



Breaking Ranks – *Revisited*

Transcript of Speaker

CHAPTER 12 EXPERT ANALYSIS

Hello, I'm Phil Schlechty. I'm the President of Center for Leadership in School Reform in Louisville, Kentucky. I've been in education for nearly 40 years. Over that time, I've learned—if I've learned one thing—it is that leadership is central to any effort to improve any organization and especially the schools'. Given that fact, I'm very sympathetic with the *Breaking Ranks* arguments and the recommendations. My charge here today, however, is to deal with one specific chapter and one set of recommendations, and then to talk with you a bit about the kind of questions that I think need to be raised with regard to both those recommendations that are raised generally by other audiences. I'm going to read to you just a bit and then talk with you quite a bit.

So I want to start with the recommendations in what is Chapter 13 in the *Breaking Ranks* documents which is, I think, a different chapter in this material.

RECOMMENDATION #1:

The principal will provide leadership in the high school community by building and maintaining a vision, direction, and focus for student learning.

There are seven recommendations. The first is that the principal will provide leadership in the high school community by building and maintaining a vision, direction, and focus for student learning.

When I started teaching back in the 1950s, it was very clear that the intention of schools was to serve communities; and there were identifiable communities to serve.



What has happened over the 40 years that I have been in education is a near destruction of many of the communities. It is no longer clear what the community is to the high schools they serve. So community building skills, as well as community serving skills, are going to become essential to leaders in the 21st Century if this particular recommendation is to be followed. It's not enough to find out who the community is. There are many communities out there, and we have to figure out how to take those communities and turn them into a community. And that's going to require an entirely new set of skills for principals and for other leaders in education.

We need to understand that the school district is a part of a school's community, just as the school is a part of the district's community. And we have to understand how to put those things together. One of the arguments that I present in most of the things that I write is you really cannot bring about change at the school building level unless you bring about supportive changes at the district level; that much of the problem we now have is that even people who are very competent as leaders find it impossible to lead in pathological organizations. And, so, you get a little change started in the schoolhouse; and then you lose that change when the principal leaves or when the superintendent leaves; and we wind up not having really a sustaining change.

So I think this was a critical recommendation. There are subtleties in it that we really need to take into account, because it has major implications for how principals are trained, developed, and identified.

RECOMMENDATION #2:



Selection of high school principals will be based on qualities of leadership rooted in established knowledge and skills that result in dedication to good instructional practice and learning.

The second recommendation says that selection of high school principals will be based on the qualities of leadership rooted in established knowledge and skills that result in dedication to good instructional practice and learning.

It's not that I can't read, it's that I can't see. So—and you need to understand that. Selection of high school principals, the idea of basing what we need to do to select high school principals on existing research assumes existing schools. And the real issue in my mind is whether or not we're prepared to invent totally new schools and require new leadership, which goes beyond the existing research.

I, along with Rosabeth Canter, for example, believe that many major changes are not being based in research; but they're based in big ideas that lead to research. And we simply limit our training to that which research illustrates. It will be a very conservative kind of training preparing people to run the schools as they exist rather than to create the schools that must exist.

And it seems to me it's a more radical framework than presented in the preceding chapters. You're going to require a type of leader, but we don't really quite understand what that leader's going to look like. We only understand it's gotta be different from the kind of leaders we've had, because they're going to be leading organizations unlike any organization we've had.



There are some things I think are kind of permanent; things that we know about leaders. What kind of leaders does this call for? Let me give you the four things that I think are critical in determining who leaders should be. Number one; they must be people of integrity. That doesn't mean just being honest. It certainly means that, but it means that people who are capable of generating in others trust. Because if we're going to ask people to do new things, it creates uncertainty. When you have uncertainty in the situation, then you have leaders about whom you are uncertain. You're likely to retreat from the activity rather than to engage it. So that's the first thing.

The second thing that we have to have are people who are persistent. I think Peter Drucker once said this—but I can't say that for sure—but something to the effect that he never saw a major change in any organization; but if you looked behind it, you didn't find a mono-maniac with a mission. I believe that about the principalship. If you're really serious about change, and you really want to bring about change, it requires persistence in the face of adversity.

