

Leadership and Operational Excellence in the Neighborhood of Make-believe

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ABSTRACT

Emerging work has explored management and leadership concepts through the lens of popular culture. This paper leverages the work and legacy of (Mister) Fred Rogers including the shows “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” and “Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood” that have been highly influential in U.S. popular culture for generations. In doing so, it explores the leadership concepts of heroic leadership, leader-member exchange, servant leadership, and transformational leadership. It also explores concepts related to operational excellence (a philosophy of management) including genchi genbutsu, viewing problems as blessings, standardization, and regular meetings. Episodes and scenarios from the Neighborhood of Make-believe as well as examples from the life of Fred Rogers can serve as case studies of sorts and can be a useful pedagogical tool in leadership classroom education. Therefore, this paper provides some suggestions to instructors of leadership on how to leverage Mister Rogers and the Neighborhood of Make-believe to guide classroom discussions. In examining leadership and operational excellence using Rogers’ Neighborhood of Make-believe, real-world leaders are encouraged to consider how the philosophies of Mister Rogers can help inform their own decision-making and influence approaches.

KEYWORDS

Mister Rogers, Operational Excellence, Leadership, Popular Culture

Introduction

The Neighborhood of Make-believe is a fictional place made famous by Fred Rogers (1928-2003), a popular children’s television personality from the United States commonly referred to as Mister Rogers. The characters in the Neighborhood model the virtues of compassion, kindness, and forgiveness among other positive traits and behaviors.

These positive traits and behaviors are, of course, important to teach children which is why the “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” show and its predecessors produced by the same studio including “Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood” are lastingly beloved in the US. But, compassion, kindness, and forgiveness are also things that people – including managers and leaders – working in organizations should also practice. As such, episodes and scenarios from the Neighborhood of Make-believe can serve as a great case example useful for leadership education.

This paper is an attempt to explore themes evident in the Neighborhood of Make-believe and relate them to leadership theories such as: heroic leadership, leader-member exchange (LMX), servant leadership, and transformational leadership. The next section takes a look at one particular management approach, operational excellence, and compares its aspects of genchi genbutsu, viewing problems as blessings, standardization, and regular meetings with ideals from the Neighborhood of Make-believe. Following these sections, major takeaways and limitations will be considered. Before turning to a discussion on leadership, this paper first provides a background on Fred Rogers and, more broadly, the appropriateness of using pieces of popular culture (such as the Neighborhood of Make-believe) to explore leadership concepts.

Background

This section gives a brief overview of the life and work of Fred Rogers. It then provides some context regarding the usefulness of exploring leadership through the lens of popular culture.

Mister Rogers

There has been much written and documented about the life and work of Fred Rogers including the popular fictionalized movie “A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood” (Heller, 2019) starring Tom Hanks, the well-done “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” documentary (Neville, 2018), and the excellent biography by Maxwell King (2019) titled “The Good Neighbor: The Life and Work of Fred Rogers.” This brief biography draws largely on the latter two.

Fred Rogers was born in Latrobe, Pennsylvania USA to a prominent family. He was often teased and picked on by other children for being overweight. He helped to overcome this and his introversion by playing with puppets which would become features of his television show.

After graduating from Rollins College, he attended Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and became an ordained minister. Rogers had a passion for music and childhood development which formed the basis of his career. In 1953, he began work at the WQED Public Broadcasting Television Station and used that medium to reach out to children. He worked on several shows but most notably on “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” that featured his puppets and original music. It also was influenced by his ministry as the messages in his show often aligned with his faith perspective though he did not typically directly discuss religion on his show.

His show targeted many difficult topics including death, divorce, growing up, the Robert F. Kennedy assassination, and other challenging issues that would be scary for children. But he did so in a calm and friendly manner that was approachable and, while not minimizing the gravity of such situations, palatable to young minds. In fact, given his demeanor and ability to relate to children, he filmed a statement to help kids (and adults) cope with the events of September 11th shortly after the tragedy. Fred Rogers’ show also emphasized positive behaviors focused on love, respect, and care of other people.

“Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” ran for thirty-three years and is fondly remembered by multiple generations who grew up with the show. Though Fred Rogers passed away at the age of 74 of cancer, his legacy lives on. As one example, his production company produces other similar themed shows including “Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood,” an animated show that features many of the same wholesome aspects of and even some of the same characters from “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.”

Leadership and Popular Culture

Fiction and popular culture, including the Neighborhood of Make-believe,” are useful to examining leadership and management phenomena. Some prior areas of popular culture that have been used to explore leadership concepts include “Star Wars” (Urlick, 2021a), “The Lord of the Rings” (Urlick, 2021b), “Harry Potter” (Simha, 2022), and the Marvel Cinematic Universe (Islam & Schmidt, 2022) among others.

Examining leadership via popular culture is most effective when it is grounded in theory. Theories are important to consider in relation to leadership and popular culture because they have been examined through academic research and are therefore likely to be generalizable to a variety of different contexts (Szpaderski & Urlick, 2018). Individuals that truly seek to understand leadership phenomena should start at the theoretical level because approaches void of theory do not systematically aid in the understanding of what was effective in a leader’s approach (Szpaderski & Urlick, 2018). Learning how to apply theory allows leaders to make sense of why particular behaviors were successful within a specific context.

Certainly, illustrating theories through examples, including those from popular culture and fiction, is very useful for understanding leadership. Using fictional examples does not minimize the importance of leadership phenomena. Rather, using popular culture can be extremely useful for at least two reasons.

The first is that considering leadership through the lens of popular culture is memorable, fun, and familiar. Many people in the U.S. grew up with Mister Rogers and so it makes sense to seek meaning, including understanding about leadership, through his shows. This makes learning about leadership fun and approachable.

The second reason why exploring leadership through popular culture is useful is because it suggests people can learn from anything. As such, popular culture can be a useful learning tool because it is influential to the way that people think and enact behaviors – and this is especially true for popular culture that was consumed during someone’s developmental years such as “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” and “Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood.”

As an example of the impact that popular culture has on perspectives related to leadership is that how organizational leaders are portrayed in movies could influence whether or not college students enroll in business majors (Urick Gnecco, Jackson, Greiner, & Sylada, 2015). Furthermore, an awareness of popular culture influences perspectives and behaviors because what is popularly discussed on a macro (i.e. societal) level often stimulates personal daily interactions that people have on a more micro (i.e. interpersonal) level (Baxter, 2010). Such macro-level discourses could include those found in fictional areas of popular culture and, in the case of the Neighborhood of Make-believe in the U.S., are prevalent in peoples’ lexicons and psyches. As leaders come to experience these areas of popular culture, they can adjust their leadership approaches (Fairhurst, 2010), suggesting that popular culture can be a strong driver in understanding leadership.

For undergraduate and graduate students, Fred Rogers and the Neighborhood of Make-believe can be useful case studies for understanding leadership by way of popular culture. Clips or songs from particular episodes (or from Fred Rogers’ appearances/interviews) can be shown to students in order to help facilitate a discussion. The below suggests some possible examples of this and provides some questions for study. Some clips are readily available via YouTube, streaming services such as Prime, on physical DVD discs, and by contacting the Fred Rogers Institute Archive (Fred Rogers Institute, n.d.).

Leadership and the Neighborhood of Make-believe

This section takes a look at several leadership theories as they relate to the Neighborhood of Make-believe. Though by far not an extensive list of all leadership concepts that could be related to the works of Fred Rogers, those explored here are some of the most salient. They include heroic leadership, leader-member exchange (LMX), servant leadership, and transformational leadership.

Heroic Leadership

To start the discussion of academic perspectives on leadership, this section considers an emerging area of leadership research related to the phenomena of exalting leaders to a high status known as “heroic leadership” (Allison, Goethals & Kramer, 2016). Heroes are often perceived as leaders and leaders can also be perceived as heroes. This is perhaps, in part, because heroes possess influence over others and, by definition, leaders influence followers.

