



Leadership in Education: Five Commonalities

By Mark F. Goldberg

Mr. Goldberg looks back on the 43 interviews he has conducted since 1989 with eminent individuals who merit the label "educational leaders," and he discovers that there is no algorithm for success in educational leadership -- though there are a handful of "large-minded qualities" that leaders tend to share.

SINCE September 1989, I have interviewed 43 educational leaders for the *Phi Delta Kappan* and *Educational Leadership*. Strictly speaking, not all the people I interviewed and wrote about were professional educators, but all the interviews were exclusively about education, and all the interviewees were seriously concerned about significant educational issues.

TheodoreSizer, John Goodlad, and the late Ernest Boyer were important national educational leaders; Deborah Meier and Dennis Littky were school principals; and Audre Allison and Florence Mondry were teachers. E. D. "Don" Hirsch, Jr., Dorothy Rich, and Carol Gilligan were somewhat more distant from schools but had a great deal to say about education as well as considerable indirect influence on school matters. Mayor Rudolph

Giuliani, Mayor Kurt Schmoke, and Gov. Lowell Weicker were politicians with extremely strong feelings about education and the political leverage to affect what happened in schools. Each of these people -- and all the others I interviewed -- were, through position or influence, educational leaders.

Leadership can take more than one form and has many characteristics, but throughout the 43 interviews, five qualities stood out. These leaders held a *bedrock belief* in what they were doing; they had the *courage to swim upstream* in behalf of their beliefs; they possessed a *social conscience*, particularly on issues of racism and poverty; they maintained a *seriousness of purpose*, holding high standards and devoting years of service to their causes; and they exemplified *situational mastery*, the happy marriage of personal skills and accomplishment. I make no claim that these five characteristics or indicators of leadership complete the domain for the topic or that I might not have found another quality or two had I interviewed a different cast of characters. However, the people I interviewed represent a good sample of the leaders of education in America.

They are women and men of different ages. They work in Boston, Massachusetts, and Austin, Texas; New York City and Berkeley, California; Charlottesville, Virginia, and Seattle, Washington; Providence, Rhode Island, and Honolulu, Hawaii. They come from the majority white community and from minority African American and Hispanic backgrounds; six of the interviewees did not speak English as their first language, and five of them were born in countries other than the United States. Clearly, there are educational conservatives, moderates, and liberals in this group. I made no special effort to interview women or men, Northerners or Southerners, or members of any other category. The only criteria for eligibility were substantial achievement in education, considerable ability to influence education, or a combination of the two.

While I am convinced of the firmness of the ground beneath me when I talk about the five characteristics below, I do not mean to represent any particular educational philosophy as the one I most favor. Don Hirsch and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani might be characterized as educational conservatives, Ernest Boyer and John Goodlad are probably closer to the liberal camp, while Shirley Strum Kenny and Kurt Schmoke are somewhere in between. Those people might not agree with my labels, and many of them cautioned me during the interviews not to confuse their educational alignments with their political beliefs. I could easily place myself along the conservative to liberal continuum, but that is not the point. I could easily tilt my description to represent a particular camp as "best," but that is not the point. The theme of this article is that the five common characteristics themselves are indicators of leadership. Each of the people I interviewed exhibited at least four of the characteristics to some reasonable extent.

Bedrock Belief

At first, I thought this characteristic was idealism: believing in a grand philosophical theory or visionary idea. But as I listened carefully to so many people, I began to understand that each person across the table from me held some fundamental beliefs that were seen as realistic and urgently required in his or her work. When Reuven Feuerstein, the Israeli special education expert who has worked extensively in the United States, spoke about seriously impaired children, he expressed his bedrock belief in their possibilities. "I consider these children modifiable. . . . You must believe that human beings can be changed. If you are really engaged emotionally as a human being, you will say, 'I have to, I must help. Change is possible because I want it so.'"

When Mark Gearan, former director of the Peace Corps, talked about the role of government in American life, he did not focus on vague possibilities or cumbersome bureaucracies. His childhood memory was that government worked. "When you grow up in a small town, you get to see how government can help people." Gearan would fly off to a distant country, get in a jeep, and see for himself what Peace Corps volunteers were doing in a medical clinic or a building project or a school. He knew and believed to his core that "government can be a force for good, and government can be a force to help others." Harold Hodgkinson, the nation's leading educational demographer, expressed his belief about his work in very powerful terms: "I believe that the implications of demographics for education are just enormous. You ignore this field at your peril."