The unfortunate thing is the way school systems are put together. When adversity begins to develop, we tend to retreat from the change and go back to the status quo rather than to drive through the change and the pain of the change. And we're going to need people who have persistence; people who are able to persevere over time even when things look bad. In fact, Rosabeth Canter has said that most changes look like a failure in the middle. And I believe that she's right about that. If you really look at change, things typically get worse before they get better. And to successfully implement this particular



recommendation is going to take a very different view of leadership than we typically have.

We're going to require to understand as well that leaders, particularly principals and superintendents, need to be able to keep their ego behind their work rather than putting their ego out in front of their work. They have to have ego control. You've got to have a big ego to be a leader; but if you've got a big, weak ego, you're going to eat up everything that you have in the personnel because you're going to be taking away their success and giving them your failures.

What you need are leaders who are prepared to give away success and absorb failure; who keep their ego behind their work rather than in front of their work; who don't see the project or the change as a reflection of them but as a reflection of we. And understand the interdependence between all those people that we're trying to get involved in the change and themselves. And understand that while they're important, their centrality—it's kind of like the quarterback on a football team; you brag too much about it and the line will show you who's really in charge here. So you better be able to give away a lot of success, because you're going to get more than your share of the credit anyway; and you may get more than your share of the blame. But that's the way leadership is.

There's an old friend of mine who passed away some years ago out on a cruise often said, "Them's the fleas that come with the dog." And you just have to be prepared to do those things that need to be done.

RECOMMENDATION #3:



Current principals will build and refine the skills and knowledge required to lead and manage change.

On the surface, that's a pretty obvious recommendation and one which I suspect would have been made in 1900 or 1930 or 1960. The idea that people need to have developmental opportunities is critical. I would make a couple of observations, however. I really am persuaded that you can't teach people how to lead; but leadership can be learned. And what you have to do is provide opportunities for people and contacts for people to learn how to lead and to continue to learn how to lead.

A part of that learning depends upon the kind of conceptual theoretical frameworks that the person learning brings to the task; that you will learn some things if you look at leadership from one set of lenses that you will not learn if you look from another. And vice versa, you'll learn things from that other frame that you wouldn't learn from the one that you're using. So it becomes very critical that leaders develop alternative frames for viewing things. As Terry Diehl and Bowman point out, it talks about different kinds of frames. But framing problems and framing understandings helps you then learn how to lead—helps one learn how to lead. And I think that's critical as we think about the kind of development program.

We also need to understand that opportunities for such learning are likely not to be present in a system that isn't committed to the development of principals. The principal acting alone can do very little, it seems to me—or at least is very limited in the range of things they can do, he or she can do, with regard to their own development if they don't have system support. I know of too many schools where there's this belief that



if the principal's out of the schoolhouse, he or she is not doing what the principal ought to be doing. Yet the fact of the matter is that large corporations take some of their top executives away for days on the assumption that they'd rather have a highly competent executive a good deal of the time than a relatively unprepared executive part of the time. And I think what we have to ask ourselves is how do we create systems to support the development of principals at the same time as we get principals to value in their own world development.

RECOMMENDATION #4:

The principal will foster an atmosphere that encourages teachers to take risks to meet the needs of students.

The fourth recommendation is the principal will foster an atmosphere that encourages teachers to take risks to meet the needs of students.

The word "risk" is very much like the word vision in the sense that it has become used to stand for all things. And everybody wants to be a risk taker nowadays. And encouraging risk taking is a very popular thing to do so long as somebody else is taking the risk.

The real issue is what do we mean by risk, and how do we talk about risk, and how do we understand the difference between risk and faddism and foolishness. It seems to me that one has to be prepared to use an old cliché to think outside the box; to act on verifiable ideas, as well as upon empirical research. I think that one of the things that has to happen if we're really serious about school reform is we've got to create models of schooling that have never existed and, therefore, there's no research base for it. That in



itself is a major risk. We've got to ask teachers to think about themselves differently than they now think about themselves. We've got to ask principals to think about themselves.

