

THE SUPERINTENDENT AS COMMUNICATOR AND DIPLOMAT



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It is common for school leaders to describe themselves as “CEOs” as they engage in the work of leading very complex organizations. Certainly if you have the responsibility for an organization—whether it’s a widget manufacturing operation or the elementary school down the block—you have to have the tools of management, of setting goals, monitoring operations, providing resources, and the like. School districts are not the same as companies however, despite some critics’ calls for operating schools more like businesses.

Businesses have the power to control their raw materials. I once worked in a glass factory during college. One of the products was baby food bottles. The company purchasing those bottles randomly inspected each shipment; if one defective or broken bottle was found, the entire trainload was returned to the factory for reinspection and repackaging. Think of that! The next time a parent shows up at the schoolhouse door with a child who has a disability, a learning problem, or even a bad attitude, try sending them back home. Not going to happen. Besides, widgets don’t run around individually in

all directions ignoring instructions from the plant supervisor. And widgets don't have parents who can sometimes be unreasonable or other times incapable of supporting their little widget. Schools are most definitely not like businesses.

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has the opportunity to weigh in on the subject. When I was a superintendent, I used to joke that I had the easiest job in town because everyone knew how to do it better than I did, and all I needed to do was listen and follow their advice. Of course, I could never get the public to speak with one voice, so it wasn't really that easy.

The reality of leading schools and school districts is that everyone went to school, and that very fact leads them to believe they are experts on schools and schooling. Moreover, while accountability in education tends to be centralized, authority is dispersed. When things go wrong in the school system, everyone knows who to call: the superintendent. But the ability to make decisions is spread across the educational landscape. School boards make policy, the federal and state governments mandate outcomes, the courts make orders, the unions create contracts and rules, and the public makes demands and sets expectations. The person at the top finds that the impressive title is merely a target to hang on his or her back while trying to sort out all these competing interests.

As Alan Blankstein, Bob Cole, and I tried to conceptualize this series on *The Soul of Educational Leadership*, I insisted that we consider the unique aspect of educational leadership that requires leaders to lead even when authority and power are not present. For that reason I have always resisted the "CEO" metaphor as a way of describing educational leadership. I just don't think it works. CEOs are in charge; educational leaders can't even make their constituents take a number.

What then is the proper metaphor? I believe it is that of *minister*. Ministerial authority comes from moral authority. Ministers get their power from on high. In the school trade, our moral authority comes from those we work with and the task we have been given.

We work with people's children—their most precious treasures. These newly minted, delicate vessels of possibility are beyond price. They are unique, and each holds a soul that must be tended with care. Even more, they are the future. It is up to the educator to plant the seed and grow the plant into a mighty tree. Our work shapes their future. So holding all that possibility in our care gives us tremendous moral authority.

Beyond that, public education has been tasked with creating the cornerstone of our democracy. Our forefathers envisioned a system of free public education that would create an apprenticeship of liberty—a place where children could learn to be contributors to our democracy. It is not so widely known, however, that the first task of public education originally was not the three R's, but that of creating civic virtue. So educational leaders have all the moral authority they need to do their work.

But the ministerial metaphor goes further. Ministers have no real power beyond their ability to see truth and speak it, to convene folks together and communicate with them. That ability to speak the word and make it flesh lies at the heart of the ministerial role, and I believe it lies at the heart of educational leadership. Educational leaders sit at the crossroads of their communities; they sit at a high place with great perspective. They know what the community is doing or not doing by what happens to the children of that community. Educational leaders see all the pieces of the puzzle. They know the truth—and in knowing it and speaking it, they can set others free.

They also can pull folks together around issues that are important. Presidents of the United States have often been described as having a “bully pulpit.” Educational leaders have their own bully pulpit to stand in and be reckoned with. School board meetings, press interviews, civic club speeches, and even the ubiquitous PTA meetings all give the school leader a chance to convene and persuade. And if those opportunities aren't enough, one can always create a task force or special committee to study and report on issues of importance to education.

Convening is no problem. But once convened, then what? This is where persuasion must take place. I believe that the central role of any educational leader is that of communicator. The biggest tool in the leader's box is the ability to

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There are certain basic skills that a leader must have: writing, speaking, and perhaps the greatest and most overlooked—listening. Leaders must not only watch their P's and Q's, but they must also dot their I's and cross their T's—literally and figuratively. If you have problems with using the language, educational leadership is not the best role for you. People will read what you write and dissect it. They will listen to what you say and critique it. And they will fully expect you to pay attention to what they tell you and to understand it.

But that's just Communication 101. The real communication skills of an educational leader center on the ability to tell stories and to craft metaphors. Perhaps the greatest communicator in the history of humankind was Jesus Christ. A poor man from humble origins, without resources or power, he has influenced millions of people over thousands of years. Setting aside the question of divinity, Jesus was an incredible communicator. Almost everything he said was a story, a metaphor, or a parable of some sort. He reduced the complexity and often the uncomfortable nature of what he was preaching to words that were accessible to common people.

