

Educational Leadership: The Curious Blend

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"It is my belief that those who lead must lead. They must move in on situations, they must help spell out issues, they must insist that problems be defined and solved, they must energize."

LEADERSHIP. What a mysterious word, maybe even frivolous. There are times when I think I know what it means but increasingly I have doubts. The doubts swirl about the understanding of leadership, how to identify and strengthen leadership abilities, how to prepare potential leaders for work in education, not from uncertainty about its merits.

This issue of *Educational Leadership* will attempt to clarify professional perspectives about leadership, to keep a focus on its presence or absence, and above all to assure ourselves that leadership remains important.

For nearly three years I have divided my time and professional responsibilities between the campus of The Ohio State University and the executive directorships of citizens groups in two large cities, Detroit and San Francisco. I have witnessed at first hand

the leadership acts of professional educators as well as lay people who have interests in the improvement of educational opportunities for the young. I have watched the blending of lay and professional perspectives. I have stood at the confluence of lay and professional thinking and observed the mobilization of incredible commitment and devotion to desirable outcomes for young people. And I have suffered helplessly as those efforts crashed upon shoals and rocky shores. Leadership to no avail, or so it often seems.

A Posture of Movement

A few years ago, I tried to define individual leadership, to set down my own "puffy" statement. It went something like this: "The genius of leadership rests in the capacity to balance big issues and small ones, to respect genuinely those who differ, to avoid compromising larger objectives for short term gains. Leaders must elicit confidence on the part of their publics most of the time, and they must do it while openly exhibiting feet of clay. Leadership is being responsive and initiatory simultaneously. It is the curi-

ous blend of leading and following, provoking and calming, disturbing and stabilizing, but always in a posture of movement, generating new strength and capability along the way."

On re-inspection, these sentences stand. They continue to represent my perspectives.

Today's leadership environments are complex in the extreme. There are few problems, questions, or issues around which one can rally immediate support or consensus. Communication is increasingly difficult. The stakes are high and growing more so every day. Not only are institutions on shaky ground but individuals are too. And the publics which professionals have caressed (sometimes even molested) are no longer our source of support and applause; they are often our adversaries.

What is it, in these times, that makes leadership so difficult? Are there conspiracies against leading? What is it that seems to differentiate public leadership from private leadership?

Answers From Within

The answers to those questions are not at all obvious. They must be sought from within the persons for whom leadership expectations prevail as well as from the situations within which leaders must lead. And they must emerge from observations about how leaders and their situations impact upon one another.

There are some conclusions about the settings within which leadership occurs, however. (There is room in this brief editorial

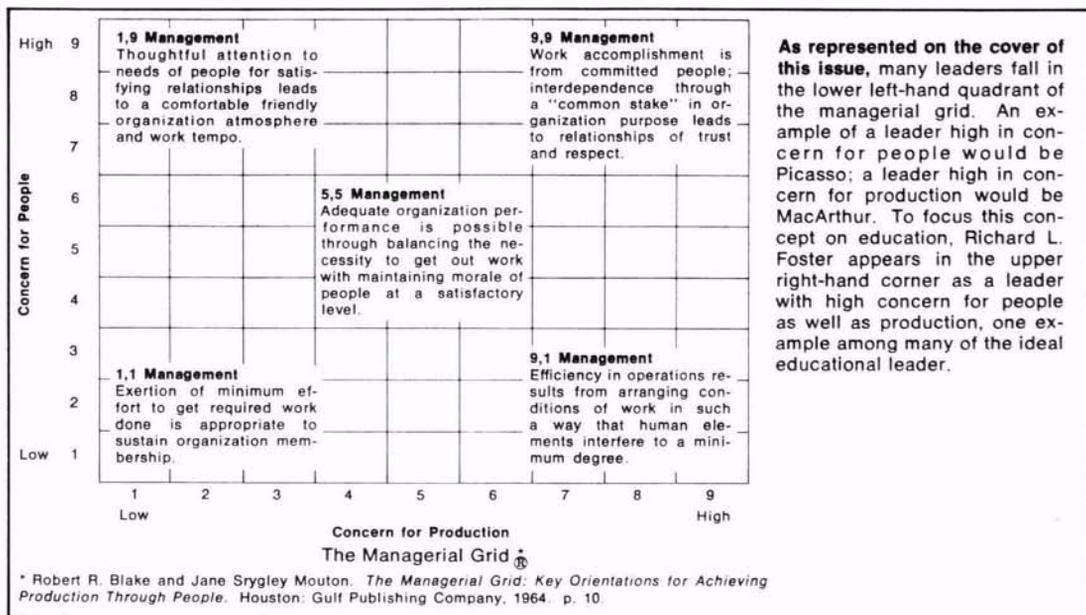
only to identify them.) The first is the growing obscurity of the basic and essential goals of American education. The second is the institutional paralysis produced when goals and objectives are amorphous or unshared. The third is that school systems are bureaucracies and as such are saturated with inertia and in their present forms almost unmovable. The fourth is the escalation of tensions and frustrations between and among teachers, administrators, and other school professionals; between and among parents, school board members, citizen groups, and the general public; between and among powerful organizations that represent the same; and between and among the levels and units of government which share the governance and management responsibilities for schools.

