fighting for the liberation of millions of people, not the glory of one individual.... In the same way that a freedom fighter subordinates his own family to the family of the people, he must subordinate his own individual feelings to the movement" (p. 228).

Similarly, the *Autobiography of Martin Luther King* (1998) contains descriptions of his own struggle to keep reminding himself that his growing fame meant nothing compared to the success of the SCLC initiatives and the wider Civil Rights Movement. One of his prayers is to ask God to keep reminding him that chance has placed him as an instrument of a wider movement but in no sense its charismatic creator. Guevara's diaries of the guerrilla warfare campaign to oust the Cuban Batista regime repeatedly stress how his own fate is irrelevant measured against the attempt to rouse the Cuban population to become the chief agents of regime change. Revolutionary leadership was for him the response to a call from the masses, particularly the peasantry. Although the small guerrilla army in which he was a commandant was physically separated from the people for much of the time, Che always viewed it as "very much part of the people. Our leadership role does not isolate us; rather it imposes obligations upon us" (1958/2003, p. 62). All three came to terms with the fact that their commitments could well mean their early death and concluded that the price was worth paying.

Our own lives obviously pale in comparison to these narratives, and our own experiences seem appallingly trite and insignificant. Yet for the great majority of people whose life is measured out in coffee spoons, experiencing collective leadership can be a transformative experience, one that changes them irrevocably, alters fundamentally how they perceive the experience of group membership, opens up new possibilities for their development,

and becomes the touchstone by which they measure their future involvements. Steve P continues to search for a professional group like that junior high school social studies department where every member contributed something essential to the whole.

The few times that we have fleetingly been a part of groups living collective leadership we have enjoyed a rare sense of personal satisfaction, of contributing something significant (though modest at an individual level) to a cause far greater than ourselves. In our own feeble way, we have tried to live this commitment not by asking what is in it for us, but by inquiring what we can do to support the group's goals. We have attempted to add our voice to the group's deliberations, but we have also been extremely conscious of our responsibility to let others, less privileged than we, set the agenda for change. We have openly opposed initiatives that violated our own principles, but we have also accepted that some level of compromise is usually necessary, except in those cases when conciliation would mark us as outright hypocrites. We have listened most of the time in such settings, though we also have learned that the responsibility to speak up, at least occasionally, is as strong as the obligation to be a silent witness. We have learned, too, that we can at times lead effectively by following others just as we can follow successfully in some cases by showing others the way. Unless community members are willing to lead and follow, to see these actions as either side of the same coin, then collective leadership cannot reach its potential as a means for making the most of everyone's talents and abilities.

What Blocks or Prevents the Practice of Collective Leadership?

Just about everything blocks the practice of collective leadership. Ego, the personal difficulty of learning to compromise, traditional leadership models, lack of faith in the ability of people to accomplish great things together, organizational reward systems that encourage individual competition and discourage collaboration, the wider ideological privileging of individuality, the power of myths and mores of the self-made man and pioneer woman, capitalism's emphasis on competition as a natural way of life,

bureaucracy's attempt to sift and order people in terms of their specific accomplishments, levels, personality types, learning styles and so on—all of these things stand in the way of collective leadership making a difference.

The sheer difficulty of implementing collective leadership models also presents challenges. As much as we admire community groups and organizations that lead collectively, we also know how unstable and unsustainable collective leadership can be. All that it takes to foil collective leadership is the almost irresistible temptation to hold a single individual responsible for some sort of organizational failure. This leads almost inevitably to a move away from shared leadership approaches and back toward one person taking charge—and responsibility—for what happens. It is also true that when individual leaders do not receive either recognition or reward for quietly guiding the group's accomplishments, some of them begin to wonder if the rewards of collective leadership are worth the lack of career advancement they are experiencing. Isn't it better, they might ask, to return to an individualized model of leadership where their contributions as individuals stand out and are more likely to receive acknowledgment?

Collective leadership takes time, and this can be the most significant barrier of all. To expect results right away is completely contrary to the slow, incremental process endemic to any collective leadership approach. Developing trust in others is the most fragile of all human projects, and the time needed for this cannot be foreshortened past a certain point. People need time to develop faith in themselves and their colleagues. They need to see for themselves in various situations that leading collectively really does result in better work being done by everyone and better overall results for the group. As we have already suggested, positional leaders require evidence that collective leadership is, in some sense, in the best interests of the group and the individuals who make up the group.

