

The Human Dimensions of Supervision

*The teacher-leader
has a status that is
earned rather than assigned.*

IN speaking about "the human dimensions of supervision,"¹ perhaps we can relieve the term "supervision" of its quite formal and even formidable coloration by speaking of a *person* who is a teacher-leader. Let us refer to such a person much more from the perspective of "acquaintance with" than from the perspective of "knowledge about." The difference between these two perspectives is near to profound because *appreciation*, which comes from "acquaintance with," must precede *understanding* which comes from "knowledge about." This order is, for me, the first law of pedagogy for I believe that we have little to *understand* unless we *appreciate* or *feel* something.

For the human dimensions and the obligations and risks of the role of teacher-leader let us turn to Martin Buber, the greatest living Jewish theologian. Following are some lines from the sec-

tion on "Education" in his writings:

If education means to let a selection of the world affect a person through the medium of another person, then the one through whom this takes place, rather, who makes it take place through himself, is caught in a strange paradox. What is otherwise found only as grace, inlaid in the folds of life—the influencing of the lives of others with one's own life—becomes here a function and a law. But since the educator has to such an extent replaced the master, the danger has arisen that the new phenomenon, the will to educate, may degenerate into arbitrariness, and that the educator may carry out his selection and his influence from himself and his idea of the pupil, not from the pupil's own reality.²

Let me now restate what I understand to be Buber's "strange paradox" as it is set in the difficult role of teacher-leader. It is the paradox of "authority and freedom," for the questions which we must all resolve as teacher-leader are these: "How much of what kinds of authority

¹ This article is based on, a paper read at the 10th Annual Spring Convention of the Wisconsin Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, May 2, 1960, at Marinette, Wisconsin.

² Martin Buber. *Between Man and Man*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955, p. 99-100. (Reprinted by permission of The Macmillan Company.)

shall we employ?" and "How much of what kinds of freedom shall we permit?"

My answer to these questions, if answer it be, is that authority and freedom must always be kept in balance. What that balance is, can, or should be, I shall not undertake to state in terms of any principles, for these would have to rest on "knowledge about." Let me, rather, share with you, as my meager experience permits me, something in the nature of "acquaintance with" such a balance.

Let me begin sharing with you my feeling-knowing about the role of teacher-leader by saying something about the context in which that role is played. This context is, of course, the context of human association—groups of various sizes, engaged in a variety of co-operative tasks, and made up of individuals who, because they are individuals, are different in talents, in interests, in skills and in knowledge. Being different in these respects they are *unequal* in these respects. But, being unequal, they are not unworthy!

Subject to Each Other

For the purposes of our concern, the most important feature of human association is that the members of it, the participants, *take each other into account*. I do not mean that they are simply polite to each other, although that relation is not ruled out. I mean, rather that each is aware of the other, identifies him in some way—as able, friendly, confused, coarse, concerned, informed, ignorant, sympathetic or whatever; makes some judgment or appraisal of him, identifies the meaning of his action, tries to

find out what he has on his mind, tries to figure out what he is doing, why he does it, or what he intends to do. Note that each does this to the other; thus flies the shuttle which weaves a fabric of understanding, subject always to correction. Let me make it clear: I speak not of the relation of object to object, of subject to object, or of object to subject. I speak of the relation of subject to subject. Each is, if you will permit a play on words, "subject to each other." Each takes the other into account as the one who is taking *him* into account. Both are active; neither is passive. Both are influencing and being influenced. Their relations are in the nature of a transaction except that here each is buyer and each is seller.

In this account of human association I mean to suggest a moving process in which the participants note and gauge each other's actions and attitudes. Each, likewise, organizes his actions and attitudes with regard to the other—he inhibits, exhibits, encourages, guides and directs himself, in short, *disciplines* himself and builds up those patterns of action and attitude which he believes to be appropriate to the situation which is, itself, constantly in change. That some are more adept at these things than others does not gainsay that all engage in them.³

Such a process of organizing patterns of action and attitudes is the group process, *par excellence*. Each is a member of it to the degree that he takes the attitudes of the others and controls his conduct—overt and covert—in terms of their attitudes. This does not mean, at all, that he agrees with or capitulates to the atti-

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³ See Herbert Blumer, "Psychological Import of the Human Group," in M. Sherif and M. O. Wilson, *Group Relations at the Crossroads*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953, p. 194.

tudes of others. The fact is only that he is aware of them and, in that awareness, structures for himself his unique actions and attitudes.

Yet this account requires an important amendment. This is that here is enacted the *democratic* group process in the measure that participation is fully shared, to the degree that compulsion is absent in each one's coming to his own patterns of action and attitudes, and to the degree to which these patterns serve goodness and wisdom as defined and understood in the democratic image of collective and individual life. Dewey's words to this effect are these: "Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community itself." Here, Dewey's statement about a fact is also a statement about a value.

