Agape Love and Leadership

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**Introduction**

In Twelve Angry Men (1957), Henry Fonda’s character finds himself in an ethical dilemma on the jury of a first degree murder trial as the stand alone hold out for a not guilty vote (Lumet, 1957). Throughout the movie, he begins to persuade his fellow jurors to decide to vote for a reasonable doubt about the prosecution’s case. This movie is an example of building cooperative community as well as group dynamics. This paper looks at how Henry Fonda’s character utilized solid leadership practices in his management of the deliberation, and how those practices translate to my own leadership.

**Cooperative Community**

According to Kouzes and Posner (2011), in order for leaders to have credibility, they must not only live their own values but create shared values within a community (Kouzes & Posner, 2011, p. 86). This creation of shared values gives a starting point for ethical decision-making. When the movie begins, Fonda’s character is the only one voting not guilty because he does not feel like it is okay to vote any defendant guilty without deliberation. His own personal value was that any person standing trial deserves to have a thoughtful jury. He is met with deep resentment and resistance from the group of men. Piece by piece, Fonda begins to examine the credibility of the evidence presented as the other jurors decide to go around the table and try to convince Fonda that he is wrong.

Unlike juror number three who keeps getting angry and tries to bully and intimidate the group, Fonda’s character remains calm and cool. Fonda begins his discussion of the case by talking about the common goal that they are all tasked as jurors. According to Robert Spitzer (2000), “First, decision makers must agree to place their common desire for integrity and honesty above their common desire for convenience and unmitigated profit” (Spitzer, 2000, p. 217). Fonda’s argument begins by establishing the purpose of the jury which is to deliberate over the evidence and have a conversation about it. Fonda repeatedly states that he does not know whether the defendant is guilty or not, but he knows that he must act in integrity to the question at hand. He elicits a call for shared values that juror number nine begins to appreciate. By the second vote, juror nine decided to vote not guilty to give Fonda the benefit of the additional conversation. By creating the shared values, Fonda’s character was able to provide the group, “with a common reference for making decisions and taking action” (Kouzes & Posner, 2011, p. 86).

The second area where Fonda created cooperative community is that he invited all parties to participate in the conversation. Kouzes and Posner (2011) write, “Participation is vital, because people’s perspectives change once they are involved” (Kouzes & Posner, 2011, p. 88). By giving everyone in the room the right to disagree, state their reasons, and discuss the validity of those reasons, Fonda created a culture where the process of deliberation was more important than the outcome of the decision. Fonda’s character earned his credibility with the other jurors because he really took the time to hear them (Kouzes & Posner, 2011, p. 90).

Many of the jurors were anxious to leave and return to their lives. Fonda also set out the shared purpose of getting through the information succinctly so that he could meet their need to come to a conclusion. Yet, he also called upon shared community values in order to keep the other jurors from allowing their self-interest to be at the expense of the greater good. Kouzes and Posner (2011) write,

Community implies that everyone’s interests will best be served when working toward a collective set of shared values and common purpose. Self-interests at the expense of common interests are frowned upon in a committed community. Credible leaders energize people to take actions that support higher organizational purposes (Kouzes & Posner, 2011, pp. 92-93).

By creating a trusting community of share values and supporting higher organizational purposes, Fonda’s character was able to capitalize on the individual and group interests.

Not all ethical dilemmas can be solved by shared values. In fact, when common values fail to solve the issue, “New values emerge and other values ascend as the world changes” (Kouzes & Posner, 2011, p. 108). Where the beginning community value was for the jury was to come to a decision as fast as possible, the ending values that emerged were about due diligence and setting aside prejudice. One value that emerged was with juror number ten who continued to make bigoted comments about poor people. The jury eventually tired of his rhetoric. One by one they stood up and turned their backs to him in sign that he was no longer a part of the discussion. The value of truth rose to the forefront over personal opinions.