Bedrock belief is the animus that inspires leaders to do their work. Education has room for idealism, for reach that exceeds grasp, but it is essentially not a pie-in-the-sky business. You must believe that what you are doing will actually help people. In her groundbreaking research on how girls and women make decisions, Carol Gilligan saw that a "new landscape" was developing for how we

understood the thinking and moral decision making of females. She believed that her continuing research would fill in more of the gaps in that landscape and enable educators and others to understand how girls and young women could thrive in the classroom and elsewhere. Hugh Price knows that African American children can achieve at a high level if these children are "offered the quality of education that enables them to meet high standards." The late Albert Shanker believed when he called his first teacher strike that doing this would result immediately in somewhat better conditions for teachers and students as well as help to build a stronger union that could continue to negotiate for even more greatly improved school conditions in the years to come.

These educational leaders took risks and had all the normal fears and concerns about what they were doing, but underneath those misgivings was the bedrock belief that what they were doing was good and important and eminently worthwhile. Shirley Strum Kenny, president of the State University of New York at Stony Brook, said it well when I asked her about her lifelong commitment to public higher education. Without hesitation or qualifiers, she responded, "My commitment has always been to public higher education. I believe that's the most important education in America. That is where you get the energy from people who have their one chance. They're not choosing from among private schools. This is it, and that's what I resonate to."

Courage to Swim Upstream

Having a few bedrock beliefs sustains you in your work, which often requires that you swim against the flow. Not every educational leader is a fully developed maverick, but sustaining any serious effort in education requires going against the current to some extent. And continuing to swim against the current requires more than a little courage. Change is often difficult for people because they must shift attitudes and beliefs to accommodate a new technique, program, or set of facts. Also, many politicians and high-level administrators require rapid results. But results from complex, often original, education programs don't occur quickly, a reality that requires perseverance in the face of resistance and criticism. John Goodlad told me that when administrators or politicians hear from him that a problem is complex and will require years to resolve, they frequently look for another consultant.

More than 15 years ago, in the face of the prevailing belief that large, comprehensive high schools were desirable, not to mention economical, Theodore Sizer argued for "small schools of choice with high standards and dedicated staff." After considerable study of many schools and extensive discussions with educators, Sizer enumerated nine fairly broad guiding principles for his Coalition of Essential Schools -- which frustrated people who wanted unambiguous, definitive, one-size-fits-all answers. Sizer said over and over again that there is no one answer. "You have to be very sensitive to who the families are, what the community is, what the expectations are."

E. D. Hirsch's ideas about cultural literacy have created a considerable stir in education for more than two decades. He has never wavered from his belief that a core curriculum, particularly in the early grades, is absolutely necessary, in spite of the prevailing progressive educational belief for many years that this was not the most pedagogically sound approach to educational excellence. In the past five or six years, Hirsch's notions have attracted increasing attention from both educators and politicians who believe that a common curriculum "based on what really works, that is demanding and rich, that is coherent, and that all elementary students can be exposed to" should be put into play.

Of course, Harold Howe II and Ernest Boyer, both former U.S. commissioners of education, would sharply disagree with Hirsch's ideas, and both men were just as tenacious in their humanistic and progressive beliefs. Boyer, in particular, was very worried about teaching information or knowledge outside an extremely rich moral context. I interviewed Boyer just a few days after he had toured the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. He was shaken by the fact that, for the most part, the Nazi leaders who implemented the Final Solution were highly educated men. Boyer felt that it was becoming increasingly important to keep asking the questions he had consistently raised over a 45-year career: "What are the most essential aims of education? What is the relationship between education and ethical behavior? Are we, in fact, educating toward evil if we fail to place knowledge in a larger context? What does it mean to be an educated teacher?"

John Goodlad has adhered for decades to the notion that each school must develop a "clear agenda that the staff can get behind to tell the narrative of that school's mission and to provide meaningful help to every student." He simply refuses on intellectual and ethical grounds to be bullied into subscribing to the latest standards and assessments, arguing vociferously -- against the current and continuing tide -- that we should "not be subject to the constant pushes in different directions from politicians and business leaders."

Albert Shanker fought for the creation of a strong union for teachers in the 1950s, when there was no large and militant advocate for teachers anywhere in the land. The Conlin-Wadlin Act said that public employees could not strike; political and education advisors told him he could not win. He simply went against majority opinion and led his fledgling union to victory.

