

Running Head: INTELLECTUAL GROWTH ESSAY

Essay

“Intellectual Growth and Motivation to Learn”

William Warrick

EDUC 802.001

Dr. Gus Mellander

11/20/01

In reflecting on this course, I have come to the conclusion that it is important to view leadership in the public school environment differently than leadership in any other arena. We have studied a number of leaders, various authors on the topic, and discussed many issues regarding leadership. Through it all, I have been somewhat uneasy in defining the characteristics of a leader in K-12 education in the same way that we would a leader in business. Public school leaders (those in administrative positions) are generally chosen differently and fill a role that is unique to the profession. Teachers are in what can be called the 'entry level' position in education yet they do not usually aspire to be 'promoted' to the leadership role. Teachers can be said to be leaders. They guide students' learning, they provide models of living, and certainly they promote a particular story - whether curricular or social. Even in school systems where character education is eschewed, it is virtually impossible for teachers to provide information that is value neutral. However, when one thinks of leaders in a school system, principals, assistant principals, and administrative (central office) staff come to mind first. It is these people who are entrusted with the task of guiding the system as a whole to provide the type of education and environment dictated by the community through the school board. The problems that need to be addressed are: the methods by which school administrators are selected and promoted; the criteria used to identify potential administrators; and the behaviors of those administrators once they assume leadership roles.

The path towards an administrative position begins with classroom teaching. All of the principals and central office administrators with whom I have worked began their careers as classroom teachers. The teacher who wishes to gain an administrative position must take an advanced degree in administration which provides the necessary certification for school leadership. Once in an administrative position, one can move up the ladder towards central office supervisory roles and, ultimately to assistant superintendent or superintendent. It is interesting

to note that virtually none of the practical skills that are needed to be successful in the classroom are necessary in the administrative roles. Those who are successful in reaching students, maintaining classroom discipline, or achieving higher test scores are not necessarily those who can lead or manage a school building or system. This further differentiates the roles of leaders in education and those in private businesses. How, then, can leaders be identified from the ranks of classroom teachers? What qualities does one look for in a teacher to disclose whether or not that person will be a successful administrator? Clearly, when the skills of the successful teacher cannot be transferred to the administrative capacity, we must look for other identifiers. I am beginning to think that those qualities are not to be found in the practical skills of the person, but in their character. Covey (1990) defines character as basic principals of living such as integrity, humility, temperance, courage, justice, patience, industry, simplicity, and modesty. He differentiates his 'Character Ethic' described above from the 'Personality Ethic' which he describes as public image, attitudes and behaviors, skills and techniques, that lubricate the process of human interaction. This, unfortunately, flies in the face of the type of leadership qualifications promoted by writers such as Gardener or Kotter. I feel that this is because of the unique nature of both the role of a public school administrator and the means by which leaders in public education are identified and promoted within the system. While it is becoming popular in some areas of the country to relinquish local control of school systems, particularly those seen to be failing dismally, to businesses, for the most part, principals and central office administrators are drawn from the pool of available talent - the classroom teachers.

The fact that I view as unique the process for selecting leaders in public education and the characteristics for success in these positions, has caused me to wonder about the nature of leadership as it applies to public schools. Kotter discusses methods and behaviors designed to move and motivate people in the business environment. It doesn't appear to me that we are able

to take the business model of leadership, with Kotter's manipulations and covert means of achieving goals, and use that to develop leaders in the schools. Certainly, in the words of my interview subject, "there has to be a better way".

In thinking about leadership as a role for which we are all preparing, it is impossible to avoid certain subliminal aspects of the term 'leader'. The word brings to mind a situation where one person dictates the actions and activities of others in a particular domain, or to a larger audience of followers across domains. For some people, the term leader carries with it a negative connotation. While the goals of a leader might be worthwhile or necessary, the role of a leader is sometimes viewed as one where someone must use a variety of means to achieve the goals of a group or to promote a particular story. Obviously, leaders can use several methods to achieve goals and one hopes that those methods will be benign and overt, but the fact is that the presumption exists that a leader will often use covert, manipulative, or unpopular methods to win support and move the group towards the stated objectives. Perhaps this is why Kotter (1999) bemoans the lack of status of the manager in public schools which, if true, is not through any outward disdain for the position, but for its perceived role as only 'out for the money'. Indeed, an argument might be made that people will often follow a leader, or promote one as a leader, simply because of his or her willingness to do those things that they do not wish to do themselves. I think this is more true in the school setting than in any other field. Many teachers have no desire whatsoever to become principals. They are content to let someone else have that task. Very often, teachers view administrators, particularly those in the central office, as being out of touch with the business of educating children. They have assumed the roles of managers and they are unable to effectively communicate a philosophy of teaching or learning.

