

Schools Need Leaders - Not Managers: It's Time for a Paradigm Shift

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Abstract

In the world of public school education everything depends on good leadership. Sadly, many of our schools administrators can't differentiate the difference between leading and managing; far too many of them don't know the first thing about fundamental leadership principles. In short, they don't understand the fundamentals of Mission Oriented Leadership, the need for top-down leadership, or the critical differences between leadership and management. A cursory review of the selection process for school administrators, and the graduate level curriculums for those who seek a degree in school administration, clearly supports the contention that policymakers and educators are under the misconception that anyone can be taught or trained to be an effective school leader. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Introduction

This paper begins and ends with a fundamental premise: in order to become more competitive with their global counterparts American schools need to be led rather than managed. In a 2010 report to the Wallace Foundation, Karen Seashore Louis and a team of researchers argued that, "In developing a starting point for this six-year study, we claimed, based on a preliminary review of research, that leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning. After six additional years of research, we are even more confident about this claim. To date we have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership" (p. 9).

Children are often told by parents and teachers alike not to be completely satisfied with their accomplishments until they can honestly say that they have done their best. Why doesn't this apply to our nation's public school system? Why are we settling for second place against countries like Finland, South Korea, Canada, Singapore, and more than twenty other industrialized nations? In short, is the United States truly committed to a first class educational system? If so, then we need to take the Wallace Foundation's report seriously and begin to look for ways to locate, cultivate, and mold the most talented people into educational leaders.

Our K-12 schools are being led by people who can readily recite and clearly espouse management principles; unfortunately, this is not enough to effectively run a school. School leaders

need to understand the crux of human nature and what motivates people; they need to have a firm handle on the true meaning of collaborative working relationships; and they need to understand the differences between participative, directive, and autocratic leadership styles. In essence, they need to know which style works best under which circumstances.

The unstructured process currently used for locating and selecting school leaders, coupled with the mediocre quality of education leadership courses provided by our colleges and universities make it clear that policymakers and educators are under the misconception that almost anyone can be taught or trained to be an effective school leader. This goes a long way in explaining why so many of our public schools are either failing or simply not performing at acceptable levels.

In his seminal work on leadership, James McGregor Burns (1978) said that, "Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth" (p. 2). Far too many people in education and business believe that leaders and managers are interchangeable. It is not surprising, therefore, that our public school systems often seek good managers rather than good leaders. What they fail to understand is that management is the application of social scientific principles with a focus on planning, organizing, directing, and controlling. Leadership, on the other hand, is an art that certainly includes the fundamentals of management but goes much further by taking on the vastly more important and difficult task of influencing people and inspiring them to succeed.

We need to abandon the long held misconception that locating a good manager to run a school is the same as finding a good leader - this mindset is not only erroneous but counterproductive and even dangerous to the future of our educational system. The research clearly shows that failing schools are the result of failed leadership at the institutional levels. Diane Whitehead, executive director of *Childhood Education* magazine (2009), argued that "School leaders, whether of a preschool, primary school, middle school, or high school, seemed to be the keystone to the school being able to realize and reach its goals...effective school leadership was, in all probability, the sole factor that determined school success or school failure" (p. 32B). In their research on turning around failing schools, Murphy and Meyers (2009) clearly stated that "In nearly all situations, leadership is seen as a central variable in the equation of organizational success" (p. 138).

The Management vs. Leadership Paradox

In their highly regarded study on leadership, Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus (1985) argued that "Leadership is what gives an organization its vision and its ability to translate that vision into reality. Without this translation, a transaction between leaders and followers, there is no organizational heartbeat" (p. 20). They make it clear that "The problem with many organizations, especially the ones that are failing, is that they tend to be overmanaged and underled. They may excel in the ability to handle the daily routine, yet never question whether the routine should be done at all" (p. 21). School principals and even district superintendents generally seek to improve, or even optimize, existing systems and processes; however, many fail to understand that the most critical needs of their schools or school systems often lie in validating their visions and either redefining or reevaluating their organizations' missions, to include the associated strategic and operational objectives. Those who are leaders rather than managers look beyond the present, focusing on laying a foundation for the future.