Here at CLSR, we talk about teachers as being leaders and inventors rather than being performers, as many of our teachers now view themselves; or being diagnosticians and clinicians. That they are not the medical model; and the model of the stage and the theater are simply not appropriate models it seems to me. That we need to understand that what teachers do is to try to get kids to do things that will result in the children learning what they want them to learn. So teaching is inherently a leadership act. If teachers are leaders, then that means that principals have to shift from being instructional leaders to being leaders of instructors.

The instructional leadership of a school is imbedded largely in the role of the teacher as is the curriculum leadership role. But that doesn't mean the principal ceases to be a leader, but he or she becomes a leader of leaders. And understanding that begins to make some sense out of what it means to take a risk, because you're always asking people to invent new approaches, new ways to deal with things; think about those things; discipline them; conduct what in the fancy language is called field research and action research; and feed that back into the system so that we can constantly improve the capacity of the school district to deliver high-quality work to children so children can do high-quality work.

RECOMMENDATION #5:



The superintendent and other central office administrators, as well as school board members, will exercise leadership in support of the planning, implementation, and long-range momentum of improvement at the school level.

Recommendation five says the superintendent and other central office administrators, as well as the school board members, will exercise leadership in support of the planning and implementation and long-range momentum of improvement at the school level.

A critical recommendation. I hope it is understood in the same way I understand it. I don't mean that I understand it better; but I have a peculiar understanding of it that I'd like to express because I think it's so critical. High schools unlike elementary schools interface with the entire community. In most elementary schools you're an elementary principal—and I know some will disagree with this—if you can persuade your faculty and the parents of the students in your school that something needs to be done; and if you can get cooperation from the central office to support that, you can change nearly anything you want to change in an elementary school. The Kiwanis doesn't much care about what you're doing; the local chamber of commerce doesn't care about schedules; the band boosters don't care about band practice; and the athletic boosters don't care about athletics.

One of the reasons that high schools are so difficult to change is because they, at the boundaries, interface with so many more agencies in the community than do elementary schools. The only other place that interfaces that way in my judgment is the



office of the superintendent that really interfaces with a variety of community-based activity.

Now, saying that, it's more than just having the cooperation and support of a high school to do whatever the high school wants to do. High school leaders must understand that they are a part of a system; and you really cannot have a vision-driven school without a vision-driven system. You really, in my view, need to have district-level vision and building-level versions of that vision. It doesn't mean if you don't have a vision and put unique twists on the vision, depending upon the school that you're a part of and the population you're serving; but there needs to be a common overall driving vision for a school district. Otherwise, we wind up with these little thieftoms, each one of which is going its own direction. And I'm not talking about standardization and routinization, which is the old bureaucratic model. You can centralize one of two things. You either centralize values and decentralized programs and procedures, or you centralize programs and procedures and decentralize values and rationalization.

What I think happens with bureaucracies is we centralize the wrong things. That as we centralize programs and procedures and how time is distributed and so forth and so on and decentralize explanations and value. What we need to do is to have a more central set of values that everybody in the district adheres to—the whatever-school-district way of doing things. They talk about the IBM way. Then each school is free to operate and to do those things they must do, their faculty must do, to meet the needs of the students who are in their particular schools.



But if we go by the schoolhouse-by-schoolhouse argument, then we create a sense of competition among high schools, for example. And that's one of the things that goes on now. The kind of competition with football and basketball and so forth—that's fun. But when you start talking about I'm a principal and you're a principal; and each of us is competing with the other, then a lot of people say, well, that brings out the best in us. It also brings out concealment. If we're interested in the benefit of all children, we must find ways to encourage principals to share their successes and not be afraid of acknowledging their failures in public so that they can get advice from their colleagues about what to do about those failures. And that's true of teachers; it's true across the board.

