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A CALL FOR ENGAGED LEADERSHIP

Another school year will begin soon. Children will be walking through classroom doors full of excitement and anticipation. The doors of knowledge will open wide and students will be ready to eagerly embrace all that their teachers are prepared to share. Teachers too will be excited about the start of the school year and will be looking forward to implementing the great teaching and learning strategies they have planned for their students. There is a wealth of positive energy and high expectations for student success from teachers, parents and the students themselves.

This scenario paints a picture of schooling that we all want to believe is true at every school. However this is not the case in most urban schools.

The persistent failure of urban schools and repeated efforts to change them have shaped much of the debate about education policy in the United States over the past forty years. The issues have remained stubbornly constant: inadequate funding and resources, unequal educational opportunity, high dropout rates and low academic achievement, student alienation, racial segregation, and race and class inequality within and among urban schools (Lipman, 2004, p. 5).

Many children entering school this year continue to come from homes where parents are ill prepared to provide the kinds of intellectually stimulating experiences that improve their children's chances of success in the classroom. In many of these homes the knowledge needed to nurture and support the academic growth of children is limited. Many of these parents do not read to, and with their children; they do not frequent the library, zoo, science or history museums, or other venues that promote learning. These parents have not had these kinds of experiences themselves to share with their children. They work hard to make ends meet and only visit the school if there is a problem with their sons or daughters. These parents, while doing the best they can, are not equipped to help their children excel academically.

Here is another scenario. Truman Elementary is a K-5 school set amidst a lower and middle-income housing tract that was constructed on the southwest side of the city in 1948. Once a typical middle-class neighborhood, Truman is now populated by few of the original, now aging residents, and a growing transient population of low-income renters. The school has a high proportion of Aid to Family with Dependent Children recipients among its 502 ethnically diverse students. About 80 percent of the school's children are Hispanic, 10 percent are Anglo, and the remainder are African-American and relatively recent Asian immigrants.

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Over eighty percent of the faculty has taught at Truman for ten years or more. Ninety percent of the faculty has had at least five years of teaching experience at Truman, while the remaining ten percent have less than five years of experience, all at Truman. Of the twenty teachers at Truman, sixteen classify themselves as Anglo, three Hispanic (all teaching in bilingual classrooms), and there is one who classifies herself as African-American. All of the staff, custodians, aides, cafeteria workers, are either Hispanic or African-American.

You have been transferred to Truman as the new principal. Soon after your arrival you encounter a fragmented staff who consistently communicates (1) that they feel no support from leadership, and (2) most of the children are 'at risk' due to factors outside the control of the school. There are extensive disciplinary problems, uneven, but overall low student achievement, and a laundry list of other irritants, ranging from the types of students in gifted and talented classes versus special education classes, to teacher gripes about not having enough supplies, math manipulatives and computer software. The former principal, and a few of the old vanguard, tried to hold on to the traditions that had made Truman an outstanding academic institution in years past. Now, instead of working as a team, teachers were guarding their turf and ignoring other challenges impacting the school.

One of the biggest challenges that has now led the State to identify Truman as a school to take over, is that of Truman students having the lowest performance on state mandated tests for the past several years. To make matters worse, many of the teachers at Truman view the parents of their students as an anchor around their children's ankles, sinking them to depths that make academic excellence virtually impossible.

This attitude about these parents and their children has been prevalent in urban schools for decades. These same negative opinions about the parents of the children they teach are growing rapidly in our suburban public schools. What a shame. We have created an environment, perceptual and real, where teachers, administrators and students are oppressed in so many ways. Many of these individuals have a diminishing sense of hope. They lack strong convictions that support high levels of student success, and the same belief in themselves. Excuses become the primary mode of discussion. Teachers blame parents, principals blame teachers, students just hate school, and parents are clueless. What a terrible rationale for simply teaching to a state mandated test for the entire academic year! Even more, what a poor excuse for lowering the expectations of students!

Presented here is a school with the kinds of challenges faced in many public schools, both suburban and urban.

- What are the major challenges that must be addressed by the principal at Truman?;
- How will these challenges be identified?; and
- What should be the role of the various stakeholders?

It seems appropriate to provide a brief overview of leadership theories before addressing these and other questions.

