

The Importance of People

Column Editor: Fred T. Wilhelms

Leadership in Transition

SOME years ago, at about this season, I was holding myself under a melancholy microscope. For a long enough time to be conscious of the weight—and not long enough to be used to it—I'd been in a position of considerable authority over a good-sized faculty. They were a wonderfully expert group of seasoned idealists, who deserved outstanding leadership; it was an open question, in my mind, whether they were getting it. To put it baldly, I was trying to size up whether I was doing the job well enough to make it a useful thing for me to continue.

You've likely been through the same sort of self-scrutiny. If so, you know it isn't the world's most delightful pre-occupation. The moments of truth string on and on like a serial story, and it's not altogether comfortable even to look back into the old chapters. Still, it seems that if we would candidly pool our more intimate reflections about leadership, we might come out with something more perceptive than generally gets written.

As I looked back over my behavior, I (you'll pardon the pronoun? "The writer" has tried to figure out how to write this without it—but I haven't found a way)—I came to suspect myself of being in a subtle competition with

members of our staff. Perhaps this is more of a universal trait than we realize: to feel some little need to be "better than" those people for whom one has status leadership. Apparently some supervisors and administrators—young ones, especially—really do achieve the feeling, a naive faith that their appointment suddenly made them wiser, more expert than anyone else on the scene. Apparently some others solve the problem by surrounding themselves with safely weak competitors.

For me, it was impossible to dodge the fact that in various ways a large proportion of our staff were better than I ever could be—better teachers, better scholars, finer and more attractive persons. What to do? The answer came suddenly: Learn to take pride in them and in being the servitor who had some chance to release them to their fullest effectiveness.

(Acquiring the attitude turned out to be easy—though that did not guarantee the requisite skills. In fact, a genuine pride can all too easily creep over into a chauvinistic one. But, regardless of that minor hazard, the basic attitude brings with it a wonderful relaxation. No longer does one feel that in some half-hour he has to produce a problem-solution superior to the one a committee sweated

out over a semester's time. One can admit not having read every mentioned reference, not knowing everything that goes on. It's a comfortable feeling, when some crucial decision has been made, to know that it stands on a foundation of the expertness of specialists, and is better than one would have produced by himself.)

However, I had to learn to admit that there are tough hazards to this business of believing in one's gang. In any sizable faculty there are people who don't always get their grade reports in on time, who forget important appointments with students, who sometimes teach sloppily or mishandle students. Over the years there may even be a few who don't pay their bills, or one who abandons wife and child. The nature of the administrator's job makes him know too much of all this. Furthermore, his office is the crossroads of conflicting ambitions, for self or department. He sees

an uncomfortable amount of petty back-biting, of sniping from behind the academic barricades. Over and over, he is disappointed to see decisions being made for spite. In short, he faces a vocational hazard of disillusionment.

If he succumbs, he is done for. No man can be a leader if he has lost the buoyancy of faith. And yet the nagging facts are there, and a pretty image preserved by ignoring them would just be a nuisance. In the long run, the needed faith will be valid only as it has roots in reality.

The Need To Be Better

What to do? For myself, I came to see that I was over-reacting. And my motives weren't as pretty as one might have hoped. I was over-reacting because I was over-anxious lest "my" beautiful organization be spoiled. The over-anxiety stemmed from a subtle feeling that, with

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my genius, I should be able to build a perfect mechanism—and any flaw in it was a black mark on me.

In a curious way it was just another form of the need to be better than anybody. Now I had to be the guy who could fix everything, even keep normal human nature from showing its teeth. I was reacting as a director might react as he was putting on a show—*his* show—if the actors didn't play it as he saw it; not as a man would react who thought that the show was owned by the whole crew. What any detached person would have recognized as mostly minor—even amiable—aberrations among truly superior folk—such aberrations had come to seem major, chiefly because they were an affront to my dignity. One needn't excuse everything; a callous indifference would be doubtfully superior to cynicism. But the sooner a person in a leader's chair learns to tell when what is at

stake is his own over-anxious ego—or what the Greeks called *hubris*—rather than the real thing, the better he will be able to build a faith in people that accepts their imperfections along with his own. And when he goes further than this, to see that variance from his private image isn't necessarily imperfection at all, he can stop charging up and down the line, trying to keep everybody's shoulders neatly squared.

