Running Head: Knowledge is a Requirement

Knowledge is a Greater Requirement for Leading Others in Comparison to Power

PhD Student

Silvia E. Moore

George Mason University

**Knowledge is a greater Requirement**

My husband is a quiet presence in our home. He is a consummate reader. His reading material spans many subjects. Tom enjoys reading both sides of any argument. His nickname is the ‘devil’s advocate’ because he will often discuss the finer points of an opposite opinion as if he is in total agreement with that opinion. He is always surprising the kids, and me, with the vast amount of trivial (according to us) knowledge that he has. For instance, one morning about 10 years ago the kids were in the kitchen theorizing about the stars and how fast or slow time travel would have to develop in order for humanity to become space explorers. My husband, no scientist, began to lecture them on the speed of light and on Einstein’s theory of folding time and space. He pulled out a piece of paper and demonstrated how it could be possible and how the math needed to solve this problem had not yet been discovered.

My husband has never laid down any ground rules nor has he ever told me to do or not to do anything; but he is our indisputable leader. As my 16 year old puts it, “Dad never gets mad or upset. When we do something we aren’t suppose to do…we just go into his office to discuss what happens and somehow when you come out of there, you feel embarrassed for having been called in.”

Tom has a whole lot of knowledge, but not just book knowledge, he has people smarts and emotional smarts. I use to get angry with him when we first married because when I asked a question he took an inordinate amount of time to answer my question which led me to believe that he wasn’t listening. But, I found out years later (I’m a bit slow) that he does not respond right away to questions or comments because he likes to process information and formulate his answers carefully. In our home, Tom is the leader because we, his family, respect his wisdom. His knowledge is a greater requirement than power to lead a ‘very’ impulsive wife and five children who did not fall far from the apple tree.

**Power & Knowledge was a Greater Requirement**

During an interview for a job as a learning resource teacher, the head of the school made it clear to me that I was to revamp the referral system to make it more transparent. As I had come from a school system where the paperwork for students with learning disabilities was managed with aplomb, if not with ‘obsessive-compulsiveness,’ I felt capable to the task.

To my relief, the school had compiled a resource handbook compiled to meet International School Certification mandates. I spent two weeks prior to the school opening coordinating the paperwork as specified in the handbook. By the time school was in session, I had finished organizing the paperwork and could focus on the kids. All was flowing well, I thought, until the first Student Study Team (SST) meeting. The Reading Specialist (my nemesis), a 20 year veteran of the school, was very upset that I had changed the paperwork and demanded that we change it back. I maintained that the new system was not new. I tried to explain that the changes were made in accordance to the ‘Resource Handbook’ she had helped to create. She did not agree and proceeded to become a thorn in my side.

This person was confrontational in every SST meeting we attended, often singling me out with negative comments. In the four years I worked in the elementary school, this person criticized everything I did openly and often dragged other teachers into our conversations/disagreements. I complained to my principal but he was powerless to help me. The woman I was dealing with had too much power. She was an artist at stirring the pot with other teachers; and, she was the ‘union’ representative. She certainly had the power and the knowledge of control.

The tipping point of this adversarial relationship occurred over a “pilot learning lab” that I instituted with the blessing of the principal and the head of school. My nemesis began a campaign of email attacks. She emailed frequently and copied all the teachers involved to say that I had no authority to do what I was doing (learning labs) and that I was overstepping my position. I answered her fiery emails with tact and poise. My replies were professional and patient but her responses became more and more abusive. I complained to my principal but nothing changed. I finally wrote a letter of harassment to the head of school. She was called in but the result was more email attacks.

Finally, I threatened her with court proceedings. The head of school called me in and asked if I was serious, I told her that I was. She indicated that it was probably for the best that this matter had escalated to this level as this teacher had been like this for years and that a formal complaint might be just what was needed to ‘cool her heal.’ Things did calm down and ‘my nemesis’ was silent for the last month of that school year.

As I reflect on this episode, I realize that my principal, a PhD in educational leadership, was helpless in this situation. Although exceptionally knowledgeable in administrative matter, testing, and curriculum; the culture of the school needed a powerful presence. The teachers were entrenched in their beliefs and only a leader with the power (and fortitude) to make changes could lead this group. The power to lead was diffused by teacher resistance of knowledge.

**Knowledge was a Greater Requirement but she Exercised Power**

As a brand new teacher, I thought I knew it all and if I didn’t I looked for it in my textbooks. My first job was in a Fairfax Country Elementary School. I was the special education teacher for 5th graders. I worked along side another brand new teacher and together we worked with students identified as poor readers, writers, or organizers. We were both new to the education world and had lots of enthusiasm and dedication. We spent countless hours searching textbooks and the Internet for ideas that fit our students. We floundered from one strategy to another hoping one would stick.

We meant well, but in the end our lack of experience and collaboration with other teachers produced students who acquired situational strategies but they did not generalize this knowledge (I know because I looped with them the next year). What was missing?...An understanding of the institution and culture; lack of planning for a continuum; and, lack of leadership.

Between Mr. Davis and me we had the learning theories memorized! But we failed to collaborate vertically with the other specialist. Had we sought their counsel we would have found out that some of the strategies we were using had been used; and, that the materials we had created were already available. Knowing this would have saved us a lot of time and stress.

When I look back at this time I think about how differently I would have structured my teaching. How I would have collaborated with the 4th and 6th grade teachers to understand how to extend what the 4th grade teachers had taught and how to prepare the students for what they were going to do. If my first year was a failure it was due to the fact that my leader, with all the experience of her years in the craft, did not give us guidance.

Rather than use her power to shape us, she used her power to ensure that record keeping was up-to-date, parent meetings met timelines, supplies were ordered and used properly, and that we (special educators) were present at meetings. Our leader failed to exercise her knowledge to ensure that we were creating learners. Our leader had the power to lead but instead she placed more importance on the administrative ‘stuff’ instead of sharing her knowledge with two obstinate ‘new’ teachers who refused to ask for help from seasoned teachers.