During the Reagan Administration, "the Department of Education stopped collecting data that would allow lawyers and others to document inequities. . . . Anything that had to do with equity reforms . . . was terminated in the early Eighties." Linda Darling-Hammond simply continued and even deepened her work in equity research at the RAND Corporation, and she continues to do so to this day. As the executive director of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, Darling-Hammond has been instrumental in creating a blueprint for equity and for better training for all teachers. Eighteen states and nine cities are using this blueprint in their reform efforts.

Mary Hatwood Futrell ran for elective office in both the Virginia and National Education Associations, even when she was "strongly discouraged from running." Futrell did not accept that "the job should go to a man or that I needed more experience." She simply waged intelligent, resolute campaigns based on her convictions and won against the odds and the hierarchy then in place.

Social Conscience

When I interviewed Professor Seymour Papert at MIT in 1990, I expected our conversation to be primarily about computers and LOGO, the program he devised for elementary students. I was taken by surprise when Papert told me that much of his interest in computers and education came from an "activist streak" that he developed as a boy in his native South Africa, where he had opposed apartheid. He wanted to include minorities in every educational opportunity. As an adult, he slowly realized that you could "change education by changing the culture, and computers could do this."

Several of the people I have interviewed -- Harold Howe II, James Comer, Hugh Price, Shirley Brice-Heath -- have devoted much of their careers to working in behalf of America's underclass, and I anticipated that they would talk about the issue of opening opportunities for minority and poor children. The fact is that virtually every interviewee raised this issue, and I finally began to understand that it is almost impossible to assert yourself as an educational leader in the United States without addressing the variables of race and poverty.

Over lunch at a Chinese restaurant in Charlottesville, Virginia, Don Hirsch told me how deeply he had been affected as a very young man by Gunnar Myrdal's 1944 book on race in America, *An American Dilemma*. All his life, Hirsch has felt that the "avoidable injustice" of not providing minority children with a proper education must be eradicated. In his core curriculum advisory group, he has included everyone from Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese to experts on Native American history and specialists on Latino culture, to make sure that Core Curriculum embraces important literary works and historical events from minority cultures. Hirsch sees Core Curriculum as playing a leading role in leveling the playing field for poor children.

Harold Howe II served as U.S. commissioner of education under President Lyndon Johnson and played a significant role in desegregating southern schools. While serving as vice president of the Ford Foundation in the 1970s and 1980s, he directed \$50 million to programs "to support minority doctoral students at high-powered universities." Howe made extremely clear his feelings about the problems of race and poverty in this country. "Middle-class kids get good schooling at home and in school. Poor kids often get lousy schooling in school, and their 'schooling' outside of school is also poor, so they really do not have a fair opportunity." These are virtually the same words that Don Hirsch used to describe the identical situation to me.

School reform and improvement are important in underprivileged areas, but they may not be the central answer to what must be done to open the door of opportunity. John Goodlad said to me in a late 1999 interview in Seattle that "we may be reaching the limit of how much improvement we can make in schools without addressing directly the issues of poverty and mobility." Claudio Sanchez is the education reporter for National Public Radio and is interested in all forms of school reform and renewal, particularly those with a good human interest story attached to them. He travels widely and has seen hundreds of schools and new programs. Yet he concludes, in words that could have been spoken by Ernest Boyer or Shirley Brice-Heath or Hugh Price or James Comer, that "no amount of money or curriculum reform or toughening of academic standards will help so long as students are plagued by poverty, drugs, violence, crime, broken homes, and other social problems."

Toward the end of my interview with Ernest Boyer in Princeton, New Jersey, I asked him if he could single out two or three problems that he saw as the most significant for educators. He named only one: "The crisis that may overwhelm us in the end: the gap between the haves and the have-nots." Several years later in New York City, when I posed the same question to Henry Levin, the founding director of the Accelerated Schools program, his immediate response was even more ominous: "I see nothing with as much potential for . . . social and economic disruption as the inability to succeed with disadvantaged youngsters."

Seriousness of Purpose

At about the 10th or 12th interview in the early 1990s, I began to notice two things: first, people spoke of spending years and decades on their central work -- never months and rarely even just a few years; and second, words such as "rigor" and "excellence" and "seriousness" were used again and again to describe their work or cause. That pattern has continued right through my latest interview, conducted just a few months ago.

For more than 35 years, James Comer, in all his work in education, "has maintained a steady focus on child development." When other educators asserted that curriculum or instruction or assessment should come first, Comer continued to argue that "it should be development first" and that "development should guide everything else." Theodore Sizer has stated repeatedly that transforming one school or many schools requires careful, deliberate, principled work, "so it's slow business, and we're here for the long haul." When I asked the late Madeline Hunter if she could thoroughly train a group of teachers if she had three months with them, she smiled at me ruefully and said, "Three months. That's only a drop in a bucket."