LEADERSHIP THEORY

Hundreds of books on leadership have been written. A major theme in most, if not all, of these books is focused on how a successful leader organizes people to get the task at hand accomplished. These discussions resulted in research focused on identifying the characteristics that leaders possessed. Much of this work studied those considered to be the great leaders, past and present. The “trait theory of leadership” is considered one of the first leadership theories to be identified in the literature. This theory provided the foundation upon which leadership was researched, defined and explained. Most noted was Thomas Carlyle’s (1841) *Heroes and Hero Worship*, and Francis Galton’s (1869) *Hereditary Genius*. Carlyle’s work attempted to identify the primary talents, skills and even physical attributes needed for successful leadership. Galton’s work studied the families of those considered to be great leaders. He believed that leadership was inherited.

Studies focused on leadership in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s began to challenge the trait leadership theory. Results from these research efforts began to say that individuals emerge as leaders across a smorgasbord of situations. Since then, a multitude of leadership theories have been delineated. The Behavioral theories of Skinner, McClelland, and Lewin, Lipitt and White were embraced by many in the field of leadership. Other theories have come, gone, and come again. Among these are the contingency theory, a behavioral model based on the premise that there is no one best way to lead. Effective and successful leadership must consider the external and internal factors influencing the organization. Transactional (based on the premise that the individual is motivated by reward and punishment), servant (based on the premise that both the organization and the employees are important; there is a strong emphasis on community building and empowerment; argues that service is the primary function of the leadership), and transformational (based on the premise that effective leadership is built on the ability to intellectually stimulate and inspirationally motivate individuals to higher levels of attainment) theories. Embedded in these works are discussions regarding every element of an organization, from the organizational structure, culture, arguments attempting to distinguish between managers and leaders, and the group dynamics. All of these discussions stress the complexity regarding leadership and how a person becomes, or is born to be, an effective leader. Yet much of the research has attempted to define leadership in less complex ways.

Many of us grew up from childhood learning to understand, for example, right from wrong, good or bad, smart or dumb, strong or weak, pretty or ugly, acceptance or rejection. Sharing was a right thing to do, while selfishness was bad. Following directions from your parents and teachers was a good thing to do, but hitting your sibling was bad. You were rewarded for the smart things that you did, and punished for your actions that were considered dumb. The strongest person won the trophy, the weakest got dirt kicked in their face. Those considered pretty (handsome) got all of the attention, while those considered ugly would be marginalized most

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all the time. If you were considered good in these ways, then you were accepted by those in control. All others were deemed different and not included in the inner circles of the main group. They were also not considered leadership material.

These straightforward examples of treatment based on either/or descriptors are at the root of many of the ills of our society today, and in our public schools. Seemingly basic, clear-cut ways of making sense of the world plague our attempts to value anyone that seems to be different. This approach has caused many of us in this society to think of gays, racial groups, non-Christians, and those with a disability for example, as less than. Thinking in this way has led to a sense of alienation for so many citizens in this country. This thinking is also the root cause of many of the challenges faced in today's classrooms. Max Stirner talks about "Wheels In The Head." He refers to a thought that a person cannot give up as a "Wheel In The Head", which in turn controls an individual's will and uses the individual rather than being used by the individual. Are these Wheels similar to the social constructs in this society that allow negative stereotypic images of people control what we think of them and tell some of us our potential for success based merely on our perceived race or social economic status? Are these Wheels similar to the social constructs in this society that provide the rationales some educators employ to justify remedial programs, tracking, rote teaching processes, and high stakes testing? Are these Wheels similar to the social constructs in this society that have created gatekeepers (IQ tests, statewide high stakes testing, and college entrance level exams) that limit entrance for so many individuals in our society into the ivory towers of higher education? I would suggest that they do. Stirner suggests a need to transgress from the educated person where knowledge is the determiner of choice to the free person where knowledge is the source of greater choice (Spring, 1994, pg. 44). What is most alarming is that differences are attributed to individuals based merely on socially constructed group identifiers. Identifiers based on false data. How can school leaders right these wrongs? This paper supports the premise that one way to right these wrongs in our schools is for leaders to embrace the concept of principal as an engaged leader.

Thomas Friedman (*The World Is Flat*), Jim Collins (*Good To Great*) and Malcolm Gladwell (*Blink*) represent authors recently espousing the need for future leaders with the abilities to work successfully with people from all walks of life. While taking more of a business approach, they are speaking to "The Beloved Community" attributed to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and supported by so many others, including this author. This premise points to the importance of broadening our perspectives regarding differences and how these different ways of seeing, doing and living can bring new synergy and greater success to organizations, and in this case, schools. We need leaders who are willing to transgress current belief and behaviors.

