



# **Leadership in School Head Teachers Based on Trust and Virtue Leads to a Better Educational Performance**

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***Leadership in School Head Teachers Based on Trust and Virtue Leads to a Better Educational Performance***

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***Abstract***

There is abundant research trying to describe the dynamics and behaviors of successful schools. These approaches are often targeted at structural levels, teaching methods and techniques, improved curriculum, systems, programs, laws or regulations. There is research and collective experience, however, to support the idea that virtue and trust in school head teachers' leadership is ranked first in the changes needed to improve the education transformation processes.

This paper is aimed at establishing a different and complementary approach to successful schools based on virtue and character as sources of trust, cooperation and positive interpersonal relationship between head teachers and teachers. Relationship and organizational trust is the crucial factor that enhances community life in schools, it creates an environment of excellence in educational outcomes. A practical model of head teacher leadership based on these evidences is currently applied in Argentina by the Varkey Foundation and will also be briefly described in this paper.

Recognizing man's social nature and interdependence, which spurs cooperation and community life, this paper posits that the development of personal virtues engenders community life and is the engine of human flourishing, and personal development. When this is applied to leadership in education, it inspires cooperation, mutual respect, teamwork, mastery, execution excellence and better educational performance.

In this sense, this paper will try to respond the following question: which are the fundamental attributes that school head teachers should have to generate trust and cooperation? To answer it, six pivotal virtues will be described using the acronym BICEPS, which suggests strength and capacity.

***Benevolence***

The virtue to genuinely, respectfully and empathically intend to help others, with selflessness, purity of heart, compassion, kindness and love.

***Integrity***

The virtue of those who tell the truth, do what they feel and say, with authenticity, and generate an honest, open, direct and transparent communication.

***Competence***

The virtue that masters theoretical and practical knowledge nurtured by curiosity. To "know how" implies a constant learning attitude.

***Excellence***

The virtue that makes possible the discovery and deployment of each person's full potential, through accountability, measuring performance and feedback. A key characteristic of this virtue implies executorial excellence, aiming for results and having passion for constant and never ending improvement.

#### *Presence*

The virtue of being always available and visible, physically and emotionally, in good or bad times. Presence connects members of the educational community and promotes autonomy and independence, encouraging creativity and innovation.

#### *Service*

The virtue of humbly giving oneself with patience, consistency and personal commitment to protect and to help develop the team's potential; understanding that leadership is influence translated in affective and effective love in action.

This research concludes that by developing this set of relational virtues within a teaching-learning community, it is possible for every school leader to generate trust and to reach its greatest potential, achieving outcomes measured by student's academic performance. In other words, virtue generates trust, cooperation team work and consequently better educational performance.

### ***Introduction***

Research on the poor scopes of learning is not something new. What is more recent is the clarity of the magnitude of this problem, given that currently approximately 263 million children drop out of school without the necessary tools for their development<sup>1</sup>.

In response to this problem, the question that this paper will try to answer is: how can schools not only achieve basic competences but also help to develop the maximum potential of students?

The usual approaches are generally directed to structural levels and to educational techniques, understood as curriculum, programs, workshops, regulations, and methods to select and evaluate head teachers. However, we believe that fostering a school leadership based on trust could represent a much more powerful element than other factors discussed thus far.

The proposal of this paper is that only through the development of a series of virtues we can achieve trust that will later affect school improvement of children and young students. This is, in some degree, an original approach for the school environment. Although this type of leadership is already working in the areas of business, sports, religion and health, in the school environment, however, it is often resisted because there is a link between this type of leadership and an efficiency and result-based concept, which paradoxically generates distrust and rejection.

Our approach states that through the development of a series of virtues in school leaders, students will be able to cooperate, develop authentic learning and achieve personal growth. Every point that we will mention in our paper is a generator of relational trust, which is the result of habits and behaviors, developed in a framework of academic excellence.

Despite the widespread recognition of the importance of trust, there is a lack of consensus to define it.

Nevertheless from our perspective what is really important is not to discuss what is the most relevant definition, but how the feeling of trust is built and what habits and behaviors need to be developed to achieve it.

Furthermore, if we had an unambiguous definition, trust would not be an achievement that could be reached instantaneously since it is a process that develops with time and effort. In other terms: it is important to discover horizons, but you have to do more than just looking at them from afar: you have to walk towards them and reach them through a clear, gradual and very disciplined path.

This approach will propose a path that leads to virtues. however, virtues require practice, repetition, effort; to postpone our natural tendency for instant gratification; it develops over time as a muscle does when exercising. In order to remember it easily, we have devised an acronym that symbolizes this idea: "BICEPS". Biceps represents a concept which describes the behaviours that generate trust. In the Varkey foundation's programs we teach and encourage the embodiment of these habits in the schools that we support and coach.

