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# Academic Leadership Journal

## [Leadership Dispositions: What Are They and Are They Essential to Good Leadership](#)

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George Orwell once wrote an intriguing and acclaimed short-story called The Shooting of an Elephant. The story takes place in the mid 1930's in Moulmein, lower Burma. Orwell was a young police officer in the province that was still under British colonial rule. He describes in lurid detail how is pressured into killing a tame elephant that had escaped his trainer's chains and was enjoying a day of freedom. Unfortunately, the elephant ravages a local market and a man is killed by the elephant. Over 2,000 Burmese were watching and waiting to see what he would do. What happens next is an example of what leadership courage is not. "I halted on the road. When I saw the elephant I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him." He shoots the elephant anyway. "I often wondered if any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to keep from looking the fool (Literature Network, 2009)." Sometimes it takes extreme courage not to act on something when being pressured by the majority. This quality or disposition called courage is one of five absolutely essential dispositions every leader must possess. Is it possible to define those qualities, traits, skills or dispositions which could guarantee or predict success for a leader in any endeavor or position which requires leadership? Do leaders at all levels and in all organizations possess certain dispositions which make them successful? I'm sure the young Orson learned a valuable lesson from that experience, and probably reasoned later his lack of courage was related to his youth. Was it? Certainly many people blame their youth for all kinds of lapses of judgment, failures of conscience and for just doing the wrong thing. Could it be that they simply don't have the "right stuff."

Leaders are leaders whether they are members of a sports organization, the military, government or education. Although there is a great deal of overlapping, where leadership qualities are the same in all organizations, this article will focus on leadership positions in educational administration; particularly the principalship and central office administrators. Is it possible to identify those who are predisposed to become good leaders?

The literature in education uses many terms to describe leadership, but very few focus on leadership dispositions. NCATE ( National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education) in their Standard 1 requires accredited institutions to define and assess dispositions, not only of teachers, but other school personnel as well. This would include all school leaders such as principals, supervisors, directors and superintendents who seek degrees or certifications from any NCATE accredited institution. (NCATE, 2006).

Many of us in the field of education have worked with, and under leaders who possessed various leadership traits and talents. Before I became an elementary school principal, I had the great

opportunity to work under the guidance of two principals whose basic dispositions were diametrically opposed to each other. The first was what I would call a “teacher’s principal.” He was a very kind, caring individual who never seemed to get upset, and always displayed a smile that never seemed to leave his face. The next principal was a person who was very demanding of me as the assistant principal, and all the teachers and students. She ruled the school with an iron hand, and if she ever smiled, it was never in front of students. The point being made is that each of these principals was successful and their schools were considered by some to be models for the entire state. I know there are extremely too many variables in school success to say that these two principal’s dispositions were the defining factor for their individual school’s success. What was very evident to anyone was that these schools took on the personality of their leaders. That much was evident in the climate or atmosphere of each school. One was warm and very friendly; the other very formal and could easily have been described as cold, but most definitely rigid. I would like to think that I learned a great deal from each of these leaders which helped defined me as a leader. I truly believe that I learned from each of these principals with seemingly opposite outward displays of their inward dispositions.

Perhaps it would be helpful to distinguish between leadership skills, qualities or traits, and then dispositions. It may be possible for a school leader to possess some good skills and even some positive traits, but lack key dispositions which may hamper them in achieving long term success.

Leadership has been defined as many things. Getting the job done is perhaps the best and most simple description of leadership. Roland Barth in Connors (2000) said that “leadership is making things happen that which you believe.” Jakes (2007) says that “leadership is to possess the ability to have a strong influence on others.” “The quality of our leadership is directly proportional to the quality of our followship (Pringle, 2007).” Leadership could also be defined as how well leaders serve the people for which they have a responsibility to serve. Every person in this universe is under some type of authority. This could not be truer than in education. My ascribed role as a principal and district wide administrator was to lead others to meet the goals and objectives set by the state and local school board. The students are under the teacher’s authority, the teachers are under the principal’s authority, the principal is under the superintendent’s authority and the superintendent is under the school board’s authority (the old “kick the dog principle”). Perhaps the best example ever given is in Mathew 20:26-27: “Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.” Ken Blanchard, a quality management guru, teaches this philosophy under the banner of “servant leadership” (Blanchard, 2002). True leadership is definitely not “just getting the job done” People with good management skills can get the job done. Some call these types who simply get

the job done as “good paper shufflers.” These people have no vision, no courage or any other quality associated with great leadership. But having to start from nothing and leading a group of individuals to obtain a prescribed set of goals or objectives is leadership. It doesn’t even have to be several goals; it could be just one goal, like improving test scores, or improving the teacher morale in a school.