In his extensive research on the differences between managers and leaders, Toor (2011) concluded that there are three significant themes: "First, leadership pursues change that is coupled with sustainability, while management endeavors to maintain order that is tied with the bottom line. Second, leadership exercises personal power and relational influence to gain authority, whereas management banks on position power and structural hierarchy to execute orders. Third, leadership empowers people, whereas management imposes authority" (p. 318). It is no coincidence, therefore, that America's highest performing schools are the products of good leadership as opposed to effective management.

In discussing the differences between management and leadership, John Kotter (2001) argues that "Management is about coping with complexity...Leadership, by contrast, is about coping with change." Using a military analogy, Kotter states that "No one yet has figured out how to manage people effectively into battle; they must be led" (P. 86). Few will argue that today's school leaders must cope with complexity; however, their schools' success will more often depend on how well they deal with change. School leaders must be able to understand and support the needs of a diverse and ever changing landscape of learners; they need to locate and hire the best and most qualified teachers; they need to appreciate the full impact of broken homes and family disputes on their students' learning; and they must be able to effectively use the various social agencies that often play such an important part in the lives of many urban students. Much of this requires leaders that have a unique and compelling vision for their schools. Kotter also makes it clear that "for leadership, achieving a vision requires *motivating and inspiring* – keeping people moving in the right direction, despite major obstacles to change, by appealing to basic but often untapped human needs, values, and emotions" (p. 86).

Leadership from the Top

Burns (1978) made a compelling point when he stated: "One of the most universal cravings of our time is a hunger for compelling and creative leadership" (p. 1). As the former principal of two K-8 schools I can readily say that most teachers - especially those in low performing schools - want principals who are willing to take charge and are not afraid to make decisions.

In recent years, some educators have challenged the notion that principals should bear sole responsibility for leading their schools. For instance, Gordon Donaldson (2006) argues that "The now widespread assumption that public schools need to change has thankfully brought our classical notions about leadership fully under the microscope. As schools have explored empowerment, participatory decision making, teacher leadership, re-culturing, and improving from within, we seem now to be able to appreciate fully the limitations of our past notions of leadership as administration" (p. 43). Much of the recent literature on the subject of school leadership argues that the classical models of leadership, which emerged from the classical theories of management, no longer serve the best interests of our schools, if they ever did. In some circles there is widespread support for leadership through collegiality and collaboration rather than the older hierarchical models that place one decision-maker at the top of the pyramid.

Kenneth Leithwood (1992) makes it clear that schools, not unlike businesses and industries, have shifted from type A to type Z organizations, thereby moving from the more centralized decision-making structures to more participative structures that emphasize a greater level of

collegiality in the decision-making process (p. 8). The full implications of collaborative leadership have also been investigated by Spillane, Halveson, and Diamond (2004), who favor the idea of “distributed leadership.” They argue that “Leadership is not simply a function of what a school principal, or indeed any other individual or group of leaders, knows and does. Rather, it is the activities engaged in by leaders, in interactions with others in particular contexts around specific tasks” (p. 5).

It is disconcerting to think that while we debate the nature of educational leadership the academic gains of our nation's K-12 students, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), have been disappointing at best. According to Rampey et al, since 1971 our students have shown little progress in reading, and only marginal improvements in mathematics. Given our limited progress over the past 40 years, it should not come as a surprise that many of our colleges and universities are forced to offer remedial reading and math programs to their incoming freshmen. There is little doubt that these trends are due, in large part, to the poor leadership of our K-12 schools. In his article titled *The Impact of Leadership in Primary Schools*, Desmond Rutherford (2005) quotes from a 1998 report published by England's Department for Education and Employment, which states, “All the evidence shows that heads are the key to a school's success. All schools need a leader who creates a sense of purpose and direction, sets high expectations of staff and pupils, focuses on improving teaching and learning, monitors performance and motivates staff to give of their best” (p. 21). In essence, top-down leadership is pivotal to any school's success.

