



A Collection of
"One to Grow On"
Columns from
Educational Leadership

THOUGHTS ON TEACHING

BY CAROL ANN TOMLINSON

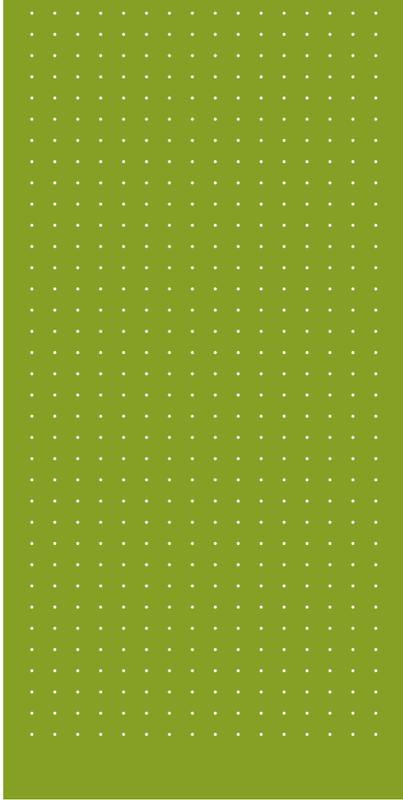


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Five top *Educational Leadership* columns from differentiated instruction expert Carol Ann Tomlinson

Respecting Students (September 2011).....	3
For the Unlikely Ones (February 2012)	6
Teach Like a 4-Star Chef (December 2012/January 2013).....	10
The Stage as a Classroom (October 2014).....	13
Communication That Powers Leadership (April 2015).....	16



RESPECTING STUDENTS

SEPTEMBER 2011 | VOLUME 69 | NUMBER 1
PROMOTING RESPECTFUL SCHOOLS PAGES 94-95

Becoming clear about the attributes we aim to live out in the classroom makes it more likely that we'll learn from what we do.

In this issue, Educational Leadership debuts a new column by educator and author Carol Ann Tomlinson. Tomlinson draws on four decades of K-12 teaching—heading programs for both advanced and struggling learners. In this monthly column, “One to Grow On,” she will share with early-career teachers her reflections, encouragement, war stories, and suggestions for how to thrive on the teaching journey.

A colleague recently reflected, “Meaningful teaching has to do not only with the skills you acquire, but also with the person you seek to be.”

Like many profound thoughts, this one is easy to recall and repeat—and profoundly challenging to enact. In pondering how to guide new teachers, I thought of this colleague's words. The start of a teaching career is one of those rare times in life when we have a chance to consider who we really aspire to be—and to begin anew. Becoming clear about the attributes we aim to live out in the classroom doesn't suggest that we won't make errors. But it makes it more likely that we'll learn from what we do, becoming stronger professionals and people as a result.

Perhaps the most powerful attribute a teacher can attain is respect for students. That's a little different from aspiring to be respected oneself. I know many teachers who seek respect and don't quite get it. I can think of none who've worked consistently to be respectful of students who did not also gain students' respect—and the respect of parents and colleagues.

Respecting students means regarding them with special attention, honoring them, showing consideration toward them, being concerned about them, appreciating them, relating to them, admiring their strengths, and caring for them. Young people are dignified and strengthened by adult respect. The absence of such respect is corrosive.

Cultivate Positive Beliefs

Respect for students is rooted in teachers' beliefs and exhibited through our words and actions. One of the finest teachers I know told me about a colleague who found time each week to stand in the area where the elementary students got off the school bus. She greeted each child with a comment or question and said to herself as each one passed, "There goes another kid who can change the world." No doubt she found it important to turn her attention toward the reason she chose to teach.

Teachers who respect students

- Understand the power of beliefs in shaping their practice. They rid themselves of any covert persuasion they may have that kids who are like them in race, economic status, language, beliefs, or motivation are somehow better or smarter than those who are unlike them.
- Believe their work can make previously unimpressive students shine—and can raise the ceilings of possibility for impressive students.
- Teach students how to grow academically and personally.
- Enlist students' partnership in creating a classroom that dignifies each person within it.

Choose Your Words Carefully

A middle school student said to his teacher, "When you hollered at me last week..." at which point his surprised teacher interrupted him. "Stop there for a minute. Have I ever raised my voice at anyone in our class?"