Towards the end of this paper, we will briefly discuss an experience that the Varkey Foundation is implementing in Argentina (FVA), where the objective is to develop the trust-based leadership of 15,000 head teachers and teachers from this country.

### ***Development***

We will start from the-fundamentals: man cannot develop in solitude since he is a social animal. For Aristotle, a man is a "zoon politikon",<sup>2</sup> a sociable being that needs to live in the "polis", in society, to reach his goals, cover his intellectual and physical needs, develop his vocation and achieve a meaningful life.

Thus society becomes the necessary framework for a human being -relational by nature- to develop and feel fulfilled. In that sense, community is possible as long as there is unity and personal virtue. An old Russian proverb has summarized this idea in the expression "*there is no village without a just man*"; there is no community that does not arise from the virtue and unity of people.

First, we will define what we understand by virtue. Aristotle affirms that human virtue is not a faculty or a passion but a habit that achieves the excellence of a faculty and its passions and almost naturally enables us to perform a task.<sup>3</sup> Thomas Aquinas expresses that virtue must be understood as "the force by which a human being can follow his impulse -*impetus*- with all the power - *potestas* - that he has (*De virtutibus in communi*, 1).<sup>4</sup> Aquinas defines virtue as *ultimum potentiae*, "the full potential one can become".

For the old Greeks, any attribute that made something work to its highest degree, according to its design, was conceived as its virtue. So, for example, being sharp is the "virtue" of a knife because this allows it to cut properly. Aristotle distinguishes two families of excellences, strengths or virtues: the moral and the intellectual.<sup>5</sup> The first ones provide parameters for the impulse of our desires in the sphere of our will. The intellectuals, on the other hand, relate to the good use of intelligence.

Virtues, therefore, are not innate but depend on us to develop them. Everything that nature gives us, we receive as a capacity and then, eventually, we transform it into an act, becoming a kind of second nature for the one who owns it.

That is to say, for virtues to mature there must be cooperation with nature where human beings gradually

develop and unfold their potentiality through the exercise of their own freedom. Translating this into educational life it means that leaders should be able to cultivate the land where the seed will fall and prepare a working environment for their team to perform so that the students may achieve their highest potential, and personal flourishing.

We have expressed that virtue is a habit that arises from the repeated and orderly exercise of our own capacities and whose results allows us to do well, in a habitual manner and with a certain competence. But this competence will only arise acting with courage and moral fortitude, exerting a political and not despotic domination of the internal structure of passions -as the old Aristotle says- that are the inner motors that energize human acts. Passions should not be eliminated or suppressed, they should rather be integrated as essential forces of human dynamism.

What virtues build school leadership based on relational trust? What virtues generate cooperation? In the acronym "BICEPS" we find a path that provides guidance, generates community life and optimizes school performance.

### ***Benevolence***

It is the cornerstone of any effective leader. a leader must have the will and the vocation to do good to others. Teachers and students expect head teachers to help them develop and grow, in an environment of security, love and acceptance. The desire to do good is the ultimate motivation of an authentic leader.

Benevolence implies that a head teacher interacts with members of his/her team sincerely with a pure heart. This condition is associated with the expectation generated by leaders aimed to motivate and to be a positive force in their environment.

A benevolent leader under no circumstance would want to harm others; he is able to postpone personal benefits on behalf others.

In other words, there is benevolence when there is a balance between self-interest and that of others and a clear tendency to postponing personal ego or a narcissistic attitude. An authentic leader realizes that she or he is in a mission higher than himself.

In a school, when students feel that their leaders care about them, or when the authorities do not take advantage of the vulnerability of the other members of the educational community a feeling of gratitude and loyalty emerges. On the contrary, if it is evident that a head teacher wishes to manipulate the organization, or use it for own benefit, his leadership will be in jeopardy and each teacher will then seek his own "personal salvation". Following this line, in an environment where a teacher feels fear and anxiety, where he/she does not feel psychologically safe, "isolated in his silo" represented by the classroom, the school teamwork weakens and eventually loses effectiveness. Even more, in any organization where there is fear to be penalized in case of failure, in order to avoid this risk, the first victim will be creativity and innovation.

