

An ASCD Study Guide for *Finding Your Leadership Soul: What Our Students Can Teach Us About Love, Care, and Vulnerability*

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This ASCD Study Guide is designed to enhance your understanding and application of the ideas presented in *Finding Your Leadership Soul: What Our Students Can Teach Us About Love, Care, and Vulnerability*, an ASCD book by Carlos R. Moreno, published in December 2023.

“Leadership soul is built on three pillars: love, care and vulnerability. In the context of education, *love* is a deep commitment to educating learners in a way that seeks their empowerment and upliftment. . . . *Care* means approaching education with the understanding that certain injustices affect specific groups of learners in unique ways and assuming responsibility for dismantling these inequalities. . . . *Vulnerability* is an educator’s willingness to bring their authentic self to those they lead, sharing their own experiences to create deeper bonds with their students and colleagues.” (p. 35)

Leadership is not a destination, it is a journey. Far too often, we have taken on the role of leader, stepping into spaces armed with a list of responsibilities and a set of expectations, yet paid little attention to our own wiring, histories, beliefs, practices, and souls. In *Finding Your Leadership Soul*, Carlos Moreno thoughtfully explores some of the most impactful people and circumstances in his life and how they have honed who he is and how he leads. His attention to seeing himself, fully and vulnerably, is a testament to and model of the power of searching one’s soul. This study guide is neither a how-to book nor a recipe. Instead, it is an invitation to follow Carlos Moreno’s guideposts as you find your leadership soul.

How to Use This Study Guide

“Reflection and applied learning are essential practices for developing a leadership soul.” (p. 87)

We recommend using this guide to activate the practices of deep reflection and applied learning as you explore love, care, and vulnerability for yourself and others. For each pillar, we have provided a selection of questions to inspire reflection and a few ideas for applying your learning. While we invite you to start with any of the three pillars, we suggest that you begin your work by focusing on self before approaching work related to others.

Love Is Embracing

“Love embraces [self as well as] the community and champions the emancipation of the community from the power structures and oppressive forms of leadership that inflict and reinforce inequalities.” (p. 35)

In Chapters 1 and 2, Moreno poignantly braids together his journey and his story as they relate to love, care, and vulnerability. His is a powerful story of trauma and acceptance, of childhood and adulthood experiences; it is history and ethnography. These chapters provide our first guidepost for deep reflection.

LOVE SELF

“We don’t need to be perfect or calm all the time, but it is important to understand the history of our responses so that we can engage in our lives with presence and vulnerability.” (p. 5)

1. **Know yourself.** Moreno opens the book with a letter to his 15-year-old self. “I know you,” he writes (p. 1). How well do you know yourself? It seems like a silly question, but sometimes we go through life at warp speed, rarely looking back and asking, “What happened and how has this impacted me?” The challenge for many leaders is to make space for reflection. Journaling, mapping, storytelling, and visualization can all provide a pathway to reflect on your life, your beliefs, your values, and your vision.
 - Take a few minutes to take a journey back through time. Close your eyes, if you’d like, and bring to mind three events, one at a time, that have shaped who you are. What happened? Who was there? What were you feeling? What were you thinking? What impact did these events have on you? Create a life map that tracks these occurrences.

- Make a list of your core values. If you could choose only three, which would make the list? Why these three? How do these values show up in your life? In your leadership?
2. **Love yourself.** As he closes the letter to the 15-year-old self he affectionately calls Carlito, Moreno expresses acceptance and affirmation: “I love and admire the young man you are, and I hope you think the same of the man you will become” (p. 3). Love is an action and a choice. There is freedom in loving, affirming, and accepting yourself. We thrive in love. We are liberated by love. How do you experience and express love to yourself, as you are right now? What impact does this have on how you experience and express love to others?
- Write a letter to your younger self. With compassion and affection, recount the longings, confusion, or worries of your younger self and offer insight and perspective. Be honest, kind, direct, and empathetic. Name the wonderful things your younger self will experience and learn. Embrace the successes and mistakes. Mention how they have shaped you. Share what you admire about them.
 - Write a letter to your future self. With hope, admiration, and gratitude, write about what you know to be true about who you are. Share your dreams and the impact you hope to have in your lifetime. Embrace the uncertainty of the journey and thank your older self for the care they will take of you.
 - Make a plan for self-care. How will you care for your spirit, your body, and your mind? Invest and commit to self-care as a practice. If you are new to this, start simply. Take a daily 10-minute walk. Enroll in a class at the local community center or library.

LOVE OTHERS

“My neighborhood shaped who I was to become nearly as much as my family and others I encountered during that time did.” (p. 7)

1. **Know others.** Throughout Chapter 1, Moreno takes an auto-ethnographic approach to his life circumstances. He recounts the social, economic, and political conditions of the South Bronx, NY, in the 1970s–1980s and

Providence, RI, in the 1990s as part of his story. In this way, he situates his experiences in context and draws understanding about their impact. Leadership soul requires the resolve for truth and justice, and the audacity to embrace communities from a place of collaboration and care. What is the truth about the community you serve? How do/will you seek justice for those in this community?

