Corrie Martin: Building Connections

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I first met Corrie in 2007 when she was working in Pacific’s Alumni Department as the director of Alumni Clubs. Corrie was a fireball of energy with a positive can do attitude. She was the office prankster (ask her about the time she popped out of a moving bin on March Lane), motivator and eternally cheerful. Even in the face of a boss-centered, autocratic leader, Corrie maintained a positive outlook, (Lunenberg & Orenstein, 2012). At the time my supervisor had a style similar to Corrie’s supervisor and although she was not aware of it, I followed her example in dealing with the situation.

I was surprised when Corrie moved to the position of Executive Director of the Women’s Resource Center (WRC) as I only knew her as the enthusiastic leader of Alumni Clubs. I realized that although I admired Corrie I did not really know her. This assignment gave me the opportunity to get to know Corrie and explore the ways in which she works with diverse constituencies both on and off campus. Her enthusiasm is infectious.

For the purposes of this paper I will focus on Corrie’s leadership style. I will begin with an overview of her background, look at how education impacted her approach to leadership, review her style and conclude with thoughts about what I have learned.

Interview

To open the interview I briefed Corrie on the focus of the class and this assignment. In her current position, Corrie works with many diverse constituencies and develops partnerships inside and outside of the university. I wanted to find out what strategies she uses to navigate these different worlds. I began by finding out a little bit about her background.

Background. Corrie grew up in Hawaii which she described as “a very diverse society with a plantation culture (mentality).” She experienced a culture that divided and grouped
themselves by race and ethnic culture. Corrie knew she was gay from a young age and although she was very comfortable with her identity she knew that society viewed it as “wrong.” The barriers of race and class bothered Corrie and she strove to find a way to be who she really was through building allies in the classroom and by reaching across racial and class lines. Her early childhood experiences shaped her leadership style, a trait identified by many, including: James MacGregor Burns, Howard Gardner and Ronald Heifetz as playing an important role in shaping leaders, (Padilla, 2005, p. 50). In fact, Corrie is a resilient person with a hardy personality and a strong internal locus of control, (Padilla, 2005, p. 55).

After graduating from high school Corrie earned her undergraduate degree at the University of Hawaii and her Master’s degree at UC Irvine. She came to Stockton after living in Vermont which she described as “a rural oasis, technologically and sustainably advanced, the Hawaii of the contiguous United States.” Education and its impact were strong threads woven throughout our interview.

Education and influence. Corrie has a base philosophy that applied to her K-12 education as well as in her experience as an educator in the classroom, “through education, I found hope.” She went on to explain her meaning “you could see people’s minds changed and that people would come together.” Early in her post-secondary career she viewed the academy and pursuit of academia as a “utopia” where diverse populations would come together and agree. She found out that this ideal was not a reality but identified the “struggle” as what keeps her interested and motivated. The impact of her educational experience is best summed up by Corrie:

I think my educational experience has been very important to my career and my growth as a human being. I did step away from academia for a while and worked in the non-
profit sector. It helped me realize where I belonged was inside a university. The
difference between the two is the experience of being able to make a direct impact with
students in the classroom or co-curricular setting.

Corrie did not diminish her experience outside the realm of academia. She emphasized
that her work in the non-profit world gave her invaluable experience with different
constituencies and audiences. This gave her the opportunity to fill many roles. Corrie had a
wide breadth of experiences and I assumed there must have been a mentor or mentors to guide
her along the way.

**Mentors.** The importance of mentors and their influence on leaders have been identified
throughout the readings. They are usually leader figures outside the family and can be
professional or voluntary in nature (Padilla, 2005, p. 57). When I asked Corrie if she could
identify a mentor that had helped or directed her along the way and if she had acted as a mentor,
her answer surprised me, while she recognizes the process and the importance of a mentor she
admitted that not having a mentor was one of her biggest regrets. In fact, she counsels others to
seek out a mentor and has also acted as a mentor for employees, colleagues and students. She
did identify a voluntary mentor, a faculty member at University of Hawaii who suggested she
switch her major from History to English and who guided her to grad school.

Upon further reflection, she thought that a couple of colleagues had offered to mentor her
but she did not pick up on the clues. Her most enlightening comment was “It’s my fault, I never
reached out, you have to know that you deserve a mentor, you have to be proactive and seek out
a mentor.” This is good advice and it is interesting that Corrie takes responsibility and faults
herself for not taking her own advice. In this statement, Corrie exhibits one of the Big Five
personality traits of a leader, taking responsibility for your actions or conscientiousness, (Lunenberg & Orenstein, 2012, p. 103).