A few months ago we asked an English teacher, Andria Zafirakou, the last winner of the Global Teacher Prize<sup>6</sup>, what did she believe was the fundamental virtue of a good school leader. She answered openly: "The main virtue is to be kind". It is remarkable the simplicity of her expression and the significance of it. For Andria, education is an act of love. Love involves watching, listening, caring for the other and that love can only be offered from freedom, with respect and honesty. In addition, this empathic attitude of a leader, involving care, attention and acceptance, is essential to generate the curiosity that impels students

to discover and understand, without restriction, the world that surrounds us.

From our point of view, school leaders should not primarily think of themselves as sources of knowledge and information, but mainly as generators of spaces where positive and productive relationships, necessary for learning, can be fostered. A leader must act as a guardian of an appropriate environment for teachers to feel safe, inspired and motivated; to give their best, without a feeling of risk, or fearing to be sanctioned if they fail. It is well established that teachers are the primary cause of students learning. head principals help teachers to develop the best version of themselves.

The school transmits a series of values and attitudes that shape the individual identities of students and molds their way of thinking, feeling and acting. These vital attitudes are learned, fundamentally, in relationships within the school community, where, love, compassion and respect play a key role.

### ***Integrity***

It is the accordance between what a person feels, thinks, says and does is of importance for the very existence of social life<sup>7</sup>. Without integrity or truthfulness there is no sustainable and productive community life. Speaking honestly means, in many cases, exposing one's ignorance and becoming vulnerable to others. Leaders that have integrity are authentic and real, they don't have a double discourse or hidden agendas, and always communicate with others in a transparent and direct manner. They do not manipulate the information, they tell the truth with respect, and honour their promises.

A truthful person does not intend to offend but, at the same time is capable of assuming the consequences of telling the truth, avoids duplicity, simulation and hypocrisy. The virtue of truthfulness is complemented by benevolence and love. Borrowing Edith Stein's words, one should not accept as truth anything that is not accompanied by love, and not accepting as love anything that is not accompanied by the truth. Finally, truth should not be mistaken with spontaneity, which is to act or speak in accordance with what a person feels at a certain moment without necessarily being aware of the consequences of what is going to be said.

A leader that has integrity observes and listens honestly and respectfully to what others say. Even when two people do not agree or express different points of view, nevertheless they can feel valued if they realize that the other listens carefully to them and value what they say, regardless of the merit of their opinions. Attention is the rarest and purest form of gratitude<sup>8</sup>.

As a counterpart telling lies represents the instrument of a leader with a narcissistic and manipulative character. Lack of truth not only corrodes credibility, but also erodes school life and weakens the academic results of any educational effort.

Human intelligence lives and breathes in an environment of truth. Truth is the foundation on which cooperation and community life are built.

### ***Competence***

Benevolence and integrity, by themselves, are not enough. One can be good and truthful, but also irrelevant, as Covey says<sup>9</sup>. To express it in more graphical manner, I will not fly on a jumbo jet flown by my best friend who is an excellent person but not a pilot.

The competence needed to compete with success requires know how and the art of the discipline one practices. The enemy to fight is ignorance. Know-how springs from an attitude of wonder, curiosity, and

learning and, above all, practice. Competence has to do with the ability to meet the goals, optimizing the way to obtain results. Simultaneously one must recognize limitations and weaknesses. Humility is the truth as Saint Teresa of Avila once said<sup>10</sup>. It is a central virtue for community life and implies to know ourselves, our strengths and weaknesses, but trusting that working as a team, avoiding arrogance and selfishness, we can develop our full potential.

Every leader needs empathy to understand their own strengths and, simultaneously to discern the feelings and skills of others. It is well established that without empathy and emotional intelligence, which are then translated into actions in favor of others, it would be impossible to generate trust and inspiring work environments. If a leader wants to be trusted, he/she needs first to extend trust.

One of the aspects that determine a competent leadership is the extensive and deep domain of the contents of the subject that is taught; teachers' love for their subject matter is transmitted to the students. The art of teaching implies knowledge but also implies competence in conveying those contents in an attractive and motivating manner.

If we talk about competence, we should mention passion. Head teachers that speak from the heart reach the heart of their students, as stated in the motto of Cardinal John Henry Newman: *Cor ad cor loquitur*, "heart speaks unto heart". No one can give what one does not have: head teachers who are not capable of embodying the virtues needed for true leadership will not be able to lead or serve in their educational communities.

A good leader, recognizes that the aspiration to improve, grow and be happy are the strongest motivations of human beings and acts accordingly.

### **Excellence**

Excellence implies a passionate search for constant improvement so that all the potentialities of the students are deployed according to their personal possibilities. When there is a vocation for excellence based on competences, competitive results are achieved.

