

Untapped Potential: In Search of the Reluctant Leader

Anthony J. Gambino, PhD.
Department Chair
Natural Science Department
Manatee Community College
5840 26th Street West
Bradenton, Florida 34207
(941) 752-5567
gambina@mccfl.edu

Crystal G. Gambino, MA
Instructor
Natural Science Department
Manatee Community College
5840 26th Street West
Bradenton, Florida 34207
(941) 752-5274
gambinc@mccfl.edu

Dr. Anthony J. Gambino is the current chair of the Natural Science Department at Manatee Community College. He holds a B.S. in Chemistry from the State University College of New York in Oneonta, New York and a PhD in Organic Chemistry from the University of South Florida. He is a recent graduate of the Florida Chairs Academy and a recipient of an International Leadership Excellence Award and a NISOD Teaching Excellence Award.

Crystal G. Gambino is an instructor of chemistry in the Natural Science Department at Manatee Community College. She received her B.A. and M.A. in chemistry from the University of South Florida. She was initially hired as an adjunct instructor at Manatee Community College and began full time teaching in 2002. She is a tenured faculty member and has had numerous situations where she was required to mentor new chemistry faculty and adjuncts in the Natural Science Department. She also holds leadership positions in the Bradenton Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Introduction:

There exist an elusive breed of potential leaders. Most of these potential leaders will go unnoticed; very few will ever reach their leadership potential. They serve out of view and live in the shadows of others. It is this existence, in the shadow, that will serve them well if they are found and developed into the leaders they could be. The question is how do you find such a potential leader, one that does their job, but gives the credit to those who they helped. They help others reach their potential by gently pushing from behind with words of encouragement. This potential leader should lead, but is reluctant to do so mainly because they see leaders as those who assign the work and then take the credit. In their mind this is the last thing they want to become. Finding a reluctant leader will take a keen eye for observation, nurturing with patience, equipping with knowledge and developing the future leader over time. Tapping into this untapped potential will be a personal investment with a high rate of return.

Before seeking to find the reluctant leader it is important to understand that there are two styles of leadership: transactional and transformational. Transactional leaders operate under the premise of “IF THEN”, which means if you do not complete this task then the following will happen (Blanchard, 2007). Reluctant leaders will never be discovered or trained under a transactional leader. The transformational leader develops ways to praise or redirect regardless of the level of competence or commitment (Blanchard, 2007). It is crucial that the search for the reluctant leader must start with you, you must be a transformational leader or become one.

Finding: Through Observation

Observation is the first step in finding a potential leader. Observation must involve getting to know each team member on more than just a name to face basis. The keen eye of discernment will allow a leader to see the true traits of each team member in their working environment. The traits, which help determine who the reluctant leader is, include: servant hood, teachability, initiative, passion and encouragement.

The first trait you want to observe in the potential leader is servant hood, a genuine interest in the service of others (Maxwell, 1999). Take note of the person who put the needs of others before themselves, this is a trait which must be there because it is not easily taught. Usually, it is the desire to serve that keeps this potential leader from leading, you must show them that they can serve others in a leadership role and that leadership and servant hood are not opposites of each other. Show a reluctant leader that to serve is to lead and to lead is to serve is one of the first major steps toward helping them realize their own leadership potential (Blanchard, 2005).

The second trait is teachability. Teachability is the ability to listen, learn and apply (Maxwell, 1999). It is ironic that in the education community you can have faculty that require their students to listen, learn and apply what they teach, but they themselves know everything and therefore have no need to listen and learn much less apply anything new. The person that is unteachable is full of pride, they are not trainable and therefore not worth the investment of your energy and time.

The third trait to note in a potential leader is initiative. Initiative is found in the self-starter, the person that sees what needs to be done and starts it up (Maxwell, 1999). They also try to push others to start things that need to be done. Not enough chairs at a meeting they go and get some, need more copies they volunteer, forms due, but not called for yet, they already have it started. These people will make great mentors, if they are not already.

The fourth trait, which will serve a potential leader well, is passion for a cause. This trait is sometime confusing; passion for a cause is not the same as pushing one's own agenda. True passion for a cause can help the potential leader ignite others to the main vision. The reluctant leader is where they are because their underlying cause already fits the vision of the intuition; otherwise they would have already left. The passion this person possesses will help others see the vision and find their place in it.

The fifth trait of the potential leader is seen in their interaction with others; how well do they encourage those around them. Being around a person that naturally encourages others is like breath of fresh air (Maxwell, 1995). Many people who encourage others are they themselves lacking in encouragement. Encourage the encourager and the whole working environment seem to improve, it like a ripple effect. Nurturing the encourager will also give them confidence into their untapped potential.