Finally, the unconventional nature of collective leadership means it triggers automatic resistance from the forces of tradition and the inertia of entrenched practices. Hierarchy dies hard. The desire to keep the chain of command in place is deeply, systemically, culturally entrenched—and completely contrary to collective leadership's democratic spirit. If everything that

someone wants to try has to be sanctioned by the next person in the chain, then collective leadership is doomed to failure. Top-down approaches and giving priority to designated positional leaders have to be abandoned before collective leadership's impact can be felt.

What Are the Perils and Pitfalls of Practicing Collective Leadership?

Like comedy, collective leadership is hard. In fact, the strain of collective leadership is similar to the struggle to make people laugh. Both take tremendous, creative effort and there is no guarantee with either that anything worthwhile or lasting will ensue. So perhaps the greatest peril associated with collective leadership is the impulse to give up, to label it a failure before it has had a chance to take effect. Collective leadership is so often a losing proposition because it is so rarely given a proper chance. Ironically, positional leaders often espouse commitment to doing business collectively, to involving everyone in decisions. But when pressure builds up around a particularly important issue, the real test of the strength of their commitment occurs. If they give in to this pressure and ignore the group's recommendation, the damage in lost trust is devastating, effectively killing the prospect for such leadership for a long time to come. In this case, the attempt at collective leadership, however well intentioned, has done more harm than good. It stains future attempts at this with a smear of cynicism. We have argued strongly that one of the great strengths of collective leadership is the fact that everyone plays a leadership role; everyone is important. But this is also its greatest point of vulnerability. If anyone lets the group down, if anyone fails to follow through on his or her part of the leadership responsibility, the whole group suffers. If this happens in multiple cases, the group's ability to withstand such a letdown weakens to the breaking point. Unless some members of the group are willing to monitor the group's progress and assess regularly each person's contribution to the whole (though it is preferable and internally more consistent if everyone does this), collective leadership is impossible. A strategy must be in place to identify and repair weak links before they can overwhelm the whole.

HOW TO ADDRESS THE TENSIONS, PROBLEMS, PERILS, AND PITFALLS ASSOCIATED WITH COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

It is a paradox that strong, committed, highly effective leaders are particularly needed when it comes to perpetuating collective leadership. It is true that collective leadership demands leaders who are comfortable being quiet, self-effacing, in-the-background contributors to the common good. But to sustain the long-term practice of collective leadership, such leaders must also remain highly active and deeply engaged with their colleagues. They must be constantly present to show their moral support, offer their appreciation at individual effort, and keep the group focused on its shared goals.

One poorly understood aspect of collective leadership is how different it is from laissez-faire leadership. Collective leadership is always hands-on, always a matter of how to keep people energized around the collective practices and goals that have been mutually identified. People who are responsible for keeping collective leadership models going must be in constant conversation with their co-workers, finding out from them what the group can do better to achieve its goals and acknowledging each person's contribution to the whole. This must be done to keep the group growing and improving and to act on the human need for individual recognition. Leaders associated with the Highlander Folk School such as Septima Clark and Myles Horton learned this practice early on in their life, and it underscored everything they did.

Just as important, leaders who are committed to making change through collective means must help the group stay focused and support the group in keeping its eyes on the prize. The prize may be broadly conceived as universal civil rights, educational equity for all, the end of racist practices; or it may be more specific, such as entry to a boys soccer league, enlivening a school's social studies curriculum, taking back a block decimated by gang warfare, or building a house for low-income people in a high-rent district. Regardless of the focus, it is easy for the group to lose its way. Someone—better yet, multiple people—must

assume responsibility for reminding the group of its shared vision and mutually agreed goals while insisting that the group's work remain consistent with that vision and those goals. Conversations about these fundamentals must be a constant, along with regular opportunities for the group as a whole to explore its purpose. It is a truism that the work of collective leaders, genuinely committed to the long-term practice of collective leadership, is never done.

But a final point about all this must also be asserted. Whether it is done through formal professional development or just an ongoing dialogue, shared understanding must develop that collective leadership is unsustainable unless it is truly collective. Until the group understands that everyone is a leader and that this carries with it more responsibility than recognition, more burden than privilege, collective leadership will falter. Whether this means formal processes must be set in place to ensure that key responsibilities are rotated, or that sharing these responsibilities evolves naturally, matters less than the need to pay unremitting attention to how true collective leadership emerges and is maintained.