You know, Demming says that competition improperly understood can have harmful effects on organizations. And I think right now there's a certain sense in which this schoolhouse-by-schoolhouse reform argument is creating an unhealthy sense of competition in the guise of trying to do something to bring them together. What we have to do is create a cooperation so that we all become winners. Every principal in a school district ought to feel responsible for every child in that district, just as the superintendent should. The school's principal ought to view themselves, in my view, at least in part as a central office employee at the same time that the central office ought to view them as a building-level employee. That we're not talking about little islands; that the elementary schools are part of the same system. But we've got to find ways to collaborate within districts between elementary schools and middle schools and between and among



elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools at the same time as we find ways to cooperate across grade-level lines and so forth and so on.

That means we have to think of ourselves and see ourselves as a part of the system. Developing district-level capacities is poor building-level reform, is at least in part a part of the function of a building principal. Helping the district level leaders to understand what it will take to bring off the kind of major reforms that this document calls for is a very critical role. That the principals going to have to see him or herself as a teacher of others; and some of the others they must teach are those who are their superordinates, not just the subordinates.

Good leaders not only influence down, they influence up and out. In fact, some of the most powerful leaders, those who are given the most space by their followers, are those people who are perceived to be influential up and out. Those that are only able to influence inside the organization are less likely to be trusted than those who can also exercise influence outside the organization and with people in the central office, people in the community; because they begin to see that they have a credibility and I-gain status by being associated with the principal who influences up and out. There's nothing I can gain and a lot I can lose if all they can do is control me.

So we have to figure out how to help principals become more influential, not only in the schoolhouse but in the school district.

RECOMMENDATION #6:



Teachers will provide the leadership essential to the success of reform, collaborating with others in the educational community to redefine the role of the teacher and to identify sources of support for that redefined role.

Recommendation six. Teachers will provide leadership essential to the success of reform, collaborating with others in the educational community to redefine the role of teacher and to identify sources of support for that redefined role.

My comments about the other five recommendations, if this recommendation is understood properly, it has a lot of power. If it's not understood properly, it's just words on a page. Praising the leadership abilities of teachers is a popular thing to do; but unless teachers are developed as leaders, it's real difficult to start with the assumption they will do what this recommendation says they will do. This is real difficult to believe that principals will do what must be done if you are to implement this reform package.

But you're going to have to have development of teachers as well as development of principals learning how to lead in different ways. Now, what this whole proposal—not just Chapter 13, but the entire series of recommendations—calls for is a total redefinition of the nature of school and the schooling enterprise. It not only calls for a change in the role of the teacher and the principal, it calls for a change in the roles of parents; it calls for a change in the roles of communities; it calls for a change in all of our roles. It's getting to be a cliché now, but it really calls for a paradigm shift, shifting the way we think about the universe that we try to lead and manage universal to the schools.

And unless we can get people to come to some understanding of new ways of viewing business as school, then changing roles is not going to change much. Let me



give you a simple-minded illustration. I find that very often when you go into a school where they have teachers aides, the teachers aide often operates pretty much like a classroom teacher without a certificate. And you have to ask yourself, Well, what are we doing here? What we need to ask ourselves is What are the appropriate roles for people who are assisting principals? And you've got an old conception. You put a student teacher in a school, and the student teacher becomes an inexperienced teacher rather than a student teacher. If you go to a hospital, you would find that interns function differently and have different statuses and different expectations; and they have job descriptions.

Very few schools have job descriptions for student teachers, as an illustration. You place a student teacher to replace a teacher rather than place a student teacher in a position called student teacher. And I'm just using those as examples of the need to reconceptualize and rethink. If you think about the way schools are laid out, they're laid out to reinforce the notion that teachers are performers as long as they're diagnosticians and clinicians. Partly because of the status it attaches to medicine, many times we use the medical model as a framework to think about education. And because of the nature of the act of teaching, quite often people see themselves as performers.

But if we're going to really move the system, we have to understand that teachers are leaders. And as leaders, they do perform. But they're not just leaders of other teachers; they're leaders of children in classes. They have the most inexperienced followers. And leadership and followership, by the way, are two sides of the same coin. Great leaders don't happen if you don't have great followers. So you have to create followership at the same times you're creating leadership.



