

Schools That Learn

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XIII. Leadership

1. Leading Without Control

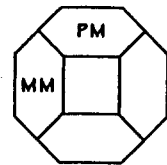
Moving beyond the “Principal Do-Right” model of educational leadership

Charlotte Roberts

*Though she is not a coauthor of this book, Charlotte Roberts has been a key figure in its evolution. A leading consultant in organizational learning, and coauthor of *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* and *The Dance of Change*, she began to help the Danforth Foundation (page 418) in a project defining a new leadership model for public school superintendents in 1993. She introduced Nelda Cambron-McCabe to this project, and has offered encouragement and perspective throughout—as well as a unique and very useful take on educational leadership. She is currently working with two school systems in making organizational learning a core competence in their culture.*

The elementary school principal turned to me during the final session of an administrators’ year-long course on organizational learning and said, “My ladies (meaning his teachers) want me to make all the decisions and tell them what to do. They don’t want any part in decision making or planning for our school.” He was a young principal with a recent graduate degree, and his comment was extremely curious. He had just spent twelve months studying ways to develop authentic participation by his staff. Did he really believe that all this time had been wasted?

Several months later, another elementary school principal gave me the “aha!” I was looking for. She was a member of a school district team from the American Midwest, one of six teams that had agreed to use



their own experience as a case study for learning about learning organizations. Each team included teachers, principals, and administrators; some even brought along their superintendent. We dug into the theories of Harvard Business School professor Chris Argyris, theories that provide the foundation of the discipline of mental models. Argyris had written:

There seems to be a universal human tendency to design one's actions consistently according to four basic values:

1. To remain in unilateral control;
2. To maximize "winning" and minimize "losing";
3. To suppress negative feelings; and
4. To be as "rational" as possible—by which people mean defining clear objectives and evaluating their behavior in terms of whether or not they have achieved them.

The purpose of all these values is to avoid embarrassment or threat, feeling vulnerable or incompetent.

In the article, Argyris points out that the net effect of these values is to block any kind of fruitful learning or change in an organization. Our conversation was lively and full of disclosure. People were "fessing up" to their own transgressions. There was release and freedom in the air. Suddenly a principal named Becky Furlong called a halt to the conversation with her exclamation, "Hey, wait a minute! This is all backward! Those four values are the *exact* measurements of a good superintendent or principal!" She went on to lead the group in detailing the prevailing model of leadership in public education. In my own mind, I began to think of this as the "Principal Do-Right" model.

1. A good leader gains and remains in control at all times. Never let them see you doubt or sweat. Take a stand and hold that position. No one else will defend the children (or policy, teacher, or curriculum) as well as you will.
2. A good leader "wins" all confrontations, regardless of the party with whom she or he is sparring—child, parent, teacher, administrator, board member, politician. Winning isn't always possible, so be able to recast the exchange as learning, planning or negotiation. Above all, when pursuing a "win," wear your opponents down with rationality (point four). Another strategy for winning is to redefine the issue as a local situation that will be dealt with privately. By dividing a complex situation and initiating local "fixes" on the parts, the leader can declare a "win."

The quote comes from Chris Argyris, "Teaching Smart People How To Learn," *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 1991, HRB Reprint #91301, reviewed in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, p. 265.

We want to credit Rebecca Furlong, principal of Mid-Prairie School of Kalona, Iowa, with bringing forth this connection between defensive routines and the "prevailing leadership model."

3. Negative feelings expressed by the principal indicate loss of control and maybe incompetence. If the building has an undertone of negative feelings, it's a sign that the principal has not been able to inspire or motivate the teachers. A display of anger, anxiety, or grief by the principal or superintendent poisons the air and ultimately spills over to the children. "If negative feelings have a hold in your building," said another principal, "it's like getting rid of roaches in an old apartment building."
4. Being rational is a sign of being educated—it's that simple. An educator, after all, develops the minds of our young people. To not appear rational is to appear incompetent. Even with emotional issues like unexpected violence, leaders are supposed to gain control, remain in control, and quickly come up with a rational plan for responding.

Becky's description reminded me of a doctoral program for educational administration that I had attended several years before. (I had left when I realized that I didn't have the constitution to endure the treatment that public education leaders get.) There, too, we had been presented with an implicit (and sometimes explicit) model of effective leadership: Advocate. Clarify the problem and take a position. Don't back down. Be strong. Be rational. Be convincing. Be right. This "Principal Do-Right" model, in itself, is a burden that many of our public educators are saddled with. It leads directly to the kinds of behavior that make it difficult to inquire and reflect at length, or to draw people together to a common purpose.

Now I understood the reason why that principal from the year before had said, "My ladies want me to make the decisions." He meant: "They refrain from getting involved so that I can personally deal with all the school's conflicts." His job, as he espoused it, was to shield his staff from problems, so they could be free to teach. But in reality, his entire leadership approach was designed to funnel problems directly to him, before anyone else could get to them (a form of unilateral control on his part). In short, the "Principal Do-Right" model of leadership was the primary driving force behind his behavior.

