



de Champaigne, Philippe. *Saint Augustine*, circa 1650.

by Dr. Toyin Atolagbe, Executive Director

My odyssey of leadership commenced within the four walls of my childhood home. Despite being the youngest of six children and the only girl, my dad nurtured me as what he called, “the first girl leader.” He made the case to our family that culturally in our Ondo town in Nigeria, the firstborn son and daughter are the only ones to attend big family meetings and engage in decision-making. While his argument always made sense to the entire family, I had no clue what this actually meant. I just trusted and played along, loving every moment of him helping me discover myself and grow over time as a female leader. During my formative years in elementary school, my leadership journey continued. When I was asked to take on more responsibilities in the classroom and questioned my ability to do so, my grade school teacher Mr. Adu would say, “You can do this, Toyin, come on! I have watched you do harder things!”

As my journey unfolded, I pursued the vocation of teaching, which allowed me to cultivate a vibrant learning environment and empower students to express their ideas and explore their potential. In tandem with this duty, I was guided (or “blindfolded,” which is my own humorous term, because I still don’t know how I became a headmaster) into the realm of school administration. Of all my leadership

roles, being a Headmaster has been the toughest of all, overseeing the intricate tapestry of a school community. However, amidst the trials and tribulations, it has proven to be the most fulfilling endeavor. The individuals entrusted to my stewardship—be they teachers, administrators, students, or parents—embody the essence of my mission: to seek, influence, and manifest the potential within each member of our school community and help them truly flourish.

Throughout my progression, a singular truth endures in my consciousness: I have always been called to serve others, and this is a longing at the heart of leadership. To operate at this level of hope and belief in another, a leader must first understand and believe in the fundamental goodness of human nature. Classicist David Hicks articulates that human nature is characterized by the capacity for reason, moral virtue, and the pursuit of knowledge. An individual possesses inherent potential which may be cultivated through education, self-reflection, and engagement with the world. To see the potential in another, those entrusted with the mantle of leadership must first affirm the inherent good in the individual, regardless of their shortcomings. We are all continually evolving through our experiences within environments marked by positive influences and opportunities for growth. Thus, leaders entrusted with shepherding their team must recognize and embrace the good, the bad, the ugly, and the work-in-progress of each team member.

How do we do this? Lately, I have been reflecting on the word *influence*, and how essential such is to effectively nurturing the potential in individuals.

Influence maintains an intricate relationship with empowerment of individuals. In its best form, influence transcends mere authority; it epitomizes a leader's ability to inspire, motivate, and uplift others toward being the best version of themselves and reaching the zenith of their capabilities. It demands that leaders harness their strength by exemplifying the virtues of humility, magnanimity, courage, justice, and integrity, thereby inspiring followers to emulate these traits. By displaying unquenchable commitment to their own personal growth and ethical principles, leaders create a powerful ripple effect, encouraging followers to embark on their own journeys of self-improvement and development.

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St. Augustine of Hippo comes to mind as an example of someone who struggled morally with his sinful nature and the pursuit of earthly desires. St. Augustine was by no means a saint when he began his journey – he was a rascal, to say the least! His youth was filled with moral struggles and misguided choices and desires. From his *Confessions*, he utters a vivid reflection of his inner struggles, "I sought you outside myself and did not find you there. I was a storm-tossed ship on the sea of life, driven by the winds of desire, seeking ports of call that could never provide solace." (Book X).

Through it all, St. Augustine found hope in the grace extended to him by his mother Saint Monica and the philosopher Ambrose of Milan who continued to pray and guide him in the way of the Lord. Due in part to their influence, St. Augustine grew up to become an eminent theologian and philosopher. His readings have blessed me personally, but even more, his journey of growth influenced by the leaders in his life continues to be an endeavor worthy of admiration.

Thus influence is essential. While championing the intrinsic good of all individuals is the goal of a great leader, upholding them to high moral standards and accountability is the glue that holds it all together. Through the lens of the ongoing spirit of discussion and collaboration, a leader must be ready to engage in regular conversation, providing feedback to guide the path for personal and professional growth. When leaders give constructive criticism, individuals find the clarity needed to address their weaknesses and leverage their strengths and capabilities. Feedback becomes a necessary catalyst for building potential, and the leader then holds the individual accountable for growth following this targeted feedback. In this manner, the individual takes ownership of his or her growth and is empowered with an increased sense of responsibility, self-discipline, and aspiration for greatness. Accountability reinforces an ethos of continuous improvement and resilience. In environments where these principles are affirmed, individuals achieve their greatest potential.

I will close by challenging each leader/reader to explore the philosophy of servant leadership intimately in all its ramifications. Let its wisdom create a mindset that propels you to see every human as a canvas of possibility, waiting patiently for the brushstrokes of a great leader to inspire a masterpiece for their life journey. When we have the courage to help another person overcome their personal obstacles; when we endure and persevere through the journey *with them* relentlessly; when we show justice by honoring them without insecurity or a compulsion for control, giving them what they deserve, and helping them reach a state of human flourishing, then we have served them nobly.



Dr. Toyin Atolagbe serves as Executive Director of Great Hearts Christos, a new model of private Christian academies in Arizona which feature the Great Hearts curriculum. Before stepping into this role, Dr. Atolagbe served as Headmaster of Archway Lincoln, after several years as a Great Hearts teacher and Dean with Archway Trivium and Archway Arete. She holds a Bachelor's degree in English Language and English Literature, with minors in Linguistics, History, Philosophy, and French from the University of Ilorin, Nigeria. She went on to obtain her Master's degree in education, with a concentration in Early Literacy Development, from the University of Lethbridge, Canada. As she progressed in administrative leadership, she earned a Doctoral degree in Organizational Leadership with an Emphasis on Organizational Development from Grand Canyon University. Dr. Atolagbe has an insatiable appetite for educational training and has facilitated training for teachers, administrators, and parents in promoting habits of excellence in children, Growth Mindset, and Mental Health of School-age Children, to mention a few.