Any discussion about educational leadership needs to take into consideration Burns' (1978) foundational position that most people are followers, and do not aspire to the lofty roles and responsibilities associated with leadership; they do, however, fervently seek good leadership (p. 1). The true value of sound and effective leadership is that it serves to unite people by providing opportunities for meaningful participation in the decision-making process; however, the final decision always rests with the leader. Throughout this discussion it is important to keep in mind that groups, unlike individual leaders, rarely take responsibility for their actions; this is especially true when it comes to failure. How often have we heard of corporate or school boards being replaced en masse due to their organizations' or schools' poor performances? Not often. It is not uncommon, however, to hear that chief executive officers, corporate presidents, district superintendents, and school principals have been replaced. The question, therefore, is not *if* our public schools should have one leader at the top; more importantly, we should be asking what kind of leaders *best* serve their needs.

To summarize, schools cannot operate by consensus; they require strong, hands-on leadership from the very top. The challenge, of course lies in locating the right individuals to lead our schools. The criteria for leadership must be both unyielding and uncompromising. Furthermore, we need to do a far better job of selecting and training our institutional and instructional leaders. Once the right school leaders have been selected they must be held responsible for creating a system-wide learning environment that fosters and empowers success in the classrooms. Ultimately, the final responsibility rests with the school leader.

In her review of a 2010 survey, conducted by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation of more than 40,000 public school teachers in grades pre-K to 12, Sara Trabuchi emphasized the value of

leadership by showing that “fewer than half of teachers (45%) say higher salaries are absolutely essential for retaining good teachers. More teachers say it is absolutely essential to have supportive leadership (68%), time to collaborate (54%), and quality curriculum (49%).” Sadly, far too many school leaders fail to take their responsibilities seriously. For instance, in the 2008 *Met Life Survey of the American Teacher*, Donna Markow and Michelle Cooper show that only 19% of teachers said that their principals had observed them in the classroom and provided feedback about their teaching skills at least once a month (p. 93). The bottom line is that there is no substitute for sound, fundamental leadership from the top.

The Need for Mission Oriented Leadership

Those who study organizational leadership and management practices readily agree that responsibility, unlike authority, cannot be delegated. It makes no sense, therefore, to think that a school could be run by committee. This is not to say that participatory leadership is not essential to the success of any school; it does, however, say that responsibility cannot be assigned to four or five different desks. In other words, we must never confuse participatory leadership with delegation of responsibility. At the end of the day only one individual can stand at the top of the pyramid and serve as the institutional leader: an individual whose primary motivation is the success of the school, someone who uses power not for personal gain but, as Bennis and Nanus (1985) said for its “capacity to translate intention into reality and sustain it” (p. 17). Such qualities are essentially embedded in the ideals associated with mission-oriented leadership, whereby “leaders communicate a clear, optimistic and attainable picture of the organization's [sic] future, encouraging subordinates to develop ‘beyond the norm’ so that the organization [sic] can also grow and develop” (Sarros and Santora, 2001a). These characteristics of good leadership effectively define “mission-oriented leadership.”

Mission-oriented leadership is not a difficult concept to understand – however, it is a difficult concept to apply – that is why leadership is an art rather than a science. Leadership is reserved for those people who have the disposition to work collaboratively with others, are willing to keep an open mind and possess active listening skills. They clearly understand that teamwork epitomizes the definition of synergy and serves as a force multiplier within any organization. Above all, however, leadership should be reserved for those who are not afraid to make a decision, no matter how unpopular it may be. A school principal who is a mission-oriented leader will do the following, in priority order:

- **Focus on creating a positive school culture:** Simply said - a school's culture is the product of its leadership. School leaders must be able to bring together the disparate and often diverse personalities within their schools and mold them into a functional team that is focused on the school's mission and vision. In his famous treatise, *The Art of War*, Sun Tsu made it clear that “He whose ranks are united in purpose will be victorious” (p. 83). Attaining this goal is far from easy - it requires a leader who can unify people in "purpose." A school leader who is focused on creating a culture of success will pay particular attention to the four areas that have the greatest impact on a school's culture: staff morale, student behavior and safety, esprit de corps, and parental support.