Since the leadership style itself was undiscussable and perhaps even subconscious, he could not recognize its power over his school. He had to see his "ladies" as not just tolerating but *demanding* control from him. Nor could he allow himself to see any of the negative consequences that came from this leadership style, such as the anxiety he felt about being wrong or the passivity and cynicism it engendered among the teachers. Imagine the trap in which he was caught. He could go to a hundred sem-

For more about unilateral control, and an exercise for helping people overcome their own tendency to "take charge" of conversations counterproductively, see *The Dance of Change*, pp. 252–54.

inars on organizational learning, but if they clashed with the “Principal Do-Right” style, he would have to discard them—perhaps with regret, but with a sense of giving in to the inevitable. After all, what other model of educational leadership could there be?

TOWARD A NEW MODEL OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

For the past five years, I have been working with a study group of school superintendents, sponsored by the Danforth Foundation, to draw forth a new leadership model for public education. We have not finished discovering, articulating, and testing it, but we have laid some groundwork. We have focused on four key competencies that allow people to lead without having to control.

1. **Engagement:** Ron Heifetz, director of the Leadership Education Project at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government (and one of the mentors of our project), defines leadership itself as the ability to mobilize people to tackle tough problems. To my mind, that is engagement, and it has two components. First is the capability to recognize an issue or situation that has no clear definition, no simple “cause” and no obvious answer. (Ron Heifetz calls these “adaptive problems”; the eminent systems theorist Russell Ackoff calls them “messes.”) When faced with such complexity, convening the appropriate people in the system and facilitating their conversations and learning is called for. This is the second part of engagement.

In his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Heifetz provides twelve questions for reflection that, in themselves, represent a process of engagement. The first five questions are aimed at stepping back and dispassionately diagnosing the nature of a crisis or problem and the attitudes people hold about it:

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- What’s causing the distress (from the “mess” or “adaptive problem”)?
- What internal contradictions does the distress represent?
- What are the histories of these contradictions?
- What perspectives and interests have I, and others, come to represent to various segments of the community that are now in conflict?
- In what ways are we in the organization or working group mirroring the problem dynamics in the community?

The next three questions reflect upon the tolerable levels of tension, dis-

stress, and learning that the community (in this case, the school system) can handle:

- What are the characteristic responses of the community to disequilibrium—to confusion about future direction, the presence of an external threat, disorientation in regard to role relationships, internal conflict, or the breaking up of norms?
- When in the past has the distress appeared to reach a breaking point—where the social system began to engage in self-destructive behavior, like civil war or political assassination?
- What actions by senior authorities have traditionally restored equilibrium? What mechanisms to regulate distress are currently within my control, given my authority?

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The final four questions help identify the places to intervene:

- What are the work and work avoidance patterns particular to this community?
- What does the current pattern of work avoidance indicate about the nature and difficulty of the present adaptive challenge and the various work issues that it comprises?
- What clues do the authority figures provide?
- Which of these issues are ripe? What are the options for tackling the ripe issues, or for ripening an issue that has not fastened in people's minds?

Engagement is not as easy as it might seem. First, the complexity of the situations usually comes with a lot of emotion on the part of constituents. Creating a safe space for conversation and facilitating listening as well as speaking are not skills taught in graduate schools. With the lack of clarity and the high pitch of emotions, the temptation is to go back to Argyris's value one, gain unilateral control, and create temporary peace.

}} For examples of "messes" where engagement is necessary, see pages 135, 355, and 471.

2. **Systems thinking:** The ability to recognize the hidden dynamics of complex systems, and to find leverage, goes hand in hand with engagement. Ludwig von Bertalanffy, one of the grandparents of systems thinking, offered a critical question to reflect on before taking action on a complex problem: "Where are the boundaries to this situation?"

See Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). The leadership definition occurs on p. 15, and the definition of adaptive systems on p. 72ff. The questions for what Heifetz calls the "balcony perspective," with a great deal of explanation, are found on p. 250ff. Also see the review of this book in *The Dance of Change*, p. 213.

One compelling story that required a school administrator to use this kind of judgment was a case, developed at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, recounting an intervention in a community crisis at an elementary school: "Deciding Who Decides: The Debate Over Gay Photo Exhibit in a Madison School," by Susan Rosegrant (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Kennedy School of Government Case Study #1440.0, 1998).

That's not a small question. If you think it is, raise it before a group and see how long it takes to gain consensus. The answer identifies (or begins to identify) the people who need to be included in the thinking and action. Bertalanffy suggested that when groups took their thinking one boundary larger than the place they set it, valuable insights often occurred. For example, if a group thought the situation involved only their middle school, they might look at the situation from the perspective of the next larger system, the school district. In other words, they could consider to what extent other schools in their district or elsewhere are part of the problem.