In her book, *If You Don’t Feed the Teachers, They Will Eat The Children*, Connors (2000) describes qualities of a good leader in terms of the P’s: people oriented, prepared, present, prompt, praising, problem solvers, procasti-blasters, pressure players, performance based, proactive and productive, and parent/public minded. Within these “p’s” one could list other traits or qualities that are similar or

interrelated. It is easy to see that qualities, traits and dispositions of leaders can all be described in similar fashion, but there are distinct differences. Perhaps one of the differences most evident is to create a shared vision for the goal or objective to be accomplished (Schmidt, 2002). Leaders must possess the vision before they can share it with the rest of the organization. To do that takes specific leadership skills like knowledge of the situation, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, good communication skills, patience, trust, and a very good sense of humor.

Good leaders do a lot of good things in order to accomplish what needs to be accomplished. In fact Connors (2000, p. 112-130), lists 150 “things” that a good leader can do to create an excellent working environment which includes encourage, praise, instigate, provide, help, cover for, have ready, maintain, celebrate and the list goes on. Please notice that they are all “action verbs.” The things leaders do comes from a strong knowledge base of the leadership position, confidence they can get the job done, shared vision with the people who are needed to accomplish the feat, and finally the patience and fortitude to keep from giving up. .

Personal interviews with individual teachers from my graduate classes on what they consider a good leader yielded the following:

- Leaders must have the ability to listen and make decisions with an open mind by not allowing or giving in to personal prejudices.
- Leaders must treat people fairly and not show partiality to any persons or groups of teachers. Evaluations must be made on the basis of merit, not favor.
- Leaders must take a stand and not waffle on any issue no matter how controversial the issue may be.
- Leaders have the ability to remain calm, or at least give the impression of calmness when situations involving emotions escalate.

Calm strength brings to mind the description of Tony Dungy, former coach of the Indianapolis Colts of the National Football League and current mentor to Michael Vick, seems to be what experienced teachers value in a leader. From the back drop of these traits, qualities and characteristics, what are the inner qualities or dispositions of excellent leaders?

Dispositions are the values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students, families, colleagues, and communities (NCATE, 2006, 53). Values and ethics are of particular interest to the excellent leader. Perhaps the single descriptor which most reflects the values and ethics of a leader is integrity. How many times has the reader witnessed the downfall of a leader, and the cause is some type of breakdown regarding the integrity of the leader. I remember very clearly an incident which showed the breakdown of integrity in a middle school principal. This principal had worked at the school for 29 years and was video taped stealing money from the booster’s concession booth. One of the current examples of the breakdown in leadership due to ethics and integrity is Governor Mark Sanford of South Carolina. The state legislature is calling for his resignation due improper use of state travel funds related to an alleged affair. How important is integrity? It is simply essential!

Other key dispositions include caring, strong work ethic and critical thinking (Helm, 2007). Leaders, as

with teachers, who are caring and nurturing are more effective in motivating teachers, who in turn motivate students to excel (Talbert-Johnson, 2006). Other key dispositions include initiative, fairness, decency, service, pro-social behaviors, honesty, humility, trust, empathy, healing and a sense of community (Armstine, 1990).

Nationally, the research appears to be focused on leader's ability to affect student success. NCATE (2006, p. 53) said "Further, these dispositions must have an impact on student learning, motivation and development. The University of the Cumberland, in Williamsburg, Kentucky, began working on a re-design of their principal program based on the recommendations of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB, 2007)) and the Commonwealth of Kentucky's Education Leadership Redesign Task Force in the fall of 2007 ( Learning Centered Leadership, 2007). In fact the entire Commonwealth of Kentucky, through its various state agencies, was involved in the recommendations for this redesign. The recommendations call for a dynamic relationship with local school districts to assist in identifying the best possible candidates to pursue degrees and certifications as principals. Part of this identification process is to identify persons who show a "passion" for the learning process, and can show evidence of supporting and encouraging student success (Learning Centered Leadership, 2000, p.7). The SREB, who funded the Kentucky Task Force along with the Wallace Foundation, funded a study called How Leadership influences Student Learning. This study definitively supports the notion that principals can be a determining factor in individual student's success (Leithwood et al, 2004). "Leadership is widely regarded as a key factor in accounting for differences in the success with which schools foster the learning of their students (Leithwood, et al, 2004, p. 17)" Indeed, the contribution of effective leadership is largest when it is needed most; there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around in the absence of intervention by talented leaders. While other factors within the school also contribute to such turnarounds, leadership is the catalyst (Ibid, 17—19).