**Corrie the connector.** Corrie identified her “major mode of operation” as connecting. Living in such a racially divided community, Corrie wondered “Why we all were so afraid of each other?” In an effort to create a bridge and connect diverse groups she invited her entire 8th grade class to her birthday party. Many thought this was a mistake and could not understand how such disparate groups, nerds, jocks, wallflowers, etc. could get along. Corrie believes that inclusiveness is a natural instinct for her, “you get as many people together as possible that have the slightest interest (in the topic).” Her philosophy focuses on people and potential connections that may lead to new partnerships and networks that may not have otherwise happened. She stated “the goal in itself might be worthy, but the real goal is to bring people together.”

When I asked for an example, she enthusiastically described the recent and successful Intergenerational Tea non-partisan voting event. The event partnered the WRC and American Association of University Women (AAUW) with the Pacific Alumni Affinity clubs,

I could have had organizations who are just interested in voting but, hey, this is an opportunity to bring in Alumni Affinity clubs, even though their mission is not voting, I pitched it to them to see if they were interested in collaborating and making connections. The groups worked together toward the common goal of educating voters and made some valuable connections along the way.

Corrie’s style encourages a democratic community that encourages individuals to participate and act in the interest of the common good, (Lunenberg & Orenstein, 2012, p. 16). I was not sure who Corrie would name as a leader she admired. I believe her choice is salient to her style.
Leader personified. Congresswoman Patsy T. Mink is the leader Corrie most admires. After my meeting with Corrie, I read about Congresswoman Mink, she was the first woman of color elected to the US House of Representatives and co-authored Title IX. She used a “coalition-building strategy” to win her first elected seat as student-body president and continued this same strategy throughout her career (Library of Congress, 2012). The Congresswoman’s strategy reminded me of Corrie’s strategy of connecting groups of people. While Corrie may not have identified Congresswoman Mink as a mentor and did not have the benefit of her physical presence as a role model, she did have her guiding principles to rely on.

Definition of leadership. When I asked Corrie to define leadership, she paused, reflected on our discussion, then stated, “My definition of leadership is a person who can rally the troops to collaborate on and achieve a common goal.” After her definition, I wondered about her ability to change her style depending on the groups or situation she is working with. Corrie said her baseline goal is to empower those she works with no matter their role. She may accomplish this by being a leader, a follower, manager, a facilitator or a motivator. Corrie fits her role to the situation which is a key trait of a transformational leader, (Lunenberg & Orenstein, 2012). In essence, she embodies and models our class definition of a leader (Julie Fontana, personal communication, September 24, 2012):

- A leader transcends boundaries by relating to and understanding their constituency. They transcend by challenging the status quo and empowering groups to rise to a greater good.
- A leader does what is right because it is right, is accountable for actions and makes difficult decisions with poise and commitment. A leader reflects and is a reflection of their followers. Lastly, a leader recognizes contexts and motivates from the heart.
A hub. As described on Pacific’s website the purpose of the WRC is: “to promote awareness of women's and gender issues and celebrate and cultivate women's leadership on campus and beyond”, (Pacific, 2012). I asked Corrie what she wished others knew about the WRC, her one word answer was “hub.” She views the center as a hub inclusive for everyone, students, faculty, staff, and outside community members. This is in line with her philosophy of bringing everyone to the table to share ideas, resources and information. She envisions a place where “people come together to make dreams happen and create institutional change.” In this way Corrie models what educational leaders should do by communicating where the organization is going and encouraging creative problem solving, (Lunenberg & Orenstein, 2012, p. 129).

Conclusion

Regrettably, my time with Corrie was short. She is a multi-layered, directed and engaging person. My surface knowledge of Corrie has deepened and changed. Where I once thought of Corrie as a fun loving, nutty, practical joker, I now see her as a leader and an agent of change who invests in those she works with by empowering them and fostering relationships that create a team environment. Corrie is passionate and dedicated to her job and the diverse constituencies that she encounters. She said that sometimes “to a fault” she sees the best in people and their intentions, but that seems to work for her. It reminded me of an old adage, “Sometimes it is better to be kind than to be right.” While Corrie models all Big Five leadership personality traits: surgency, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and intellectance, she is also aware of the importance of adapting her role depending on the situation, (Lunenberg & Orenstein, 2012, p. 103 ). Corrie is a leader I would follow, she takes advantage
of strengths and suitable abilities to reframe the situation and attain the goal, (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 40).

This assignment brought the relevancy of the class materials and activities to life. The base questions you provided helped me brainstorm my questions, but instead of being wedded to my interview protocol, I had a richer experience by letting Corrie speak and listening as her ideas flowed. My only suggestion when preparing future students for this assignment, especially for first year students, would be to tell them not to be so focused on their questions that they miss the golden nuggets of information the interviewee is providing.
References