Nurturing: With Patience

Tapping into the untapped potential of a reluctant leader has a lot in common with growing a plant. The similarities between growing a plant and nurturing the potential leader begin at the bottom; both start with a seed. In the nurturing of a potential leader the person is the seed, they are placed in a position, the pot, and give certain tasks, the soil. A potential leader in position will do nothing to become a leader; they are like a seed in soil it will not grow unless certain key ingredients are added. These key ingredients are: the water of trust, the air of encouragement, the sunshine of a positive work environment and the fertilizer of rewards and recognition.

The water of trust will start the seed growing. Like water, trust can never be removed from the person. Like water, trust must be given in just the right amount, too little and growth slows down, too much and the person drowns as a potential leader. Trust is given in the form of task and responsibility (Maxwell, 1995). The temptation will be there to overload, resist it at all cost.

Every plant needs air; your job is to supply the air of encouragement. Do not take acceptable work for granted; make sure to thank people for it; this encourages people to continue to try. Encouragement raises self-esteem and builds courage (Maxwell, 1995). The reluctant leader may be very good at encouraging other, but usually they are very hard on themselves. If you want to be able to take the reluctance away from the reluctant leader, make sure to encourage them daily.

Sunshine makes plants grow. A positive work environment helps the potential leader grow in every aspect (Maxwell, 1995). The work environment is not so much the physical space as it is the emotional level. It is crucial to have a team-based philosophy that everyone's work has significance. The reluctant leader does not know how important their work is; it is your responsibility to show them the significance of their work. A positive work environment is one where people feel secure. This emotional security has many facets; people in a secure environment must feel free to pursue their dreams. Norman Cousins once said; "People are never more insecure than when they become obsessed with their fears at the expense of their dreams" (Maxwell, 1995). One of the key ingredients that will help the reluctance leader become a leader is making them understand that failure is okay as long as one tries. These potential leaders are reluctant because they have been made to feel that failure is unacceptable and it is better not to try than to try and fail. It is crucial that the prospective leader feels free to break new ground and take risks. Remember, at this step, to show them that if something goes wrong you will take the heat and if something goes right you will let them take the recognition.

Your planted potential leader will be growing with the water, air and sunshine, but in order for them to flourish you will need to fertilize with rewards and recognition. Productivity must be rewarded and recognized, but be careful not to reward for no reason (Maxwell, 1995). Fertilizing a plant too much or at the wrong time can destroy the plant. Make a practice of catching people doing things right, the reluctant leader is watching how you treat everyone, so make sure you praise and reward those members of the team that are doing and not those who are idle.

Equipping: With Knowledge and Skill

Equipping begins with a very fundamental question; ask yourself “Have I given this potential leader the equipment to do the assigned tasks?” Do not ask them to assist in scheduling if their computer does not have a spreadsheet program. Before you assign any task to the potential leader always ask; “Am I asking them to build a birdhouse without a hammer and nails?” (Maxwell, 1995)

The next basic level of the equipping process is training. Equipment may be present in the workspace, but without the skill to use it may as well not be there at all. Training is a key essential to the equipping process (Maxwell, 1995). Training comes at many different levels: task training, personality training and team training, are just few general types of training that may fall under the umbrella of the training part of the equipping process. The total sum of the types of training your potential leader will need is dependent on the position the person is currently in or will be placed in. Certain types of training are universal for any leadership position. It is important that you focus on these first, and keep your eye open to see what talents your potential leader possesses. The talents you find in the potential leader during the equipping processes will become their strengths (Liesveld, 2005). These strengths will help you determine the best way to develop and find a place for that specific reluctant leader.

The first type of training that any potential leader needs is general task training on the equipment that they may be required to use. Reflecting upon the analogy of scheduling without a spreadsheet program, a spreadsheet program is only useful if the person knows how to use it. As a leader you will sometimes find yourself observing team members overloaded with new processes to learn without having the guidance to do so. It is crucial that you develop a plan to train any team member in a new process. This training can be done as a general training session and followed up by the positioning of silo mentors, team members who have a skill for a specific task, for each process (Trautman, 2007). If you know that the individual will need to interface with a new piece of software six months from now you will need to coordinate training on the software in advance of the start-up date. When you are training the reluctant leader, in any task, make sure that there is a well-developed plan for them. By doing this you will safeguard them from the feeling that they are being left high and dry. It will be essential that you personally meet with the reluctant leader periodically to see how their training is going.

