Visions That Blind

Principals would do more lasting good for schools if they concentrated on building collaborative cultures rather than charging forcefully in with heavy agendas for change.

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The current emphasis on vision in leadership can be misleading. Vision can blind leaders in a number of ways. For instance, the principal who is committed to a particular innovation or philosophy—whole language, integration of special education, cooperative learning—may pursue it in such narrow and self-defeating ways that key teachers will resist the idea until the principal leaves or is transferred. In other cases, the principal is "apparently successful" in getting teachers to use the innovation while failing to achieve more basic changes in enabling them to consider alternatives, reflect on their practices, and otherwise improve.

The high-powered, charismatic principal who "radically transforms the school" in four or five years can also be blinding and misleading as a role model. This principal's strategy is fragile because so much depends on his or her personal strength and presence, which is relatively short-lived. I have not seen any follow-up studies of schools that have been transformed by powerhouse leaders, but my hypothesis would be that most such schools decline after the leader leaves. Also, the particular direction of change in these schools may have some flaws that go uncorrected because of the leader's dominance.

The basic problem in both of these situations — overattachment to particular philosophies or innovations, or overreliance on the charismatic leader—is that they restrict consideration of alternatives and suppress the voices of teachers who may have questions or who may be open to other ideas than the ones being considered. Too much store is placed in the leader as solution compared to the leader as *enabler* of solutions. Such reliance leads at best to short-term gains, at worst to superficial solutions and dependency.

The crucial question is "Whose vision is it?" Principals are blinded by their own vision when they feel they must manipulate the teachers and the school culture to conform to it. Such a vision does not serve long-term development:

> "My vision," "my teachers," "my school" are proprietary claims and attitudes which suggest an ownership of the school that is personal rather than collective, imposed rather than earned, and hierarchical rather than democratic. With visions as singular as this, teachers soon learn to suppress their voice. It does not get articulated. Management becomes manipulation. Collaboration becomes cooptation. Worst of all, having teachers conform to the principal's vision minimizes the possibilities for principal learning. It reduces the opportunities for principals to learn that parts of their own vision may be flawed, and that some teachers' visions may be as valid or more valid than theirs (Fullan and Hargreaves 1991, p. 90).

Developing Collaborative Cultures

While principals can be instrumental in implementing particular innovations through direct monitoring and support, schools are not in the business of managing single innovations; they are in the business of contending with multiple innovations simultaneously. Rather than impose their individual visions, principals would do well to develop collaborative work cultures to help staff deal with all these innovations. To build collaborative work cultures, principals must concentrate on fostering vision-building; norms of collegiality that respect individuality; norms of continuous improvement; problem-coping and conflict-resolution strategies; lifelong teacher development that involves inquiry, reflective practice, collaboration, and technical skills; and restructuring initiatives (Fullan et al. 1990, Fullan and Hargreaves 1991).

This does not mean that principals' visions are unimportant. The clarity and quality of their visions may have helped mark them for leadership, but:

> Principals have no monopoly on wisdom. Nor should they be immune from the questioning,

inquiry, and deep reflection in which we have asked teachers to engage. Principals' visions should therefore be provisional and open to change. They should be part of the collaborative mix (Fullan and Hargreaves 1991, p. 90).

In short, the principal should strive to be not an instructional leader, but rather a leader of instructional leaders (Glickman 1991, p. 7). He or she is responsible for making vision-building a collective exercise. It is a mistake to fix on a vision too early in the process. Louis and Miles (1990) observed during the course of their case studies of five urban high schools engaged in major improvement projects:

> The more successful of our schools had no a priori mission statements. Instead, multiple improvement efforts coalesced around a theme or set of themes only after the activity had begun (p. 206).

When one commits to major reform, it is often best to start small and experiment, gradually expanding on the successful:

> The objective of evolutionary planning is to capitalize on the "low risk" quality of smaller-scale innovation to increase certainty. This, in turn, increases motivation and the possibility of concerted, more "tightly coupled" action across the school (Louis and Miles 1990, p. 211).

Thus, an alternative approach to vision-driven reform is one in which the principal pursues promising visions provisionally, learning as well as leading through collaboration. If there is one justifiable generic vision, it is schools working together to press for and support improvements.

During the course of our Learning Consortium work over the past three years,[1] we formulated eight guidelines for how principals should approach the complex task of working interactively with teachers and communities:

1. Understand the culture of the school before trying to change it;
2. Value your teachers: promote their professional growth;
3. Extend what you value;
4. Express what you value;
5. Promote collaboration, not cooptation;
6. Make menus, not mandates;
7. Use bureaucratic means to facilitate, not to constrain;
8. Connect with the wider environment (Fullan and Hargreaves 1991).

Districts also need to employ short-term strategies (inservice for leaders) and mid- to long-term strategies (selection and promotion criteria and procedures) to create, coordinate, and allow the development of leadership for collaborative school cultures (Fullan and Hargreaves 1991, Zywine et al. 1991).

The message for both the school and district levels is captured in Schein's (1985) observation: "*The only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture.*" But the process of helping to develop collaborative work cultures is complex. It requires great sophistication on the part of school leaders: to express their own values without being imposing; to draw out other people's values and concerns; to manage conflict and problem solving; to give direction and to be open at the same time. Thus, Schein's statement should not be taken too literally. Developing school cultures is a subtle, not a blatant business. □

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[1] The Learning Consortium is a partnership of four large school boards (average number of students 54,000) and two post-secondary institutions, set up in 1988, designed to work on teacher development across the teacher education continuum (preservice, induction, inservice, leadership), and on school development by coordinating the resources, policies, and practices of the districts and of the post-secondary institutions (see Fullan et al. 1990).

References

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