But if you're going to have that happen, you have to have an understanding of the role of the leader in leading people; and the principal has to see him or herself as a leader of leaders as I said earlier. And that's a critical change in role. It requires teachers to understand that it's not what they do that's the critical dimension, it's what they're able to get students to do that is the critical dimension. And if students learn what the students do, they do not learn what the teacher does.

That's a very, very different kind of conception; and it requires—you know, we often run workshops, and they ask you to name four behavioral objectives you will accomplish. That's just patent nonsense in this regard. You've got to talk about reconceptualizing, rethinking, reunderstanding. And a lot of that comes through dialog and conversation, the principal walking down the hall and carrying on a conversation with someone; walking into a classroom and instead of saying, "What are doing?"; taking a look at the classroom and saying things like, "How many of these children do you think were actually engaged in what you asked them to do? How many of them are ritually engaged—that is, they did the stuff because you asked them to do it and they saw no meaning or significance to it? How many of them were passive, just kind of sat there; and as long as you didn't bother them, they didn't bother you. And did we have any evidences of rebellion?"

And focus people's attention on the fact that students do not learn unless they're actively engaged—do not learn substantial amounts—unless they're actively engaged in the activity that's supposed to produce the learning. Ritual engagement is commonplace, particularly in many high-performance schools. Kids will do anything that the teachers



ask them to do as long as it results in the grade that they want and has a chance of increasing their SAT scores. But once you take those two relatively coercive measures away, the kids do not find the work particularly engaging.

It would seem to me that we would be well advised as we think about teachers as leaders to help teachers understand that as leaders they are known not by what they do but by what they get others to do; as any leader is known by what they do rather than what they get others to do. The principal needs to be known by what he or she is able to get teachers to do and do with enthusiasm. Teachers need to be known by what they're able to get kids to do and do with enthusiasm, so long as that is all focused on desired learning outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION #7:

The leadership of students, parents, and others in the school community will enhance the work of the principal, who should recognize this potential for leadership by nurturing and supporting it.

Recommendation seven says the leadership of students, parents, and others in the school community will enhance the work of the principal, who should recognize the potential for leadership by nurturing and supporting it.

I don't know whether this is a statement of hope or fact, but I'll treat it as both. At the present time, I don't think it's a statement of fact—that is the leadership of students, parents, and others of the school district doesn't always enhance the performance of the principal in fact. I think it should. And that's a real problem. How do you create an environment where there's enough teamness and enough sense of community in a school



that we're all working toward a common agenda rather than pulling against each other in different agendas.

And too often what you find in communities, whether they're high school communities or total school district communities, is factualism and struggles between and among various factions and groups for the heart and soul of the organization. So wherever the principal comes down, he or she's on the wrong side of the issue for somebody. And we're going to have to learn to develop skills in which people develop a common understanding and a common set of commitments and move toward common goals. And if we can't do that, we're certain to lose public education.

I don't think there's much doubt that public education right now is under more threat than it's ever been. And it's under threat because there's all kinds of new competition forming. For example, the medium that's being used to present this material, is still in its infancy. And this presentation is still in its infancy. But the time will come when—it's already here; the virtual high school's already here. There's lots of things wrong with it; there's lots of things we can criticize the virtual high school, the virtual courses about. But they're showing in the embryonic form that growing competition for public school students' attention. And they can put design principles in place that really get students engaged. And over the next 20 years that's going to become an emerging phenomena; and the emerging curriculum of the cyber schools or the virtual schools very well could be the submerging of the curriculum of the high school, unless we learn how to manage these things and deal with them in a more straightforward fashion.



And that means we've got to think school differently. We've got to think not only timeframes differently; we have to think about how we allocate space. We need to think about how we assign people and use people. We need to think about how we employ technology, by which I mean—when I use the word technology, I mean the means of doing the job whatever the means and whatever the job. I don't think computers are the only technology. When they went from the harpoon to the powered gun; when they went wheeling, they changed the wheeling industry. That was a technological change.