The concept of heroic leadership suggests that followers can have high expectations of their leaders. Heroic leaders are often perceived to be almost perfect or infallible by nature. Followers go along with leaders’ self-made decisions because they are held in such high regards.

It is usually not appropriate to attribute such a high level of status or regard toward leaders (Fitzgerald, 2020). After all, every leader fails at some point. Very few leaders are perfect or, oppositely, completely bad. All leaders have their own uniqueness and faults which suggest that there are good and bad aspects of each leaders’ approach (Pendleton, Furnham, & Cowell, 2020). Because very few leaders are actually perfect, the idolization of a “hero-leader” seems quite problematic.

However, Mister Rogers provides a counterexample to this as his leadership is exemplary with very few blemishes if any on his character. Many people in the U.S. look up to Mister Rogers as a hero and he is very influential to many peoples’ behaviors in childhood and beyond.

Rogers seems to have very little controversy surrounding him. There appear to be no scandals, no moral failings, and very few critics of his character. For modern day celebrities, this is unheard of. In an era marked by division and disagreement, most people in the U.S. who have experienced Mister Rogers’ show have a high positive opinion of him. As such, he may be one of the very few true heroic leaders worthy of examination. As such, future research may want to consider a fuller further examination of how organizational leaders can adopt some of Rogers’ behaviors to become more heroic in nature.

To use Mister Rogers to discuss heroic leadership in the classroom, instructors may want to have students read King's (2019) "The Good Neighbor: The Life and Work of Fred Rogers" biography or view Neville's (2018) "Won't You Be My Neighbor" documentary in full or in part. Following assigning one of those two biographical pieces on Mister Rogers, three questions that could result in classroom discussion on heroic leadership and Mister Rogers could include:

In what ways do you view Fred Rogers to be both a hero and a leader?

Many people look up to Fred Rogers while others suggest danger in looking up to heroes as leaders. Do you think that there are any potential dangers to looking up to Mister Rogers as a model hero/leader? What are some issues with using heroes/leaders as role models?

Who are some other heroes/leaders that could be role models? How do you compare their leadership styles to those of Mister Rogers?

Leader-Member Exchange

Another consideration of leadership studies is Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory. According to LMX theory, leaders and followers have dyadic relationships, which is characterized as either high- or low-quality based on the ways in which they interact (Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2001). Thus, LMX theory suggests that leaders have high-quality interactions with some followers but not with others.

High-quality interactions are characterized by an open exchange of ideas and information highlighted by mutual trust and respect (Byun, Dai, Lee, & Kang, 2017). High-quality interactions likely occur most often when leaders and followers view each other to be similar to each other (Soeprapto, 2020). It is also likely that leaders have many low-quality interactions with some followers as well. Low-quality interactions would consist of unclear information, negative emotions, low trust, infrequent communication, and perhaps even hostility (Thompson, Buch, & Glasø, 2018). Low-quality interactions occur more often when leaders perceive followers to be dissimilar from themselves.

The quality of interactions impacts a variety of organizational outcomes (Kim, Han, Son, & Yun, 2017). These can include the amount of knowledge that is shared, the roles in which leaders and followers take on, followers' levels of motivation, how committed followers are, and levels of satisfaction at work. Each of these, in turn, impact turnover, job performance, and a variety of other crucial big picture organizational outcomes. With positive interactions, the outcomes will be positive. On the other hand, these outcomes will be negative with negative interactions.

Similar to the critique of heroic leadership presented above, Mister Rogers also does not seem to follow the tenants of LMX. LMX assumes that leaders have in- and out-groups characterized by the nature of interactions. However, Mister Rogers only seems to have positive interactions with everyone. In other words, he seems to have no out-groups as evident by how inclusive he is in his interactions. For example, on his show, viewers are left with the impression that everyone is indeed Mister Rogers' neighbor.

Instead, Mister Rogers seems to be guided more by a discursive leadership approach (Fairhurst, 2008). With this approach, leaders do not focus on dyadic relationships with followers – rather, they seek to communicate in ways that resonate with multiple audiences at the same time. In other words, a discursive-focused approach runs counter to LMX by minimizing the importance of in- and out-groups in favor of enlarging the in-group to create interactions that are positive for everyone. As Mister Rogers seeks to call everyone his neighbors, organizational leaders can look to Mister Rogers as an inspiration regarding how to take a more discursive approach to communicate effectively with all stakeholders.

