The Learning Leader

During the second session one of the guest speakers made a comment about Dan Evans’ leadership that stayed with me. The session focused on Governor Evans’ work in higher education in Washington State. Barbara Smith a founding faculty member at Evergreen State College made the remark, “Dan Evans comes to leadership positions ready to learn.” In the next two sessions, I noticed that other speakers who had worked with Governor Evans in a variety of capacities made similar comments about the former governor’s capacity to learn. In the last session, Donald Horowitz spoke passionately about the governor emphatically declaring:

“Dan Evans is always a teacher. He’s a good teacher and he was a good governor because he is a good learner.”

These statements struck me as unusual. While I am a graduate student heavily invested in the act of learning, the idea of learning as a leadership quality hadn’t occurred to me before. When I think of the term “leader” I often think of adjectives like knowledgeable, commanding, and wise and phrases like “take charge.” I suppose that I have thought of a leader as the kind of person that has already done their learning. When they are in charge it’s their turn to show and tell.
Of course, when I think back in my experiences with leaders in school, at work, and at organizations where I have volunteered the best leaders have not been these “Great Santini” types. Instead they often scored low on the ‘know-it-all’ scale and high on the mutual equality scale. They were the leaders open to listening, collaboration, and getting their hands dirty. I am not sure if I understood at the time that these are also important components to learning. In retrospect I realize that the favorite leaders in my life have been good learners. I valued these leaders because they valued me. My opinion mattered because they had room to hear someone else’s voice besides their own. Also with these favorite leaders there was never one way to accomplish a task. They lead and people followed them because there was mutual respect and trust.

Hearing that Dan Evans’ openness to learning has been an important leadership trait in his career was vitally important to me. The reverence that Dan Evans’ former colleagues had for him highlighted the value of this leadership trait. To hear how valuable learning and learning from others above, below, and equal to you in stature was an excellent reminder for me as I approach the “end” of my student career. One would think that as a graduate student I would automatically embrace the concept of “life-long learning” but I have to admit to times in my work life when I have been less than open to input and innovation. I have fallen into the trap of sticking to the old way of doing things because I know how the old way works. When Ms. Smith said that Dan Evans came to Evergreen State College as the new college president “ready to learn” I realized that I only have to keep learning if I want to remain relevant and effective.
For Dan Evans it seems that being a learner has meant that he highly values education and innovation. Examples of these three values are everywhere in Governor Evans’ speeches and actions as a public leader. In Dan Evans’ 1965 inaugural address the first topic in his “A Blueprint for Progress” section was a state constitutional amendment to free up future money for the education needs of Washington’s children. For the new governor, there was “no other single area of government, no other public service for which we are responsible, that is more important to our future…”\footnote{Evans, Daniel J. Inaugural Address of Daniel Jackson Evans sixteenth governor of the State of Washington. Delivered to the thirty-ninth Legislature. Jan. 13, 1965. p. 6.}

His work in creating a statewide community college system and establishing Evergreen State College are further examples of how Governor Evans values education. He did not just talk about the value of education. He worked to create more and better education opportunities for the citizen’s of Washington State.

As a learner, Governor Evans constantly demonstrated and discussed the value of innovation in public service. This includes innovation within his political party and policy work as well as innovation from his colleagues, staff, constituents, and even his own children. In his speech to St. Martins College titled \textit{The Challenges of the 70’s}, Evans stated, “Traditional methods are not always adequate, and they are certainly not adequate today. We face dramatic new changes.”\footnote{Evans, Daniel J. “The Challenge of the 70’s.” St. Martins College. Sept. 30, 1970. p. 2.} Evans felt that a changing environment requires innovation from public leaders and he challenged his fellow policy makers and public servants to make innovation a part of their agenda.
Being innovative meant that Evans was also not afraid of failure in his work or the work of others. One of my favorite remarks by Governor Evans also came from *The Challenges of the 70’s* speech. He spoke of the various mechanisms available to public leaders to reach the state’s goals for the coming decade and challenged his audience to “Be innovative enough to make mistakes!” Then he offered a family story as an example.

“Every once in a while when our family goes skiing we end the skiing day and my nine-year-old comes down the last hill, and he’s kind of a hot shot skier, and he proudly says, ‘Dad, I skied all day today and I didn’t fall once.’ And every time he says that, I say, ‘You didn’t ski hard enough, because if you didn’t fall, you weren’t learning anything new.’”

For Dan Evans, active learning includes making mistakes.

In my work life this has been difficult for me to accept. For years I didn’t feel comfortable trying new things at work or taking on bigger, high profile projects. Several incidents with high-strung bosses and over anxious clients had taken its toll on me and I had become completely risk averse. I had lost the sense of confidence and adventure I had had as a student. When I was a student I knew that my successes and failures only affected my own GPA. But on the job, my mistakes had the potential to be much more public and diffuse. Finally I had a boss that enabled me to shake my fear of failure.

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Instead of monitoring my every move and providing detailed instructions for everything in my job description, he allowed me to go about my work as I saw fit. Most importantly my former boss laughed at some of my smaller failures and remained unruffled when I made big mistakes in earnest. In the end, losing my fear of failure allowed me to feel more comfortable with responsibility and to (finally!) move forward in my career.

Now that I consider the ability and desire to learn a valuable leadership quality I feel a sense of relief as well as a feeling of burden. I am relieved to know that to be a great leader you don’t have to know everything. On the other hand, to be a great leader you have to be willing to learn everything you can. This takes a great deal of energy and when the learning process involves failure it can be painful as well. However I felt a sense of comfort when I witnessed the results of investing the energy and going through the pain of being a true life-long learner.