"Oh no!" the student exclaimed, "but you sometimes raise your eyebrow, and it's louder than any other teacher I've ever known." What the student understood is that sometimes quiet communication is the most powerful kind. He "listened" to the raised eyebrow precisely because his teacher communicated with him respectfully.

Teachers who respect students choose their words and tone carefully. They consciously

- Listen to students—and hear them.
- Use positive humor, not sarcasm.
- Provide corrective feedback in ways that foster student effort.
- Acknowledge student growth.
- Use their words to defuse difficult situations.

Watch What You Do

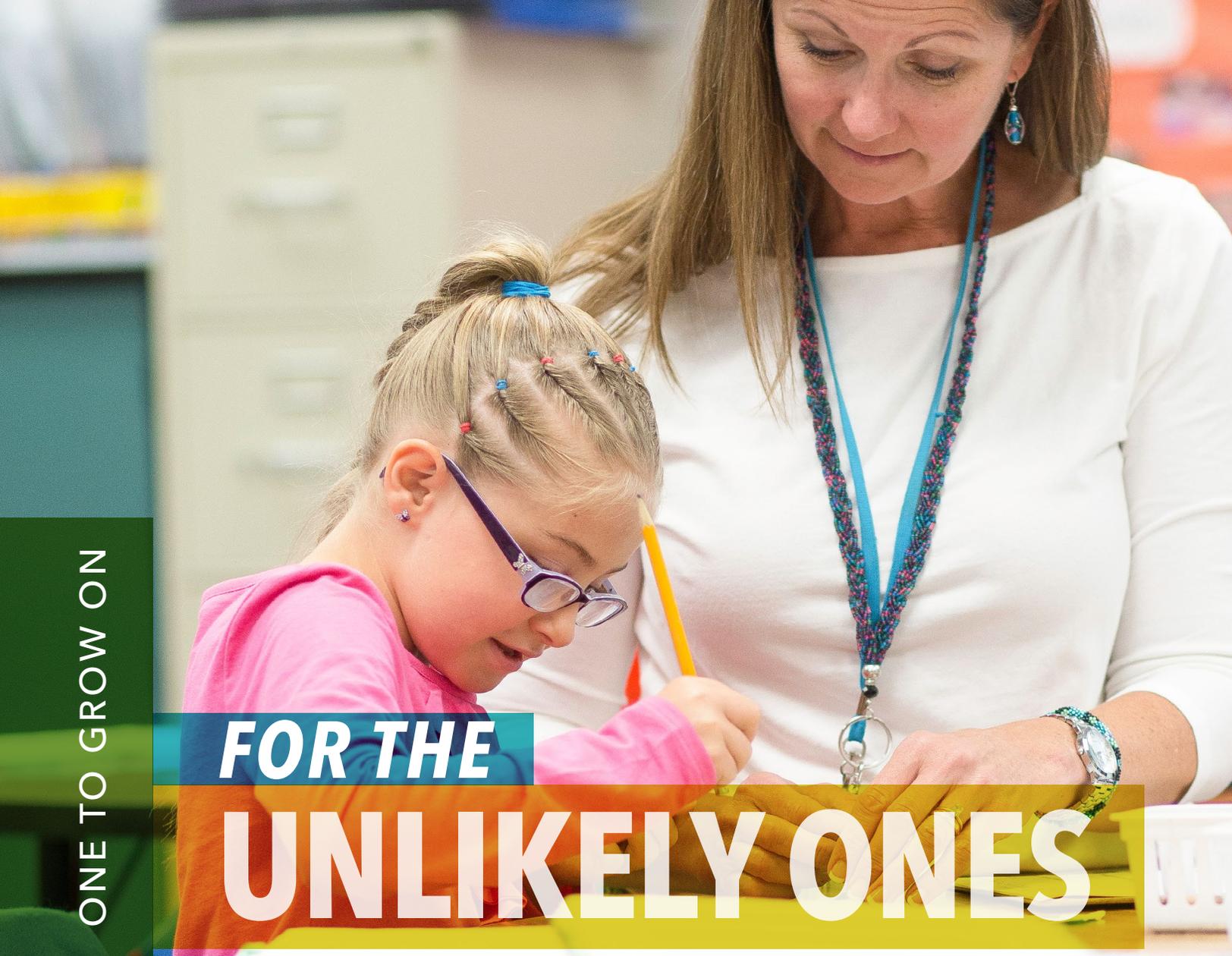
A high school teacher received a similar comment many times on the end-of-the-year survey she gave students, something like, "This is the first time I've ever felt I could be successful in school." The teacher believed absolutely in each of her students and communicated respectfully. But it was *how* she taught that changed how students saw themselves.