The second type of training that a potential leader will need is training in determining personality types (including their own), and how to deal with given personality types. Training in personality types and how to deal with those types will be

indispensable to the potential leader. Personality training comes in many different forms. If you have had such training then use the system you have been trained in. If you have never had any training in how to determine and deal with different personalities, this will be a good time to bring a professional in to do a group training session.

The third type of training that the reluctant leader will need, is situational leadership. Training in situation leadership involves three basic skills: diagnosis, flexibility and partnering for performance. When you are training the reluctant leader in situational leadership he/she must be trained to look at their team members and diagnose each member's competence and commitment level. The member's competence level can fluctuate from Low to Moderated to High. A member with a low competence level might be a new team member fresh out of school or someone who is at the beginner stage of learning a new process, while a member with a high competence level might be a senior level team member or someone who knows the process very well. In order for your potential leader to diagnose a member's competence level they will need to evaluate that member's knowledge, skills and experience. A team member's commitment level can also fluctuate from Low to Variable to High. A member with a high commitment level might be either an excited new hire or an individual who has a genuine interest in the situation. A member with a low commitment level might be one who either has become disillusioned with the process or may be one who does not like change. When you training your potential leader to evaluating a member's commitment level you will be training him/her to evaluate that member's confidence and enthusiasm level. (Blanchard, 2003)

The practice of situational leadership employs two types of behavior: Directive where the leader is telling team members what to do, when to do it, where to do it and how to do it and Supportive where the leader is listening to team members, involving them in the decision process, encouraging them, praising their progress and facilitating their interactions with others. Once the potential leader has learned to evaluate the competence and commitment level of a team member they will have to then choose one of the following styles of leadership: Directing, Coaching, Supporting or Delegating (See Appendix A). One way to help a potential leader learn how these styles work is to model and explain the system you are using in different situations. A Directing Style of leadership provides high direction and low support. In this style the leader will provide specific direction about roles and goals and closely track performance. They will also provide frequent feedback. The Coaching style of leadership provides high direction and high support. In this style the leader will explain the why, solicit suggestions, praise progress even if it is only partially right and continue to direct task accomplishment. The Supporting style will require high support and low direction by the leader. In this style the leader will facilitate interaction with others, listen to people, draw them out, encourage and support them, but provide little direction. The Delegating style will involve low support and low direction. In this style the leader will empower the individual to act independently with appropriate resources to get the job done. (Blanchard, 2003)

The second part of the potential leader's situational leadership training involves instructing him/her in the art of being flexible in determining a leadership style. A leader cannot assume that every task a member is trying to accomplish will require the same leadership style. If you are successful in instructing the potential leader in the art of flexibility, you will have also train him/her in the last skill, which is partnering for performance: when the team works together to accomplish a task or develop a process then everyone wins. (Blanchard, 2003)

The one type of training that the reluctant leader needs that other leader will probably not need is courage training, this type of training may involve placing them in situations where they will find out it okay to ask for help, it okay to fail, and it okay to admit you are wrong. Courage training will integrate into the other forms of training. It is important to remember that in all aspects of training, keep in mind that you will want to give a potential leader a task that they have not been completely trained for to see their ingenuity. Once you have completed most of the training, give them a chance to use that training. You will need to give the reluctant leader responsibility, authority and accountability; this will help complete their courage training.

In all of the training you do it is helpful to keep in mind the five step equipping process by John Maxwell: Model, Mentor, Monitor, Motivate, Multiply. Model, any time you train someone first model whatever it is you want to train him or her to do. Mentor, after they have seen the task now walk them through it slowly explaining steps along the way. Monitor, now that they have seen it twice and had it explained, allow them to do the task and explain it back to you. Motivate, let them do the task without you and offer encouragement to them. Multiply, the last step is the one you have been waiting for let them train others. (Maxwell, 1995)

Conclusion:

The future will bring many holes in leadership positions with few qualified people wanting to fill them. Training the reluctant leader may seem like a lot of time and effort, but as you embark on this journey you will find that the all the rewards of such an investment are not long range. In preparing the reluctant leader to become a future leader you will find your burden of leadership getting lighter while the amount of potential leaders multiplying very quickly. The reluctant leader is naturally good at finding others like themselves and once you have trained one or two reluctant leaders you will find them successfully removing the reluctance out of this hidden group of potential leaders. The well trained, now not so reluctant leader, will show those who serve in the shadows that service in the light can be equally fulfilling. Successor planning will become much easier with a ready pool of potential leaders who are willing to serve and bring out the best in any team or organization.

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