

# Leaders as Learners: A Possible Dream

Principals need to value and work toward change in themselves before they expect change in teachers.

LUCIANNE CARMICHAEL

*"The problem with this system is the old guard attitudes of some top administrators. There'll be some changes made; I assure you of that!"—the words of a "new broom" superintendent.*

*"I'm working hard to get these authoritarian principals to change their ways. We could turn this system around if we could motivate these principals. Can't figure out why they don't see it"—a district superintendent.*

*"I'd like to try some new programs in my school, liven up faculty meetings, but I can't get teachers interested. They're satisfied with doing the same thing every year. They need staff development"—a principal.*

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The common theme of these quotes leaps out at me: getting other people to change, to learn something new, acquire more enlightened attitudes. Reform always seems to begin one rung below the reformer. But as each person in the chain of authority fastens on lower level individuals who must change, the possibility of change in self is nimbly bypassed.

Dedicated reformer-principal that I am, I've had all sorts of schemes for enlightening teachers. And I have been the subject of similar schemes thought up by superintendents for enlightening me. From first-hand experience I can say that the schemes rarely work. Somehow our bosses never see this. Neither do we see it when we are bosses.

Human beings change from the inside, not from the outside. We gain new insights that lead to changed behavior only when we perceive a need for change in ourselves. This perception doesn't come easily for most adults. It comes only as a result of considerable disequilibrium, confusion, and pain, which forces on one's consciousness the idea that present behavior isn't working well.

Administrators who want to change others aren't dimwitted or malevolent. They are merely small parts of a larger pyramidal authority structure that is threatened by change, conflict, confrontation. Psychiatrist Maurice Vanderpol says that when one looks up the pyramid of authority, persons above appear more wise, competent, and powerful than oneself. When one looks down the pyramid, those below seem less wise, less competent, and less powerful. We authority holders easily buy into this role of wisdom, competence, and power both because of our own internalized acceptance of the role and because others below assist with their expectations of us.

The myth of omniscience and omniscience, reinforced, I think, by re-

cent literature on effective schools and their larger-than-life principals, is not easily confronted. As a principal with omniscience well-internalized, it is difficult, perhaps frightening, for me to confront my own frailty, doubt, finiteness, and need for growth. It is virtually impossible for "lesser" humans around me to do the confronting. One usually tells the boss what one thinks the boss wants to hear—which precludes the boss learning much of anything new. The irony is that we don't model change for those from whom we demand it, all the while wondering why our demands aren't met.

After a year's sabbatical to ponder this and other ironies, staff development seems an odious concept to me. About all I can handle is self-development, and that's not easy.

## Dumping Omniscience

The idea of dumping the omniscience myth and getting on with our own development has occurred to a number of principals around the country. In the Boston area, principals have banded together to create the first Principals' Center under the direction of Roland S. Barth, former principal and member of the faculty of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. With the financial and moral support of the university, Barth enlisted a part-time staff consisting of an associate director, four former principal doctoral students, a research associate, two clerical assistants, and a visiting practitioner (me).

In the first year of operation, working principals conducted programs for other principals on such topics as collective bargaining, RIFs, dwindling resources, teacher evaluation, anger and stress, positional and personal authority, computers, and writing and publishing, to name a few. In addition, nationally known presenters and members of the Harvard faculty conducted workshops and mini-courses.

The Center is guided by an advisory board, the majority of whom are working principals who plan programs and decide major policy. Some 170 area principals have voluntarily and independently joined the Center at a cost of \$100 each, which attests to the principals' commitment to self-improvement and their willingness to act as resources for each other.

Member principals involved in presenting or participating in the after-school, evening, and weekend sessions are enthusiastic about the value of the information and collegiality available at the Center.

"We're so isolated in our schools," said one participating principal. "At the Center, I've discovered other principals facing the same difficult problems I face and, more important, having the same feelings of doubt, exhaustion—sometimes fear and anger—that I have. We've been able to share feelings, solutions to problems. I leave sessions with a lot of new ideas."

Commented another principal: "It's especially valuable to get in contact with principals in other systems, and with parochial and independent school principals. We've never talked to them before. We share many problems and, after all, we're all working for the same purpose. It seems as if now we can cooperate instead of compete."

**T**he most significant and essential idea behind a principals' center is that it is initiated and directed by principals, for principals. It is not initiated and directed by a school district or education department. When this occurs, a center becomes just one more way of "doing it to" principals, with all the short-term and disappointing results of externally-initiated growth schemes.

Although the metamorphosis of each principals' center will be different, it's important to note an idea common to all centers. The purpose of principals'

centers is not to develop political clout for principals, or to improve working conditions or salaries, though such things could be by-products. A principals' center focuses singlemindedly on improving professional skills, attitudes, and expertise among principals.

In New Orleans, a grass-roots effort, by and for principals, is in full swing. What began two years ago as four other weary principals and I getting together once a month for wine, cheese, and moral support has become a large and vital group cutting across public, parochial, and independent school lines in two parishes. With an 18-member board of directors (15 principals, two business persons, one university professor), we have become incorporated as a nonprofit organization independent of any institution or school system and determined to design and direct our own growth and learning.

With hard work and considerable stubbornness we literally went door-to-door in the business community to raise \$20,000 for our planning year. During our first year we will hire an administrative assistant to the board president, assess the needs of and the resources among 600 or so area principals, design programs, and write a proposal for operational funding.

We are not alone. Principals in Westchester County, New York, and in New Jersey have started down the same path. The National Institute of Education is now considering "networking" among these beginning principals' centers.

#### **Our Destiny in Our Hands**

As principals we may have had some power within our own schools, but we have not had much within school systems. As we begin to feel a new dignity within ourselves, we sense a new respect coming from top administration. Boston area principals report, too, curiosity among teachers about the Principals'

Center. The Center models and legitimizes the idea of leaders as learners. That model is a powerful one.

Change will start with us; we'll worry about staff development later. It may even take care of itself if we play our new role as learners convincingly. It won't be good enough to disappear once a week to a place called a Principals' Center. Visible change in practice must follow if credibility for the educability of educators is to emerge. To me, it's an exciting idea. **EL**

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