Albert Shanker gave the better part of a long career to forming a strong teacher union. It took James Gray 15 years before the National Writing Project was on a firm footing in enough states for the word "national" to have substantial meaning. Mayor Giuliani has been unrelenting for over seven years in his campaign for schools run by people who "are demanding, have a clear vision of what they want to accomplish, and are willing to be accountable." Shirley Strum Kenny has spent her entire career in public higher education, and Don Hirsch has been promoting cultural literacy and Core Knowledge for nearly two decades. John Goodlad and Theodore Sizer have devoted most of their careers to their work with schools and organizations dedicated to reform; the same is true for Carol Gilligan, in conducting her careful research on how girls and women make moral choices, or for Dorothy Rich, in developing her MegaSkills techniques for parents and teachers to use with children. Even when it comes to making a difference in the life of a single student, it appears that considerable time is required. Shirley Brice-Heath told me that the students who make it out of "desperate circumstances" invariably have mentors who work with them for years in a "sustained involvement."

The language that leaders use when they describe their work or their attitude toward their work is quite strong. Shirley Strum Kenny spoke to me about the "importance of rigor. I learned early on the importance of doing your work as nearly perfectly as you could, and that has stayed with me." John Goodlad is convinced that nothing will happen in schools unless you "first train people in how to carry on a serious conversation." Work in schools is important and must be done with great purpose, considerable knowledge, and decisions that grow out of a "thoughtful agenda." Mayor Giuliani spoke again and again of the need for schools to be "tough, demanding, and exacting."

When Seymour Papert was training Costa Rican teachers in LOGO some 15 years ago, he and the teachers discovered that they all wanted to go beyond just learning to use computers. The teachers learned to program as well. It was their way of asserting that teaching was not "some low-grade profession that can't contribute anything sophisticated." From Hugh Price, who wants the curriculum to be "demanding, rich, and coherent," to Mary Hatwood Futrell and her strong advocacy of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, virtually everyone I interviewed emphasized rigor, excellence, and seriousness of purpose, but perhaps no one quite as

originally as Stephen Jay Gould. "I have strong feelings about intellectual integrity, doing things for yourself, not accepting what you're told, reading as much as you can. . . . My boyhood hero was Joe DiMaggio more than anyone else. . . . His excellence was on a baseball field, and he was gracious and elegant. He was an artist at bat, and he didn't make compromises on the field."

Situational Mastery

Situational mastery is the element that probably makes it impossible to locate a set of generic characteristics that would constitute all you need to learn to be an educational leader. No two jobs are alike, no two leaders have precisely the same set of talents, circumstances and culture are always peculiar to an organization or place, and the fit between an individual and the work to be done is everything. I do not believe that any of the people I interviewed could have exchanged positions and had the same success.

Harold Hodgkinson is convinced that "leadership is unpredictable" and that the only training possible is to "train people in what gifts they have for particular settings." Neither Audre Allison nor Florence Mondry, two outstanding English teachers trained in National Writing Project techniques, had any substantial instruction in college or graduate school in teaching writing, nor did they believe as young teachers that writing was as important as literature in the English curriculum. Each is a fine writer who came to understand that her own writing was the catalyst that allowed her to grow more excited about writing in the curriculum and to master techniques that would help her students write often and well. Several of their students were recognized as exceptional writers by the National Council of Teachers of English, and both women influenced many other teachers to include much more writing in the curriculum. However, neither woman had the least interest in moving to school administration or any other position outside the classroom.

For Dorothy Rich, the keys were time and extreme practicality based on experience. As her "recipes" for helping youngsters began to accumulate, Don Cameron of the National Education Association told her that she was "the Dr. Spock of education." Madeline Hunter was just the opposite, relying almost entirely on "impeccable research," which she translated into language that teachers could understand and use in the classroom. Seymour Papert and Don Hirsch combined a social conscience with painstaking work in their fields of expertise to create something new and appealing. When he first became interested in school reform, Theodore Sizer had no idea what might lead to success. Over a period of years he learned that a combination of several elements -- a thoughtful and devoted staff, high standards for teaching and learning, and small schools of choice -- all operating according to the Coalition's guiding principles, was often a formula for success. He was pleased by this discovery, but somewhat surprised. Sizer had been the dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, but he now knew that "the kind of work we do doesn't have the precision respected by traditional education people, and I don't think it can by its nature."

