On Preparing Individuals for Public Leadership

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Assumptions:

1. We are trying to develop individual capacities for exercising leadership in the public sector
2. Roughly speaking, we think that their overall capacities for leadership is the sum of their “cognitive/intellectual/ analytical/knowledge” capacities on one hand, and their “psychological, emotional, moral, and interpersonal” resourcefulness on the other.
3. One common view is that in trying to maximize the value added of our academic institution, we should select for the second, and concentrate on building the first. That is the comparative advantage of being in a university rather than in the world of practical experience.
4. This view is buttressed by the fact that the academy believes it has both established knowledge, and powerful methods of generating new general knowledge that can guide action not only in general, but also in particular circumstances. It also believes that it has analytic methods that allow rational, inquiring individuals to investigate and describe particular concrete situations more accurately, and to predict the likely consequences of particular interventions. Together, the general knowledge applied appropriately in the individual case, and the analytic methods that allow both accurate description, and support a rigorous logic that traces the path from being able to describe what is occurring in a particular situation, to a confident judgment about what could be done to improve the situation in some way, enable responsible, disciplined, rational individuals to observe and reason their way from uncertainty and indecision to confident action. In this view, the only, or at least most responsible and appropriate way to exercise leadership is to have invested enough time and care in the use of cognitive capacities to have earned the right to be as confident as they can be in making important decisions for the benefit of some larger collective. Even if the existing knowledge, and the existing analytic tools are not strong enough or complete enough to get us all the way to a confident action, their potential for informing the design and evaluation of particular decisions and actions should be exhausted before anything else is done.
5. An important irony is that among the most important and robust findings of social science is that individuals find it very hard to be “rational” in the sense that they are motivated to look for information (even if it disconfirms their existing ideas), or in the sense that they have well developed, consistent preferences that they can use in assessing the value to them of alternative activities.
6. What is true of individuals is even more true of collectives.
7. Given this solid mass of social science evidence, one wonders why social scientists, when they turn their attention to finding the means to improving public policy, would have such confidence in the prospects of pushing important public decisions very far in the direction of what they would view as intellectually responsible and rational. They could embrace this ideal as a normative goal, and they could keep producing intellectual products that could be used in the ideal rational process they long for. But if they were really true to the intellectual discipline of taking individual human beings and societies as they are, one might imagine that they would try to think a bit more accurately and rationally about what individuals who wanted to contribute to the quality of collective decision-making and action could most usefully do in the world as it is, rather than in a world that was re-made to their specifications.
8. If one were to take the world as it is, it seems to me that one would have to accept the following painful truths.
* Individual human beings are emotional and social as well as rational beings, and the thoughts they experience as rational and well-founded are powerfully influenced by their emotional experiences and moral commitments as well as pure logic and evidence.

* Effective action to deal with collective problems will always involve collective discussion and action as well as individual decisions and actions.
* Given the variety of individual experiences and positions in the world, it will be hard rather than easy to construct a fully rational and fully shared understanding of the world in which we are living, and which we would like to make better. When a reasonably broad consensus emerges about social conditions, whether anything should be done to improve them, what would that take, and who will contribute the resources and do the work, it will be pretty hard to dislodge it. It will also probably be formulated at a relatively high level of abstraction and generality which will be wrong in many particular contexts.
* For many reasons, (perhaps even biological reasons) it is hard for individual human beings to take responsibility for a collective effort, and to be able to exercise it consistently and well. One of the important devices we use to call leadership into existence is to create institutional structures that confer the right and the responsibility to exercise leadership. But this is a highly imperfect process. The institutions actually don’t work all that well. They quickly become obsolete. They use their authority to reduce anxiety rather than create adaptability. This is not just a matter of intellectual capacity; it is a matter of social circumstances and personal resourcefulness in adapting to changing circumstances.

None of these observations should be seen as arguments for abandoning the search for objective knowledge, nor to develop analytical methods and frameworks that can support rational thinking in complex situations, nor to use rationality and evidence to guide individual and collective decisions. Nor should they be seen as arguments for being casual or less than fully determined in helping those who would like to exercise public leadership to become knowledgeable and skilled reasoners.

But it is to remind us that this is only a part of learning how to be a good public leader. We can leave the rest up to experience that comes later. But it would also be plausibly useful to think about how research, curriculum, and pedagogy could be adjusted to support the emotional, relational, and normative side of leadership and management in professional programs as well

One of the main reasons to do this is the worry that the traditional academic focus on acquiring knowledge, and learning methods for empirically exploring the world, and framing conditions in the world as optimization problems to be solved might all go to waste if the other parts of leadership capacities do not develop at the same time. It is not just that the well trained analysts and decision scientists might not be able to get to the conclusions, or to make their ideas live beyond their own beliefs and commitments. It is also possible that if such individuals actually found themselves in situations where they had authority or other individuals more or less momentarily depending on them for some insight or guidance, they might fail to have developed the required emotional and relational capacities to use their analytic capacities themselves when they should and or available for collective use and guidance. Thought and action in the world are not so deeply and clearly divided between the rational and the emotional, nor between the individual and the collective. The rational is often influences, and sometimes even informed and improved, by the emotional. The individual is often influenced and sometimes even informed and improved by the collective. But sometimes the emotional and the collective threaten the rational, and it is up to an individual to defend the rational. When they do so, they will need substantial emotional resourcefulness to gain the courage of their convictions, and significant relational skills to help the irrational group discover the wisdom of the apparently idiosyncratic individual.