Teachers who act respectfully toward each student

- Study their students continually to understand how to teach them better.
- Connect with their students, and connect their students with one another.
- Ensure that each student contributes to the success of the class.
- Make curriculum engaging and meaningful for each student.
- Expect much of each student and provide the support necessary for students to meet those expectations.

A new teacher who doesn't make missteps is a rare beast. Mistakes are part of learning for teachers as much as for students. But a persistent desire to respect those we teach keeps us moving in a direction that serves students, ourselves, and the profession well.

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FOR THE

UNLIKELY ONES

FEBRUARY 2012 | VOLUME 69 | NUMBER 5
FOR EACH TO EXCEL PAGES 86-87

An act of faith begins when a teacher looks at a young person and says, "This one's not doing well enough."

I had dinner recently with a group of college students. Our host was my friend Terry Greenlund, who'd been a teacher and mentor to the students around the table. As they reflected on their history with Terry, Andre said, "Know what my first memory of you is, Terry? When you made me sit down next to you to do my homework. You made me stay there for five minutes. I thought I was going to die for sure."

When Terry met Andre, he was an elementary student who spent too much time in the principal's office. His schoolwork was weak. He came from a low-income, complicated

family situation and was in danger of becoming the wrong kind of statistic. The kind of kid that hovers between “easy to overlook” and “Why did he end up in my class?”

Andre continued with the story. When he could finally sit and attend to work for five minutes, Terry required 10; when he could handle 10, Terry asked for 15. “I was thinking the other day when I was studying,” Andre mused, “I can keep at it now for hours without noticing.”

That’s a story starter, but the real story is long, painful, and exhilarating. Along the way, there was tutoring; medication for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); visits to a counselor; mediocre grades; outings to museums; and a trip to South Africa—too many things for a short space. The sum of it is that Terry and Andre constructed a dream. There may be nothing more demanding or rewarding within the reach of a teacher.

I’ve learned lots about teaching from Terry, mostly by watching him and listening. I once asked him to say in a nutshell what he does to guide students from low prospect to high success. He listed four principles.

1. Engage in acts of faith.

An act of faith begins when a teacher looks at a young person and says, “This one’s not doing well enough.” It takes on a form when that teacher pledges, “I’ll be a catalyst for a more promising outcome.”

Terry explained how he approaches a student who worries him. He communicates to that student that he sees him or her—and observes something worthwhile. Delivering that message requires what Terry calls a concrete manifestation of belief. He might simply say, “Here’s something I read yesterday that reminded me of you. Read it and tell me what you think.” Or, “I have a chance to nominate someone for an afterschool program that seems pretty interesting. I want to nominate you.” The message might be embedded in an invitation: “I need help getting labs set up twice a week. Would you come up on lab days and help me get the room ready?”

Terry takes kids like Andre to their first college-level basketball game and asks them to imagine themselves playing in the game. That begins the journey from believing a dream is possible to realizing one’s dream—to seeing the possibilities and acting on them.

Offer opportunities.

When a kid lives in a constricted universe, ruts come to look like the horizon. For Andre, attending graduate school was initially a dream too far; even summer camp seemed like something from an alternate universe. Terry shows such kids what’s possible. He’ll give a young man a set of brochures for space camp, basketball camp, and a summer music program, and ask him to decide which one sounds most interesting. Three interdependent processes follow from this action. Terry begins to know the young person as an individual,

the two of them begin to develop trust, and they create goals and discuss how to achieve them. And all those things center on an opportunity that extends the student's horizon.

Spend time with a kid who should try out for a play or the basketball team or who aspires to create a truly cool class project. Study the student's strengths. Help that young person set and pursue goals that reflect those strengths. Learn from the student's culture, even as you invite the student to learn about yours. Listen for the fears that come with the hopes. Be there for the whole trip.

3. Bridge the gulf.

The gulf between nowhere and somewhere is wide. Teachers who mentor for success need to help kids learn to live in the two worlds that success will require—the world of their past and that of their future.

Duane, another of Terry's students, talked about how terrified he was in his first advanced placement class: "I realized every other kid in there had been groomed for success in that class since before kindergarten. They were pros at a language and a school game I didn't even know existed."

By getting to know a student, you'll identify that learner's gulf. The kid who misses too much school may never have learned to read. The kid who's always late may never have accepted responsibility for setting an alarm clock and getting up when it rings. Duane didn't know how to talk to a teacher. Andre didn't know how to sit still.