Gardner (1995) speaks of direct and indirect leaders. While direct leaders are seen to exert influence on an audience in directly, indirect leaders influence others primarily through their

example and the work they have done within their domain. I am beginning to see this distinction is an important one in the field of educational leadership because of the unique nature of how leaders are identified and are seen to be qualified by their audiences. In a classical sense, direct leaders are those who actively seek to become the guiding force behind (or, indeed, in front of) an audience of followers. Direct leaders are politicians who seek offices, military leaders who strive for command of units, or those in other domains who desire to influence others to a particular ideal or story. Indirect leaders, on the other hand, more often find themselves with followers without actively seeking them. An audience will find a person's story (as defined by their body of work, expertise in a subject, or their embodiment of a lifestyle) compelling enough to follow that person. In this respect, one might find reason to disagree with Gardner's notion that, "... the personal lives of indirect leaders are not germane to their influence" (1995, p. 10). A compelling argument can be formed which suggests that indirect leaders derive a substantial part of their following through the way they conduct their lives. Admittedly, the argument hinges on the definition of embodiment. Gardner states that embodiment is, "the way in which .. leaders conduct their lives". In this respect, he is speaking of a leader's professional life. Gardner differentiates between personal and professional comportment. While Einstein's followers were influenced by the way he led his academic and professional life, they were not at all interested in how he might have dealt with other people. I believe that this is a somewhat simplistic view and, in the case of educational leaders, not at all correct. In a field such as education, particularly public school education, the manner in which a leader comports himself has very much to do with his influence and his leadership.

Typically, a leader in business does not interact with the clients directly. The business leader leads his or her employees. In the school environment, the principal is constantly visible to the students and parents of the community. Consequently, the type of interaction between

the principal and teachers, students, and parents is particularly important. The school principal can create an environment of trust, respect, and communication or he can create a situation where he is seen as detached from those who are working for him. Before learning can take place within a school, it is up to the administrator to foster an environment that will facilitate healthy interactions between teachers and students, teachers and parents, and the administrator and the community served by the school.

It appears to me that the distinctions between schools and businesses are further blurred when the public begins to view the 'product' that they are purchasing (with support and taxes) as quantifiable. This is becoming true in Virginia with the Standards of Learning test scores. It is now possible, many people believe, to rate schools objectively with data taken from these tests. Then schools begin to resemble business in that they have a product, teachers assume the role of salesmen, and the corporation as a whole (the school district) provides the public with a yearly 'sales' report in the form of SOL test reports. Shareholders (the public) can then demand performance based only on the 'bottom line'. This is truly unfortunate because the quality of education and the qualitative nature of teaching and learning should not lend themselves easily to rankings by virtue of test scores. Thus, principals who do an exemplary job of facilitating teaching and learning and creating a positive school climate, may not get the credit they deserve if test scores are not as high as the public might desire. Rating administrators solely on this basis puts them at a disadvantage because it does not take into account the myriad factors that can effect the scores and yet not be affected by the principal's leadership.

In this class, I have discovered many different leaders in a wide variety of fields. All of those leaders, however, had specific goals that they sought to attain. They were all measured against whether or not they were successful in attaining those goals. In the public school system, that becomes difficult because the goals are difficult to define, difficult to quantify, and are

subject to change with a changing political landscape. This, coupled with the fact that there is no administrative track that future administrators are drawn from, indicate the need to investigate further in this area. I think that my interest in learning more about the roles of leaders in the public schools, particularly in terms of how they are different from those in private industry, has been piqued. The school administrator must be someone who embodies those qualities which create environments for learning and growth for teachers as well as students.

## References

Covey, S. (1989). *The seven habits of highly successful people*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Kotter, J. P. (1999). *John P. Kotter on what leaders really do*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.