Ella Baker: Learning Collective Leadership

In the popular imagination, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is the acknowledged charismatic leader of the Civil Rights Movement. Behind the scenes, however, history has shown Ella Baker to be the movement's most influential theorist of, and practitioner in, collective leadership, or what she often referred to as group-centered leadership. As an unsung leader, Baker worked behind the scenes, partly because that was what she wanted and partly because that was expected of her. But mostly, it was because the nature of collective leadership militates against any one person clearly standing front and center as some sort of leadership figurehead. For Baker, leadership was never about charisma and always about helping people realize the power of collective solidarity.

By collective leadership, Baker (1972) meant exercising influence as part of a community of equals in which every person contributes a distinctive, indispensable voice to the whole, while also standing strong with others in support of mutually agreed

goals. Traditional leaders too often make followers dependent, stripping them of the capacity to learn from their experiences and make decisions for themselves; collective leaders encourage self-sufficiency and affirm, as Baker often did, that no one should "look for salvation anywhere but to themselves" (1972, p. 347). At a time when large, impersonal organizations were increasingly the norm, Baker believed that people could have greater collective control over their own lives by being part of small work groups, or by restructuring large organizations for smallness. Baker assumed that organizations should be broken into structures small enough for people to get to know one another as persons, so that a kind of collective ownership of outcomes could emerge. Payne (1995) noted that Baker "envisioned small groups of people working together but also retaining contact in some form with other such groups, so that coordinated action would be possible whenever large groups really were necessary" (p. 369). Only by keeping structures small, she asserted, could both individual and collective growth be nurtured.

Throughout her life, Baker held steadfastly to her belief that leaders are at their best when supporting ordinary people in leading themselves. For her the most effective leaders were self-effacing people, more interested in developing leadership in others than in getting recognition for their individual achievements. When asked by an interviewer to explain how you organize people, she said matter of factly that you don't start with what *you* think. You start with what *they* think. She continued, "You start where the people are. Identification with people.... If you talk down to people, they can sense it. They can feel it. And they know whether you are talking *with* them, or talking *at* them, or talking *about* them" (Cantorow and O'Malley, 1980, pp. 70, 72). She affirmed repeatedly that leaders are teachers who must create opportunities for people to learn from each other and reflect on the best ways to take action collectively. She maintained that leading and learning are part of the same process and that no successful movement can endure unless it has leaders who are intent on learning from those around them.

Leaders were critical to Ella Baker, not as solitary individuals who bask in the reflected glory of group action but as solid and selfless collaborators in the enduring collective struggle for social

justice. When she was first organizing the group that became SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), Baker hesitated to be overly directive. She observed, "Those who had worked closely with me knew that I believed very firmly in the right of the people who were under the heel to be the ones to decide what action they were going to take to get from under their oppression" (Cantarow and O'Malley, 1980, p. 84). She did not seek credit or even much compensation for what she did, but she received enormous gratification from witnessing people who enjoyed little notice from others grow with her support into selfless, collective leaders. As Barbara Ransby shows in her magisterial biography, Baker's approach to leadership was democratic and reciprocal. She saw leaders as both teachers and learners, with learning "based on a fluid and interactive relationship between student and teacher" (Ransby, 2003, p. 359). As Ransby also points out, Baker was in accord with Antonio Gramsci, who observed that "every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil is always a teacher" (1971, p. 239).

Baker's commitment to leadership as partnership and collective endeavor comes through in her description of her work with the NAACP branches:

> If you feel you are part of them and they are part of you, you don't say "I'm-a-part-of-you." What you really do is you point out something. Especially the lower-class people, the people who'd felt the heel of oppression, see they *knew* what you were talking about when you spoke about police brutality. They *knew* what you were speaking about when you talked about working at a job, doing the same work, and getting a differential in pay. And if your sense of being a part of them got over to them, they appreciated that. Somebody would get the point. Somebody would come out and say, "I'm gon' join that darn organization" [Cantarow and O'Malley, 1980, p. 72].

Baker respected people in the classic sense of seeing them discerningly in all their wholeness and uniqueness. Respect means literally to see again, to regard with new, more penetrating eyes. Baker practiced this respect by helping people become more acutely aware of their collective intelligence and power. An important element in this practice was her refusing to make assumptions

about the people she endeavored to lead. She strove to find out all she could about them so she could acknowledge and appreciate them in all their complexity and fullness. Not surprisingly, she grew famous among the rank-and-file membership of the NAACP as the leader who seemed to know and understand each branch's special situation and the unique challenges that the branch leader faced. She did this, as Moses and Cobb (2001) pointed out, by quietly working "in out-of-the-way places" and then by really "digging into [life in] local communities" (p. 4). As Ransby (2003) noted, "She met hundreds of ordinary black people and established enduring relationships with many of them. She slept in these people's homes, ate at their tables, spoke in their churches, and earned their trust. And she was never too busy, despite her intense schedule, to send off a batch of thank-you notes, sending regards to those who she did not contact directly and expressing gratitude for the support and hospitality she had received" (p. 136).

