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Leadership Development – Trial by Fire
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Abstract

The postmodern world is still struggling to blossom and flower. Organizations and their leaders often seem to be locked into Newtonian-Cartesian mechanistic worldviews, first wave behaviorism, and positivism. The theory and practice of servant-leadership, resilient leadership and adaptive leadership informed by psychology provide a way to address increasing levels of complexity in a postmodern world. Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce is perhaps the greatest exemplar of servant-leadership in American history. The essential characteristics of resilient leadership are captured in the story of the battle of the Big Hole in the Nez Perce War of 1877. Adaptive work entails a change in values, beliefs, or behavior and requires diagnosis and action. As part of the diagnostic process, a model of human performance focused on resilience and adaptation is presented. Prescribed burning offers a practice field for developing adaptive and resilient leaders. Leadership is responsible for creating an engaging climate conducive to the growth and development of their people; the key ingredient to high performance. While improving policy, planning, and risk management are all necessary, perhaps the most important actions are emphasizing and devoting more resources to reflection, learning to develop expertise; and taking care of people. While we need to develop the capability to learn from all unexpected outcomes (the good, bad, ugly, and near miss), how we deal with tragedy is critical. Compassion is the cornerstone. The basic premise of this paper is that leadership is forged through experience (trial by fire), particularly experience responding to traumatic events.

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