



FOCUS

on

Education

Educational leadership
who provides it
and where are they
taking us?

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A VIEW FROM THE TOP: LEADERS, RAMBO, POETS AND THE CHILD

Andrew Rose

In the recent Iran-Contra Congressional Hearings, Vice Admiral John Poindexter quoted Teddy Roosevelt's quip: "The buck stops here." If leadership ends with accountability, where does it begin? Effective leadership evolves from inspiration. Our own Commissioner Saul Cooperman has set the New Jersey Department of Education's climate by his "sense of mission." It is such vision that initiates, and, it was such Presidential taking of responsibility that culminates. How we get from inspiration to culmination, then, is the story of leadership itself.

Advocacy, but from whose eyes?

For a Chief School Administrator, a sense of mission needs clarification. Schools have unique charges and responsibilities. Expectations vary according to one's position in life, resulting in diverse ideas for educational improvements. Frequently, conflicting points of view need reconciliation and the superintendent is the person who can best pull people together, marshalling their energies in a single direction.

We are well aware of the General Systems theory caveat on interrelatedness: that a system will not survive if its output is unacceptable to the environment. School systems do need to be dynamic, adjusting to society's needs. A current example of responsiveness is the increase in public school pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten programs. However, these accommodations are not necessarily improvements. Whether or not they are depends on whose perspective is taken in designing and implementing them.

An educational leader begins as the Chief School Advocate for children. The clarification of mission must center on "what's good for kids" and only one view consistently focuses on them: the study of child development. Knowledge of child development needs to be at the core of every decision touching' on the educational process. Returning to our heightened interest in pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten classes, we need to question their developmental appropriateness.

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David Elkind's *Hurried Child* warns against the woe-begotten adult rush to burden young children with excessive structure and formality. Some of this debate involves the needs of working parents for child-care. Some involves an attempt to raise academic standards by providing more earlier. Others involve a concern for readiness, creative play and socialization skills. Schools cannot ignore societal needs, but how educators respond should be determined by what we know from child development.

It is the superintendent's role to deal with such controversies, trying to recommend actions that deal with the conflicting demands without violating the principle of developmental appropriateness. Unfortunately, many adults and schools no longer recall a child's point of view and rush to impose inappropriate expectations.

The late constitutional lawyer, Alexander Bickel, championed the flawed benefits of democracy because it "reconciles the irreconcilable." Superintendents face this challenge, leading a school community to value its children based upon the perspective of child development.

Inspiration

"Everything vital in history reduces itself ultimately to ideas, which are the motive forces." According to Nisbet in, *Twilight of Authority*. The vision of how a community's young can best be educated requires specificity and a powerful articulation. To motivate a faculty is a formidable task because, as professionals, teachers have their own training, commitment and sense of pride. It is foolhardy to exclude teachers from the decision-making process. In fact, an important ingredient of motivation is the decentralization of certain aspects of authority. Without the genuine delegation of many instructional decisions, initiatives will not be taken and a climate of professionalism will be lost.

Cornell University Professor of Organizational Behavior, Karl E. Weick, in *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 1982, has encouraged large districts to: "centralize on key values and decentralize everything else." He also exhorted administrators to: "get out of the office and spend lots of time one to one, both to remind people of central visions and to assist them in applying these visions to their own activities ... to interpret what they (teachers) are doing in a common language."

Obviously, visions remain private unless they are publicly expressed. In *A Passion For Excellence*, Tom Peters and Nancy Austin stress the need for intensity and passion in articulating a sense of mission. They describe dozens of instances of visions dramatically expressed and of the use of symbols"...

(V)ision made visible!" Buck Rodgers, IBM's former vice-president of marketing, writes in *The IBM Way* that: "The only sacred cow in an organization is its principles." Accordingly, a vision is successfully given life when everyone involved is inspired to share in its ownership.

Rambo, Ninja and Toughness!

Styles of leadership have been extensively studied and discussed. Field experience has highlighted a cultural preoccupation with toughness. American notions of leadership have been popularly depicted by the image of John Wayne. Macho perceptions clash with the role of child advocate, motivator of professionals and sympathetic listener to parents. Boards of Education are entitled to a take-charge leader, but a clear understanding of assertiveness is necessary.

The explosive style of Rambo seems a slight overkill for a school system! There are times, surprisingly often, when toughness is called for. People bring personal agendas to work, to parent conferences and to Boards of Education. It is essential that superintendents recognize, empathize with wherever possible, and redirect such pressures. Times occur when staff negotiations strive, understandably, to meet the needs of equity. Children's needs must weigh heavily, critically in the balance. Dale Mann of Columbia University has commented on reactions to his "effective schools" research that: "... the politics of education is about adult working conditions, not children's learning conditions." An effective superintendent will temper such an adversarial position with Tom Peter's findings: "We are emotional creatures ... Our life is a drama to each of us. The winners are institutions and leaders that own up to that reality and live with us as humans - not as automatons." He believes that leadership comprises a paradox: "tough and uncompromising about our value systems but at the same time care(ing) deeply about and respect(ing) our people." This view surpasses cynicism by accepting a paradox, choosing neither toughness nor softness. His resolution is passionate vision with empathy for the employee as a human being.

The incongruence of a Rambo style is that it gruffly disrupts as "a bull in the china shop." On the other hand, is a Ninja style any better? Surely the silent assassin fails to use the due process of progressive discipline, let alone to openly face his intended victim! In the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's 1987 Yearbook, Trinity University Professor of Education Thomas J. Sergiovanni succinctly summarized real assertiveness:

"When observing highly successful school leaders at work, we see that they know the difference between sensible toughness, real toughness and merely looking tough and acting tough. Real toughness doesn't come from flexing ones muscles simply because one happens to have more power than another. Real toughness is always principled... Successful leaders expect adherence to common values but provide wide discretion in implementation." Assertive anger follows violation of the common values. The values are the districts' goals as well as our profession's ethics - the articulated vision.

One form of assertiveness is most powerful and effective. It is the ability to privately confront staff members who no longer belong with children. Varying histories cause "burn-out" yet many people are willing to recognize their need for career changes if properly counseled. Private encounters of this nature are neither one-shot, nor brief, pleasant nor easy. But a leader can effect change (e.g. resignation, early retirement) if he/she has an assertiveness derived from passionate advocacy, vision, principles, and empathy.

“Hold Fast to Dreams”

Poets remind us of the value of dreams and the wonder of childhood. A spark fades in each of us as soon as we forget "the eye of the child." Superintendents can sparkle as educational leaders. Bosses, negotiators, referees, organizers, planners, evaluators, public relations experts - all these we must be. Yet, none has true meaning if we are not first and foremost child advocates seeking to sensitize and inspire our Boards of Education, teachers, pupils, parents, press and media, community members, business people and teacher preparation colleges. This formidable challenge, in the best of us, is driven by an impassioned concern and reverence for children and family life.

William Wordsworth's poetry embodies this drive:

"My heart leaps up when I behold
 A rainbow in the sky;
 So it was when my life began;
 So it is now I am a man;
 So be it when I shall grow old.
 Or let me die!
 The Child is father of the Man;
 And I could wish my days to be
 Bound each to each by natural piety."

Leadership is fraught with contradiction, conflict and controversy. Its accomplishments change lives, impact on communities and cultivate institutions. Poets and children sing its rewards alike!