Transforming leaders do not hold forth with their knowledge and experience but use them to create opportunities for people to learn together, to become, as Burns (1978) points out, "joint seekers of truth and of mutual actualization" (p. 449). Baker noted that her work as activist and leader did not stress imparting new theories or drawing complex pictures of social relations. She focused her efforts instead on helping people more clearly "see their own ideas" (Ransby, 2003, p. 363). She was famous among the SNCC membership for holding individual side conversations with quieter participants (often women) while group deliberations were going on, and then interrupting the discussion to announce to those assembled that someone had just expressed to her a powerful idea that needed to be heard by everyone. Dallard (1990) reports that Baker would sit down next to a particularly reticent participant, quietly draw that person out, and then grab the attention of the rest of the group by shouting: "Look, here's somebody with something to say about that" (p. 84). In so drawing people out, Baker hoped to make every participant an integral member of the activist community, so that they could join in the collective spirit of these important, often decisive gatherings.

She was also the one inclined to locate areas of agreement or consensus, in the midst of what appeared to be sharp conflict. During a meeting of SNCC when a bitter argument broke out

between the partisans of direct action and civil disobedience and those committed to advancing the goal of increasing voter registration, Baker stepped in with unusual directness to show how both goals could be pursued simultaneously. Reflecting on this occasion, Baker noted: "I never intervened ... if I could avoid it. Most of the youngsters had been trained ... to follow adults.... I felt they ought to have a chance to learn to think things through and to make the decisions. But this was a point at which I did have something to say" (Dallard, 1990, p. 86). Here the lesson that Baker needed to teach was too important not to intervene. She wanted the students to see that creating forums for people to share ideas is an essential element in collective leadership, but there are also times when disagreement should cease and common ground must be identified.

Empowering SNCC and Group-Centered Leadership

In April 1960, with her tenure at King's SCLC coming to an end, Baker welcomed more than two hundred student protesters from nineteen states to Raleigh, North Carolina, to propose an organization to coordinate and support the emerging student protest movement. Baker admired the students' initiative and identified closely with their courageous struggle. She quietly created an atmosphere at the conference that would allow the students to share their experiences freely, learn from each other, and build a foundation for a new student movement. Baker knew that the students' actions were momentous, but she feared that anxious adult leaders, such as King, might slow their progress by urging caution. In organizing the Raleigh meeting, Baker hoped to convene a forum for discussion and learning that would remain student-centered and allow the students to explore creating their own, independent organization. This is, after all, one of the key prerequisites for the emergence of collective leadership: creating free spaces for people to dialogue openly, both to identify ongoing differences and to build new areas of agreement.

When Baker spoke at the conclusion of the student gathering in Raleigh, she touched on a number of these themes. First, she made it clear that the sit-ins symbolized something much more

than the right of Black people to be served at a segregated lunch counter. The daring actions of these courageous Black college students were certainly undertaken as part of a struggle for their own emancipation and that of their race. But they were also part of a movement to uphold human freedom that held "moral implications ... for the whole world" (Forman, 1972, p. 218). What they accomplished and how they responded under pressure could inspire freedom lovers across the globe to rise up against their oppressors. Second, because the struggle was so universal and so urgent, Baker noted, a democratic and group-centered focus must be maintained. By deemphasizing the leadership of charismatic individuals, the goal of expanding the sphere of human liberty could be guided by many voices and not detoured by an individual power grab. For Baker, true collective leadership occurs when the individual is stretched to his or her highest potential "for the benefit of the group" (p. 218).

Baker was also adamant that the students should remain independent of adult control and of traditional top-down ways of running organizations. Spurred on by Baker, the students declared they wanted the group as a whole to supply the necessary leadership to advance their cause. Baker also urged the group's leaders to embrace adult education. Although the conference in Raleigh had been a great triumph, she argued that the future success of the student movement depended on the willingness of the organization to create training programs in nonviolence and group dynamics. Again, it was structures and programs to codify and expand people's already developed knowledge and skills that would ensure the success of the movement, not how many in the wider community looked for guidance from a particular person as the embodiment of the struggle. Furthermore, only through organized training could the rage engendered by racism be channeled into efforts for meaningful and lasting social change.

