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When Leadership Spells Danger

Leading meaningful change in education takes courage, commitment, and political savvy.

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For the past 25 years, we have worked with thousands of professionals around the globe—including many school superintendents, principals, and teachers—who seek to exercise leadership. We have listened to their stories, to their successes and failures, in an effort to understand the essential components of successful leadership. In the process, we have learned that educators often fail to appreciate how dangerous and difficult it can be to lead on behalf of what they care about most.

Leadership in education means mobilizing schools, families, and communities to deal with some difficult issues—issues that people often prefer to sweep under the rug. The challenges of student achievement, health, and civic development generate real but thorny opportunities for each of us to demonstrate leadership every day in our roles as parents, teachers, administrators, or citizens in the community.

Leadership often involves challenging people to live up to their words, to close the gap between their espoused values and their actual behavior. It may mean pointing out the elephant sitting on the table at a meeting—the unspoken issue that everyone sees but no one wants to mention. It often requires helping groups make difficult choices and give up something they value on behalf of something they care about more. Leadership often entails finding ways to enable people to face up to frustrating realities, such as budget cuts, low achievement scores, high dropout rates, or the gap between the revolutionary aspiration of leaving no child behind and the programmatic design and funding of NCLB.

Most of us, most of the time, pass up these daily opportunities to exercise leadership. We stay within our area of expertise and opt to affirm our primary loyalties. Doing otherwise would be personally difficult and professionally dangerous.

Why Leadership Is Dangerous

We often confuse leadership with authority. We look to people in high positions and bemoan their lack of leadership. But opportunities for exercising leadership do not depend on position. Leadership can come from any place within or even outside an organization. And the more authority you have, the more you risk when you exercise leadership. Leadership is dangerous because you are rarely authorized to lead.



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Every one of us operates within a scope of authority in our professional, civic, and even family roles. Whether you are president of the United States, the principal of a middle school, or a teacher in a classroom, the people around you expect you to follow a set of behaviors. As long as you do just that—meet their expectations and stay within your scope of authority—you will receive praise and support. In other words, your scope of authority is a contract for services; if you deliver those services, whether by improving student test scores or by maintaining a quiet classroom, you will be rewarded.

Ironically, we often call people who stick to their scope of authority "leaders." For example, a Missouri district superintendent, under pressure from teachers in one of his primary schools to do something about their hard-driving and sometimes abrasive principal, found a way to promote the principal out of her job. He believed that he had exercised leadership because he had eliminated the complaints and restored equilibrium. But he had also removed a principal with a 20-year track record of dramatically improving student achievement and retention in the poorest neighborhood in the district, a feat she accomplished in part by pushing the teachers to operate beyond their current norms and expertise.

Leadership often means challenging your authorization. When you do that, you often meet resistance. Sometimes that resistance takes the form of social isolation or personal attacks. In the most extreme cases, some leaders, like Anwar Sadat and Yitzhak Rabin, have been assassinated because they challenged the norms and values of their communities.

People will often go to extremes to silence the frustrating voices of reality. If leadership were about giving people good news, the job would be easy. If Sadat and Rabin had distributed money to their people, or told them that they would not have to change their ways, they might have lived longer. People do not resist change, as such. People resist loss.

You may appear dangerous to people when you question their values, beliefs, or habits of a lifetime. You place yourself on the line when you tell people what they *need* to hear rather than what they *want* to hear. Although you may see with clarity and passion a promising future of progress and gain, other people will see with equal passion the losses you are asking them to sustain.

Why Leadership Is Difficult

One of the classic myths about leadership is that it means having the knowledge and expertise to provide the answers we need to resolve the tough problems we face.

For many challenges in our lives, experts or authorities can solve our problems and thereby meet our needs. We look to doctors to make us healthy, mechanics to fix our cars, parents to teach us appropriate behavior, and bosses to resolve personnel disputes. We give these people power, authorizing them to find solutions—and often they can deliver.

Problems that we can solve through the knowledge of experts or senior authorities are *technical challenges*. The problems may be complex, such as a broken arm or a broken carburetor, but experts know exactly how to fix them.

In contrast, the problems that require leadership are those that the experts cannot solve. We call these *adaptive challenges*. The solutions lie not in technical answers, but rather in people themselves. The mechanic can fix your brake linings, but he cannot stop your 80-year-old father from riding the brake pedal because he is afraid of driving too fast. The surgeon can fix your son's broken arm, but she cannot prevent your son from rollerblading without elbow pads.



