On Rethinking Leadership: A Conversation with Tom Sergiovanni

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Tom Sergiovanni shares how he came to abandon his earlier views about leadership and how he came to believe that professionalism and leadership are contradictory.

*Y**ou write about "substitutes for leadership." Are you really saying that leadership is an outdated concept?***

Not leadership; what's outdated is our understanding of it. We think of leadership as direct and interpersonal, and assume that we must have it. But there are many situations in which leadership is not an issue. I think that if we study those settings, we'll find that certain qualities can substitute for leadership.

Such as?

Norms. Commitments. And professionalism, which I think is an important substitute — but one that needs a little clarification. When we think of professionalism we may think of competence, but there's more to it than that. Professionalism has a virtuous aspect. For example, there's a commitment to exemplary practice. Professionals don't need anybody to check on them, to push them, to lead them. They are compelled from within.

But surely the leader — the official leader — helps develop such qualities?

You're saying you need leadership to get the substitutes for leadership. You may be right.

But another way to get at it is to change the metaphor for the school. We view schools as formal organizations, so we think of leadership in terms of the hierarchical bureaucracy. In communities, on the other hand, people are bonded together in different ways, and a different kind of authority

compels them to behave as they do.

I think we've had it upside down. Traditionally we've served our leaders. I'm suggesting that in an idea-based organization, a community enterprise, if you will—see, I still slip and use words like "organization"— the person with moral authority is cast in the role of serving the enterprise even more than others who also serve the enterprise.

That doesn't mean you're a weak leader, that you don't hold people accountable. You can express disappointment. You can talk about letting standards fall. As a matter of fact, I talk about leadership by outrage. In traditional management, when you base your leadership on bureaucratic authority, you're supposed to be cold and calculating. When you base it on psychological authority, you have to be sensitive to the interpersonal needs of other people, which might mean treating them like children, I don't know. But when you base it on moral authority, you can behave normally. You can get angry and be disappointed, just as you do outside your official role, even with loved ones. When you treat people that way, it seems to me, you're treating them much more authentically.

Now, obviously, you're not going to be harsh and cruel. But if you're not pleased with something I did, say so. If I let the standard down, it's a learning experience for me, an opportunity for me to renew my commitment. And not only should leaders practice leadership by outrage but they should encourage it in others. Nobody has a special license to protect the

standard. The only thing that makes the leader special is that she or he is a better follower : better at articulating the purposes of the community; more passionate about them, more willing to take time to pursue them.

This is a very different way to think about leadership. What caused you to reexamine your ideas?

Well, frankly, much of my work in leadership over the years has been more part of the problem than the solution. When I recognized that, I began to rethink traditional management theory. It came about gradually, of course, but I particularly remember doing a workshop on leadership styles somewhere in the Philippines. We had an instrument and so on, and I would say that to be effective in a certain situation the leader should do such and such. And every time I'd say that, one person would ask, "What do you mean by effective?" He was a pain in the neck for the whole two days, so I put him down and ignored him — but that has haunted me ever since.

I began to feel that what I had been saying was vacuous, that everything I had been advocating about leadership was all process, no substance.

About 1980 or so I suffered what you might call a professional mid-life crisis, feeling that many of the things that had been important to me — my work on motivation and so on — now seemed devoid of meaning.

So I began a different line of inquiry. About 1982 or '83, it became clear to me that while my students and people in workshops were patient and respectful of what I had to say, they actually made a distinction between workshop knowledge and real life career knowledge. In real life, they weren't driven by the theories I taught them but by other ideas and other

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conceptions. They even had different theories about how the world worked. So I began to get curious about what kinds of theories principals, superintendents, and other leaders had in their heads — why they thought the way they did.

Well, I began to discover that they were not uncomfortable with ideas like moral authority. Maybe they wouldn't use the same words I would, but they were concerned about things like school pride, and they continued to do things like copying materials for teachers or putting kids' clothes in a washing machine and washing them. There's nothing in the literature that says principals ought to do that, and yet those are powerful moral statements.

So that led to my doing a series of studies on leadership. What I began to understand was that ideas were the key. Leadership wasn't just coming up with a slogan that you could call your "vision"; these leaders brought to their faculties a set of conceptions that became an idea structure for their schools. These idea structures weren't necessarily the same — some were even quite different from what I would have liked — but in each case there was something this person believed in and felt passionately about; it was that person's source of authority.

As I continued to think about it, the critical theorists — writers like William Foster and Richard Bates — helped me understand why I was beginning to have misgivings about psychologically based theory, including my own earlier work on motivation, going way back to my dissertation. For example, for the most part, Maslow and Herzberg didn't study females, so they espoused motivational theories that had to do with achievement and competitiveness; they didn't think about caring and nurturing relationships. And the work of McClelland provided us with a male model of achievement that focused on internal criteria for excellence and individual success rather than on community building.

By the way, that was another shocker for me, because when I first began to read the feminist literature, I thought, "Who are these arrogant people?" But it turns out they were right. Management literature traditionally was written by men for men, and its values — individualism, competition — define success in a masculine way. Maslow's theory exults self-actualization: self this, self that. Well, as a group, women tend not to define success and achievement that way. They are more concerned with community and sharing.