>> See the article "A System Diagnoses Itself" for an example of this; page 364.

After the boundaries are temporarily set, the next questions to ask, (from Meg Wheatley's work) are: "Who belongs to the system? Do they know they belong?" Get their input. Work the social system.

Convene a group, for example, to consider the forces at play and the interaction of those forces. A sample scenario: A state legislature's decision to measure the performance of each school causes anxiety, which leads to oversupervision by administrators, which leads to fear by teachers, which leads them to do two things. They can "teach to the test," forgoing teachable moments and exciting tangents. They also can tell children who are expected to produce low scores to stay home for the next few days while the tests are being given. School scores go up, the legislature takes credit for good things, and schools go on gaming the testing process. The performance of the schools looks good; the performance of the children is lost.

A new superintendent comes into the system and discovers what's going on. Should she disclose the cover-up or bask in the artificially high performance? What is the vision for the system? Whose issue is this? Where are the boundaries? Who belongs in this situation, and do they know they belong?

3. **Leading Learning:** The ability to engage people and to study systems is not enough for dealing with complex issues in public education. To lead learning means to model a "learner-centered," as opposed to an "authority-centered," approach to all problems, inside and outside the classroom.

Most of us have experienced the authority-centered approach to problems in the way we were taught as we progressed through the educational system. Teaching in its authoritative form exposes the child to theories, techniques, and rules, and requires the child to

prove the accurate reception of all this information through testing. Then teachers “grade” the quality of the child’s reception. If the child receives poor grades over a course of time, he or she gets “remedial” teaching. Teaching, in short, is organized for the adults in the system—in the same way that “Principal Do-Right” leadership is organized for the sake of the administrator’s self-image.

Authority-centered problem-solving is insidious and sometimes difficult to spot. Even if there is a plaque on a school wall saying “We’re student centered,” be suspicious. Look at the school policies. You may find the policies are designed to reinforce authority at the expense of learning and to make the life of the adult teachers safe and comfortable.

What, then, does learner-centered leadership, as a competence of educational leaders, mean? It means that learning and the acceptance of uncertainty that is always part of learning are part of the culture, or the genetic code, of the system. Teachers still teach—probably in many different ways from how they were taught themselves, even during their professional education. When the child doesn’t accurately receive a lesson, the teacher asks, “How did I contribute to this situation? What does this student need to succeed? What can I say or do to help this child take in and apply these concepts? Does the student feel a part of his or her learning? Who belongs in this conversation, and do they know they belong?”

In such a culture, all people in the system are seen as learners and act as learners. It is no longer as important to appear “learned”—to have several graduate degrees and authoritativeness as the primary credential of leadership. Instead, leaders expect themselves and others to be uncertain, inquiring, expectant of surprise, and perhaps a bit joyful about confronting the unknown.” Leading learning gives principals and superintendents the freedom to say “I don’t know where we’re going . . . and I’m still willing to dig into this ‘mess’ to discover a way for us to go.”

4. **Self-awareness:** This competence recalls, for me, one of the most painful and yet useful conclusions from our Danforth study group conversations. Leaders in public education come and go (voluntarily and nonvoluntarily) at an alarming rate, as did the superintendents in our group. What had all of us missed seeing? What were the early warning signals that the superintendent no longer “fit” the system and was about to be let go?

We concluded that leaders must be self-aware. They must know

the impact they are having on people and the system and how that impact has changed over time. Perhaps the leadership model has changed since they've come to the job. The school board that hired the superintendent rarely has the same membership after two to four years. The new members may demand another leadership model. Then it's time to go.

Self-awareness is a position of strength. There are at least two components to the task of developing it: taking time away from the office to personally reflect, and engaging a personal coach in the office for some period of time. Time away from the office may involve a personal mastery program or a good psychotherapist who understands the pressures of public leadership. A personal coach is someone who genuinely likes you and cares about your wholeness. The coach also must be committed to your journey into the dark of the decision: "Can I continue to offer value for this system?"

The pain of being fired or retired early, after being shredded in the local media, is horrible. There will, of course, always be pain (and joy) in any leadership position. Knowing one's strengths, personal vision and values, and where your personal "lines in the sand" are drawn will build a base of self-awareness that allows you to craft your career and have more good days than bad.



2. Peer Partners

The Danforth Foundation Superintendent's Forum

For the past seven years, the Danforth Foundation, a nonprofit foundation based in St. Louis, has regularly brought together a group of about sixty school superintendents to talk about their organizational learning efforts in a program called the Forum for the American School Superintendent. Of course, school superintendents often come together for professional meetings, but the Danforth Forums (as we call them) are different. Danforth provides some support for superintendents' travel expenses and for small-group learning initiatives, but there's much more to this effort than money. The superintendents come from urban, suburban, and rural districts; but all of them have at