This is not the first generation of Americans that have experienced dramatic technological change; it's not the first generation in the world that have experienced major technological changes. But it is the first time that technological change has focused on the core business of school, which is the information-processing, information-storing, information-retrieving, information-dealing-with, information-communicating business.

And until we get leaders who understand what their business is and focus on that business, we're not going to be able to implement any one of these seven recommendations.

LEADERSHIP:

In reading Chapter 13, I was particularly taken by one of the statements that was kind of pulled out and highlighted; and I want to read and discuss this for a minute. It says the leadership of students enriches a high school and provides valuable experiences for the young people who assume leadership roles.



True. The issue is how do you get people who do not normally pursue leadership roles to become leaders. There are many people that we say, Well, he or she is a natural leader or a natural athlete or a natural whatever. What about those of us who are unnatural? We're not natural. How do we develop in people the skills that it takes and the ambition that it takes to, in effect, lead others and develop leadership skills?

We need to have—I think what Meg Whealey said, is leaderful organizations. That we can no longer settle for the leaders that bubble up. We've got to learn in school as well as in the principalship and the superintendent, how do you create opportunities for people to learn to lead. And that means we need to create opportunities for students to learn to lead as well as the faculties to learn to lead as well as for principals to learn to lead.

Because we're talking about a society where increasingly you're getting fragmentation precisely because we don't have the kind of responsible and moral leaders that we need who can see beyond the interest of their particular group to the larger social unit. And we need to have people who have skills in leadership all the way from practically third grade, I suppose, and even before that. We're not just talking about identifying the natural leaders, we're talking about creating and developing leadership. We have to have more of an, I guess I'd call, an agricultural view of things than a mining view of things.

And right now the way we get our leaders is kind of through strip mining—you go out and take the soil away and find out who the leaders are. Then the farmer comes along, however, and recognizes that if he's going to get a crop, he has to plow the field,



he has to put fertilizer on it, he has to do all those things that lead to growth and nurturance. We use that word nurturance, but we seldom nurture people who aren't already growing. And, so, we need to figure out ways to jumpstart some of the growth so that we're constantly developing leaders and leadership in our schools all the way from the custodians—for example, you go to many schools and talk with the people that we assume are in nonleadership positions; people like secretaries and people like custodians and cafeteria workers. And we talk about them as low-ranking folks. And they are on the salary schedule. Yet, if you watch many of them in communities, they're presidents of their local lodge or their local club. They are, in fact leaders—everyplace except in school.

We need to learn to take advantage of the leadership that is already there and help people understand that we value that leadership skill. And that we organize ourselves in such a way that everyone is focused on the needs of children; everyone is focused on increasing the learning that goes on in school and understanding that in the end our job is engaging work for kids from which they learn important stuff. And that's the job of the leader.

Now, I want to talk a little bit—and kind of in this whole arena—about some other observations that seem to me to be—I'm not saying they're overlooked, but they might be enhanced a little bit.

I've done a lot of work trying to study what I call "Change Adept Organizations." My view is that organizations, or schools particularly, are change inept. It's not that they don't do a lot of changing; they do a lot of changing. They're change prone. The problem



is that change seldom goes anyplace. We act for about three years, and then we jump onto something else which last three years. Then we jump onto something else when the big ideas begin to cause trouble. We abandon that big idea and immediately jump to another bit idea. You're already seeing this, for example, right now you can hear people beginning to talk about teacher education as the coming issue.

That's where I came in in 1957, when teacher education was the coming issue. And, obviously, we solved the problem between 1957 and 1970 when it quit being the issue, because we now got the problem again. And if you've got the problem again and again and again, you haven't solved it.

So what happens is we get started on something and then we abandon it. Then we start something else and then we abandon it. And so all of these big ideas—many one of which may be very powerful and, if fully implemented, would work. But all these big ideas get lost someplace in the shuffle because education systems, as I call it, change inept.