School leadership does not imply an immutable role, that is, leaders and teachers are not trained only once; they require "a constant and never-ending improvement". It was James Kerr who coined this concept by observing the habits of the All Blacks, the world-famous New Zealand rugby team, who, in their daily training, internalized the need of a "constant and never ending improvement".<sup>11</sup>

Excellence requires perseverance, discipline, consistency; always with a clear focus on the development of true capacities. Emilio Komar, a renowned argentine philosopher, recalled John Henry Newman's statement that "true development is the development of the truth"<sup>12</sup>, and he interpreted it as *eidopoiesis*, the unfolding of one's true self.<sup>13</sup> The development of the personal *eidos* constitutes the most authentic form of development. The deepest desire of human beings, which is behind all their daily desires, fears, hopes, sorrows and joys, is to reach the fullness of their potential making patent what is latent.

Leaders who aspire to excellence aim at creating an optimal working environment, so that everyone can achieve their best version of themselves. This search for excellence has its roots in the spontaneous and natural will that human beings have as part of their nature. It is what Scholastics called *voluntas ut natura*, that is, a dynamism – for the ancient Greeks, this inner dynamism that tends toward completion and fulfilment is called *telos*- or an original, primitive, spontaneous and natural drive, that expresses itself as

an innate tendency towards perfection.

Ultimately, a school leader in cooperation with human nature unleashes this innate inner dynamism that leads the school team to fulfill the highest version of themselves.

### ***Presence***

Presence is understood as a state or attitude of physical and emotional availability or permanent support, which could be represented as an affective and effective participation in teaching activities, whilst at the same time respecting the autonomy and personal initiative of each member of the faculty.

True presence empowers teachers, encouraging them to take risks and be creative without fear of reprisal if things do not come out as expected. A leader's presence results in cooperation, not in control or domination. As a reference we can mention that the head teachers of our school leadership program (PLIE)<sup>14</sup> claim that young people in their schools, who recognize the benevolent presence of administrators and teachers, are more committed to their schools and are less prone to engage in risky behaviour.

Good leaders prepare the conditions for learning and to do so, they must be there, physically present, in good times and bad times. Head teachers who are physically and emotionally present are itinerant; they circulate around the school, and they have "open-door" offices. This means that they are always available to receive their teammates, since the reason for their leadership is based on a permanent availability towards the school community so that teachers can teach more and better.

### ***Service***

True leadership is service and influence. This happens in all venues of life but particularly in an educational environment. Service is the willingness to offer oneself, humbly prioritizing other people's needs over their own, as expressed in the Gospel of Mark: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all". (Mc 9,35)

A student trusts someone who has professional competence, but also, and above all, that is willing to inspire and motivate their faculty humbly and with service and dedication. In this sense I dare to say that Psalm 23 "The Lord is my Shepherd" is the hymn and paradigm of the highest form of leadership.

### ***Conclusions***

The position of each school head teacher, entails huge potential and responsibility. Our approach aims at making school head teachers cooperate with the natural capacities of their team by means of a sustained leadership based in virtues that generate relational trust.

Interpersonal relationships are fundamental pillars that support daily life in schools. Virtuous behaviors and habits (BICEPS) generate trust; these interpersonal relationships between teachers and administrators are the foundations of cooperation in school organizations that enable teamwork and facilitate the processes of educational change.

We have expressed that trust is built and fed with facts. On the one hand, this paper has provided a conceptual and descriptive reflection about trust, but above all, it has intended to describe a method based on behaviour and habits to achieve it. This path has been tested in several programs managed by Varkey Foundation Argentina, directed to head school teachers. These school leaders recognized its potential to promote educational reform and enhance academic performance. The experience of



developing educational leadership in the different programs of the Varkey Foundation reinforces the idea that there must be a clear path to develop trust and the universal virtues embodied by BICEPS represent a GPS for effective school leaders.

Even if school leaders say: "trust me", if students do not observe concrete facts they will not trust, because trust requires us to be witnesses rather than prophets. The heart of all educational reform goes through the hearts and competences of the head teacher and the team of educators.

In school life, in order to achieve true learning, we need to generate a series of conditions that, as a result, represent relational trust, which consists in believing and becoming vulnerable in front of others in exchange for being benefited by them.

Trust is a feeling generated by forming habits, and implies that teachers feel psychologically safe within their work environment. Experience shows that a school head teacher who does not generate relational trust cannot mobilize his team or produce relevant educational changes. In this context we affirm that virtues are universal because they are based in human nature which is older than its history.

Those school leaders who, with their personal virtues, radiate their love for teachers and students, and with authenticity and competence transmit their passion for academic excellence, are those who achieve, humbly and with a spirit of service, the changes that lead to school improvement.

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