The dietitian can recommend a weight-loss program, but she cannot curb your love for chocolate chip cookies.

Most social problems are adaptive. They are not resolved with a logical argument. We know that eating lots of chocolate chip cookies will not help us lose weight. We'd like an anti-chocolate-chip-cookie pill. Organizations, communities, and individuals would prefer to treat adaptive problems as technical ones. That way, we could solve the problem without changing, taking a loss, or giving up anything.

Technical problems reside in the head; solving them requires an appeal to the mind, to logic, and to the intellect. Adaptive challenges lie in the stomach and the heart. To solve them, we must change people's values, beliefs, habits, ways of working, or ways of life. For teachers to learn a new set of competencies to help them leave fewer children behind in their classrooms, they may have to endure a temporary loss of confidence as they face the gap between the demands for performance and their current practices. And developing this competence will probably require the school to make adaptive changes as well, adopting new norms of supervision, experimentation, and collaboration.

Most problems do not come cleanly bundled as technical or adaptive. They include elements of each. Losing weight is a combination of the technical aspect of getting a dietitian's recommendation and the adaptive challenge of following it.

Most people would rather have the person in authority take the work off their shoulders, protect them from disorienting change, and meet challenges on their behalf. But the real work of leadership usually involves giving the work back to the people who must adapt, and mobilizing them to do so.

Tactics for Survival and Success

Successful leaders in any field tend to emphasize personal relationships. This principle is especially true for those in elective office. Political people give great care to creating and nurturing networks of people whom they can call on, work with, and engage in addressing the issue at hand. Able politicians know well from hard experience that in everyday personal and professional life, the quality of human relationships is more important than almost any other factor in determining results.

For educators, however, thinking politically often presents a challenge. They enjoy autonomy in the classroom and often beyond. Moreover, educators often are linear people, used to argument, logic, and relying on the merits of the case. Sometimes educators believe so deeply in the rightness of their cause that they have difficulty seeing the values at stake among those who hold opposing perspectives.

If you have difficulty keeping relationships central in your efforts toward change, consider how the following five essential aspects of political thinking can help you exercise adaptive leadership.

Don't Do It Alone

Find partners. This task is sometimes easier said than done. Even those who agree with your goals may hesitate to share the risks, preferring to wait and see how secure the footing is

before they take action. In addition, personal considerations may make you reluctant to join forces with others. After all, partners might push their own ideas, compromising yours. Connecting with them takes time, slowing you down. And working with a group might dilute your visibility—a drawback if you want to reassure yourself and others of your competence.

But partners can strengthen both you and your initiatives. By enlisting partners, you build political power on the basis of personal relationships, instead of simply relying on the logical power of your evidence and arguments. Further, the content of your ideas improves when you take other viewpoints into account—especially if you can incorporate the views of those who disagree markedly with you. Forming partnerships that include diverse viewpoints is especially crucial when you are advancing a difficult issue or confronting a conflict of values.

It's a mistake to go it alone. By creating alliances even before your initiative becomes public, you can increase the probability that both you and your ideas will succeed. For the next meeting, personally make the advance phone calls, test the waters, refine your approach, and line up supporters. In the process, find out what you are asking of your potential partners. Know their existing alliances and loyalties so you realize how far you are asking them to stretch to collaborate with you.

Keep the Opposition Close

To exercise leadership, you must work as closely with your opponents as you do with your supporters. Most of us cringe at spending time with—and especially taking abuse from—people who do not share our vision or passion. Too often we take the easy road, ignoring our opponents and concentrating on building an affirmative coalition. But rather than simply recognizing your own anxiety about dealing with your opponents and plowing ahead, you need to read this anxiety both as a sign of vulnerability on your part and as a signal about the threat you represent to opposing groups.

Keeping your opposition close also connects you with your diagnostic job. The people whose perspectives you most need to understand are those most upset by your agenda. The opposition has more to lose, and therefore they deserve more attention.

As you attend to your allies and opponents in advancing your issue, do not forget the uncommitted and wary people in the middle—the people who will often determine your success. These people may resist change merely because it will disrupt their lives and make their futures uncertain. Beyond the security of familiarity, they have little substantive stake in the status quo—but don't underestimate the power of familiarity.