Because of that notion of change inept/change adept, which I stole from someplace—I'm not sure where—I think it was Rosabeth Canter—that I tried to identify what the attributes of a change adept organization are. And the very first one I think is so critical to the point that we're talking about here—that you don't find a change-adept organization, an organization that not only does a lot of change but is good at it—where you do not find leaders who have a very clear conception of the nature of the business they're leading. They understand who their customers are; they understand what their products are; they understand what they must do to get those products; and they're able to



communicate that to those with whom they work and who work around them and with them. And that's a very difficult thing to do. You can't do it by having an all-hands meeting once in the fall, when it was magic of September times, when you get all of the staff together and say what a glorious year it's going to be and then forget it. It's got to be shaped.

The beliefs, the drive, the system have to be communicated in every question the principal asks. When they go down the hall, they're asking kids questions about how interesting is the work that you do. And then when they're watching classes, they're causing teachers to ask those kinds of questions and how engaging is that work. People know what you expect by what you inspect and what you respect. If you're talking about valuing engaging work, then you have to ask questions that force people to think about engaging work, not just questions that have to do with is the room straight or— I worked for a principal many years ago. I hope he isn't watching this. I assume he's still alive. But his big thing was are the blinds straight when you leave the room at night. That's the way—because he had this idea that, you know, if the school didn't have even blinds, it was somehow or another a sign that we were unprofessional, so he would inspect the room to see if the blinds straight. He never once looked at my lesson plans, but he sure was heck on blinds. Well, if you ask people those kind of questions, then the kind of responses you're going to get is he's got good blinds—window blinds, I guess.

Well, we have to understand that the role of the principal is partly defined by the kind of questions the principals ask; not the kind of answers they give. Leaders in the modern organization do not lead by answers. You hire people to give you the answers.



What you have to do is be smart enough to ask the right questions so that they get the answers to the things that need to be answered. And learning how to lead that way requires you to have a very clear conception of what your business is. Am I biased? Those of you who have ever read anything I've written know is that the business of school is inventing work the kids find to be engaging, and from which has enough of the right content in it that they learn important stuff.

So it's high-content activity that's highly engaging for kids is what our business is. If we do that right, learning happens. Learning is like profit in business; it happens because we do our business. But our business is inventing work for kids and having a clear focus on the work that we give children and having a clear focus on supporting teachers in designing that work. And working with the teachers in designing that work is a critical function.

STEPS:

I'm often asked—given the reform agenda as contained in documents like *Breaking Ranks*—what is the first thing I should do. In a new book that I'm going to have published this next year dealing with change-adept school systems, I speak to that issue in the last chapter when I talk about two things. If I can only tell school board members two things, what would I say. If I wanted to tell superintendents two things, what would I say? If I wanted to tell principals two things, what would I say. And students and teachers and union leaders and so forth and so on. I'm old enough that I was presumptuous enough to say I've never before given any direct advice, but I will this one time. Well, maybe I'll make this twice.



For leaders to lead the reform that they are being asked to lead, the first step is to get your own head right. Unless you have a clear conception of—and a clear vision yourself—where you think things ought to go, there's no way to get a group to develop a vision. Groups do not develop visions. Groups respond to visions that are developed, and they modify them. But you can't—a group does not think. Individuals in groups think. This is not to say that you've got top-down leadership. It's rather to say that somebody has to bell the cat. Somebody has to come in with the nerve to say, "If you don't stop me, here's the direction I think we'll go. Now, I'm prepared to be stopped because unless you go with me, we can't get there. So let's begin to talk about my vision and see what modification it's going to take to make it our vision. But that means first I've got to have my vision clearly articulated."

And I think the first step in leading real change is for the leader to sit down alone and figure out what they believe about a number of very important things. For example, what do you really believe is the purpose of school? What do you really believe about the capacity of kids to learn? You know, it's easy to say all children can learn; but it's much more difficult to say all children can learn more than they're now learning. And it's our obligation to ensure that they do so. And once you say that, you've changed that belief structure.

Now, what do you really believe about the primary causal mechanisms, the result in learning? Do you believe that every child comes to you really capable of learning, or is that so conditioned by family background, SES, and so forth and so on that some children just aren't going to learn? You know, we kind of cop out on that one. Even



when we escape the genetic argument, we jump into a cultural argument that says given the kind of children that these are, what do you expect? They're not going to do as well as children who were born to the purple. And that's a very different kind of a thing. We have to say, "Do we really believe that these kids are—if we could invent the right kind of work—are capable of high-quality academic performance?" But that's the first step.

