The Dark Side of Leadership: Combating Negative Dimensions of Leadership

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Abstract

This chapter includes a discussion of dark side tendencies in the classroom, an analysis of basic needs, and the behaviors that are exhibited when these needs aren't met. A series of proven practices educators can implement to minimize these behaviors in the classroom is discussed.

The Dark Side of Leadership: How It Shows Up in the Classroom

Anyone who has watched *Star Wars* remembers Yoda's persistent warnings: "But, beware. Anger, fear, aggression. The dark side are they." Young kids—and adults, too—are intrigued by this "dark side" phenomenon. Yet, as we become more self-aware, we also begin to recognize that we all have dark side tendencies. In his seminal work on human motivation, Maslow (1943) theorized that for people to achieve higher levels of motivation (self-esteem and self-actualization), they must first get their basic needs (such as physiological, safety, and belonging needs) met. In academic settings, students will have difficulty achieving goals, mastering skills, and exhibiting creativity if they don't first feel safe and a sense of belonging (McLeod, 2007).

To develop leaders who exhibit strong character, personal capability, initiative, interpersonal skills, and strategic perspective (Zenger & Folkman, 2009), instructors need to recognize when behaviors stem from unmet needs and nurture higher levels of motivation (Maslow, 1943) and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1997). Students come from diverse backgrounds and social environments that have shaped their values, behaviors, and norms. While these environments can nurture strengths in character and leadership abilities, they can also cultivate dark side tendencies, including compulsiveness, narcissism, paranoia, codependence, and passive-aggressive behavior.

Compulsive students constantly look for reassurance and approval; need to maintain absolute order, often following highly regimented routines; often see the classroom as an extension and reflection of themselves; are excessively moralistic and judgmental; are status conscious (often sharing their position or titles); and exhibit workaholic tendencies (McIntosh & Rima, 2007). Since compulsiveness can stem from angry and rebellious attitudes, these students often feel they cannot express true feelings, and will repress anger and resentment (though their feelings can surface in end-of-course evaluations or in classroom activities).

Narcissistic students are driven to succeed by a need for admiration and acclaim; have an overinflated sense of importance; have great ambitions, grandiose fantasies; have difficulty with criticism, often responding in anger; are often dissatisfied with achievements; and are self-absorbed (McIntosh & Rima, 2007). They display an inability to learn from others or experiences and are unwilling to take responsibility for their actions (Kakabadse & Kakabadse, 2013). Since self-absorption and uncertainty often stems from deep feelings of inferiority, these students may not enjoy their success and may feel dissatisfied with their lives.

Paranoid students often exhibit suspicious, hostile, fearful, and jealous behaviors; are worried that someone will undermine their leadership; are hypersensitive to actions of others, attaching subjective meaning to motives; often create rigid structures for control; and take lighthearted jokes seriously (McIntosh & Rima, 2007). Paranoid students can become argumentative, belligerent, and stubborn (Kakabadse & Kakabadse, 2013). Since paranoia can stem from strong feelings of insecurity and a lack of confidence, these students may interpret otherwise innocuous behaviors as threatening or condescending.

Codependent students are often peacemakers who cover up problems; are benevolent with a high tolerance for deviant behavior; are often willing to take on more work so that they don't have to say no; react rather than act; and take responsibility for problems (McIntosh & Rima, 2007). Since codependent students often feel repressed

and frustrated, they often have trouble giving full, honest expression to emotions or problems.

Passive-aggressive students are often stubborn, forgetful, and intentionally inefficient; they tend to complain, resist demands, procrastinate, and dawdle as a means of controlling those around them; and on occasion, can exert control by short outbursts of sadness or anger (McIntosh & Rima, 2007). Since passive-aggressiveness can stem from anger and bitterness, many passive-aggressive students are afraid of success, since it leads to higher expectations.

Combatting Negative Dimensions of Leadership

Educators have the responsibility to address inappropriate behaviors in the classroom. Once the roots of these behaviors are understood, instructors can structure their learning environments to nurture higher levels of motivation (Maslow, 1943) and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1997), which will, in turn, help students develop into strong leaders, respected employees, and active, contributing members of the community (McLeod, 2007). The following eight basic needs (Miller, 2004) provide a framework for understanding the needs of students, and to meet these needs in the classroom.

Belonging

Students need to feel a sense of belonging where they feel like they add value and have a role to play in the classroom (Miller, 2004). When students do not feel like they belong, they can feel like an outsider, isolated and insecure. This feeling can manifest itself in shyness, fear in group settings, separation anxiety, or identity confusion. Students who don't feel like they belong often withdraw, contribute only the bare minimum, act out in group settings, and create tension in the classroom.

Instructors can help students overcome these tendencies by:

- Creating a space that students can call their own

- Being hospitable—acknowledging special dates, welcoming students, exchanging contact info, and meeting with them

- Building trust and being trustworthy

- Developing a desire to know people

- Being aware of learning preferences, needs, health issues, allergies

- Calling people by name

- Sharing personal stories and allowing others to share their stories (according to level of comfort)

Nurturance

Students need to feel like instructors care about them as individuals. They need to know that faculty value their contributions, and that they will be supported in meaningful ways to help them be successful. Many students long for opportunities to grow and pursue their passions, but often need someone to help nurture these talents and draw them out. Students who do not feel cared for can feel burned-out, depressed, and bored (Miller, 2004). Many who go long periods of time without nurturance can question an instructor's motives when attempts are made to show them support.