Although Baker was self-effacing and often quiet, the vision she projected was radical. She reminded the students frequently that they needed to "learn to think in radical terms." Baker used "the term *radical* in its original meaning—getting down to and understanding the root cause. It means," she asserted, "facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system" (Moses and Cobb,

2001, p. 3). Baker was respected as a leader who believed in the Civil Rights Movement as a unitary movement, but who also used the movement as an opportunity to radically alter the structures of the wider unjust system.

Teaching and Learning in the Practice of Collective Leadership

Even as SNCC began to exert a major influence on the Civil Rights Movement, the need for searching and extensive discussions about its mission and structure remained strong. For at least the first two years of its existence, years in which Baker continued to play an active role, SNCC gathered periodically to revisit and explore their collective purposes. The "marathon meetings" that inevitably ensued frequently included Baker's quiet and unobtrusive presence. She rarely contributed a view of her own but participated most often as a listener and occasionally as a questioner. Comparing her to Nelson Mandela, Grant (1998) explained that Baker listened closely and actively to every person and would occasionally refer to a previous speaker's words to lend them added credibility and weight. She regularly paraphrased and synthesized what others had said and taught the young people in SNCC "that everyone had something to give, thus helping them learn to respect each other" (p. 137) and to regard what they were doing as a shared, collective struggle.

Baker also participated by questioning students with a skillful Socratic persistence, an ability she shared with Aldo Leopold. Baker would not tell the students what to do, but she would interrogate participants repeatedly about purpose and mission. As Mary King (1987), an early SNCC volunteer, noted, "Again and again, she would force us to articulate our assumptions" (p. 60). Mary King sometimes felt intimidated by Baker's methods, but she came to see that her questioning was a strategy to combat dogmatism. Only through persistent and sharply worded questioning, King learned, could the temptation to adopt a single, doctrinaire approach be avoided. She attributed to Baker one of the most important lessons of her life: "There are many legitimate and effective avenues for social change and there is no single right way" (Payne, 1995, p. 97). Through such questioning, Baker

sought to encourage a new understanding of the nature of shared struggle in which all were encouraged to see that social justice and universal human rights could be achieved only through collective solidarity.

As we have argued, Baker insisted that an organization's members must have control over their own decision making. This was especially true of the SNCC students, who believed that overbearing adults would only hamper efforts to keep the movement energized. But they *would* listen to those rare adults who treated them as equals and who regarded the students as responsible thinkers and doers. This was exactly Baker's stance, which is why the students prized her leadership. As Bob Moses said in recalling Baker's legacy for SNCC:

> It was Ella more than anyone else who gave us the space to operate in. As long as she was sitting there in the meetings, no one else could dare come in and say 'I think you should do this or that,' because no one could pull rank on her. Her stature was such that there wasn't anyone from the NAACP to Dr. King who could get by her. I think that the actual course of the SNCC movement is a testimony to the fact that the students were left free to develop on their own. That was her real contribution [Dallard, 1990, pp. 84-85].

Joanne Grant (1998) points out that although Baker spurned the profession of teaching as a vocational aspiration, her chief role with SNCC turned out to be as teacher. She wanted to develop new leaders, and there was no way to do so except through some form of instruction. Of course, Baker employed a variety of forms to support and guide the students: listening, affirming, questioning, and only rarely asserting. But these were all aspects of her teaching role. Baker was a fount of wisdom and experience for the students of SNCC. As time went on, her ability to teach, facilitate, and redirect the students toward more productive, generous, and humane collective goals grew into legend. It was out of such encounters that her reputation grew.

According to Howard Gardner (1995), leaders tell a recurring story that reveals the identity of the leader, underscores group goals, and highlights the values that the group both espouses and enacts. In a statement to her followers that parallels Gardner's

claims about the leader's story, Baker succinctly put forward her own leadership narrative. It brings us full circle by reminding us how she fulfilled her role as the voice of collective leadership during the Civil Rights Movement. She encouraged her followers to foment radical, collective change, but only after cultivating a thorough understanding of the tragedies and triumphs and trials of their collective past:

> In order for us as poor and oppressed people to become a part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. That is easier said than done. But one of the things that has to be faced is ... to find out who we are, where we have come from and where we are going.... I am saying as you must say, too, that in order to see where we are going, we not only must *remember* where we have been, but we must *understand* where we have been [quoted in Moses and Cobb, 2001, p. 3].