Some men might say defensively that what you're saying is sexist; that it replaces men's belief that theirs is the

better way with a view that women's way is superior.

Well, I don't have hard evidence, but you don't need hard evidence to make informed judgments. My reading of the literature on successful schools shows that while women are underrepresented in principalships, they are overrepresented in successful principalships, so there may be something to it.

*You're not saying that men can't learn this?*

Absolutely not.

But the most telling argument against an emphasis on process rather than substance is that a person can be successful in a psychological sense but the enterprise may not get better. As a matter of fact, it could get worse, because people who have no moral commitment but all the leadership skills can be very skillful in promoting the wrong things. We'd be better off if they weren't such good leaders.

As you reexamine leadership, are you questioning the concept of instructional leadership?

Sorry, yes. Nobody defends bureaucratic authority; they all see that as "command" leadership. Some have a problem with my criticisms of psychologically based leadership, because leadership style, personality, motivation — all that stuff — seem to be at the core of what we study. But where others really part company with me is when I say that technical rationality is not a very good source of authority either!

What do you mean by technical rationality?

I mean the findings from the teaching effectiveness research, school effectiveness research, and so on. I realize
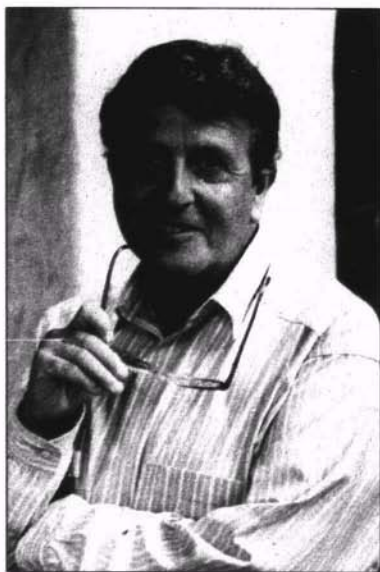
that some people won't like what I'm saying, because we've been led to believe that that stuff is terrific. But there's a strong case for teachers needing to create their practice in use — for not treating the research on teaching as a set of prescriptions. It doesn't tell you what to do, it informs your practice.

That may be true, but I wouldn't define instructional leadership in those terms. To me, it simply means that the principal is deeply interested in and knowledgeable about teaching and learning.

Well, I have problems even with that. I may have been influenced too much by what I've seen happen in Texas. In 1984, Texas passed a law declaring that all of its principals would be instructional leaders. It required that they all take 36 hours of instruction on something called "the lesson cycle," and that they learn how to use the Texas teacher appraisal system. They were to go into teachers' classrooms at

least four times a year and make sure the teachers were teaching the "proper way." I think the term "instructional leadership" has been captured; it's been spoiled.

And, anyhow, surely there are better labels. How about *principal teacher?* At least principal teacher suggests a kind of community with teachers. *Instructional leader* suggests that others have got to be followers. The legitimate instructional leaders, if we have to have them, ought to be teachers. And principals ought to be leaders of leaders: people who develop the instructional leadership in their teachers.

So much for principal leadership. We're hearing more and more about teacher leadership these days. Where's the overlap?

I think you worry less about leadership if you think that one of the challenges of leadership is to establish substitutes for it. The more successful we are at establishing substitutes for leadership, the less important it becomes to worry about who are leaders and who aren't.

What does this mean in practice? Suppose I'm a school principal. What do I do?

Well, there's no easy recipe. I suppose it requires a change in your own mindscape about how human enterprises work. They're much more loosely connected than they appear. Can I use social science jargon as a shortcut? Traditional management theory is based on the notion that organizations are managerially tight and culturally loose when it's probably the opposite: they are managerially loose.

For example, evaluation systems don't matter a nickel. They're one of the biggest wastes of time in the

world, because it's not important what a person does the two times that you're in the classroom observing him or her. When you're not there, teachers teach in ways that make sense to them according to the norms. And norms are connected not to the managerial side of life but to the cultural side. So we need to acknowledge that and try to figure out how we can develop a "stickier" management and leadership practice, one that touches people and stays with them.

You can't abandon hierarchical leadership entirely, can you?

No, there are five sources of authority, not three. You've still got bureaucratic, psychological, and technical-rational — but competence and virtue should dominate, I think; the other three should supplement. You fall back on hierarchical authority and psychological leadership because the world is imperfect. But if you're really a professional — there's something antithetical, isn't there, between the notions of professionalism and leadership?

Is there?

Yes. The more leadership is emphasized, the less professionalism flourishes.

In a particular school community?

Yes, and the inverse tends to be true. The more professionalism is thriving, the less need there is for leadership.

So it's no accident that at a time we're beginning to stress teacher professionalism —

I think the door is open now to a kind of revolution. We're beginning to

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recognize that schools are special places where people care about teaching and learning. They're not like most organizations; you can't apply organizational principles to places characterized by sandboxes, books, and children. Schools are more like families and small communities where, if you can develop the right substitutes, you can throw traditional leadership away. There's no need for it ever again. □

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