If this account presents something not only quite complex but even mystical, such is the nature of the process of human association which is the process of *communication*—whether or not it takes verbal form. We may now better understand Dewey's observation that "... of all things communication is the most wonderful ... that the fruit of communication should be participation, sharing, is a wonder by the side of which transsubstantiation pales."⁴

Traits of the Teacher-Leader

Within such a context the role and status of teacher-leader emerge. This means that I conceive this role and status to be a thing *earned*, rather than *assigned*.

Let me state what I understand to be the minimal conditions for the emergence

⁴John Dewey. *Experience and Nature*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1926, p. 166.

of the role and status of teacher-leader. They are these:

1. A human association, democratic in its self-image
2. A common task or call it, in the somewhat heavy language of our craft, goal-oriented activities which are good and wise
3. Democratically disposed individual members with differing talents, skills, interests and knowledge.

The teacher-leader is, then, the person who comes to be set apart from the other members of a human association by reason of the superior influence which he exerts upon the goal-setting and goal-achieving activities of such an association. How far such a person is from the one who is *officially* designated as teacher-leader, I leave to your own insight. I trust that the distinction between earned and assigned teacher-leader role and status is thereby confirmed. It is a real, not a titular designation. It is the role and status of teacher-leader, not of chairman or boss.

Such an interpretation of the teacher-leader role and status reveals that it does not reside alone in any personality trait taken singly, or even in a constellation of so-called teacher-leader traits. It reveals itself as the *function of a personality in a situation*. One cannot be teacher-leader in a social vacuum. Furthermore, certain personality types interact better and more effectively within certain kinds of group situations than do other personality types. Thus the role and status of teacher-leader is a relative rather than an absolute one. However, this fact of relativity should not be taken to mean that there is no similarity in the attributes which make for effective teacher-leader behavior in quite different group situations.

What these constants in teacher-leader traits or attributes are is difficult to state with either precision or certainty. Nevertheless let us hazard a sampling of them. They are such as these: respect for individual differences; the ability to initiate and an unwillingness to dominate; the skill and tact necessary to strike the "right" balance between *effectiveness*, which is the cooperative accomplishment of intended group objectives, and *efficiency* which is the feeling by individual group members that they have been rewarded; and the ability to feel what the Quakers call "the sense of the meeting." Yet even these assumed-to-be teacher-leader attributes require the "right climate" of human association for their effective manifestation.

And now to these add the following: the gift of listening with "the third ear"—the ear of deep and sympathetic insight; one who is slow to anger and plenteous in mercy; one who does not command, for commandments anticipate only blind allegiance; one who shows and *teaches* but does not exhort; one who does not seek disciples, for the teacher-leader does not require servitude of one who, when the occasion arises, will supersede him; one who is virtuous and, in being so, knows that virtue is not an alternative to power but is, rather, the skillful and decent use of it; and one who understands the import of the paradox that "since I am their leader I must follow them."

Each of these, whether far or near as universal attributes of the teacher-leader, will depend for its best expression on the type of human association to which it is appropriate, because these traits in some degree, both arise in and are effective only in those human associations in which they *can* arise and function. The role and status of teacher-leader are,

thus, always a kind of "back-inference" from demonstrated and proven abilities in given situations.

Yet, even as I recite these little-better-than hunches about the constants in the person whom I have called teacher-leader, I feel that one attribute has slipped through my fingers—perhaps one of the most significant. I share it with you in Count Tolstoi's delineation of the gray and aged commander of the Russian troops at the battle against Napoleon at Borodino. That the setting was military rather than civil or academic I believe is relatively unimportant:

"He gave no orders, but only assented to or dissented from what others suggested . . . when he listened to the reports it seemed as if he were not interested in the import of the words spoken, but rather in something else—the expression of face and tone of voice of those who were reporting . . . he knew that the result of a battle is decided, not by the orders of one commander-in-chief . . . but by that intangible force called the spirit of the army, and he watched this force and guided it as far as that was in his power.

Let me give you another conception of the role and status of teacher-leader: this time from civil affairs. I share with you the words of Edmund Burke: "For my part, in what I have meditated upon the subject, I cannot, indeed, take it upon myself to say that I have the honor to *follow* the sense of the people. The truth is that I met it in the way I was pursuing their interest according to my own ideas."⁵

From the attributes which have come out of my perceptions of the role and status of teacher-leader, to which are now added two classic conceptions of

⁵ Burke has been accused of opposing democracy. He opposed only its Jacobin form and manifestation which he saw, and correctly, as producing a totalitarian mass state of despotism rather than genuine democracy.

leadership in military and civil affairs, perhaps you may be able to construct an image of the teacher-leader most proper for the varying forms of human association whose theatre is the school. I think of these varying forms lying within two major categories of human associations: those of teacher-and-students, and supervisor-and-staff. I remind myself, and you, that I have been trying to shed some light of the "right" balance between *authority* and *freedom*.

