

Shared Leadership — “The Damn Thing Works”

David Weingast

Superintendent Bruce Caldwell's philosophy of shared leadership was met with skepticism at first; it even scared some. Five years later there are both general approval and residual skepticism.

“The damn thing works!” So spoke a veteran teacher about collegial responsibility in the Mansfield, Connecticut, public schools. To the naked eye it works too well to be believed. But in a concentrated effort to uncover weaknesses, I could only conclude that shared leadership in Mansfield is genuine. Conversations with almost a fourth of the hundred-person staff confirmed that this is the real thing, neither contrived nor superficial. It is happening in a semi-rural, sophisticated district of 1200 children distributed in three K-4 elementary schools and a 5-8 middle school.

The plan is not without defects and it might not be exportable. But this does not diminish its validity. The scheme has special importance because much that is called “shared leadership” in business, in education, in industry, and in the professions is really a great deal less.

Mansfield's leadership philosophy reflects the personality of its energetic but low-keyed superintendent, Bruce Caldwell. Secure,

confident, sensitive, he seems relaxed about the high-risk game he plays; risky, because as superintendent he alone is accountable for what happens in his schools. He is comfortable sharing power and seems not to be troubled by giving his teachers responsibilities that in most places are the superintendent's own.

In Mansfield classrooms teachers conceive and write curricula, help to screen and nominate professional staff, help prepare the budget, schedule their schools, and bring recommendations to the Board of Education. Here in public the teachers defend their proposals and take their chances on acceptance. Mostly it is acceptance, because intensive labor will have gone into the presentation. The teachers will have conferred with the superintendent and heard his thoughts and his cautions. But a typical staff proposal will nevertheless reflect teachers' judgment on what to teach and how to teach it. On a rare occasion Bruce, as he is called by most of his staff, has been surprised by what he has heard his

teachers say to the Board. But when the Board asks him what he thinks about a teacher's recommendation Bruce responds readily. Good preliminary staff work almost assures that he will concur with the teachers' proposals. But if he disagrees he says so. All the while teachers and superintendent are mindful that both stand to lose if they get badly out of step. The plan absolutely requires that the parties trust each other, that they be willing collaborators, that they have common goals, and that the sharing process be continuous.

Bruce has full faith in the principle he practices. The teaching staff, he feels, will do its best work as partners of the superintendent rather than as subordinates. With joint responsibility for the educational enterprise, teachers have a big stake in its success. In their classrooms, Mansfield teachers are testing the validity of their own judgments, not the decrees of a higher official. In these circum-

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stances, Bruce believes, the creative resources of teachers can best be put to work.

Bruce's convictions follow closely the theories of some seminal thinkers on leadership. Among the group whose beliefs dominate the executive management field are Abraham Maslow and Frederick Herzberg. Maslow put forth the idea of the hierarchy of needs. People, he said, have basic physical needs which, when satisfied, recede in their conscious minds. They then begin to look to the satisfaction of psychological, esthetic, and emotional stirrings. They want to be made welcome in society, to be

appreciated, to be loved. Further, they yearn to express their talents and flourish when their accomplishments are recognized. These are the essentials for a person's growth, or in Maslow's terms, "self-actualization."

Frederick Herzberg after vast research concluded that two sets of discrete factors exist in most job situations. One set he calls "hygiene" factors, such as working conditions, supervision, company policy, interpersonal relations, security, and salary. The other group, labeled "motivators," includes confidence, trust, appreciation, recognition, responsibility, and the possibility of growth. Herzberg says that these "motivators," while they are the main force that drives us toward achievement, are often missing from the real world of work. Many employers concentrate instead on improving the hygiene factors.

Bruce Caldwell's schools exemplify the Maslow and Herzberg theses. Scholars and researchers in the management field have long endorsed these ideas but they have been able to identify few operational models. Herein lies the importance of the Mansfield system, a microcosm for the study of "motivators."

Curriculum Councils

At the heart of the Mansfield plan are curriculum councils organized by subject. Teachers from the eight grades volunteer to serve on the council of their choice. Council members decide what curriculum work needs to be done and proceed to do it. They may write the curriculum themselves or get the help of outside consultants. A portion of the time needed for curriculum council meetings comes out of the school day; buildings are closed eight afternoons a year for this purpose. Additional meetings, as needed, are held during non-school hours.



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Each curriculum council has an elected "convener," a "co-convener," and a recorder who handle administrative and clerical duties. Minutes of each session are available to the staff; anyone who is not a member of a particular council can learn from these minutes what is going on and may attend any council session.

Each council sets itself a goal and tries to reach its predetermined mark. Absenteeism is frowned on; a teacher who fails to show at meetings would sense the disapproval of colleagues. But there is no administrative attendance-taking or enforcement.

When a council has completed its task, presumably a curricular document, it would be ready to make its presentation to the Board of Education. Before this public session the superintendent will have met with the council, helping to shape their proposal, which could include curriculum objectives and content, techniques, teaching tools, supplies, equipment and staff. While the superintendent could not compel council members

to accept his thinking, the group would at least have listened to him. Almost without exception, when a council proposal is ready for the Board, teachers and superintendent will have resolved any differences. But council proceedings are democratic; unanimity is neither required nor assured.

