

Learning to Lead

by

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There is no shortage of talk about “leadership” but the term remains enigmatic, variously defined and frequently confused with related terms and processes. Consequently, opportunities for individuals to learn by reflecting on their experience and to share that learning with others are frequently confounded by the imprecise, and thus confusing, use of terms like “management,” “leadership” and “administration.” Since these social functions are infinitely complex and contextually variable, it is important to establish a scaffold of shared meanings that will support a constructive discourse about them in order to enable the continuous individual and collective learning required to perform them effectively.

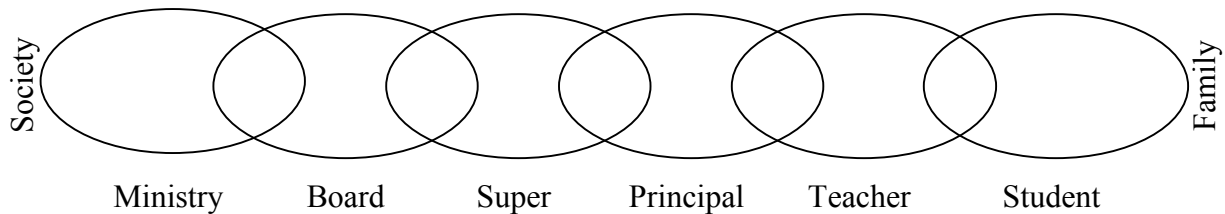
Particularly unfortunate is the profligate use of the term leadership to describe any admirable or successful act in a relationship, group, family or organization. Recently, however, a bit more discipline seems to be emerging in the use of the term to describe acts of personal influence that invite and nurture common commitment, as compared to management, which describes acts of positional authority that ensure compliance with roles and responsibilities. Both leadership and management are vitally important and both require intelligence, skill and tact in order to be done well, neither more than the other. Both also require foresight, which should not be mistaken for leadership although that is unfortunately common—even more so when foresight is embellished as vision.

Leadership and management are the yin and yang of administration, which is the collective term best used to describe the role of a principal or vice-principal. The term “manager” is justifiably unpopular because it seems to suggest someone who merely manages, and does not lead. The term “leader” is more in vogue, but it too is inadequate to describe the role of a person with positional authority because it may too easily imply that s/he eschews management, which would be both irresponsible and ineffective. Management and leadership are equally noble, complex and necessary.

Because the school system is simultaneously both a bureaucracy and a community, management and leadership are, in practice, inextricably entwined even though we may speak of them as if they were distinct. Conceptual models, particularly as they strive for consistency and clarity, are invariably an artificial imposition on experience, which is inherently messy. Our analysis and our definitions should not deny that fact. They must come with the caveat that all classifications are artificial constructs requiring interpretation in context and that the reductionism of analysis must be balanced by an appreciation of the gestalt of practice and the interdependence of functions. It is useful to parse our experience and define our terms, but we should not then imprison our thinking by reifying the distinctions we have created.

As we distinguish leadership from management, we must also recognize that leadership is not something that is done exclusively by leaders, or at least not by formally designated leaders. It is an act defined by the nature and quality of relationship between people that transcends specific roles and permeates the school system and its community. Everyone can, and should, lead—trustees, support staff, superintendents, teachers, parents, school administrators, students and provincial officials—by acting in ways that strengthen relationships and encourage commitment to the common cause of public education. Leadership is always broadly distributed, whether we choose to acknowledge that fact or not. It is best, therefore, to begin with this appreciation as we attempt to understand the specific leadership opportunities and responsibilities of those in positions of authority.

Of course, it is also true that authority is distributed. (Only students are powerless - a problematic fact that warrants another article!) Education is necessarily a “loosely coupled” exercise in which the specific means of accomplishing the School Act mandate of “enabling all learners” are largely determined at the classroom level. At the same time, because there is a desire to ensure equitable access to quality learning opportunities for all students, there is a legislated structure of intended learning outcomes, but this bureaucratic framework can, at best, provide only partial assurance of consistency and equity. Ultimately, it is a clear, strong common vision and commitment amongst trustees, teachers and administrators that ensures quality learning experiences for all students. Nonetheless, a certain “chain of command” does exist, although it is more accurately and productively understood as a “chain of relationships.”



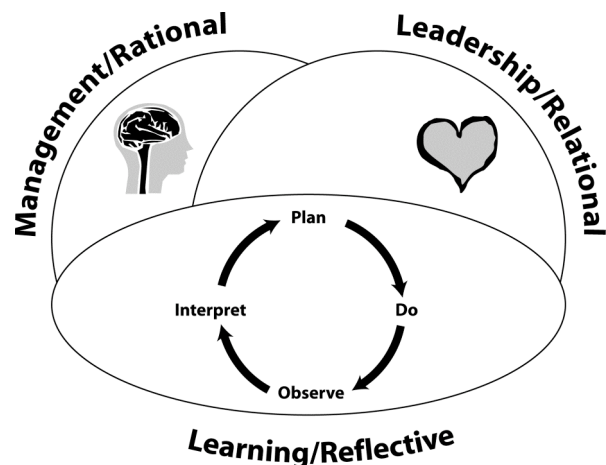
At each point of intersection in this chain of relationships there are actions that involve a combination of authority (i.e., management) and influence (i.e., leadership). There is at each intersection also responsibility and accountability that flows in both directions, and an inescapable interdependence that binds the actors to each other. (One might connect the two ends of this chain, thus forming a loop, in order to better illustrate the fact that schools are both created by and responsible to the commons, which is the ultimate source of authority.)