Communicating an Idea

These observations bring me to comment on what I believe to be the central intellectual problem facing the teacher-leader—the communication of an idea. I choose to present this problem through the poetry of the Persian poet, Kahlil Gibran, and the prose of the American educational philosopher, John Dewey. Although each refers to, or implies, only the role and status of teacher, their wisdom is quite as apt to the role and status of teacher-leader. Gibran writes: *

No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your own knowledge. . . .

If he is wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.

The astronomer may speak to you of his understanding of space, but he cannot give you his understanding.

The musician may sing to you of the rhythm which is in all space, but he cannot give you the ear which arrests the rhythm nor the voice which echoes it.

And he who is versed in the science of numbers can tell of the region of weight and

* Reprinted from *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran with permission of the publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Copyright 1923 by Kahlil Gibran; renewal copyright 1951 by Administrators C.T.A. of Kahlil Gibran Estate, and Mary G. Gibran.

measure, but he cannot conduct you thither.

For the vision of one man lends not its wings to another man. . . .

I hope that you will wish to add this to your own collection of "the poetry of pedagogy"—the art to which we are all devoted but whose literature is so lamentably blind to its artistic, and hence poetic, nature.

Now, John Dewey's view and language on the same problem—whether ideas can be taught, *as ideas*. I share with you some lines from *Democracy and Education*:

. . . *all* thinking is original . . . no thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another. When it is told, it is, to the one to whom it is told, another given fact, not an idea. The communication may stimulate the other person to realize the question for himself and to think out a like idea, or it may smother his intellectual interest and suppress his dawning effort at thought . . . Only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem at first hand, seeking and finding his own way out, does he think.⁷

I cannot forbear remarking here on the most redundant of redundancies, but one heard often in teacher circles: "We must teach them to think for themselves." The truth is, of course, that they can think *for* themselves only if they can think *by* themselves. The help we may give them is implicit in Gibran's and Dewey's wisdom.

But I see the role and status of teacher-leader in yet another context—that of priest and prophet. At the more elementary levels, our task is perhaps exclusively that of priest—to communicate the truths of the past, the culture's inheritance from past cultures. But, progressively, as these levels are left behind.

⁷ John Dewey. *Democracy and Education*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916. p. 188.

our role becomes increasingly that also of prophet—to examine the relevance of the cultural inheritance for present times.

In the priestly role we are, in the best and most exacting sense of the term, soothsayers, that is, truth-sayers. In our prophetic role we are examiners, judgment-makers and critics. Severe injury to the idealism of our students will certainly follow if we play the prophetic role before an immature audience. But, just as surely, our failure to play the role of prophet at the proper stage of our students' maturity will leave their critical capacities undiscovered, unchallenged and undeveloped. Our obligation as teacher-leader is to play the roles of priest and prophet in helpful and proper balance. Both are called for more often than we think.

Our Faith in Progress

In these roles we serve the *beliefs* of our culture and *reasoned insight* into their meaning and usefulness. The beliefs are our convictions. These dictate the priestly role. This is our debt to the Hebrews. Reasoned insight takes the form of criticism of our convictions; this dictates the prophetic role. This is our debt to the Greeks. Thus, in these roles, we confirm the values on which not only our craft but also the civilization which it seeks to serve are founded.

May I now identify what is for me the prime virtue of the teacher-leader? This is the faith that we can bring every participant in the associations in which our professional life is cast to the top of his level and achievement and this, not by outdoing someone else but by coming into his largest intellectual and spiritual stature.

This is the faith that there is a yet undiscovered and unachieved dignity

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and worth in everyone. This is the grain of mustard seed which is "indeed the least of all seeds; but when it is grown is the greatest among herbs and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and rest in the branches thereof."

Such a faith is a faith in *knowing* and *loving*. Of the nature of knowledge we hear and know much. It is the nature of love of which we stand in great need of better understanding. I refer to love of self as well as to love of others, for they are not alternatives and they are not separable. When I speak of "love of self" I speak not of self-renunciation or selfishness. I speak in affirmation of the scriptural injunction to "Love thy neighbor as thyself." If to love my neighbor as a human being is a virtue, then it must be a virtue rather than a vice to love myself since I am a human being. Self-love does not exclude, indeed it includes, self-knowledge. How pathetic it would be if it were said of us; as King Lear's daughter said of her father, that "he hath ever but slenderly known himself" which condition was, I gather, cause of his inability to love himself. We know, by reason of this lack, what manner of man he was.

Thus the components of the democratic character developed in a democratic social order, come to view. These are thinking and loving. These are the human dimensions of supervision.

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