Acknowledge Their Loss

Remember that when you ask people to participate in adaptive change, you are asking a lot. You may be asking them to choose between two values, both important to the way they understand themselves. Any divorced parent understands how difficult this choice is. Most of us shudder at the prospect of having to choose between our own happiness and what's best for our children.

You may be asking people to close the distance between their espoused values and their actual behavior. Martin Luther King, Jr., challenged Americans in this way during the civil rights movement. The abhorrent treatment that he and his allies received during marches and demonstrations dramatized the gap between the values of freedom, fairness, and tolerance, on



one hand, and the reality of life for African Americans on the other. King forced many of us, self-satisfied that we were good people living in a good country, to come face-to-face with the gulf between our values and our behavior. Once we confronted that gulf, we had to act. The pain of ignoring our own hypocrisy hurt us more than giving up the status quo. The country changed.

Participating in adaptive change often demands some disloyalty to our roots. To tell someone that he should stop being prejudiced is really to tell him that some of the lessons of his loving grandfather were wrong. To tell a teacher that she has to begin measuring her success by how well she raises student test scores or teaches the "unteachable" students may challenge a great deal of what she was taught about her job.

You need to respect and acknowledge the loss that people suffer when you ask them to leave behind something they have lived with for years. It is not enough to point to a hopeful future. People need to know that you realize that the change you are asking them to make is difficult and that what you are asking them to give up has real value to them.

Accept Casualties

Any significant adaptive change that benefits the organization as a whole may clearly and tangibly hurt some of those who thrived under the status quo. If people simply cannot or will not go along with change, then they will become casualties. You must choose between keeping these people and making progress. For those who find taking casualties almost too painful to endure, this part of leadership presents a special dilemma. But it often goes with the territory.

If you signal your unwillingness to sustain casualties, you invite people to ignore your goals. Without the pinch of reality, why should they make sacrifices and change their ways of doing business? Your ability to accept the harsh reality of losses sends a clear message about your courage and commitment to seeing through the adaptive challenge. Understanding that successful change will likely cause casualties will enable you to focus on your priorities—and be more mindful about helping those people who get left behind to move on to their next position.

Accept Responsibility for Your Piece of the Mess

Taking the initiative to address important issues in your school or district does not relieve you of your share of responsibility for these problems. If you have been in a senior role for a while, you almost certainly had some part in creating any existing problem and in failing to address that problem in the past. Even if you are new, or outside the organization, you need to identify the behaviors you practice or values you embody that could stifle the very change you want to advance. You need to identify and accept responsibility for your contributions to the current situation even as you try to move others to a different, better place.

In our teaching, training, and consulting, we often ask people to write or deliver orally a short version of a leadership challenge that they currently face in their professional, personal, or civic lives. Over the years, we have read and heard thousands of such challenges. Most often, in the first iteration of the story, the author is nowhere to be found. The storyteller implies, "If only other people would shape up, I could make progress here."

When you are too quick to lay blame on others, you risk misdiagnosing the situation. And you also risk making yourself a target by denying that you, too, need to change. Instead of setting up a dynamic of you versus them, accept your share of the responsibility and face the problem



together.

Acknowledging your piece of the mess is both a success strategy and a survival strategy. After all, if you can identify and fix your piece of the problem, you will have made some progress on it. Further, you will send a strong signal to others that you are willing to do your share of adaptive work as well.

Needed: Adaptive Leadership

The adaptive challenges facing education communities today are as sacred in their importance as they are difficult. At times they may seem intractable. The competition for scarce resources has been further intensified by the new demands for security and expenses of the war on terrorism. Policymakers are demanding performance accountability measures for students and educators that bring into question deeply held notions of good teaching, good learning, and success in the classroom; these accountability measures also force us to face our long-standing acceptance of the wide gaps in achievement between rich and poor students and between white and minority students.

We will not meet our current challenges by waiting for higher authorities, such as the state commissioner, the governor, or the federal government, to figure out the answers. Although many important new insights are generalizable across education contexts, each school district, school, and classroom must discover the adaptations that will succeed in its environment, for its students and their families. The kind of leadership that can fashion new and better responses to those local realities needs to come from many places within classrooms, districts, and communities. In this complex environment, it is more important than ever that educators at all levels exercise adaptive leadership.

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