Far too often, we educators are guilty of using language to obfuscate what we really mean. We use acronyms whose meaning we hardly remember ourselves and expect the layperson to understand what we are talking about. We rattle off statistics without context or reference. For example, it is one thing to say that the war in Iraq will cost America \$3 trillion—that is a big and meaningless number. It is another thing to say that those dollars could buy every American man, woman, and child a brand-new car. Now that communicates. We fog up our communications and then we wonder why we don't have the support of the public. Educational leaders need to ban big words and bigger wall charts from their world and start to make things personal and accessible.

I have often urged superintendents to tell their own stories. They should open themselves up and become vulnerable to their communities. That openness will not weaken them—it will give them strength because it will create a powerful bond with those who hear them. The 2008 presidential election has provided new insights into the power of personal story. Barack Obama in particular has shown that the use of personal narrative to tell a larger truth is extremely powerful. On the Republican side, Arkansas Governor Mike

Huckabee came from nowhere to become a serious candidate by using his ability to connect and tell stories that people understood. Ronald Reagan, back in the 1980s, was known as the Great Communicator—a storyteller and a gifted user of language. His famous “Morning in America” speech, made during the 1984 presidential campaign, wasn’t just words; it was a vision of hope for a nation. The ability to communicate makes a leader truly a leader.

But words are only part of the story. Researchers tell us that about two-thirds of all communication is nonverbal; it is tone and body language. Further, every educator today knows that there are different learning modalities. Some people learn by hearing or reading, others learn visually, and still others learn tactilely. My point here is that to communicate fully, one must use varied tools. The old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words is true. Effective communicators are able to vary their communications to take a variety of receivers into account.

Beyond using all these tools, a great communicator must also listen. Yogi Berra, the fabled catcher for the New York Yankees, was known for his offbeat phrases that didn’t seem to make sense at first but when thought about seemed rather wise. “It ain’t over ’til it’s over”—while obvious, it states a truth that many overlook as they declare things finished before they really are. Yogi once said that “you can observe a lot just by watching.” True. I would add that you can hear a lot just by listening.

But listening is more than just turning on your ears. It’s also about turning on your heart. Listening is an act of respect and love for the one you are listening to. You are giving the person your all during that time of hearing him or her out, and you have to listen with a real sense of care and empathy. It isn’t about just shutting up and allowing the person to talk, or letting someone get something off his or her chest. You must listen to the person’s words, and then listen for what is behind the words. Most of us can’t always say what we really mean. Sometimes in very emotional situations we say things in ways that mask or garble what we really want to say. The good communicator uncovers and ungarbles these words by listening with the heart as well as the head.

A couple of years ago, I visited a school district involved in lots of controversy because of squabbles over the use of books in the literature classes that some of the more conservative parents thought should be banned. Other parents wanted the books left in the curriculum. It was a

classic case of whose rights get affirmed. As I listened to the parents reading the racier passages from the books and railing at the board and administration for not doing their bidding by immediately removing this material they considered offensive, I found myself setting aside my own anger at these parents who would presume to tell others what their kids could or could not read based on their own values. I found myself hearing what was behind their words: fear. They were trying to bring up their children in a world where they were assaulted on every side by smut and offensive language and ideas, and they wanted to protect them from that. I can't say I think the school should have removed the books just because those parents were offended, but I did find myself wondering about the kind of conversation that could be had if the school took the fear issue seriously and talked with the parents about that.

Albert Einstein said that no problem can be solved at the same level at which it was created. What he meant was that when you see (or hear) a problem, the solution probably lies on a different plane. A controversy about eliminating a class or program in a school is usually rooted in inadequate funding. Sometimes shifting the discussion to a different plane allows communication to flow more easily.

This takes me to the other half of this strangely titled volume: Diplomats. What is a book about school leaders doing talking about being a diplomat? Shouldn't that be in a book about the

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Foreign Service? No. The need for diplomacy is all around us. We start trying to teach our children at a very early age about the value of diplomacy. The whole lesson of learning to say "please" and "thank you" is really a lesson on diplomacy.

If you have a job with no inherent power, how can you get other folks to do what needs to be done? Diplomacy. In the teachings of Taoism, it is said that a leader should strive to lead in such a way that when the job is done the people say, "We did it ourselves." That seems to me to be at the heart of being a diplomat. It has often been said that there is no job too big to do if people don't care who gets the credit for it. Leading means losing your ego and letting the world flow toward that which must be done. You do that by being a diplomat centered on the outcome, not the process. Diplomacy requires surrendering one's ego for the greater good.

We all know great diplomats when we see them. Many of us were raised by them. All of us have had teachers who were gifted in getting kids to do work that we believed was our own idea. I'm not talking about manipulation here—diplomacy is not about fooling people. It's about respecting them, showing that respect, and working with them toward a better outcome.

Educational leaders have lots of power. Theirs is not conferred power or positional power. It is the inner power created by the ability to rally folks to a cause larger than themselves, to persuade them to do what they know already is the right thing to do, and to do so with a song in their heart. Communication and diplomacy—these are the centerpieces of any leader who leads with a sense of soul and service.