- **Remove the poor performers:** There are far too many teachers and staff members working in our public schools who have absolutely no business in education; some do not have the required pedagogical skills, others lack the motivation to be educators, and there are many others who see teaching as simply a job rather than a profession and do only the bare minimum. Teachers that are not meeting acceptable performance standards are not only doing a disservice to their students they are also negatively impacting the school's morale and undermining its culture.

Unfortunately, many school leaders are intimidated by non-performing teachers' often abrasive personalities and tough demeanor. When a teacher or staff member is not performing to acceptable standards they certainly need to be offered an opportunity to take corrective action. They also need to be provided with the kind of support that will help them become productive members of the school. However, if they cannot make the necessary adjustments within a reasonable period of time, they need to be removed from the school. This demands strong, discerning leadership.

- **Prepare a clear mission statement:** The school leader must communicate a clear and realistic mission - one that every stakeholder can understand and accept. She or he must also establish clear priorities for achieving success, which must be understood by the students, their parents, teachers, and administrative staff. If priorities are not clearly delineated, or if they do not highlight academic achievement and good citizenship, there is little reason to believe that the school will ever achieve real success. The school's mission statement is often the most visible marketing tool (both inside and outside the school), and as such it must answer the following three questions: Why does the school exist? What is the school's purpose? What does the school intend to achieve? The school's mission statement should be: (1) Short, concise, and to the point; (2) Meaningful to all of its stakeholders; (3) Realistic (can be implemented in a reasonable period of time); and, (4) Measurable (qualitatively, but more importantly, quantitatively).
- **Serve as a change agent:** Not unlike any dynamic organization, where no two days are ever the same, schools need leaders who epitomize the importance of change and have the ability to influence it. First and foremost, they need to make it clear to teachers, students, and parents that the status quo is unacceptable. Next, they need to establish clear priorities for everyone in the school, using the school's vision and mission as their guiding light. Last, they need to remove any doubt that change, in the form of continuous improvements, will be the school's mantra and that teachers and staff have a choice - they can either get on the train or be left behind; there is no middle ground.
- **Empower others:** Organize the school so that it is focused on success. Not unlike corporate leaders, school principals must be able to influence as well as manage the staff. They must feel comfortable with empowering staff members to make decisions while never losing sight of the simple fact that they will ultimately be responsible for their subordinates' decisions. Again, authority and responsibility are not interchangeable concepts.
- **High visibility:** Lead by walking around. This is probably one of the most difficult aspects of leadership because it is not only exhausting but also requires the principal to spend non-

school hours completing administrative responsibilities. In discussing Lee Iacocca's leadership style when he took Chrysler Corporation from bankruptcy to success, Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus (1985) say: "Iacocca's high visibility symbolizes the missing element in management today (and much of management theory) in that his style of leadership is central to organizational success" (p. 17). Although there is nothing new in this concept my experience shows that far too many school principals fail to leave their office for any significant amount of time during school hours. Teacher satisfaction surveys have clearly demonstrated that the principal's "presence" generally improves staff morale and goes a long way in creating a positive school culture.

- **Set the right example:** Exemplify those traits that have always been the hallmarks of successful and admired leaders: strong work ethic, a positive, can-do attitude, and the highest level of integrity. Today, more than ever before, our elementary and secondary students need the best role models. In essence, every student should want to grow up and be like his or her school principal.

Selecting and Preparing School Leaders

America's educational system is ill served by its current methods for locating and preparing school leaders. For instance, just because someone is a good teacher does not necessarily imply that she or he would make a good institutional leader; people with good organizational skills do not always transition into effective leaders; and managing people is often a far cry from leading them. First, and most importantly, administrators need to identify the characteristics and skills that best support successful school leaders, i.e. which ones are personal, intuitive traits (that can rarely be taught) and which are the trainable skills. In all, understanding the true differences between management and leadership would go a long way to identify the right individuals for training and preparation.