Not all Mansfield teachers are enamored with shared leadership. When Bruce came to town as superintendent he called the staff together to explain his philosophy and solicit their understanding. His shared-leadership idea scared some. Others didn't believe him. A few discerned the beginning of an era of interminable meetings. Five years later there are both general approval and residual skepticism. Bruce points out that with decision-making power go responsibility and accountability. This is not to the taste of some teachers who may object on principle. Others prefer to be told what to do. To some teachers shared-leadership is a contrivance by which administrators shift their burdens to the teaching staff.

How Do Principals Feel?

What about the principals—three elementary, one middle school, and one assistant? Shared leadership may have put them in an equivocal position. At curriculum council meetings it is obvious that teachers are making crucial decisions about the program of studies. While council meetings are open to the principals, it is obviously difficult for them to attend the half dozen or more councils that in effect meet simultaneously. Moreover the teachers speak of the principals as "facilitators." The principals, that is, are expected to create optimum conditions for carrying out the program which teachers for the most part have created. Not every principal relishes the role of facilitator. An old-fashioned principal, used to running everything, would be out of place here.

Mansfield's principals profess to be happy with the new spirit. At least a couple have infused shared-leadership thinking into their own buildings. But this has been by individual initiative; nobody is forced to do anything.

Principals speak admiringly of teachers' professional health as a consequence of the present philosophy. One principal said, "The teachers are professionals. They appreciate the fact that they have control over what happens in the school system."

Beyond the curriculum coun-

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cils, nevertheless, principals see a big theater of operations in their respective school communities, with themselves as leaders. One said, "When parents call up they want to talk to the principal, not to a committee." In fact, shared leadership appears to be important

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chiefly to teachers, administrators, and the Board of Education. There seems to be little consciousness of it in the community.

Some elementary staff who favor the shared leadership idea nevertheless worry that the curriculum councils are set up according to subjects. In this they see a chance of excessive compartmentalization at possible cost to the whole child. They also caution that emphasis on separate subjects can adversely affect faculty cohesion.

Teacher power is a fact in Mansfield. Not the economic-political variety that hits the front pages, but in terms of fundamental authority to shape and operate the program of studies. And that's not all. When a vacancy occurs in a school the principal constitutes an in-house committee of teachers who, with him, develop specific job criteria, screen applications, interview candidates, observe them on the job, and make recommendations to the superintendent. Virtually without exception their proposals stick.

How Does the Board Feel?

How does the Board feel about shared leadership? Skeptical at first, with predictable doubt of the propriety of a superintendent giving major power to teachers—but with successful experience the

Board has come around. The Board knows it can expect mature, well-thought-out proposals from the teacher councils. When Board members ask the superintendent for his opinion they know they'll get an honest, informed answer. They also put some value on the fact that the councils present the collective thinking of skilled professionals. This, they feel, can be worth more than the judgment of even the most able superintendent acting on his or her own. Above all the Board has confidence in their superintendent. They see shared leadership as his personal style of operation and they're pleased with the results.

The Board is getting a good buy for their money. They like the quality of work produced by the teacher councils. They also know that teachers perform capably in the screening and selection of staff. In most school systems these jobs absorb costly administrative time.

Is Shared Leadership Exportable?

Is this system exportable? Yes and no. For the plan to work, the superintendent would have to be both intellectually committed and emotionally attuned to this mode, and would need the support of a congenial Board, an education-minded community, and a high-calibre staff. These are exacting requirements. One teacher said, "It's hard to separate the plan from Bruce."

Bruce himself came to his present philosophy through slow maturation. He absorbed the heavy literature of leadership and was able to apply enlightened theory to the complexities of a school superintendency. Though he is contemplative, he is of this world, a formidable opponent in racquetball and a respected faculty regular on the basketball court. His steady performance in both sports hasn't hurt his standing in town one bit.

Mansfield's shared-leadership

plan requires extensive, almost constant staff interaction—among teachers and with the superintendent. But the system is free of mush and sentiment. Each participant is likely to assert his individuality and this is respected. Bruce's own conduct of his office calls to mind Maslow's injunction, "When the facts say 'yes' and the public says 'no' the good leader ought to be able to stick with the facts against the hostility of the public."

Bruce's philosophy appears to have struck deep roots. Some old-timers on the staff think back to an era when they were "told what to do and how to do it, with four copies of everything." Mansfield's teachers work hard but there is no sign that they would trade their present responsibilities and gratifications for an easier life under a more traditional arrangement.

Again and again in talking with teachers I heard them refer to their "ownership" in the schools' program. They are proud of their accomplishments in curriculum and other major parts of school life which they have helped to create.

One teacher spokesman, reflecting on the superintendent's way, said, "It's not just that he's a nice guy. He has a philosophy. He has high expectations of me and I like that. I feel more respect as a person now." Perhaps this is the ultimate endorsement of shared leadership. *EL*



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