The University's graduate faculty seeks to identify outstanding leaders through a highly selective entrance process. The first component is an entrance interview with selective faculty members, and each candidate will be measured against a rubric designed to identify key indicators (and yes, dispositions) for success as a school principal. The local school districts will play a key role by recommending individuals who possess qualities that the district has observed. The university is redesigning the entire program to make sure candidates, not only have key dispositions, but have a thorough understanding of assessment and curriculum before they complete the program.

Perhaps no single occurrence in the last twenty years in American Education has had a greater impact on American Education as the standards movement. As late as the mid 1980's schools were being run mostly by local school boards who viewed education as the way they were taught. Thanks to groups like the National Council for the Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), schools and school systems began to measure their success against standards to determine exactly how they measured up. In Kentucky, the entire state's educational system was declared unconstitutional in 1990. The outcome of this happening resulted in the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA). Now, all school systems in the state of Kentucky, as well as the colleges and universities who train teachers and school administrators must do so using the state's standards. Not only that, but these same groups must be accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) through the Education and Professional Standards Board (EPSB) of Kentucky. Principals and other school administrators, in addition to the above standards, must show competence in the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards for school

leaders, and the Southern Regional Critical Success Factors.(SRCSF). In addition, new administrators must show competence in addressing the Educational Technology Standards and Performance Indicators for Administrators (ETSPIA).

We have identified a few key dispositions for school leaders, but there is one that has been hinted at, but not really defined. That would be the disposition of courage. Looking back in time at all those who have been identified as great leaders, the term courage always seems to surface. When I think of courage, I am reminded of people like Alvin York, Winston Churchill, Arthur Schindler, the brave police officers and firefighters on 9/11, and of course our young men now fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. None of our principals will probably be required to show that kind of courage, but they must be willing to fight for the cause of all young students who deserve a great education. A teacher in one of our early interviews expressed it clearly when she said a great leader should not “waffle,” but have the courage to stick to a cause and not be deterred by dissent.

From what we have discussed so far, there are five key dispositions that are a must for any school leader. We know that there are hundreds of things a good leader can do, but the real issue is who they are, as people, as teachers and as school leaders. “Good teachers are the ones who never forget what it was like being a student and good school leaders are the ones who never forget what it was like to be a teacher (Connors, 2004, p. 11).” The five crucial dispositions are: Integrity, Courage, Caring, Strong Work Ethic and Ability to Think Critically. I know there are more, but these broad dispositions seem to incorporate all the meaningful dispositions which are critical for a successful school leader.

Why will these five dispositions create a climate for success? Because:

- integrity will keep the school leader from making bad choices regarding the safeguard of valuable resources,
- courage will allow the leader to make difficult decisions and stay the course
- caring will keep the priorities where they should be, on the students, teachers and parents
- strong work ethic will ensure success by not giving up until the job is done, as well as pushing hard until every child in the school has success,
- Ability to think critically will allow the leader to understand difficult issues like curriculum design and the use of assessment to ensure total student success.

Chesley B. “Sully” Sullenberger, on Thursday, January 15, 2009 U.S. Airways flight number 1549 leaving New York’s LaGuardia airport bound for Charlotte, North Carolina displayed one of the most poignant examples of leadership courage in recent years. Since I live in Charlotte, I followed the news of the downed flight with a great deal of interest. Reportedly, Sully told the co-pilot that, because they had taken in a flock of birds into their engines, they would have to make an emergency landing. Since the plane was, at that point, in the heart of New York City, the co-pilot predictably asked, “where?” Sully said that they were going to go down into the Hudson River. The chances of pulling this off were very slim, but he guided the plane to a perfect landing. Sully admitted later that he did not know if the maneuver could be done, but his years as a glider pilot definitely paid off. Having the courage to try the maneuver was the key, however. This is a great example of exactly what courage “is,” and not like to example of the Killing of the Elephant.

Most school administrators will, most likely, never have to make a decision to kill an elephant or land a 747 jet airplane, but they will be called on to make some very important decisions regarding the lives of young children. The decisions they make will, not only require courage, but will require a whole set of key dispositions. It is essential that school districts choose administrators with the utmost care. Just having an administrative certification or licensure is not enough. Identifying and assessing the ones who have the proper licensure and key dispositions is essential. Being able to make the proper assessments, and place administrators with the proper skills in the right positions should be, and is, the topic of continuing research.

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