One example case that could be examined would be the message that Fred Rogers gave immediately following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US. Though only about a minute long, this message provides suggestions on how to talk about tragic news events to children. In the clip, Rogers keeps using the term "us" to talk to viewers thereby trying to make his message resonate with as many audience members as possible. Upon showing this clip in class, instructors may try to leverage the following questions to begin a fruitful discussion:

Even though this communication is via television with no opportunities for viewers to respond immediately or directly to Fred Rogers, do you get the sense that he strives for high- or low-quality interactions with followers? In what ways do you see evidence of high- or low-quality relationships between Rogers and viewers/followers?

What about Fred Rogers' communication style makes him an effective leader? Is there anything about the way in which he communicates that you believe could make him less effective?

In what ways does Mister Rogers attempt to broaden his in-group based on the way he communicates his message?

Servant Leadership

The theory of servant leadership was articulated in the writings of renowned leadership expert Robert Greenleaf (1977). The servant model of leadership advocates that leaders focus on contributing to a greater common good that helps a larger group of people instead of just focusing on one's own personal goals and ambitions (Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999). Servant leaders make a conscious effort to improve the world around them. They are driven to do so and this comes from an understanding of oneself, an understanding of what is needed to be done to improve the common good, and an understanding of how that individual can contribute to the improvement (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002).

Thus, leaders who take the servant approach understand their context and work to remove barriers of followers to help facilitate improved performance. In doing so, they empower followers to work from within organizations to improve their context in the way that they see best. Servant leaders view their roles to not be ones of status, but to be focused on facilitating working together to improve the common good (Greenleaf, 1977).

Mister Rogers seems to be the definition of a servant leader. He rarely focused on himself but, instead, always built-up others in the messaging of his show. By sharing that all of his viewers are special, he empowered them to change the world in a positive way. He advocated that people should seek to be servants in his famous quote about looking for helpers during crisis situations. In his statement, Rogers suggested that helpers can get others through difficult times which is very much at the heart of servant leadership.

Mister Rogers understood his strengths (including music and childhood development), knew his context (including the growing emergence of the television medium), and found a way that he could fit to improve the world. His positive message encouraged promoting kindness, love, and respect for everyone thereby contributing to the improvement of the common good.

The idea of helping is so pervasive in almost every episode of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" that it is difficult for viewers to miss. Thus, just about any episode from his television series could be used to illustrate servant leadership. To use the Neighborhood of Make-believe as a case study in a class on leadership, instructors are encouraged to select their favorite episode of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood." The following questions may be asked of students following their viewing of the episode or clips:

Which characters showed evidence of helping? How did their actions influence others?

How did helping others lead to positive outcomes for everyone in the Neighborhood of Make-believe?

Transformational Leadership

The last leadership theory addressed herein is transformational leadership and is similar in nature to servant leadership. Transformational leaders encourage followers to see beyond their own self to better serve the goals of a group. Transformational leadership is motivational in nature in that it inspires followers to collaborate together.

Transformational leadership contains four aspects that leaders exhibiting this style can possess: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation (Alatawi, 2017). Idealized influence is when a leader is seen as a role model. Inspirational motivation is when a leader

articulates a clear and compelling vision that drives others to action. Individualized consideration is when a leader treats followers as equals and recognizes their dignity and uniqueness. Lastly, intellectual stimulation is when a leader coaches and challenges followers to help them to think outside the box. Though leaders do not need to display all of the characteristics in equal amounts to be successful, the more they display would lead to higher leadership effectiveness in multiple contexts (Urlick & Sprinkle, 2014).