Instructors can help students overcome nurturance issues by:

- Actively listening, demonstrating genuine curiosity and interest

- Acknowledging effort

- Giving second chances

- Connecting with those who might feel lonely

- Reaching out through cards and words

- Seeing the good in others

- Considering how others best receive nurturance—through words? Time together? Acts of service? (Chapman & White, 2012)

- Giving public positive feedback, so others know you appreciate their work

- Being hospitable—bringing treats, eating meals together

- Providing resources needed

- Discovering needs through inquiry or surveys

- Focusing on strengths and drawing them out

Support

Students need to feel supported in problem solving and risk taking (Miller, 2004). They need to know that instructors are here for them, and that they will receive help to figure things out when they are struggling. Students need to feel like they will be supported and encouraged as needed. They need to know that they will be taught what they need to know to be successful. Students who don't feel supported can exhibit helplessness and dependency, panic about new experiences, and fear of or resistance to change. They may have difficulty solving problems, asking for help, and taking risks. They might become either overly dependent or overly independent. They may lack innovation and creativity.

Instructors can help students feel supported by:

- Providing role and assignment clarity

- Having regular check-ins (one-on-ones)

- Providing team-building exercises

- Creating a positive atmosphere using peers' positive reinforcement

- Creating confidence by giving them 90 percent of what they already know how to do and then pushing them another 10 percent out of their comfort zone

- Backing them up and encouraging them

- Acting consistently

- Communicating that you'll be there during the journey

- Doing what you say you're going to do

- Not being judgmental, displaying both empathy and sympathy

- Asking them what they need

- Anticipating needs

- Giving of your time during office hours and before or after class
- Using written communication (including the syllabus and announcements) to show support

Protection

Going back to school can be scary for many adults, especially if they have been out of school for a long period of time. Providing a safe environment for them to learn can include acknowledging this fear, helping them to navigate unknown pitfalls, and giving them a safe place to be themselves and discover their new scholarly voice (Miller, 2004). Students who don't feel protected can feel anxious, fearful, timid, and skeptical. They can be afraid to take risks, and if there are too many risks without a safe place to try new things, some will choose to leave.

Instructors can provide a safe environment by:

- Providing a safe place to be
- Co-creating norms of safety in the classroom
- Responding without judgment
- Refraining from gossiping
- Being open/vulnerable about struggles
- Listening actively
- Asking questions without interrogating
- Providing positive responses to questions
- Being warm, cheerful, and helpful
- Reaching out to new students personally to understand their fears

Structure

Students need clear boundaries so that they know what to expect and how to be successful. They need limits on time and behavior so that they can feel free to focus on their work within these limits (Miller, 2004). Without this structure, students can be prone to lateness, procrastination, and non-assertiveness. They can be obsessive and

compulsive about their work, fixating on small details, and asking many questions to be sure they have things just right.

Instructors can provide structure by:

- Managing through expectations
- Teaching, correcting, and training
- Helping establish good habits
- Following through on commitments
- Modeling desired behaviors
- Setting balanced personal boundaries
- Not having unannounced expectations
- Communicating clearly (don't expect others to read your mind)
- Providing clear guidelines in the syllabus, announcements, and other communications

Emotional Containment

Students also need support and safety in emotional expression and learning to focus emotions (Miller, 2004). The classroom can provide a safe place to express emotions (yes, even strong emotions). Students need to know that their emotions aren't too intense for instructors to respond to and help them express those feelings safely. Without limits of emotional containment, students can exhibit unbounded physical expression of feelings, numbness or repressed emotions, or fear of expressing emotions. They can also have difficulty getting in touch with their emotions.

Instructors can provide emotional containment by:

- Remaining calm and clear when someone else is emotionally distressed
- Showing compassion
- Listening actively and being in tune to others
- Not being defensive or offended by emotions
- Identifying emotions

- Being a good listener

- Validating others

- Asking for time to process before responding

- Not trying to problem solve, just listen

Respect

Respecting students conveys valuing them as individuals (Miller, 2004). Respect communicates recognition that they have their own strengths and ways of experiencing, and these are valued. Respect gives them the freedom to be who they are, and communicates stability. It also gives them the space to evolve and grow even beyond what the classroom alone can offer. When students don't feel respected, they can have difficulty functioning autonomously. Creativity and innovation can be stifled, and they can exhibit absenteeism. They can also develop inappropriately close attachments to others.

Instructors can demonstrate respect to students by:

- Allowing for individuation and separation

- Valuing thoughts, feelings, and differences

- Asking questions

- Speaking the truth—after drawing them out

- Seeking to understand their perspective

- Seeking to understand their experiences in the context of their upbringing and life

- Exhibiting genuine curiosity

- Embracing differences

- Exhibiting cultural competence

- Providing constructive feedback mixed with encouragement for the things they do well

- Encouraging creativity and innovation

- Drawing out their strengths and individuality

Bonding

Students need to observe healthy, appropriate, and positive relationships (Miller, 2004). This might be in our interactions with other students, faculty, and administrators. They need to know that faculty are connected in these relationships. They need to know that our relationship with them is different than with others. And students need to know that collectively, instructors will share information to help them be successful. Without bonding, students can feel uncertain about forming and maintaining relationships. It can hinder collaboration, and students can have difficulty working with others to solve problems. Cliques can be formed, and students can feel like those around them are playing favorites.

Instructors can nurture bonding by:

- Acting respectfully toward other students, faculty, and administrators
- Modeling healthy bonding
- Maintaining relationships over time
- Creating memories together
- Sharing meals together
- Reminiscing together
- Sharing verbal expressions of recognition and encouragement
- Being present at celebrations, such as commencement ceremonies and retirement parties

Conclusion

Most educators will recognize these basic needs and how unmet needs can manifest dark side tendencies. These proven practices can be implemented in classrooms both proactively (to prevent these behaviors), and reactively (when we recognize these behaviors). To best help students, educators can exhibit genuine curiosity and caring,

evaluate the expectations that are placed on students, and provide safe places for growth and overcoming behaviors.

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