According to Cunningham and Cordeiro (2009) "Educational leadership preparation programs throughout the United States are under intense scrutiny and criticism" (p. 5). It should not come as any surprise that school administration and leadership graduate programs focus on managing rather than leading. This has led to a lack of transformational leaders in education and it explains why so many school principals and district superintendents don't understand the various nuances associated with situational leadership. The process for developing school leaders must be rigorous and selective. The following model is intended to serve as a starting point:

- School districts should establish a standing leadership program for their aspiring principals and assistant principals. The program should include an active leadership committee, comprised of assistant superintendents, human resource professionals, school principals, and lead teachers, who would review the background information of qualified candidates that aspire to leadership positions. Individuals who meet the entry level criteria (favorable evaluations, principal and peer recommendations, etc.) would then be placed on a list of potential principals/assistant principals. Throughout their period of observation candidates would be offered opportunities such as chairing committees and serving as instructional team leaders to demonstrate their leadership skills within their schools and districts.

The district leadership committee would periodically evaluate whether the candidates possess the requisite leadership skills to be successful school principals/assistant principals. For instance, candidates would be evaluated on their oral and written communication skills, initiative, motivation, ability to accept constructive criticism, performance under pressure, and willingness to go the extra mile on behalf of their school and students. Additionally, their annual evaluations would include very specific information about their leadership skills and successes. This pool of leadership candidates would then be considered for selection to a one year internship program that would prepare them for assignments as future principals. Only the best and most capable leaders should be offered the opportunity to serve as interns.

- The educational leadership programs at America's colleges and universities, where they exist, often lack substance and fail to meet the true needs of school leaders. The overwhelming majority of graduate programs in education effectively teach management rather than leadership principles, often by people who have never led a school or school system. A truly noteworthy school leadership curriculum will include detailed instruction in team-building, time management, effective communication, working with diverse groups, and budgeting. Such instruction can legitimately be provided only by those who have been in the field and had first hand experiences. Today, far too many of our college and university professors that teach classes in educational leadership either lack meaningful and practical experiences in the field or have been out of the field for decades. Leadership instruction is very different from teaching graduate courses in accounting, math, or history. Our future school leaders need to hear from practitioners who have been in the trenches - especially the successful ones.
- Leadership instruction should take full advantage of the case study method, and should be taught by both university instructors (those with leadership experiences) and either existing or retired school principals and district superintendents. Second only to the hands-on experiences offered by internships, case studies and role play provide very effective means of bringing simulated reality into the university classroom. Neil Cranston's (2002) varied research in the area of case studies shows that such methods provide professional development opportunities that are, "dynamic and grounded in 'real-life' experiences involving some of the myriad of highly complex challenges faced by school leaders" (p. 4). His research on the value of case studies (2008) as important instructional tools in leadership development also shows that:
 - cases are grounded in authentic "real world" stories of the challenges facing principals; and
 - discussions at the workshops lead to creative and constructive exchanges concerning leadership challenges (p. 581).

Conclusion

America does not have the luxury of time when it comes to improving the quality of its K-12 public schools. Most, if not all, of the other industrialized nations have made it abundantly clear that their futures depend on a well-educated populace. Second only to having the best and most highly qualified teachers in the classrooms, America's schools need great school leaders at the helm.

We are in desperate need of leaders who are bona fide visionaries, mentors, coaches, motivators, and team players; people who lead by walking around rather than from the comfort of their offices or desks. The most effective and successful school leaders focus on their institution's mission and vision, with an acute sense for situational awareness. Such leaders build effective relationships within the local community, gain the trust of their staffs, and make every effort to "know" the students and their parents. The hallmark of a true school leader rests with his or her ability to develop personal relationships and to positively influence others.

America is at a significant crossroad relative to its K-12 educational system, and it must act quickly. If we are truly serious about equipping our students to compete globally then we need to locate and train institutional leaders rather than managers. For all practical purposes, our future depends on this.

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