

# LEADERSHIP

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## OVERVIEW

### IF ONLY WE KNEW ENOUGH

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One reason teaching is so difficult is that we don't know enough about all the factors affecting learning. For example, we know that people are very different from one another, but we can't agree on exactly how they differ or on what those differences mean for how they should be educated.

In the last decade some teachers have begun to experiment with *learning styles*, persuaded that the concept helps them to both understand differences better and to provide for those differences, thereby improving learning. But the field is young and confusing, so others reject the whole idea as faddish and impractical. For example, some people are bothered by the fact that most of the advocates, such as Rita Dunn, Anthony Gregorc, and Bernice McCarthy, view style quite differently and make conflicting recommendations for practice. But the competing models don't trouble Pat Guild (p. 10), co-author with Stephen Garger (p. 63) of the ASCD book, *Marching to Different Drummers* (1984). Guild (her name rhymes with "mild") emphasizes the central theme of the learning styles movement, which to her is that individuals are different, so a single way of teaching—or supervising—won't work for everyone.

Of course, that apparently simple principle can be devilishly difficult in practice. We have our bureaucratic notions of fairness—"If I do it for you, I'll have to do it for everybody"—and our desire to uphold standards—"There's only one way to get an A in this class." And why not? Fairness and equal treatment are fundamental values. Still, when we accept the concept of style, we realize that what is suitable for one person may not be suitable for another, and that excellence takes many forms.

But *why* such diversity? I got a glimpse of a possible reason when I talked several years ago to a professor of agriculture at the University of Nebraska. In the 1960s, he said, agriculturalists dreamed of a "green revolution"; they hoped to find the most prolific strains of corn and rice and to plant them all over the world. Then they realized that if a few strains were planted too widely, they could be wiped out by particular diseases or pests. Now, instead of narrowing the search, horticulturalists are looking for genetic diversity. My acquaintance travels frequently to South America, going from village to village

to harvest samples of native beans. Knowing that the modern world is irrevocably losing many forms of life (scientists estimate that we are currently losing three species a day), he takes the beans back to the university nursery, where their genetic material can be preserved.

If diversity ensures the survival of beans and corn, it must also contribute to the survival of human beings. Some of us can tolerate cold better than others. Some prefer more structure, some more interaction than others. Some of us, before investing energy in doing something, need to understand *why*. Similar differences must have enabled our ancestors to cope with awesome physical and mental challenges. Not all survived, of course, but when conditions were a certain way, those with a particular set of qualities were especially valuable. And though it may be less obvious in the modern world, it's still true that our individual strengths complement those of our associates who have other characteristics. If we understand this—if we are convinced that such variations are not only acceptable but *desirable*—we are more likely to try to adapt to them, whether we fully understand them or not.

If we don't know all we'd like to know about individual differences, we know even less about the brain, which as Stephen Garger (p. 63) points out, is surely the source of those differences. The good news is that scientists are at last beginning to solve the mysteries of this "last frontier" (Restak 1980). We are beginning to understand just how complex and powerful the human brain is and to see how we might arrange schools to take advantage of that power. Renate Nummela Caine and Geoffrey Caine (p. 66), who are writing a book to be published by ASCD early next year, have refined a set of principles derived from brain research that promise a profound effect on learning. We have much to look forward to.

In the meantime, we continue to do our best, knowing that we don't know everything, but keeping our minds open to the emerging knowledge that can help us be more effective. □

#### Reference

- Restak, R.M. (1980). *The Brain: The Last Frontier*. New York: Warner Books.

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