Mister Rogers excels in transformational leadership because he engages in each of these behaviors. Rogers is certainly a role model as so many people in the U.S. admire and look up to him. Rogers also articulated a clear vision in his relentless approach to inclusion and respect for others – and he also created and articulated a clear vision for how television can be used to engage children. By saying that each person is different and special, he acknowledged each person’s uniqueness and dignity. And, lastly, in his approach to talking directly to children via the television, he challenged the approach that other educational shows could take into the future.

One great example that might be used as a case study could be Fred Rogers’ 1969 testimony to the US Senate’s Subcommittee on Communication. In his comments, Rogers uses transformational influence tactics to secure funding for public broadcasting. The following questions might help to begin a discussion on Fred Rogers and transformational leadership:

***Which of the “four I’s” of transformational leadership are evident in Rogers’ testimony?
How did they help to influence others?***

Are there any of the “for I’s” that are not evident in Rogers’ testimony? Is there anything else that Mister Rogers could have said that would show further evidence of any of the “four I’s”?

This is but a very brief overview of some leadership theories and how they relate generally to the life and work of Fred Rogers. As illustrated, there is a lot that organizational leaders can learn from examining Mister Rogers’ life and shows.

Operational Excellence in the Neighborhood of Make-believe

Operational Excellence (OE) is an additional area related to leadership that can be illustrated via the work and philosophy of Mister Rogers. As this section illustrates, many of songs in “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” and “Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood” show evidence of operational excellence principles. Referenced song lyrics were accessed via the Neighborhood Archive (n.d.).

OE is a management philosophy focused on teamwork, problem-solving, and continuous improvement. Organizations of all types and in any industry can attempt to implement OE, but doing so requires a positive leadership style in which employees are empowered to remain focused on customers (Institute for Operational Excellence, 2012). Operational Excellence is related to lean initiatives because of its focus on improvement (Melton, 2005). OE is also related to the Toyota Production System of management (Liker, 2004) which emphasizes the importance of people in organizations that engage in process improvement.

Operational excellence differentiates itself from some other continuous improvement initiatives by emphasizing certain considerations including but not limited to (Urlick, Hisker, & Godwin, 2017):

- The importance of changing business operations to be integrated with an organization’s supply chains (Shah & Ward, 2003).
- Providing value to customers by minimizing waste (Liker, 2004).
- Focusing on organizational culture to engage in continuous improvement (rather than focusing only on tools; Liker & Hoseus, 2008; Mann, 2015).
- Emphasizing the respect for and importance of employees as they engage in continuous improvement activities (Provance, Ramisetty, Urlick, & Wiczorkowski, 2022; Saito & Saito, 2012).
- Engaging in transformational leadership behaviors by leaders serving as role models, encouraging creative thinking, training and developing others, and emphasizing the importance of teamwork (Bass and Avolio 1990).

Operational excellence does focus on adjusting an organization's entire culture in engaging in continuous improvement to minimize waste and, as such, has certain philosophies and practices that leaders leverage to help influence the assumptions and values of a group. Some of these that relate to the Neighborhood of Make-believe include genchi genbutsu, viewing problems as blessings, standardization, and regular meetings. In each of the sub-sections below, specific song excerpts are highlighted as examples from the Neighborhood of Make-believe. Instructors who would like to leverage examples from the Neighborhood of Make-believe as illustrative cases of leadership in their courses will want to find clips of the referenced songs in full, play them for their students, and then ask the questions at the end of each sub-section to foster a discussion.

Genchi Genbutsu

Operational excellence and lean terminology include many Japanese words. The idea of genchi genbutsu is one such term and it translates to "go and see" (Senior & Hyatt, 2015). This means that those engaging in continuous improvement activities go to the source to gather information. In other words, when trying to solve a problem, employees should be empowered to go directly to the part of the process in which there appears to be an issue. They should not rely on here-say or rumors as they attempt to resolve issues but should rather see the issues and collect data firsthand. The idea is that the best way to problem solve is to have the greatest possible understanding of an issue and the only way to do that is by going to the source to collect firsthand information.

The idea of genchi genbutsu is evident in the "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" song "Look a Little Closer."