- Visit and patronize local establishments and organizations. In addition to investing in local businesses, discover how they fit into the tapestry of the community. Decide how you might partner with local organizations.
- Engage in ethnographic research about the community you serve. Identify elders, community truth-tellers, and local leaders to listen to, learn from and build relationships with. Get to know the community from a social, economical and political perspective.
- Participate in community activities.

2. **Love others.** In Chapter 7, Moreno offers guideposts for *embracing love*. Leaders have the opportunity to set the stage for a culture that is positive, respectful, caring, loving, and vulnerable. We exude it. We celebrate it. We support it. How have you embraced this community? How will you embrace this community in the future?

- Make time for people, especially young people. If someone were to review your weekly schedule as a representation of time you devote to getting to know people individually, what would they see? How much time do you hold sacred for getting to know people well? Create a schedule that aligns your beliefs and values with how you spend your time. Next, explore how you might implement this aligned version.
- Lao Tzu advised, “Watch your words, they become your actions.” Take notice of how you engage with others. Are you present? Pay attention to your words and your language. Challenge yourself to speak positivity and life into those you serve and work with. On a daily basis, encourage creativity, brainstorming, and experimentation.
- Seek to understand, not to criticize. While feedback can be loving, it may not always be warranted. Ask questions to understand. Provide feedback from a place of care. On a daily basis, give praise to others.

Care Is Service

“Leaders with soul bring highly individualized caring to learners and serve families and the community. . . . Caring without love is intellectual and technical, bounded and constrained.” (p. 36)

Moreno draws our attention to the distinction between the benign act of care and a more love-infused motion of caring. It is the noticeable difference between doing what is expected and acceptable, and performing actions that honor, respect, and empower. One approach is not necessarily better than the other, but caring may more readily allow for trust and vulnerability. How does caring show up in your day-to-day interactions and decisions?

1. **Care for self.** Moreno points out that caring starts with self-reflection. As you consider your personal commitments, values, and priorities, what message are you sending yourself? What do you care about, as it relates to you? What would more care look like for you?
 - Listen to yourself—to your spirit, your body, and your mind. Find a quiet place to sit still for five minutes (increasing the time as needed) and listen to your inner voice. What is that voice telling you? How does it feel? What do you need to be more caring toward yourself? Allow yourself to express your needs and your feelings freely.
 - Exercise compassion, patience, and understanding for yourself. Form or find community with others where you can express and experience genuine mutual support and caring. Notice what you need to feel this way.
2. **Create conditions for care of others.** In Chapter 7, Moreno guides us toward creating more caring environments, developing caring relationships, and achieving more patience and understanding.
 - Listen to your students and staff. Find ways to collaborate with, learn from, and amplify the voices of others. Create opportunities for others to lead. What practice or system exists to help you create these opportunities?
 - Ask yourself daily, “In what ways have I exercised empathy, compassion, patience, and understanding?” What practices and systems support

empathy, compassion, patience, and understanding as a schoolwide culture?

- Build brave spaces. How is trust earned, strengthened, and restored? What practices and systems support this?
- Attend to the whole child. On a daily basis, spend time to get to know a student as an individual. How do you define this knowledge? How do others in the school community define it? How can this be a shared practice?

Vulnerability Is Openness

“Vulnerability guided by love dismantles the barriers between leaders and those they serve. Love stimulates an openness to being changed, to learning with, through, and for others.” (p. 37)

Moreno exemplifies vulnerability in his soul-searching letters to himself and others. He recounts experiences, unpacks feelings and finds meaning. The letters are as reflective as they are aspirational.

1. **Create the conditions for vulnerability for self.** Moreno references “lived curriculum” as shared stories that center life lessons and provide a framework for creating vulnerability. What four life lessons could you share that reveal your humanity and frame your lived curriculum? How can sharing your lived curriculum create vulnerability (and humility) in you?
2. **Create the conditions for vulnerability for others.** Moreno draws our attention to Kwenda’s (2003) “mutual vulnerability” and disrupting cultural and positional power dynamics. He challenges us to place ourselves in the position of learning alongside others (e.g., students, teachers, parents), thereby setting the conditions for authenticity and a measure of risk-taking.
 - Write a letter to a person in your past who has had a profound impact on who you are today. It could be a mentor, student, colleague, friend, or family member. Recount a shared encounter and describe how it influences your actions today. Share your feelings and what kind of meaning you have made from the encounter.

- Write a letter to someone who will benefit from your work in the future. This could be a mentor, student, colleague, friend, or family member. Share your hopes for your impact and the legacy you will leave. Include actions you will take to bring your vision for the future into fruition.
- What practices and systems exist for teachers to experience mutual vulnerability? For students to experience mutual vulnerability?
- What change can you make to shift power dynamics toward more vulnerability?
- What change can you make to shift your community culture toward honoring the human experience (with grace and space for risk, trials, triumphs, etc.)?

Reference

Kwenda, C. V. (2003). Cultural justice: The pathway to reconciliation and social cohesion. In D. Chidester, P. Dexter, & W. James (Eds.), *What holds us together. Social cohesion in South Africa* (pp. 67–80). HSRC Press.