The Importance of People

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This month's column is the contribution of Newton C. Hodgson, of Emory University in Atlanta. As a result of his study of how teachers feel about leadership, Dr. Hodgson identifies several interesting aspects of the whole problem of who should lead and when. What follows might provide additional leaves for the supervisor's notebook.

Lead a Group! Who, Me?

"I wouldn't dare lead a discussion. I just *couldn't!* I just *can't!*"

THIS is Anita Baker, a fourth grade teacher, talking. The words are taken directly from the tape that records the interview. Italics and exclamation points are poor vehicles indeed to convey the anxiety and apprehension that spring from the speaker. And yet she is reacting to a purely hypothetical proposal; the interviewer has just asked her how she would feel if she were asked to lead a discussion group at the next system-wide meeting.

Anita is a competent teacher. She leads her class of forty-plus elementary pupils for six hours or more every day. She does not feel threatened by this kind of leadership. But even to consider leading a group of her peers for two hours throws her into a panic.

And then there is another side to the picture. How do teachers feel about having other teachers lead *them?*

"I'm afraid that unless the leader knows what he is doing, they get too much down to the specifics. And too much time is consumed by 'my little Johnny does thus-and-so.' And that irritates you. You feel like your time is wasted. And then I guess you feel like you know about as much as the teacher who is leading the discussion."

Margaret Apperson is a friendly, patient person, a veteran of many in-service meetings. She frankly prefers a leader who knows the subject under discussion and who is experienced in guiding discussion. She would prefer a consultant from outside the system because, as she puts it, "You are freer then."

These are expressions of feelings. Real feelings of actual people. Anita is terrified at the thought of having to lead a group. The prospect threatens her deeply. Margaret would rather not be in a group led by a fellow teacher. Her feelings are strong regarding this matter. These two teachers are not atypical. We can expect feelings like these to be aroused, in varying degree, whenever we propose leadership experiences to teachers.

There are instances, of course, when teachers have accepted the leadership role despite some trepidation and have worked through to a successful conclusion. When this happens there appears to be a striking growth increment. Success in leadership seems to generalize into feelings of adequacy that affect other aspects of their work. Edwina Martin is a young teacher in a semi-rural elementary school. She demurred when the supervisor asked her to lead a system-

wide group discussing the role of art in the elementary curriculum. She pleaded her youth and inexperience and scanty knowledge of the subject. But she finally agreed to accept the responsibility and went to work on the problem with great energy.

She sought and received effective help from an art consultant who was also to meet with the group. Later on she felt it was a very worthwhile experience:

"I worked pretty hard on the group. But I enjoyed it. I really did. After I got into it. I was real nervous and scared to start off with. But the last meeting didn't upset me at all. I was more confident in myself and everything else."

Edwina has grown a lot since she started teaching. And this experience contributed not a little to that growth. But I wonder, do we really have to make teachers "real nervous and scared" in our efforts to promote their growth in leadership?

The meetings referred to in the discussion so far have all been large system-wide affairs, dealing usually with a relatively broad and hard-to-pin-down subject like "Improving Classroom Instruction Through Meeting Emotional Needs" or some such impressive topic. The groups have included teachers from many different schools and have included a fair sprinkling of status personnel from the school system as well as an impressive array of visiting firemen. Leading a subgroup of 30 to 40 people in such a setting would constitute a formidable challenge to the most seasoned in-service worker. It is not surprising that a classroom teacher would perceive the task as threatening.

Under other conditions, however, teachers feel differently. Change the setting to the local school. Make it a group of fourth grade teachers meeting once a week to discuss "How can we reduce the noise in the halls?" Have no status person present unless by request. Have the leader selected by the group. Under these conditions, threat is reduced to a minimum. Expertness in the leader is not expected by other members of the group; he is seen merely as performing a necessary group function. The problem is seen as a real and practical one to which any member may be able to make as good a contribution as the next.

Marella Carter is an older teacher. She has been teaching in her school a long time. She thinks of herself as traditional in her teaching. She was chosen, not long ago, to lead the upper elementary group of teachers in her small school in a series of discussions on whatever topic they thought was important. She feels satisfied about her experience.

"I think we got a great deal out of it. At least I did. I happened to be the leader of my group and I thought a great many ideas were brought forth that helped. We had a good recorder and we thoroughly enjoyed our discussions. We would have enjoyed consultants occasionally, but not every meeting. Because we worked out things that were real to us and were not real to anyone else."

This small group worked with great satisfaction. They went on from a rather superficial problem of noise in the halls to work out carefully considered agreements concerning their language arts program. Marella's voice does not reflect the tensions that are so striking in Anita's recording. Does this difference reflect a character weakness in Anita? Or would she, too, have been relatively comfortable in taking over leadership of a group like Marella's? My guess is that she would have been. *Relatively* comfortable, that is. For I think that there are two factors involved: the teacher's feelings about the situation in which he is to lead; and the teacher's feelings about himself.

The evidence that we have regarding teachers' perception of themselves and of each other in the leadership role is limited. What I have been able to gather suggests two generalizations:

1. Teachers prefer that larger, more formal and heterogeneous groups be led by a person who is presumed to know the subject under discussion and is skilled in leadership techniques. For these meetings, they want a leader who can and will *lead.*

2. Teachers show least resistance to assuming leadership in the local school on local problems. They are also most ready to accept leadership by their peers in this setting.

My intent in this discussion, by the way, is not to argue that teachers should only be used as leaders in the local school. Far from it. I am firmly convinced that growth in leadership capacity is a most promising road to growth in general professional competency. My point is simply that teachers have feelings and that these feelings should be taken into account in planning professional experiences.

The assumption of leadership responsibility is often perceived as in some degree threatening. The apparent threat is more intense for some people than for others and some situations are inherently more threatening than others. So let us exercise a reasonable degree of sensitivity when we consider asking teachers to assume status leadership in discussion groups. The main job, after all, is to help teachers grow, a matter not necessarily expedited by scaring them half to death.

—Newton C. Hodgson, *assistant professor of education, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.*

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