My introspection also revealed a pivotal weakness in lack of frankness, a little evasiveness that was generally—though not always—of kindly origin. Pragmatically, the tendency to postpone the unpleasant half-hour only piled the problem higher till it crashed down on our heads. But more was at stake. People have a human right to know how things stand, whether they or their proposals are going to be backed, or not. I came to see that there is no substitute for simple,

direct honesty. I resolved to practice it—and to practice it promptly when problems arose.

(This was a toughie, and perfection kept slipping off the fingertips. But *without any exception* when practice approximated the ideal, the result was *always* healthy. The dreaded hour ended in a new mutual respect, sometimes a fine new relationship even grew out of a direct clash. And then there were the many, many times when exposure to sunlight simply evaporated what never had any real substance anyway.)

How one longs for the frankness to come the other way, too! How one values the occasional staff member who just lays it on the line! No sensitive status leader can long forget how endlessly his thoughts and his actions are being hashed over and groused at in boiler room and Kaffee-Klatch. One certainly wouldn't want it wholly different, if the

only alternative is a supine acquiescence. Nothing is sicker than an organization in which the leader gets his way because the group feels that he means well, would be offended, or for reasons of personal inadequacy, needs support. Any good leader wants disagreement. But if only the useful disagreement could be got out in the open and put to work! Here probably is the very keystone of successful group action. I tried hard to learn the techniques of getting it out in the open; I retain my faith that there are ways; I myself never felt much success. And I suspect that to many another person in a status leader's job, as to myself in those days, the sensed presence of the under-table communication remains a sapping, draining thing.

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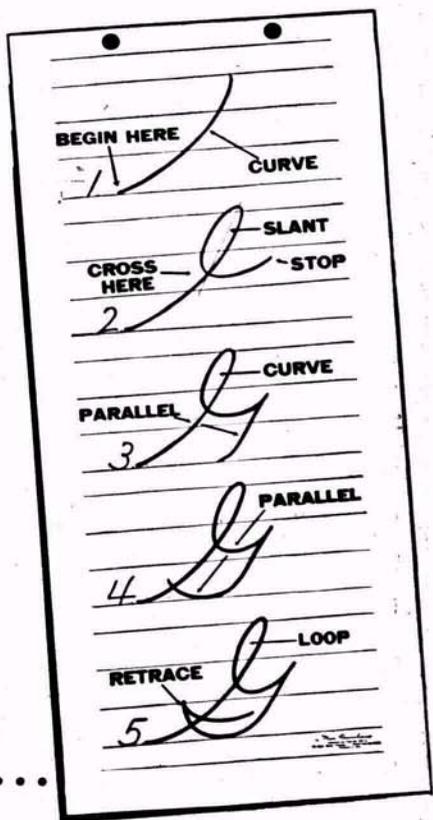
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sunny good will that are incomparably our greatest need. Technique and sophistication are well enough in their way, but when all is said and done one warm, generous impulse is worth a peck of them. How to hang onto the generous warmth and the simple faith under the battering of incident and incident and incident—that came to seem to me the final problem of the responsible leader. Faith and warmth create a buoyancy that spreads to help people rise. In those serene moments when one has them he intuitively acts with wisdom. Free from blinding preoccupation with himself, he can look with a perceptive and sympathetic eye to the needs and yearnings of the other fellow. He can see the situation as it really is and act constructively.

But the serene moment fades; perhaps one's feelings have been hurt; his authority and dignity seem in jeopardy; his anxious insecurities are on the prod. He begins thinking over-much of himself, and compulsive blinders narrow down his vision. No longer is he free to see things and people as they really are. He acts from defensive fear. And then comes petulance and a whiny fretfulness, tearing away in a day what has been woven in a month.

How can one raise himself out of the muck of his native tendency? Some few, fortunately, rarely face the problem, for their inner security is great and they steadily refresh those who come to them. More, by far, learn to control themselves and to dissemble, more or less successfully. Some go through years unconsciously tincturing every decision with a self-defending taint.

