

The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Leader

It's puzzled me for a long time. I have worked with, and been friends of, superintendents from large districts such as Philadelphia, San Francisco, Rochester, NY, and Minneapolis, and districts as small as Plains, Montana and West Branch, Michigan. Over time I have observed certain common behaviors that didn't entirely make sense. As a friend, aware of their underlying beliefs and values, I found it even harder to understand.

Why would people at the "top" of an organization -- who most of us believe have all the power -- begin to act as if they had little of it? Why would child-centered teachers and principals -- who thought that moving "up" would enable them to have greater influence on more children's learning -- soon have to turn their attention to longer-term endeavors in order to find satisfaction in their jobs? Why, within two to four years, did they seem to withdraw within a glassy-eyed wall that limited effective interaction with those around them?

It's not that we haven't been informed about the different nature of the CEO's job. Deming got part of it right when he stressed that these people work ON the system, not IN it. Others have talked about these leaders "doing things right", as opposed to managers "doing the right things." But little of that helped me understand why "good" people would act in ways that they themselves had seen as "bad" before they had moved up into those positions. "Commanding and controlling," or clannishly grouping into "Old-Boys [or Girls] Networks" seemed to be seldom questioned, effective parts of the work setting for those "powerful" people at the top.

Uncles and Fathers

Then last month I overheard a conversation that provided me with my clearest insight about the critical difference in leadership at that level. During a break at a meeting, an organization's chief executive was trying to describe how the world looked to him, and especially how it felt, after he moved from a deputy level to the organization's top job. When he paused, a woman listening to him touched his arm and reflected: "...sort of like the difference between being an *uncle* and a *father*."

Wow! Could this be it? It may not be in the published research, but anyone who can recall the experiences of becoming a father or mother for the first time may remember the feeling when a role accountability (parent) and the personal responsibility for another entity's survival began to become the simultaneous drivers behind the ways we responded to a child's needs. Soon we didn't even have to think about it as different. Could this be what I had been seeing manifested in a larger "family system" -- the system leader's organizational accountability driven by a personal sense of responsibility for the survival of another total entity, not just some of its parts?

Almost all (if not all) of us with ideas for "systemic" improvement of schools have spent our organizational lives working in, and trying to improve, schooling's "parts"-- classroom instruction, teacher support and development, curriculum, management, etc.. Even though we may have a good sense of what school organizations "should" be like, we often have trouble grasping that they are ALWAYS more than the sum of their parts. At the local level, everything does connect with everything else even though we may not consciously deal with the connections. We may understand the "elephant," but we still act like "blind men" standing around it because we have lacked experiences of comparable scope and nature -- experiences in which we must be totally responsible for "this" [not some future] "elephant's" survival.

We may not even be aware of the need for this experience. The individual roles we play are accepted as seemingly-separate disciplines. As teachers, principals, superintendents, curriculum specialists, etc., these role-blinders may help us keep our time and resources focused on our particular part of the "elephant," but they prevent us from ever being able to deal seriously with the whole. Moreover, support systems have developed to reinforce this system-blindness through separate pre-service preparation programs, separate communication vehicles (magazines, journals, on-line discussions,) and, yes, even separate professional associations, like AASA.

Empowering the “Powerful”

It can be hard to relate to the loneliness of the CEO/ superintendent’s role -- disconnected from those whose daily acts they influence and whose awareness and insights they need in order to keep the whole ship afloat in a sea of constantly changing conditions. It may even seem self-serving for a publication from AASA to suggest that these men and women need help, and that this must be a priority for those concerned about systemic improvement of America’s schools. It is assuredly counter-intuitive to propose that these powerful people at the top, who seem to get all the privileges, are relatively “powerless” when it comes to making a difference in the lives of the children their actions touch.

But if this “need” is real, then the consequences of continuing to ignore it may be even more rapid turnover in the ranks of present effective leaders, and the turning away of those with potentials. Of more serious consequence is that without understanding the different (“father/mother”) nature of local system leadership, the “uncles and aunts” of reform will continue their attempts to do what they think is “best for the kids” through piecemeal, seldom-connected efforts. There will be little chance that communities can create and sustain accountable organizations responsible for meeting the specific learning needs of *each* of their children.

Connecting Leadership and Learning

Within the past few months, AASA has released a planning paper developed to explore this specific constraint on effective schooling and the paradoxes that support and emerge from it. Among them, that the only system in American education that is called a “system” -- a school district -- seems to be the one that is most difficult to understand as a system. Many attempts to improve schools end up in frustration when people try to get their hands around something they cannot quite get their minds around. One of the most interesting dimensions of this paradox seemed to be an underlying belief that the school system or district is a major part of “the problem.” Perceptions of this dimension of local schooling as a rigid, unfeeling bureaucracy are so strong that it is virtually impossible, even counter-cultural, to even think that the school district might also contain “the answer” -- a place to embed the missing framework and scaffolds that could support *sustainable* changes in the ways all of its classrooms and schools operate.

The planning document -- *Connecting Leadership and Learning* -- was developed to support a new AASA initiative, a National Center for Connected Learning, which emerged from society’s developing understanding of organizations as connected systems., and of their leaders’ primary role as *connector* of the system’s “parts. But it was becoming clear that the role required support that had been missing. The leader-as-connector role required ways to envision where these connections are, or need to be. It required that a system leader’s vision encompass not only a view of a desired future, but also of the present organization *as a system*. This present vision had to include a sense of the whole as a bounded, coherent system, and an understanding of how everything fits within that whole -- both to each other, and to the “whole’s” purposes.

AASA’s Executive Director, Paul Houston had initiated the Center’s development because the repeated experiences of AASA’s system-leader membership seemed unresolvable within the present ways schools were understood. We had to have, he felt, a different way of seeing and understanding school systems and then, within this common vision of the “whole,” provide strategies that promoted and took advantage of the new possibilities for collaboration that this would reveal. We had to have practical ways to translate these understandings into a sustainable, coherent local system that “joined together...adults and children working toward the same end of higher achievement.”

In its 1996 report Using What We Have to Get the Schools We Need: A Productivity Focus for American Education, the Consortium *on Productivity in the Schools* pointed out that America already knows enough to fundamentally change the ways schools function. They suggested that the problem instead was that our society needed to look at its schools through a *different lens*. “Without a sense of the *whole*, we end up with what has become a familiar cycle of patchwork improvement and disappointment.” The 60-page AASA planning paper attempts to provide that “different lens” and then to use it to suggest strategies that aim at the root of many of today’s underlying problems. Its premise is that today America has the *knowledge* to operate its schools as continually-improving systems of people dedicated to making a difference in the lives of children. Now it requires leaders with *wisdom* -- that unique form of knowledge that develops as the product of learning from repeated experiences.

This requires leaders with *new understandings*, and then *tools*, that empower them to manage the means-ends interdependence of their organizations. For these system leaders, a vision of what schools should be “someday” is not enough, especially in a dynamic world of unforeseen complexities. System leaders must have ways to keep the experiences of others linked to the same vision. And their vision of the “whole” must have within it an *infrastructure of sustained operational processes* that can maintain continual interaction between vision, action, and results.

To enable this, the paper proposes strategies that distribute the functions of both *leadership* and *learning* throughout the organization’s interdependent roles. Shared leadership based upon shared learning, it proposes, can enable America’s communities to develop and support leaders who can deal with the *scope, nature, and immediacy* of today’s educational needs.

[Sidebar]

Copies of [Connecting Leadership and Learning](#) are available from Cindy Clarke at AASA - [cclarke@aasa.org]