**Leadership and Group Practices**

One of the strongest leadership characteristics of Fonda in the movie is his display of agape love. C.S. Lewis’ understood agape love as, “loving one’s neighbor by wanting the best for him and exercising one’s will to act accordingly” (Nicholi, 2002). Spitzer (2000) defines agape as, “care for another motivated solely by an awareness of the intrinsic dignity of that other” (Spitzer, 2000, p. 229). Even though Fonda disagreed with the angry juror number three throughout the whole movie, Fonda still shows agape love to the other man. When the other jurors leave the room grabbing their jackets at the end of the movie, Fonda takes juror number three’s coat and walks over to him helping him up from his seat. They proceed to walk out together. Fonda showed complete respect to everyone from the defendant to those that disagreed with him throughout the entire move. He held a deep abiding agape love.

Additionally, Fonda’s character displayed exceptional communication skills. He used comprehensive listening. Comprehensive listening is, “motivated by the need to understand and to retain messages” (Johnson, Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership, 2011, p. 225). An example of comprehensive listening was when Fonda paid attention to the fine details of the eyewitness testimony and was able to relate those details in a comprehensive case to the group. When others questioned the validity of his critical thinking, he did not argue with them but listened intently on their point of view.

Openness and supportiveness played a key role in Fonda’s ability to be an effective leader. Johnson (2007) writes,

Ethical team members are both open and supportive. Openness refers to an individual’s willingness to surface issues and talk about problems while, at the same time, enabling others to do the same. Supportiveness describes the desire to help others succeed (Johnson, Ethics in the Workplace, 2007, p. 153).

Fonda displayed his openness by his ability to really talk about the tough issues. He was open to honest dialogue. He was supportive in terms of creating a space for others to be successful. Fonda was not interested in being right as much as he was interested in having the whole jury deliberate to the hard truth.

**My Leadership Ability**

For my own self-reflection on my leadership growth, Spitzer’s questions in his section on agape love deeply moved me. Spitzer (2000) asks,

1. Do I have the peace (from conviction about my ideals and principles, or from faith and prayer) to be courageous in practicing my principles?
2. Do I have the peace to be self-disciplined (detached from passion) in practicing my principles?
3. Do I have the peace to be humble (detached from ego-rewards, self-pity, and ego-rage) in practicing my principles? (Spitzer, 2000, p. 229).

The honest answer to these questions is no. I do not yet have the peace to always live my values. I tend to walk away from situations that require me to hold my values steadfast regardless of what others think. Instead, I often judge the group or organization saying that they are not quite the right fit. Both examples that I have used in my papers this term with the Interfaith Council and with the Unity church are examples where I walked away instead of stepping forward into the uncomfortableness of conflict.

Where Fonda had the communication skills, and the deep agape love to hold him true to his principles during difficult times, I have honestly lacked the emotional and spiritual maturity to do that. I will hold my tongue and keep the peace rather than question areas of divisiveness. The last question from Spitzer about humility and ego lets me know that I have had my ego in the way of agape love. I have stood in judgement on principles and felt myself in rewards, pity, and rage instead of peace.

I am having difficulty giving a concrete answer to this section because the work that I need to be doing in my relationships with others is inner work. I have to spend some time growing my inner capacity for peace, a deeper sense of my values, and patience to allow conflict to grow me. As much as I would like to say that I have been a servant-leader, the honest answer is that I have been struggling so much financially that my motivations have sometimes come from fear of staying viable. My way of becoming more like Fonda is to do a better job of my own shadow work, create space for deeper connection, stay instead of run when things get tough, and cultivate a deeper inner life. I was humbled by those questions of Spitzer because the showed me where I still need to grow.

**Conclusion**

Fonda’s agape love, communication style, and ability to create shared community made him an effective leader through conflict. By using leadership principles, Fonda was able to inspire a group of diverse people into collaboration. Seeing his example of leadership, coupled with the questions by Spitzer, I realize some deep shortcomings in my own leadership emotional and spiritual maturity.

# **References**

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