Mentors need to develop clarity about what successful people do and how they think in terms of mastering knowledge—and mastering life. They need to teach those skills and model them.

4. Persist.

Kids who come from far behind can, with committed support, learn to soar. In the process, they sometimes crash. They need someone with a longer vision and greater wisdom than their own to be there when that happens.

One boy Terry had reached out to, Will, was expelled from a prep school just before winter holidays for stealing another student's jacket. Terry guessed that Will didn't know how to talk to his peers in his old neighborhood about who he was becoming in the new school in a far-away place. But they'd understand a sharp-looking leather jacket.

Will was devastated. Terry was hurt and frustrated. "I didn't tell him how costly his actions were," Terry said. "He already knew. I just said, 'It will take very hard work to move beyond the decision you made when you stole the jacket. If you want to do that work, I'll be here for you.'"

If all teachers lived these principles with kids they care about, we'd change the world. Consider how Andre's story came full circle. Andre graduated from college and elected to teach in the poorest school in the low-income district where he grew up. During his first teaching year, his students surpassed his expectations in terms of their academic achievement and their behavior as citizens of the school. Andre believed they would excel, and he let them know that. He provided opportunities that extended their limited perspectives. Andre is now in a doctoral program preparing to teach teachers. I think that's a very good thing.

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TEACHING LIKE A FOUR-STAR CHEF

DECEMBER 2012/JANUARY 2013 | VOLUME 70 | NUMBER 4
COMMON CORE: NOW WHAT? PAGES 90-91

How do you feel about the new Common Core standards?" is the question I'm asked most often these days. Here's what I think.

I have a number of teacher heroes who've lifted my understanding of the art of our profession. More to the point, they have lifted the lives and prospects of the hundreds of students they've taught. Some of these teachers have the ability to help students know they are valuable and capable; others have a profound capacity to help students identify their purpose in life. Two of my heroes—Steven Levy and John Hunter—have consistently done both those things and have also revealed the many gifts of learning to countless young people.

Steering by Students' Enthusiasms

Steven Levy looked for what he called “the genius” of the content he taught and set out to connect it with the genius in each learner entrusted to him. He crafted a new curriculum each year—from scratch. One year, his students studied a bike path in their community as a way to learn math, science, social studies, writing, music, and art—and to appreciate the complexity and uniqueness of their New England town. Another year, nearly everything in the curriculum centered on the journey of the Pilgrims to the shores of the New World and on how they made a life there.

His students would tell you that their year with Mr. Levy was alive, dynamic, demanding, and fresh. Time went quickly, and they were transformed as learners and human beings by what they studied and how they studied it. Steven believed strongly that he could create curriculums that would simultaneously let students explore their world and meet the school district's expectations for content knowledge. He called what he was doing “steering the enthusiasms of the students toward the shore of the required curriculum.”

Teaching 4th Graders the World

John Hunter developed the World Peace Game in which his 4th graders encountered the complexities and possibilities in their world and in themselves. In the World Peace Game, students represent various countries on the verge of war. They must study and take into account realities of economics, geography, culture, government, meteorology, natural resources, and other elements while choosing actions their countries will take in response to various scenarios and interconnected dilemmas John presents to his students.

The game may last a month—or three. It takes place around a four-level, Plexiglas board filled with game pieces representing various conditions of their world, from undersea exploration to the stock market to hunger. To achieve their joint goal of avoiding armed conflict, students must collaborate and engage in complex thinking and problem solving. They learn to understand and appreciate varied perspectives on an event and to be empathetic with those whose views and needs differ from their own. They have to put aside the inclination to argue or stomp off; they learn to persist in the face of daunting odds.

John says the World Peace Game gives students a way to explore the world and discover their own realities. Thus they learn content 4th graders need to know—and more than any set of textbooks has ever contained. And they are enlivened, enriched, and extended as people.

Steven Levy, John Hunter, and teachers like them function from the premise that to learn is to become more fully human and that curriculum should be a catalyst for that kind of learning. These two educators understand the potential benefits of standards. They

also understand that standards can be one ingredient in a powerful curriculum, but they should never become the curriculum.

Dinner—or Ingredients?