Look a Little Closer

*We've gotta look a little
Look a little
Look a little closer
To find out what we want to know.
We've gotta look a little
Look a little
Look a little closer
To see just how things go.*

From the lyrics of the song, listeners are encouraged to look as close as possible to get the information that they seek. If people are truly to understand something, they must look closely much in the same way that genchi genbutsu suggests that individuals go directly to the source of an issue to get data firsthand to truly have knowledge of a phenomenon. Some example classroom discussion questions could include:

How did "looking a little closer" benefit the characters that sing the song? What are some benefits of "going to the source" to get information?

When trying to understand problems, what might be some potential issues with not "looking a little closer" to make sure that a decision-maker's information is accurate?

Viewing Problems as Blessings

An organization's culture can impact whether or not its members seek out problems (including through engaging in genchi genbutsu) and, when they find them, how they go about solving them (Fadnavis, Najarzadeh, & Badurdeen, 2020). In many organizations that are most effective in implementing operational excellence, problems are viewed as blessings or opportunities for growth. Because operational excellence focuses on continuous improvement, identifying problems is important because solving them is the only way to continuously improve. The organization that does not actively seek out problems does not improve.

Unfortunately, it seems that many individuals do not perceive problems positively. But, as the song "When Something Seems Bad, Turn It Around" from "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" suggests, we should seek out those bad things and make them into something good.

When Something Seems Bad, Turn It Around

*When something seems bad,
Turn it around
And find something good.*

The song lyrics align with OE. Problems (i.e. things that seem bad) are actually opportunities to get better (i.e. finding something good). Organizational members should take Daniel Tiger's advice and, rather than deny that they have problems, actually seek them out to improve and make something positive out of them. Some potential questions that could be asked of students include:

How did viewing problems as blessings help the characters in "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" based on this song?

Why do you think it is useful (or not useful) to try to turn around bad situations in organizations (i.e. to try to find the good/opportunities inherent in organizational problems?)

Standardization

Standardization is about establishing requirements in organizations (Bigelow, 2002). These standards help to reduce variation and can apply to a specific way that each job in an organization should be done, the way that a process should be conducted each time it occurs, or any other recurring phenomena that is under the control of an organization. These should be documented but can be changed when a new better way is found. Once this occurs, the new way becomes the revised standard (Urlick, Adams, & Smith, 2017).

Unfortunately, people in organizations may resist certain initiatives because they are unsure or afraid of what to expect (Urlick, Li, Konur, Smith, 2018). But, standardization can in some ways help to alleviate this uncertainty. With standardization, everything is documented clearly so that people in organizations know exactly what is expected of them. This is reminiscent of the song "When We Do Something New" from "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood."

When We Do Something New
When we do something new,
Let's talk about what we'll do.

These lyrics suggest that change can be scary. In organizations, for example, employees may be unsure of what they might be asked to do which could cause some fear and anxiety. But, this can be resolved by documenting roles and processes because it improves clarity and understanding. Furthermore, communicating these standards reduces unpredictability and variability which is key for operational excellence. Of course, the standards should be flexible when a new "better" way to do something is found – but this, in turn, should be communicated well in order to "talk about what we do." Some questions for discussion could potentially include:

Based on the full song's lyrics, what are some examples of how communication can relate to setting expectations? Given this, in what ways might communication be important for emphasizing standardization in organizations?

How can communication and standardization help to alleviate the fear of change?

Regular Meetings

The final keystone of operational excellence explored herein is that regular recurring meetings should take place. Communication is obviously important in OE cultures. Regular recurring meetings should occur to discuss key performance indicators impacting quality, effectiveness, and efficiency among other metrics. They should address things that are and are not working well in an organization in order to continue to improve (Andersson, Manfredsson, & Latz, 2015).

In "The Weekend Song," which regularly closed out episodes of his show, Mister Rogers also advocated for regular meetings. Furthermore, he expressed the desire to share ideas and engage in dialogue.

The Weekend Song
I'll be back, when the day is new
And I'll have more ideas for you.
And you'll have things you'll want to talk about.
I will, too.