The blending of managerial authority and leaderly influence is a complex process that frequently involves dilemmas in which two valued ends conflict or cannot be simultaneously satisfied. Sometimes this is a matter of insufficient resources—for example, budgeting and timetabling—and sometimes it is more fundamental—for example, fulfilling a rational policy-based interest in justice and a relationship-based sense of compassion when dealing with a staff or student situation. This dilemma-based tension is experienced at all levels in the system, from the board room to the classroom.

The ubiquitous dilemmas of public education, and in particular of administration, require an inclination to, and capacity for, personal reflection and public deliberation. This can help us to live the dilemmas with more wisdom and grace, but it will not make them disappear. Scarce resources will not suddenly become abundant and the moral disagreements within our pluralistic community will not magically be resolved. Unfortunately, the constructive deliberation that is desperately needed is also often challenging. It requires confidence, humility, patience, commitment to public education and as much IQ and EQ as one can muster. Developing the will and the skill, not to mention the sustainable energy, to personally engage in ongoing deliberation, and to help others to do likewise, is, perhaps, the most important developmental task for new administrators.

So, let's try to put the task of learning to be an effective educational administrator into a framework that is sufficiently complex to adequately represent it and sufficiently simple to be actually used as one continuously refines the required understandings and skills.

The **management** aspects of school administration are the technical and legal duties related to the hierarchical structure of the school system and the authority that is vested in the principal. In large measure, these tasks focus on compliance with legal mandates, local policies, or the rationally defined duties of the role. They involve the stewardship of resources and the provision of processes and structures that are necessary, although not sufficient, to enabling the school to achieve its goals. When assessing the principal's management, the underlying worldview is rational (aka bureaucratic, technical or mechanistic), the focus is on competence, and the operative question is, *Does s/he tend to the infrastructure of the school and the internal and external processes required to sustain it in an efficient, effective and timely manner?*



The **leadership** aspect of a principal's role is more artistic than technical. It relates to the community served by the infrastructure and is effected through influence rather than authority. Leadership fosters not merely compliance but meaningful commitment to the school and its purposes. It attends to the human relational aspects of the role and the deeper meanings and purposes of the school, as distinct from the more utilitarian duties and bureaucratic mechanisms that support those purposes. When assessing the principal's leadership, the underlying worldview is organic, the focus is on character, and the operative question is, *Does s/he articulate the school's purpose and values effectively and treat other people in an ethical manner that is consistent with those values, builds commitment to that purpose and fosters individual initiative in support of it?*

Leadership behaviour defined in this way should not be limited to the principal, or to others with formally designated authority. It is a way of being that is open to all. While the

principal has a special responsibility for exercising leadership, s/he also has a duty to invite, recognize and nurture it in others.

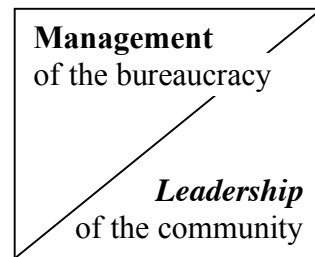
In the diagram, management and leadership are distinguished, but it should be noted that the school district is simultaneously both a bureaucracy and a community. Thus, every action has both rational and relational elements, and involves both management and leadership. Management is not in any way inferior to leadership because it provides an essential foundation of order and efficiency without which nothing else can work. However, there is a sense in which leadership should occupy the foreground of our intention and management should occupy the background. When planning our holidays, the destination takes precedence over the vehicle even though the vehicle is essential. This is the reason that the leadership circle is seen to lie on top of the management circle in the diagram.

Frequently, there is a tension between these two essential dimensions of the principal’s role— between the rational and the relational aspects of the work, between bureaucracy and community, between authority and influence, and between ensuring compliance and inviting commitment. Some of the most subtle, but important, learning that is required in order to be effective in the role is the ability to deal

Direction

Discussion

Dialogue



simultaneously with these often contradictory aspects of experience. It is not sufficient that there be a situational balance of management and leadership—a little management today and a little leadership tomorrow, or leadership when one can find some time after the management duties are done. There must be a fusion of these two elements in all actions, a healthy combination of direction, discussion and dialogue in each conversation. Thus, management and leadership are not intended to be opposites that define a polarity, but rather the yin and the yang of an indivisible whole. Often leadership is shown by the way one goes about management tasks, or simply the way one interacts with others. Coming to understand the challenge of infusing management with leadership, to give words to the feelings and dilemmas that it creates, and to deal with it in an increasingly metacognitive fashion is what leads to wisdom and enables us to share our experience with others and learn from theirs.

The *learning* component of the model acknowledges the intention that a school should be a learning community that is constantly engaged in intentional gathering and purposeful use of feedback for the purpose of continuous improvement. This requires that each and every individual within the organization conduct him/herself in a thoughtful manner and develop the discipline of reflection *on* action and reflection *in* action so that he/she enhances his/her personal understandings and skills, and is able to adapt to the dynamic circumstances of the school and its community. The principal should be a visible model in this regard. When assessing the principal’s learning, the focus is on curiosity and the operative question is, *Does s/he behave in a thoughtful manner, treating each experience as an opportunity to learn, and demonstrating the willingness and ability to seek and use feedback to continuously improve management and leadership understandings and skills?*

No one can be expected to come to school administration with fully developed understandings and skills, and no one is ever finished learning them. A school administrator must be a lifelong learner who grows and develops continuously through reflection, dialogue and study. The most effective administrators are always in the process of learning to lead and thus in a constant state of becoming a better leader. By adopting common language they will be better able to share both the questions and the insights along the way.