For myself, lacking anything even approaching a full answer, I did find one clue. The ceaseless drains, so often talked about when supervisors and administrators meet, come chiefly—and



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this is not wholly avoidable—when one lets himself be cast in the role of “the superior”; when he sees himself as doing the “giving.” They do not come very much when he is working shoulder-to-shoulder with the crew on a shared task, everybody giving, everybody taking. A man floats easier if he doesn’t stick up too high.

Looking back, it seems to me that I have said each time that the road to health, to wisdom, to the full use of a serene intelligence, is to rest more upon the strength of the group; in a sense, to take less overweening responsibility; in the calm knowledge that the group can bear its share and be the better for it.

Yet, if this seems in any way to play down the importance of leadership, it is wrong. For increasing evidence shows that adult groups have a basic psychological need for strength in leadership—if strength be properly conceived—not

far from analogous to children’s basic needs for strength in those around them. New forms of leadership, yes; less leadership, *no*.

The transition to the new forms is being painful. A group will react violently, today, against even mild forms of autocratic decision-making which would have gone unnoticed two decades ago. And the leader himself, conditioned by the times, suffers uneasy pangs if he reverts to old patterns. Yet, at the same time, most groups have developed too little skill in concertedly managing their own affairs—too little, even, of the will to responsibility for doing so. And most status leaders have developed little skill in helping them. The result, not infrequently, is a power vacuum, lack of ability to act, and irritated frustration. We are between the old and a dimly perceived new, and we need to be working forward speedily.

Well, it looks as if it didn't quite come off. Much of what I vaguely sensed and wanted to catch on paper has dribbled through my fingers. And yet I retain a feeling that some things on this order are closer to the nub of the heavy task of leadership than much that often is said.

By the very nature of the job common to ASCD many of you must have valuable perceptions. Some of you have tried one kind or another of leadership role, found too much head- or heart-ache, and shifted. Why? What went wrong? Some of you have learned to live happy, effective lives in the most demanding jobs education holds. How have you done it?

Why not put your perceptions on paper? Try a whole column, if you like, or send me a letter and let me join your ideas with those from other letters— anonymously or by name, as you choose. The role of the leader in this transition, as we grope our way to new relations among mankind, is newly and strangely demanding. Let's try to focus our expertness upon it.

—FRED T. WILHELMS, *professor of education, San Francisco State College, California.*

Professors and Practitioners

(Continued from page 38)

only after he has gone as high on his own Cloud as he can.

I mean to say just this: that if teachers of teachers (and those whom they teach) are to do their job properly, they might well come to admit that they really have something to learn from teachers of teachers of teachers, i.e., "professors" in the humanities and the sciences. They had better come to understand that the "professor" invents (I use

the word etymologically) the very things that are ultimately taught to their students. And, although he doesn't claim, if he is properly modest, to know how to teach it to their students, especially if their students are in grammar or high school, still he knows what the subject is, what the rules of discovering its nature are, and what is required properly to master it. All these things are "theoretical." And discovering them is possible only for him who dwells on Cloud Nine. To deny this is to come down with that anti-intellectualism which is the great American disease, even as for the professor to insist that only he knows how to teach his subject to all comers is to come down with another American disease, pseudo-high-browism.

There is much to be said against both sides, to be sure. But it would be better to learn what is to be said *for* both sides, and to learn further how to deal seriously with the kinds of language in which it inevitably must be said. Still, the immediate issue is what is to be said against those educationists who are, wittingly or unwittingly, proponents of sentiments like the one I have quoted. And I think that maybe they, in their zeal to prove themselves right by enlisting "professors" on their side, had better give due consideration to what that enlisting means: to take another as seriously as one takes oneself. Conferences and speeches and sociable arguments are nice. Understanding (and the respect which follows only from understanding) is better. If we don't learn to listen (I do not say talk) in one another's language, we will surely be in the position of that King to whom young Bartholomew (we have all taught him) addressed the fateful words which I have quoted at the beginning of this communication.

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