In these lyrics, Mister Rogers suggests having daily meetings (i.e. “when the day is new”) and that is common in many OE organizations. But, the frequency (daily, weekly, between shifts, etc.) that some organizations use depends on the situation, industry, and context. Regardless, these meetings are set and recurring to discuss each person’s experiences and to create a dialogue to further enable continuous improvement. Some potential questions that could be used to guide classroom discussions might include:

What are some benefits of regularly recurring meetings?

Do you see any potential drawbacks to regularly recurring meetings? If so, how might these be avoided?

Discussion

When reflecting on how to use examples from the life of Fred Rogers and from the Neighborhood of Make-believe as a jumping off point for classroom discussions on leadership, instructors may want to consider some of the questions suggested above. But, beyond that, they might also develop their own questions and/or find other additional examples (from Fred Rogers or other areas of popular culture that might be of interest) to serve as illustrative cases. Regardless of how instructors leverage the examples noted herein or others, they should also make sure to emphasize how such examples could help in learners’ real-life work contexts. It is not enough to just show examples and talk about what leadership activities worked for Fred Rogers or his characters. Instead, learners must be challenged to understand how examples of Mister Rogers and the characters in the Neighborhood of Make-believe can be adapted to fit their own unique organizational realities. As such, one general recommended question might be asked related to each of the topics noted within this paper and that is:

How can what you learned from Mister Rogers and the Neighborhood of Make-believe help you in your own leadership context?

There are several other implications that should be considered in light of examining phenomena from the Neighborhood of Make-believe in a business context. As noted in this paper there are, of course, many connections between leadership theories and the operational excellence management philosophy with the work of Mister Rogers and subsequent shows produced by his company.

First is that not everyone can be as perfect as Mister Rogers. He seems to have been a truly pure person and exceptional leader who cared for the development of young minds. And, indeed, as has been noted herein, he is perhaps one of only a few truly heroic leaders. Of course, not everyone can be as close to saintly as Mister Rogers, but his philosophies of care, respect, and inclusion are ones that all leaders can embrace and aspire to. As leaders engage in decisions that impact others, having the question “what would Mister Rogers do?” in the back of their minds could help to make sure that the dignity of each individual is considered.

Second, in asking this question, leaders must also be aware of their context and fit their behavior to match their environment. While all leaders will not work in the Neighborhood of Make-believe or even in the television or childhood development fields as was Mister Rogers’ areas of expertise, all can consider how his philosophies can be leveraged in their own contexts. Themes related to many of the leadership and OE contexts explored herein include empathy and creating connections with other individuals. Understanding how leaders might best engage in these two behaviors in their contexts can go a long way in building a positive workplace culture.

The third takeaway applies to researchers and leader practitioners alike. It is that those who want to learn about leadership should seek unlikely sources (such as the Neighborhood of Make-believe) for inspiration. As noted herein, much can be learned from pop culture and fiction. But such artistic works are not the only areas in which students can learn more about leadership phenomena. Organizational leaders and researchers should seek other inspirations, both real and imaginary, to explore leadership concepts. Furthermore, even exploring the leadership approach of Fred Rogers further in a lengthier format through the use of additional examples could prove fruitful to provide leaders with further clarity and more inspiration.

Lastly, OE has not always been adopted by many organizations (Locher, 2011; Teeuwen, 2011) in part because it is incorrectly perceived as not being applicable to some contexts. One major criticism suggests that

its approach to management is primarily applicable to manufacturing organizations which is not accurate. However, by relating some of its components to the Neighborhood of Make-believe, it becomes apparent that OE is applicable to a variety of non-manufacturing contexts. If OE principles can be used in the Neighborhood of Make-believe, they can likely be used in most environments.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the works and legacy of Fred Rogers through the shows “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” and “Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood.” In doing so, it has illustrated how the philosophies of Mister Rogers related to respect, care, and inclusion can inform both leadership and operational excellence approaches. In exploring concepts related to leadership and OE, this paper advocates that researchers and leaders will consider how Mister Rogers’ approach can relate to their own contexts. In doing so, hopefully organizations can become kinder and more empathetic places to work that develop more welcoming cultures.

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