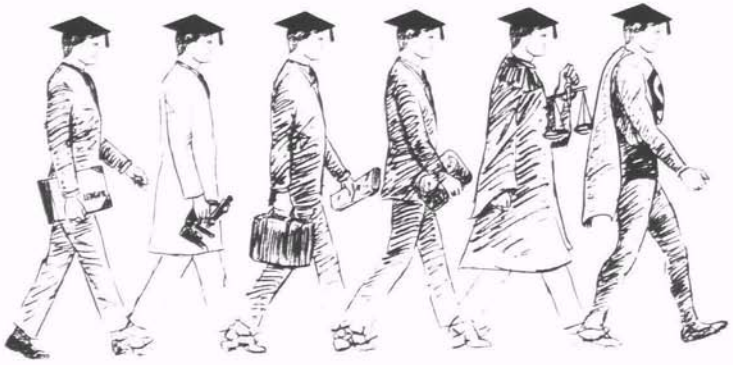

Ingredients of Leadership

RHODY A. McCOY*

I DO not intend to limit my energies here to attempts at abstract definitions. Rather, I will present some concrete observations and translate them into programmatic concepts. Within such a frame of reference, it is difficult for me to accept the fact that institutions training teachers for elementary grades still prepare them to enter systems where they are responsible to teach several subject areas. In the same vein, I suggest that the average motorist knows how to start his machine, change a tire, purchase gas and oil, and beyond that has little, if any, knowledge about the car.

Today educational leadership necessitates a special breed, a hybrid. There are some facts that we alleged leaders take for granted by virtue of the use of symbols, for example, superintendent, principal, or chairman, and our behavior is predicated upon what the symbol calls for or mandates.

The aspiration to prestigious positions of "leadership" in education no longer exists, as evidenced by the rapidity of transition. I once had the privilege of being present at an interview by a local governance body with a candidate for superintendent, and in humorous disbelief heard him ask about tenure. This is humorous, because historically no superintendent had lasted beyond one year in the very position he was applying for, having been ousted by student, parental, teacher, political, ethnic, or racial pressures. Consequently, I would nominate only young, healthy, stouthearted individuals with a sound medical history for positions of educational leadership.

Any potential leader or incumbent should have certain key academic experiences in such areas as accounting and its related fields, research skills, public relations and communications, political organizations and processes, and school law; and I am not suggesting that exposure to courses represents competency.

The need for these bodies of knowledge should be self-explanatory and even blatantly obvious. Let me now attempt to link them with observations. The field of education has been intrinsically involved with the judicial branch of government; consequently, the leader must, and I emphasize *must*, be aware of and knowledgeable of the spectrum of litigations involving or affecting schools, and consequently should begin to establish options and alternatives in anticipation. This necessitates an effective communication system

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that allows him to prepare his constituents well in advance, that is, to obtain their feedback, concerns, and criticisms.

The leader must be an educational strategist and architect. In order to execute this function effectively, he must be capable of conducting research not in the traditional sense but must have skills and mechanisms to ferret out the subtle concerns of his clientele. The overt issues will surely arise, usually in some form of confrontation, for example, over bussing.

Further, the skills and techniques of research are needed if the leader is to be able to examine at all points the conduit between policy decisions and their implementation. Too often a leader playing out his assumed role either makes a decision or is expected to effect a decision and puts it into the "tube" and is never aware of how it travels through the conduit. When accosted he rightly becomes the scapegoat, for he has naïvely assumed that he has unquestioned executive authority.

This leads me quickly to two additional areas. A leader must be able to assemble and hold together a cadre of competent and complementary people who keep the conduit from becoming constipated. Consider a situation in which a particular policy had been anticipated by the clientele and, when announced, was found in conflict with prevailing interest groups—a situation that led to confrontation. The leader must now have the public relations and communications skills. In the case of the media he must be skilled in and conscious of interview techniques and their implications. He should be skillful in preparing a clear and concise text. He should avoid perpetuating the conflict through his questions and answers. He should also recognize the value and technique of appropriate timing in the use of the media.

A potential educational leader should be conscious of the traditional techniques for staff selection. A position is vacant, applications are solicited, the filtering process narrows the candidates down to—let's say—five; obviously, such things as age, experience, and academic preparation are already in the hands of the interviewers. In order to legitimatize their subjective selection, they must ask peculiar questions and the candidate must be prepared for them. Examples: What do you bring to the position? (Hell, it's already on the vita.) Or, why do you want the job? (It's vacant and I think, some say I know, I can do the job. That wording should tell the selection committee.)

"The educational leader should be able to place his undated resignation on the table . . . and then negotiate."

Educational leaders should demand time and the commitment to explore education policy with the various interest groups and attempt to obtain their support. Today, too many leaders feel that once they are accepted by the community folk (indigenous) and even the professionals, they have administrative control. That is folly, for neither group can claim to be the power brokers. One must use the research skills earlier referred to and identify the power brokers and obtain their cooperation, or at least wait and seek options. Any other course of action turns the educator into a figurehead, or an unemployment statistic.

Finally, the educational leader should be personally secure enough to utilize his skills in manipulation. The school board, for example, must be made conscious of its peculiar role and be open to leadership by the superintendent, that is, be manipulated in a sophisticated manner to encompass their interests and dignity. The same skill could be applied to a principal and his staff.

In other words, the educational leader must possess a "hole card." By that I mean he must have a program, a success model, if you will, that is visible, concrete, and one which supplies the basis for his clientele to support him, or not to support him. Beyond this, he should be able to place his undated resignation on the table and equally assure the interviewers of his higher aspiration, and then negotiate for the position. I think the appropriate terminology is "trade-off." This is not to suggest personal arrogance or an inability to be flexible, but rather competence, inner security, and stability. □

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