The second step, it seems to me, is to gather around you a group of people who in Cotter's terms would function as a guiding coalition. They would be people who, among them, have power—that is, the ability to allocate resources; the capacity to lead—that is, the ability to get other people to do things without authority. They would have some understanding of—they would have some technical skills; the skills to do those things that are going to be required; or to invent those things that need to be required. And have some degree of credibility with those other people who are going to have to support the change. That's the second step.

Now, it doesn't mean that every person in your group has to have all four of those qualities; but it does mean that all four of those qualities must be present in the group. And then once I got those folks around me, we would take my beliefs and their beliefs; and we'd have dialog until we came to a consensus about what we believe. And then we'd begin to take that same dialog to wider and wider circles. Because until you get your beliefs right, particularly among key actors, there's no possibility you're going to bring about systematic change. Because what you're going to wind up with is different people operating from different belief structures give different signals, inspect different



things, and respect different things. And, therefore, people begin to think that change is seven or eight different things as opposed to a common coherent direction.

Once I had gotten to that point, I then would begin to assess the capacity of my organization—whether it's a school district or a schoolhouse—to support and sustain the kind of changes that we're talking about. I'd look at various kind of capacity-building issues; the capacity, for example, to collaborate is very clear. That if you don't have the capacity to engage in collaborative activity—and not just collaboration between the school and external agencies, but collaboration within the school. Can the history department collaborate with the English department? Can the English department collaborate with the math department? How about collaboration between and among various units. For example, can you collaborate with the central office; or do you have the capacity—what's it going to take to become more collaborative internally as well as externally? Not just an example.

We've identified ten of those capacities as a part of a project we call a standard-barrier school project, which is designed to help districts and schools identify those areas where they have lacked capacity to support change, and then create that capacity over the long term.

But we need to—I'd do that kind of assessment. Based on that kind of assessment, I then would begin to develop school improvement plans, I supposed I'd call them. And I would begin to talk about how we improve our schools in order to develop the capacity to support the change we need to support. Because too much change—many good ideas in education become abandoned precisely because the districts and the schools



do not have the organizational capacity to sustain them over time. It's not that the ideas were bad. We had some good ideas in the 1960s that have been abandoned.

We also need to understand that we're going to have work more carefully and diligently with classroom teachers. And principals are going to have to become authentically teachers of teachers at the same time that they are learners themselves. And by teachers, I do not mean pedantic—tell people how to do it; but much more of a Socratic teacher who walks into a classroom—I mean, I may not know the subject of mathematics well; but I'm smart enough to figure out the kind of questions that a mathematics teacher ought to be asking about his or her teaching. I'm not smart enough to tell a mathematics teacher about the content or the chemistry teacher about the content; and one shouldn't expect me to. I certainly don't know enough to talk to the Russian teacher about how to teach Russian. But I do know the kind of questions that I can cause the teachers of Russian to ask themselves that will lead to more fruitful understandings of what it is we're trying to do in this school and in this classroom.

And that's the kind of thing, it seems to me, that leaders have to learn to do; is to ask important and powerful guiding questions.

CONCLUSION:

Just one concluding thought. I want to start—or end where I started. Leadership is critical at all levels of the organization. And development of leaders is critical. And every leader has an obligation to develop other leaders, because we need to, again, I think, according to Meg Wheatly, leaderful organizations; organizations that are full of leaders. It's no longer enough to have the lone ranger out riding around and whipping up



people on a white horse. But neither is it any longer possible to move systems without strong leaders, as well as a lot of leadership.

Leaders need leaders. Powerful leaders understand that and move those leaders and give them the kind of autonomy that they need to lead, while at the same time setting direction. But the most critical things that modern principals are going to have to learn is how to give direction without exercising overcontrol; how to lead rather than how to manage.

I hope that I have been useful to you and thanks a lot.