New Webster's Dictionary defines transgress: to go beyond; to act in violation of; to step across. Most of us would consider transgressions to be against the law; to be a negative action. Yet it seems that most, if not all, great discoveries emerged because someone chose to go beyond; take a different path; and stepping across the standard ways of doing and thinking. For us to transgress means to begin anew,

to imagine the possibilities of how things can improve, and to move forward in new and creative ways. We suggest that, when looking at school leadership, now is the time to transgress.

As stated before, there are numerous theories that attempt to define leadership and clarify the role of the leader. It is suggested here that most, if not all, of these theories enhance a person's ability to lead. However, leaders should strive to take from all of these theories and to not fully embrace just one. Leaders need to broaden their perspectives about leadership on a continual basis. Leaders need to take their knowledge of leadership and employ the skills needed to accomplish goals, given the situation. Embedded in this work is the need for more emphasis being placed on the importance of relationships from an individual versus group perspective, as a way to help empower individuals to excel in their work. Hollander reminds us, "Reaching leadership at the next level means "doing things with people, rather than to people," which is the essence of inclusion....It also provides an atmosphere that promotes fairness of input and output to all (Hollander, 2008, p. 3).

The call here is to believe that in today's work environment successful leaders must recognize the individual more now than the group, or groups within an organization. Understanding the importance of each individual in an organization and using the attributes that they bring to the team is indeed a challenging and, for some, a daunting task. It is posited here that this task can be successfully accomplished when leaders embrace the concept of principal as engaged leader. Leaders in today's school environments must continue to listen, learn and better utilize the knowledge and skills of other stakeholders. These leaders must be able to function in an ever evolving teaching and learning environment. Similar to the ethos of engaged pedagogy, engaged leadership assumes that every stakeholder has valuable contributions to make that will improve the organization. The engaged leader inspires participation, encourages meaningful working relationships between stakeholders, and is enthusiastic about the possibilities that emerge from this type of dynamic, interactive, inclusive process. The proposition here is that leadership must be inclusive of the voices of all stakeholders. When stakeholders are fully engaged, the organization becomes a more interactive, exciting, transformative, progressive, productive, and successful teaching and learning environment. In this type of environment everyone has opportunities to contribute in positive ways. Most, if not all, individuals grow in this kind of environment. They become more empowered advocates for the success of the organization, and develop their own leadership skills. The engaged leader helps to create the kind of teaching and learning environment that causes others to critically examine their own perspectives, question those perspectives with others within the organization, and move towards more improved teaching and learning.

The premise presented here states that in order to increase the productivity of an organization, leaders must move away from generalized understandings of people and their jobs, to more of an individual, personal approach. Within larger organizations, this work is done with direct reports who in turn embrace this same

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approach with their direct reports. Of course leaders find opportunities to interact with other members of the team in similar ways. Max DePree, in *Leadership is an Art*, puts it this way when looking at leadership with an elegant (great) company:

Most of the time, when we consider ourselves and others, we are looking at only one part of people. The measure of individuals-and so of corporations-is the extent to which we struggle to complete ourselves, the energy we devote to living up to our potential. An elegant company frees its members to be their best. Elegant leaders free the people they meet to do the same (DePree, 1990, pg. 142.).

In other words, this premise calls for leadership that looks for the good in an individual, at the gifts provided to them, and begin relationships from this premise. Each relationship is built on a desire to serve others in ways that lead to actions that support the mission of the organization in very positive, productive ways. Engaged leaders are part teacher using a Socratic approach, mediator of group discussions, and activator of the goals that emerge from this work.

Spock: ... Were I to invoke logic, however, logic clearly dictates that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.

Kirk: ... Or the one.

Star Trek: *The Wrath of Khan*

The role of leadership is indeed one of growing complexity. Yet, it is still focused on working to clear pathways to facilitate the work of others. Leadership understands that the needs of the many are most important. That process varies given the unique dynamics at play. Yes, all aspects of leadership should be considered and utilized as needed. Undergirding decisions should be a desire for leadership that is anchored by service to others and on the goal to provide influence, direction, and be a part of a community of individuals dedicated to the mission of the organization. Yet there are times when decisions must be made. External and internal factors often call for a multifaceted approach to leadership. The discussions that follow will attempt to bring clarity to our variety of approaches to leadership and change.

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