

Give leadership roles only to people you would trust with your children | Professor Audrey Murrell

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by Cristina Muntean

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Professor Audrey J. Murrell is an associate professor of business administration, psychology, public and international affairs at the Katz Graduate School of Business, University of Pittsburgh. She is also director of the David Berg Center for Ethics and Leadership. While she was in Prague in August 2012 to teach during the school's Global Executive Forum and moderate a panel discussion on ethical negotiations and the real costs of corruption, Murrell drew attention to the importance of choosing the right leaders in a society or corporation. Unless we entrust resources to people with competence and high moral standards, we will all have to suffer in the end, she says. Murrell conducts extensive research, teaches, and works with organizations on strategies to enhance their overall effectiveness by utilizing their most valuable assets – their human and social capital. Her work has been widely published in management and psychology journals.

Q: As a professor of the University of Pittsburgh and researcher, what is your main topic of interest at this point?

A: In my position of a faculty member who does research, the thing that I really try and push both to organizations and especially to leadership is the importance of really investing in people. That is difficult because we have limited resources in difficult economic times. It is easier to focus on the short term. Yet, organizations that really understand the broader picture know that if we invest in our human capital and in forming strong relationships with our customers –

internal customers, business customers or the broader consumer – then we will succeed long-term. Thus, the reason I study mentoring is not because I am interested in mentoring per se, but because I am interested in tools that can be powerful to help organizations to not only develop talent but to develop leaders.



Q: Does mentoring truly work in that sense, in your perspective?

A: I think particularly when it comes to developing the next generation who can help to shape, reinvent or re-energize an organization, the transfer of knowledge and ideas happens through the powerful tool of mentoring. So, what I actually get at in the last book that I did, which was called “Intelligent Mentoring,” is to try to get people to see that they need to be thinking about how you are developing people, and there especially needs to be thinking about how you develop leaders.

Q: What is the other theme that preoccupies you?

A: The thing that keeps me up at night is that we think enough about whom we put in a position of responsibility. That it is the most important thing that an organization does – who they pick to be leaders across all levels. I am not just talking about the CEO. I am talking about the person who supervises employees. I am talking about the person who manages a particular unit. The most important decision that we make just isn't whether we put resources in one direction versus another, but it is who we trust to be the stewards of the people of the organization. And I think any time you have to make a decision about whom to put in a leadership role, you should be up at night.

Q: Is there any reason we should pay such specific attention to this matter?

A: The example that I give the students is: if I wouldn't trust you with my children, why would I trust you with my organization? If I don't have enough confidence in you that I would trust you with the most special thing to me personally, then what is it about you that would make me entrust you as a steward of the most important asset of my organization, which is my people? That is the thing that worries me. Because of time or relationships or a whole bunch of other factors, we make way too casual decisions about whom we select as leaders. And leaders ought to be stewards. They ought to understand it is not about power, it is about you taking responsibility for the resources and the people and the things that are entrusted to you. Leadership is about trust, that the organization trusts you. The shareholders trust you. The employees trust you. The customer entrusts you. The responsibility of taking care of the resources of the organization, of taking care of all of what the organization does is upon your shoulders, and as a leader you must be aware of it and respect the trust placed upon you.

Q: What happens when the entrusted leader doesn't stand up the challenge?

A: You will see a lot of pain. That occurs when you care about the organization, when you step back and you know that the person who has the responsibility isn't taking care. And I think a part of it is that when you are entrusted with something, you don't own it. Your job is to return it better than you received it and build its capacity further. That is what stewards do. They take things, and they take care of it on behalf of other people and return it to the next leader and to the people better, not worse, than when they got it.

Q: To what extent is this sort of aware leadership about competence and to what extent about the moral values that you must have as a leader?

A: I think it is about three things. One is competence. Leaders have to have tools; they have to have knowledge and skills in order to perform. That is one of the things that education does. That is what we provide. But the second thing is character. What I communicated to our students is that you already have values. You came to us with a certain set of values and a certain set of aspirations – we didn't give you those, you developed those on your own through your experience. That is a part of when we try to look for a match with students who are coming to our programs, because you come to us with a certain character that really aspires to do something not only good, but different, innovative, something people haven't seen before but that adds value to a broad array of stakeholders. So, yes, you need the competence but that competence has to be matched with character that you bring to the table.

The last thing you need is confidence. One of the crucial things is about the focus on experience-based learning. People forget that you don't build confidence getting speeches and me giving you pep talks and saying: "You're great, you're wonderful" and cheering. You build confidence through experience. That's how you go. The more experience you have in leading, the more experience you have in dealing with crises, the better.

One of the things that is going on with students in the program right now is that I am teaching them social responsibility and ethics in negotiation. We are giving them a lot of work to do; we are giving them challenging demanding problems about real organizations; we are putting them in real negotiation situations and giving them room – and they feel overwhelmed. But it is good. Students tend to become very concerned because they feel overwhelmed just by all the things they needed to accomplish in a short period of time. But guess what? That is exactly what is going to happen to you when you go back to work and face a crisis. And so, that feeling of being overwhelmed and how you navigate through all of that matters because having that experience means that when you go back to work you have the necessary confidence and you know you can navigate through anything.

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