The individual, professional, or lay leader finds herself or himself somewhere in this milieu, struggling. It is understandable that many will capitulate in the face of such odds, throw in the towel, ride out the event until retirement, or as lay people, walk away in disgust and disappointment. But what of those who choose to stay?

The agendas of leaders are burdened with hosts of problems and issues. Some are major, mind boggling, complex in the extreme. Others are trivial, at least on first inspection. Big problems and little problems co-exist and compete for attention. The true leader has either a learned or an intuitive recognition that there are differences in scale and scope among them which warrant and demand attention. Failure to acknowledge and deal with big issues can be catastrophic. Similarly, to ignore an accumulation of small

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As represented on the cover of this issue, many leaders fall in the lower left-hand quadrant of the managerial grid. An example of a leader high in concern for people would be Picasso; a leader high in concern for production would be MacArthur. To focus this concept on education, Richard L. Foster appears in the upper right-hand corner as a leader with high concern for people as well as production, one example among many of the ideal educational leader.

issues can be the "kiss of death" for the leader. Thus, the leader must sharpen the ability to balance among the big questions and the small ones, of being sensitive to which is more important at any given point in time, and through the investment of fantastic amounts of energy avoid overlooking the significance of either. It is a tough, demanding expectation for one who chooses to be out front.

A Sustained Endeavor

Those who aspire to lead should season that aspiration with the recognition that leadership is a sustained encounter. It is with persons who differ one with another and on many occasions with the person at the helm. In situations that are marked by conflicting views the evolution of respect and understanding for difference is slow and painful.

On today's leadership scene the presence of difference is so widespread and so visible that to speak of it seems unnecessary. But despite its obvious presence, there are those out front who have not yet learned to respect those who differ nor have they learned to institute practices and procedures which credit differences properly, keep them

in perspective, and/or produce settings which maximize the constructive potential of difference. Those who choose to lead must nourish the strength inherent in variation.

Leaders are always surrounded by temptation. For example, there is temptation in winning short run advantage at the cost of losing a larger purpose. In the crucible of day-to-day responsibility the frequency and intensity of such opportunities are distracting. When issues are tough and emotional it is appealing to build a sense of accomplishment now and to turn aside from the central question.

I am not equating short-term gains with compromise. I am referring rather to what often are acts of desperation on the part of leaders. They need a victory so fiercely in their own judgment that they are willing to accept less than coming to grips with major problems. They sell out for short-term gains. They rest on immediate satisfaction. And, in the process, they obliterate the prospect of meeting the larger issues satisfactorily.

This is a substantial problem for leaders. Those who succeed are more often than not those who are able to keep the larger objectives in focus and direct their energies toward them. They are willing to forego

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easy and short-term gains even in strenuous and fatiguing times rather than settle for less than what the achievement of the major objective would mean.

The Relevant Others

As I have observed educational leaders, especially superintendents and principals, I have wondered at the proliferation of “publics” to which they owe an allegiance. In my early years in the profession of education (when I was a school superintendent) I recall spelling out for myself “relevant others” with whom I shared common interests or obligations. At that time the listing was relatively brief and manageable. As a superintendent it included the professional staff and the board of education, a few community leaders, and community organizations such as the PTA. Likewise my concerns flowed toward the state, both the legislature and the state department of education. The newspapers were essentially friendly and the examples of hostility from them were relatively few.

That landscape has altered for those who serve in those positions now. Principals and superintendents must understand and relate to sharply differentiated communities of interests. Parents, students (the clients of the system), affirmative action advocates, political extremists, taxpayers, racial and ethnic spokespeople, the media, professional organizations, the courts, and hosts of others so far outstrip my experience two decades ago that comparison offers little but stark contrast. Building and maintaining confidence within pluralistic environments, especially those in cities, is an expectation for leadership that pushes at the boundaries of human capability. Few persons are trained to negotiate among such interests. It requires the sensitivity to difference described earlier. It demands a patience of unusual proportion

and must be constructed on principles of trust and confidence. Leaders must trust their publics if they are to earn confidence in return.

Today’s educational leadership is public in every way. Gone are the days of “back room deals” and running a game outside of public view.

The rapid spread of “sunshine laws” puts both policy maker and administrator on stage. Doing the public’s business in public is tough. It forces persons to think in the glare of bright lights and grinding cameras. It causes leaders to declare themselves and to be put on record often without the benefit of reflection. It puts those up front, up front, “warts and all.” Those who can deal with these circumstances, who can roll with the punches and still retain perspective, can acquire sufficient public trust to sustain themselves in leadership roles. But those who cannot, those who become defensive, insular, protective, hostile, will not survive the leadership imperative.

Leading exacts a high price from those who accept the challenge. Leaders have to possess energy, lots of it. Energy for planning and reflection, for daily associations with people, for encounters with adversaries, for achieving agreements, and accepting defeats. The pressure on leaders is unrelenting, sustained. Leaders have to stick around, clean up after the dance. There is little if any down time or breathing space before the next problems, the next demand, the next negotiation.

It is my belief that those who lead must lead. They must move in on situations, they must help spell out issues, they must insist that problems be defined and solved, they must energize. Leaders must not stand around and allow the ship to sink. Leaders set sail, hoist anchors, move through turbulent seas, and deliver a cargo safely to the other shore.

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