If I laid out on my kitchen counter raw hamburger meat still in its Styrofoam container, cans of tomatoes and beans, jars of spices, an onion, and a bulb of garlic, and invited my friends to have dinner by chowing down from one end of the counter to the other, my invitation would be stunningly easy to decline! Further, thereafter, my friends would take care to avoid my kitchen when they were hungry. My error would be that I confused ingredients for dinner with dinner itself.

Not only do Steven and John understand the difference between ingredients and dinner, they understand that one can make many different dishes with the same ingredients, by changing proportions, adding new ingredients, using the same ingredients in different ways, and so on. In their careers, they've developed the art of making elegant dinners that incorporate, but are not limited to, prescribed ingredients.

Jay McTighe uses an architectural analogy. He speaks of standards as building codes. For a variety of reasons, it's unacceptable to ignore the building codes. Great architects and engineers follow these codes but don't let them limit their capacity to build a wide range of compelling, functional structures that both attend to human needs and expand human possibilities.

So here's what I think about the new Common Core standards. They are ingredients for curriculum—better ingredients than many we've had in the past. But they are not dinner. They are contemporary building codes—better suited to the 21st century than many previous sets of building codes. But they're not the buildings.

It is quite possible for us as teachers to simply “cover” the Common Core standards as though they were our curriculum. To do so would be to confuse ingredients with dinner, or building codes with architectural design—and woefully shortchange our students. It's also quite possible for us to work toward becoming the equivalent of four-star chefs or architects who reinvent the cityscape—and to dignify our students and their prospects.

What I really think about the new Common Core State Standards is that the decision we make about their role in curriculum is mighty important!

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ONE TO GROW ON

THE STAGE AS A CLASSROOM

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INSTRUCTION THAT STICKS PAGES 88-89

We worked on the productions almost daily for 12 weeks with a focus and a fervor that were consuming.

I learned my most powerful lessons about learning that “sticks” not in the classrooms where I spent seven hours a day teaching, but in an extracurricular activity I led. For 15 years, I directed a full-length play every spring. My actors and actresses ranged from 12 to 15 years old.

The plays we worked on were a stretch for them: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *David and Lisa*, *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*, *Annie*, and so on.

We worked on the productions almost daily for 12 weeks with a focus and a fervor that were consuming. If you signed on, you didn’t miss rehearsals. You memorized lines, as

there were no prompters; and if something went wrong for one actor, you helped fix the problem so no one in the audience had any idea there was a problem. Whether you were a lead, an actor with fewer lines, a lighting technician, or a prop setter, you “stayed in character” when rehearsals or performances were in progress. Both the adults and the students made it clear that they expected visible professionalism. Every year, their goal became to create an audience experience that was better than the year before.

I recognized many reasons why the plays were important. The challenge level was high—and there was a team that pulled together to ensure that everyone succeeded. Students felt part of something larger than themselves. We worked together to understand the play rather than just memorize it and repeat lines. There were roles for all sorts of people with all sorts of strengths. Every person was indispensable, and every incremental improvement—in projecting lines, moving sets silently in the dark, or applying makeup effectively—was celebrated by many people.

There was a very real audience. The students generally performed five or six times for about 2,500 to 3,000 people total. Students had to dig deep within themselves to find experiences, will, creativity, and skill to do jobs that some people thought early adolescents couldn't do.

Learning Why It Worked

During those years when I spent each spring directing plays and each school year translating what I learned from those plays into my classroom, I had no precise language for what made on-stage learning stick. I had no tidy categories for thinking about what I could do in my classroom to create the same sort of learning experiences. Only much later did I encounter the work of Edward Deci (1995, 2012) and Richard Ryan (Deci & Ryan, 1985), who have spent their careers studying human motivation.

I think if they'd observed our plays develop, Deci and Ryan would have said this work provided three key elements that led to self-motivation, excellence, and learning that sticks: autonomy, competence, and connectedness. Students were motivated and thus could work with a lot of autonomy. They also valued the content, process, and product involved. Kids understood that their growing competence was key to the success of something big. They were part of a connected team and felt the power of relationships.

As a director, I supported student autonomy, competence, and connectedness as well. I helped develop a meaningful rationale for the work we were doing. I treated that work as important and worthy. Trying to understand the student's perspective, I asked myself questions like, How can I help this young person connect with this role? How might it connect with his or her prior experiences or key strengths? I made time for students to explore such questions themselves and to develop deep understandings of the content of the play—and the role they assumed in making that content meaningful.

From the beginning, the students knew that my goal as director was to become increasingly superfluous. If the play worked, it would be because the students learned how to make it work. With each play, I gave the actors the reins of learning as soon and as often as possible.

