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Michelle Obama: Setting the Standard for Moral Leadership

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Abstract

The literature on both Transformational and Charismatic theories of leadership espouse the importance of communication as a part of the leadership phenomenon and a precursor to becoming an effective moral leader. Developing moral character and leadership skills has never happened overnight. Readers of this paper will learn of a distinguished leader who grew up in the inner city of Chicago with caring parents who taught the importance of moral leadership. Coming from a unique background, living in an era of difficult times, facing a society of uncertainty, our First Lady, Michelle Obama, has grown into a leader that has earned respect for moral leadership qualities. Through using a transformational leadership style, Mrs. Obama has asked children to start eating healthier and has encouraged companies to support military families.
Defining Moral Leadership

Moral leadership has been defined as the ability to encourage others to be visionaries; engage in empowering educational activities, both as a student and teacher; encourage others to bring joy to hearts; build unity while cultivating diversity; oppose one’s self-centered tendencies by turning towards one’ higher purpose for existence; understand relationships of dominance and be able to facilitate transformation into relationships of inter-dependence, reciprocity, and service (Taylor, 2011).

Another definition of moral leadership pertained to moral leaders having responsibilities that will impact ethical dimensions of leadership. For example, Mintzberg (1980) identified ten managerial responsibilities of a leader, separating ten into three roles such as interpersonal (figurehead, leader, and liaison), informational (monitor, disseminator, and spokesperson); and decisional (entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator, and negotiator). In essence, Mrs. Obama has demonstrated all of these qualities of moral leadership through services and devotion by helping others.

Locating Moral Leaders

As a moral leader, individuals hold one another responsible for helping others stay aligned with important ideas while creating organizational policies, practices and reward systems based on moral values. This type of leader can be found in secondary education, corporate America, and higher education. For example, at the secondary level, Taylor (2011) stated that Michael Fullan described moral leadership as imperative at the school level. In particular, over the past three decades, childhood obesity rates in America have tripled, and today, nearly one in three children in America are overweight or obese. The numbers are even higher in African American and Hispanic communities, where nearly
40% of the children are overweight or obese. Studies have shown that chronic obesity-related health problems can cause such diseases as diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer, and asthma among children (PR, N., 2012). There are so many children and adolescents that are either obese or overweight and the trend is not reversing (Ilka, & Wallace, 2012).

**Making a Difference in Schools**

Mrs. Obama wanted to make a difference so in February 2010 she declared a war on childhood obesity and introduced the *Let's Move Initiative*; a ten billion dollar, 10-year initiative to eradicate childhood obesity and raise a healthier generation of kids over the next decade. Her efforts and most recent initiative have garnered the attention of many public and private entities, including K-12 school districts across our nation (Ilka & Wallace, 2012).

Schools were presented with a myriad of opportunities to prevent and manage childhood obesity. These included modification of the health and physical education curriculum, collaboration with school health staff, parent and community outreach and alteration of the school lunch programs. Food Service directors grounded in morality and a universal commitment to putting “kids first” have been most successful at improving the quality of school nutrition programs (Scheck et al., 2012).

In addition, Golley (2010) stated that food provided by schools at lunch and other times of the day has the potential to support children’s nutrition, growth and development. Anecdotes from teachers and parents described that healthy foods would help children concentrate more, improve behavior and increase academic performance when healthier foods are introduced into meal plans.
At the corporate level, Becker (2007) stated that Jack Welch, an outspoken former chairman of General Electric Company and a business executive once summed up his leadership philosophy as “The Welch theory is those who do, get, and those who don’t, go.” In other words, leadership was all about authority and power and the will to move on, to change and to transform. It was some kind of process that gets people to do something in accordance with the leader’s vision and objectives. For example, after Mrs. Obama married President Obama, she had a vision to help young adults so she begun working in public service by assisting Mayor Daley with planning and developing the city of Chicago. This job led to an opportunity to serve as executive director for the Chicago Office of Public Allies which was a non-profit program designed to help young adults develop skills for employment.

**Supporting Military Families**

Another moral leadership push that Michelle Obama supported pertained to helping military families stay employed. For example, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) has started to back an initiative to create workplaces that were supportive of employees who were connected to the military. The Joining Forces program was created to recognize and serve our nation's extraordinary military families. “This was a challenge to every American to say thank you, take action, and make a real commitment to supporting our military families” (Wright, 2011).

As result of this program, many human resource professionals have incorporated this innovative in the workplace to hire military spouses and support families. SHRM's leaders have pledged to educate human resource professionals and others about the skills that military spouses bring to the workplace and the challenges faced by military spouses
and families. In 2010, SHRM announced an initiative to work with the U.S. Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment & Training Service to find solutions to the high unemployment rate among military veterans. In addition, SHRM and more than 100 of its state councils and chapters have signed statements of support with the organization Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (Wright, 2011).

Attending College

In higher education, colleges and universities have a stake in the outcome of good leadership and could be a major determinant in the development of good leaders. Colleges and universities were a place where most future political, business, academic, religious and athletic leaders learn. For example, Mrs. Obama was born on January 17, 1964 in Chicago, Illinois and grew up on Chicago's South Side. Mrs. Obama attended Princeton University where she graduated cum laude in 1985. After graduation, she earned a law degree from Harvard Law School in 1988. Upon graduating from law school, she worked as a lawyer, city administrator and community outreach worker.

Mrs. Obama joined the University of Chicago in 1996 as associate dean of student services and helped develop the university's first community-service program. She then worked for the University of Chicago Hospitals beginning in 2002, as executive director of community relations and external affairs. In May 2005, she was appointed vice president for community and external affairs at the University of Chicago Medical Center.

Mrs. Obama has many qualities of moral leadership that could be summarized as a transformational leader. Mrs. Obama has conveyed charisma, motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized attention to all of her followers. In essence, transformational leaders articulate purpose for individuals within an organization in a
manner that transcends short-term goals which focus on higher-order intrinsic needs (Guthrie & Schuerman, 2010).

**Summary**

Mrs. Obama has brought talent, knowledge, and respect to our nation.

Mrs. Obama believed in education and has demonstrated this by performing well in school. Upon graduating from high school, she attended college and continued her education by obtaining a law degree. With her knowledge and expertise, she has given back to the communities, school systems, and military families.

As a transformational leader, Mrs. Obama has led in admirable ways that have caused followers to identify her as a leader (Guthrie & Schuerman, 2010). For example, in one of her opening speeches she stated, “I come here as a mom whose girls are the heart of my heart and the center of my world—they’re the first thing I think about when I wake up in the morning, and the last thing I think about when I go to bed at night. Their future—and all our children’s future—is my stake.” —Michelle Obama (Ansari, 2011).

Another prime example of Michelle’s leadership pertained to investing in education and the overall health of children. Mrs. Obama has urged Americans to educate others about childhood obesity which was often associated with the onset of Type II Diabetes (Rabin 2010). In addition, November 14th has been devoted to World Diabetes Day and has been awarded as an opportunity to educate elementary children about the power to have control of their health. Finally, Mrs. Obama has addressed issues and encouraged companies to make a difference by supporting military families and providing job opportunities to military wives and spouses. In essence, Mrs. Obama has set the standard
for becoming a moral leader. Mrs. Obama has inspired women across the world by creating an image of strong leadership, positive character, and high moral standards.
References


