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# School Leadership's Trials and Trails: A Hundred Leadership Paths Diverged, Intertwined and Bifurcated, Sometimes Coming Out At the Same Place

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*School Leadership comes in many manifestations and nomenclatures. Though the course of a day, a school year, or a lifetime an individual's leadership style will emerge in a variety of diasporic ways that will encompass the unique individual who has the title of school administrator. The literature is replete with leadership terms and stories. All of the leadership paths and stores are instructive to those who pursue a lifetime of learning and leading in this business we call "school administration."*

*Keywords: school leadership, principals, school boards, leadership*

During one of those interminable committee meetings that all university instructors are required to participate in for the "service contribution portion of the contract," a colleague remarked to us how tired he was due to the fact that he had spent so much time grading papers. In my irreverent style I told him, "Isn't it much better teaching college classes and grading papers than being one thousand feet underground in a coal mine bent over at the waist?"

He looked at me like the pariah that I sometimes can be and said, "I'm not so sure." Not so sure indeed. I retired as a school administrator after having been a superintendent for thirty years. I have not worked a day since I procured my job as an associate professor of educational administration in January of 2004. Being a university professor is not work in any conventional sense of the word; this is fun. This is part of what is wrong with many college professors today. They have no notion of the real world of work. President Harry Truman perhaps said it best, "All that changes in history is the name we give things." In my forty year career in education I have seen the emphasis go from small high schools and school districts are best, to larger high schools are more economical, can offer many more electives, and pay higher salaries to attract better teachers and administrators, back again to smaller schools are much more student and community accessible and personal. The large school small school issue is just one of many "hot button" topics that ebb and flow in the world of educationalese.

There were approximately 180,000 books published in the United States last year, or about 490 per day. Almost 4,000 dealt with the subjects of management and leadership in a substantive way. Several hundred of these titles dealt specifically with the leadership role of school administrators. A few of these titles go on to best-seller acclaim, while the preponderance remains largely unread and unutilized. In addition to the books published on this topic, there are thousands of journal articles and popular articles published annually and archived.

There are so many titles and articles about leadership and management available that is impossible for any one individual to have read or even sifted through, or even be aware of, any significant number of them. We try as best we can to be aware of the literature in the leadership-management field, but it is a very difficult assignment. On occasion, a book about leadership will make the New York Times bestseller list for nonfiction. This was the case, albeit briefly, for Nassir Ghaemi's book, *A First-Rate Madness: Uncovering the Links Between Leadership and Mental Illness*. Ghaemi's thesis is that when a crisis looms, it is the leader who struggles with aspects of lifelong mental illness who leads best. Any leader will do when things are going well, but only a leader with mental illness can achieve greatness in the most difficult and trying of times. This book may provide school boards with new criteria when looking at administrative candidates.

The value of contemplating leadership for anyone who aspires to be or has ever been a leader is the metacognition factor, the analytical process of trying to figure out the entire topic. Reflecting on my role as a school district superintendent and my current role of teaching graduate students who aspire to become school principals about the subject of school leadership, I have come to wonder if I was a leader, a manager, or just the guy in charge. Just as Nassir Ghaemi has attempted to redefine what constitutes a leader, I have also redefined my idea of what makes a person a leader, or a manager, or just in charge of something.

Whether the school board consists of five, seven or nine members, keep in mind that all school board members are rabid political animals who have made themselves available to the electorate for a very specific reason or reasons. This elected political group employs a superintendent and sometimes the entire administrative team that they believe will best serve the collective interests of the school board. The administration will stay in place as long as the board is "satisfied." Officially, the reason that an individual seeks a seat on a school board typically goes along the lines of "I am running for the betterment of the district," or "I am seeking a seat on the board to better serve the students and parents of the community."

Seldom to ever will you hear a board candidate say something to the effect of "I am running because this district is so amazingly wonderful that I wish to help the administration and teachers to continue to do the stellar job that is currently being done." The reality is that folks run for a school board seat because they want something. This something may be nothing more than local acclaim or seeing their names in the paper upon occasion. Typically, board candidates want something much more concrete. I have seen them desire to add female soccer to the athletic program because they had a daughter that was prolific in that sport. I have known some to wish to add vocational classes for their children or more AP classes for their children, or a dual enrollment program at the community college, once again for their children. It is true that other children will benefit from the board members' desires; however, there is an absence of truth in the political advertising.

More often than not, a reason for seeking a school board seat is to run a coach out of town, or "get" a particular teacher or school administrator fired. Former Speaker of the House of Representatives Tip O'Neal once said that "All politics is local." Boards of Education represent local politics at its very worst when it consists of nothing more than a self-serving tribe of opinionated obsequious buffoons. Once school administrators accept the fact that the school board is political, we can come to understand the reality that leading a political configuration is difficult. President Obama could speak to this reality with the legislative group that he must lead.

There are those who say that leadership does not exist apart from management, and do not stress about the difference between the two concepts. Most authors make much ado about contrasting the different roles of management and leadership. The focus of principal education has typically been to stress the role of leadership over the role of "just being the manager." The literature of leadership rarely if ever covers the concept of "just being in charge" of others. Is a school manager in charge? Are the terms synonymous or can they even be considered in the same sentence? Can the school manager be a leader? If the principal is in the process of giving the due process rights to a student who is about to be suspended, is the principal a manager or a leader, or just in charge of the suspension process?

I have arrived at the position that principal candidates wish to become school leaders, not because they know what they mean, but due to the fact that the literature tells them that this is the way they should think.

One of my projects is for the students in principal preparation classes to discuss the differences between a principal as a manager and a principal as a leader and the experiences that they have had with both types. The discussions are both interesting and instructive. A few examples:

"Leadership is a culture of mentorship. The movie *Lean On Me* demonstrated the difference between management and leadership."

"I see principals that have taught in the classroom for a minimum amount of time. How can they be a leader if they haven't taught or worked with students in years if not decades?"

"Managers are always on the defensive and pointing fingers. They cannot step-up to owning their mistakes. Leaders say thank you for your help and continue to make changes for the better."

"Managers just keep the status quo, while leaders look to the future."

"Leaders are not afraid to share the success with the employees."

"Managers are the ones who direct, delegate and ensure that operations run smoothly. Leaders are the people who make a difference."

Another favorite discussion of mine is for the students to consider a person, living or deceased, whom most of the class would be familiar with, that they consider a great leader. A small pool of names is brought forward each semester. These are some of the typical responses on the discussion board:

"The leader who I think has continued to influence our county is Franklin D. Roosevelt. Being elected four times as our president is a true reflection of his leadership. Moving our country out of the depression and through WWII to become an eventual world power speaks volumes to the leadership he provided during those difficult times."

"To me Bill Gates is one of the most respected men in the world. He creates many great situations that people from all over the world benefit from. The Bill Gates Millennium Scholarship and the Gates Foundation are just two examples of Bill Gates' leadership."

"Martin Luther King, talk about a leader who stood for what should be right for all citizens. He faced many obstacles and never wavered in his quest for fair treatment and justice for all people."

"Abraham Lincoln is a true leader. He was able to guide a divided nation to a successful conclusion of the war."

Conclusions are as follows: Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Bill Gates, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and occasionally Ronald Reagan are named as examples of people who most exhibited leadership. Any discussions concerning the differences between leadership, management, being a boss, or being in charge become confused in the literature, to the point where a new bricolage is necessary. The term that we have arrived at for the rest of the twenty-first century is 'Lenager'. A person has to have the appearance of being a leader and manager, and also leave a legacy.

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