Deci's work indicates that when teachers support independent learning, students will experience the three essentials of autonomy, competence, and connectedness, and learning will stick. Those years of experience directing young people on stage taught me a great deal about how to place them on center stage in classrooms as well. Good lessons with a long reach.

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ONE TO GROW ON

COMMUNICATION THAT POWERS LEADERSHIP

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COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS FOR LEADERS PAGES 90-91

Stick around long enough and you find that, over the years, you've had lots of bosses or "superordinates." If you're fortunate, you'll have had a few real leaders among that batch. At least, that's been the case for me.

I've had a couple of bosses who quite literally hid from controversy, one whose hallmark was grumbling and blaming, one whose driving purpose appeared to be status, a few who belonged in the Micromanagement Hall of Fame, and some who specialized in one-upmanship—trying to prove they knew more than the next guy. Some members of this tribe were annoying, some were restraining, and some felt superfluous. I learned something from each of these people—but not much about leadership.

I've also had the great fortune of working for *real* leaders. People in this tribe nearly always made me feel as though I worked with them rather than *for* them, or more

precisely, that we worked together for something bigger than any of us. I found them energizing, thought-provoking, and nurturing. I've learned from each of these people as well. They provided an apprenticeship in what it means to lead.

How Leaders Empower Teachers

Some portion of leadership is silent. As we watch people in leadership positions, we see that they live out (or don't) what they ask of colleagues: hard work, principled convictions, trustworthiness, courage, and so on. Such modeling is revealing, potent, and instructive.

But verbal communications are also central to real leadership. As I think back on the communication patterns of the effective leaders I've worked with, I see seven shared characteristics in how they interacted with me and with my peers.

- *They spoke and acted from deep conviction.* They saw our common work as a mission to extend young people's prospects. They were well informed about this mission, and their depth of understanding stretched my understanding of my work as well. Their passion, knowledge, and personal commitment made us feel that our work was more than "a job."
- *They always remembered the humanity of the people with whom they spoke.* I had the sense that these educators valued people more than directives or mandates. Their communications consistently demonstrated that they cared about the wholeness of coworkers' lives. They took time to know us as people who lived beyond the classroom as well as in it, celebrating, laughing, and sharing sorrows with us. In that way, they made us feel whole.
- *They listened more than they talked and asked more than they told.* These leaders used silence for mutual reflection. They made disagreement feel safe and fruitful—both their disagreements with us and ours with them. They gave us voice.
- *Their communications and actions cultivated trust.* My colleagues and I rarely felt let down by what the real leaders we worked with said, asked, or did.
- *What—and how—they communicated helped others develop a sense of agency and competence.* More often than not, these leaders seemed to ask, "How can I help you do the things you're inspired to do?" or "How can I help you do your best work?"
- *They asked a great deal from fellow educators—but always provided support so people could reach those high expectations.*
- *They remembered to express gratitude.* They knew they were not "lone rangers of change" and took care to acknowledge the large and small contributions of their partners in change.

How Teachers Enact Leadership

My past life as an English teacher is still alive and well for me, and I have a bit of Pollyanna in me, too. So I believe in the power of words to dignify people and ideas. I'm keenly aware of the power of words to degrade as well. I know I've been happiest with my work in the classroom when what I said to my students, and how I said it, served to

encourage them. I've been most disappointed when my mouth engaged before my brain did in ways that made any student feel disrespected. Even when a leader is delivering a corrective message, the message needs to dignify those who hear it.

What a leader believes is important. I like to think of the classroom as a microcosm of a world that raises all its citizens' prospects. In my experience, what the teacher believes, and how he or she communicates those beliefs, sets the parameters for everything that happens in that microcosm—and shapes the aspirations of everyone involved.

I believe unequivocally that the mission of teaching is one of the most compelling in the world. I believe that as my understanding of that mission deepens, I can lead students to join me in the opportunities it provides us. And I believe teaching is about people first, and then ideas—and somewhere way, way down the line is a mandated test.

I don't think I entered teaching holding these beliefs. I suspect I learned them from leaders who communicated and modeled them for me. I can think of no more appropriate tribute to what those leaders taught me than to attempt to enact the same lessons in the daily practice of teaching.

In the end, I suppose, we're all apprentices in our work. We are fortunate when we have moments to learn from master craftspeople.

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Learn more at www.ascd.org/carolanntomlinson.

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