For Mary Hatwood Futrell, an important skill is the "ability to persuade people to change." Carol Gilligan felt strongly about doing the research that would allow people to change their thinking on their own. Reuven Feuerstein's work requires enormous faith in his carefully researched and crafted techniques, many of which are invariant and allow little room for teacher creativity or adaptation. Richard Sterling, executive director of the National Writing Project, has great faith in what works in many classrooms and has little confidence in the "world of erudite scholarship, in my view arcane and not useful in the way I want my life to be useful." Harold "Doc" Howe II is convinced that the

best leadership requires the least authority. "People perform best if everyone knows why they're being asked to do things and not when they're told, 'Just do it.'" Mayor Giuliani is willing to give schoolpeople some leeway, but they must operate within his guidelines and his notion of what constitutes success.

When I asked Don Hirsch if he felt that every school should eventually subscribe to Core Curriculum, he answered, "This is a big country. There's room for everyone." In a country where, 15 years from now, 68% of the students in California will come from homes in which English is not the dominant language, but only 9% of the students in Maine will come from such homes, there must be more than one answer. In the view of Hugh Price and Claudio Sanchez, we must do all we can to eradicate poverty and raise the opportunity standards in minority schools. Goodlad does not think any school has a chance unless committed, intelligent leaders lead the staff to form "an agenda, an awareness of the conditions that have to be put in place, and then grasp the strategies that one has to use to effect change." The particulars for Goodlad will vary from place to place, but the general requirements will remain the same.

We've all seen business leaders succeed brilliantly with one company and fail with another. The same is true of teachers, principals, school superintendents, and other educational leaders. When I interviewed Mayor Schموke of Baltimore, I learned that some programs worked in one school and failed in others. I do not believe that Albert Shanker would have been terribly effective as a demographer or a university researcher. Carol Gilligan, a groundbreaking researcher and excellent writer, would not have been a successful union leader. Perhaps Harold Hodgkinson got it right when he said, "Leaders have some sustaining interest in some issue or cause," but "leadership is something you ascribe to people after they've done it." Each of the people I interviewed has "done it," and thank goodness these powerful individuals are not interchangeable.

Final Thoughts

When I first considered writing something about leadership, I thought that outlining the most mundane requirements for the role might be helpful: find a mentor, or don't alienate any crucial group. I quickly saw that I would end up with a bewildering list of 40 or 50 elements, most of which would not suit a particular person or set of circumstances. Many of the people I interviewed emphasized how difficult and complex their work was to carry out. Manuel Justiz' statement on training teachers at the University of Texas at Austin, where he is dean of the School of Education, is typical: "If you're going to prepare teachers, you have to understand the classrooms of today and the richness of learning, the changes in the family unit, the diversity in the student population, and all the other problems and challenges that exist in today's schools." In Austin, there are schools performing so brilliantly that they win national recognition and are held up as models; other schools in the same district are in desperate condition, verging on being taken over by the state. I doubt that the same set of leadership skills will work in every school in Austin.

Linda Lambert wrote a helpful book in 1998 titled *Building Leadership Capacity in Schools*. She pointed out that a mistake we make is considering "leadership to be synonymous with a person in a position of formal authority." Lambert believes that leadership in schools, and by extension anywhere, must be expanded to the point where important new ideas or programs will remain even if the "leader" leaves. That seems to me a good idea, but many of the people I interviewed prefer to work alone (Harold Hodgkinson) or to be the driving force behind what they do (Rudolph Giuliani).

Dennis Littky and Deborah Meier, or people very much like these two outstanding principals, are needed to keep their schools running with enthusiasm.

Jerry Patterson published a small book on the superintendency called *The Anguish of Leadership*. While the book is interesting and affecting and contains several practical suggestions, it supplies no powerful statements on what to do, let alone how to do it, in order to ensure success. Neither Lambert nor Patterson has it right or wrong. Both of them wrote good books that might be helpful to many people. The problem is that there is no algorithm for success in educational leadership. It's just too complex, too varied, and too subject to change for any singular answer.

At the end of the day, I concluded that five large-minded qualities, not simple-minded answers, were the most powerful commonalities I could locate among 43 interviews: possessing a bedrock belief in the potency and usefulness of one's work; having the courage to swim upstream, no matter how long it takes, no matter what the obstacles; being determined to exercise one's social conscience to make certain that everyone gets inside the tent for excellent education; maintaining a seriousness of purpose, which includes perseverance, integrity, and rigor; and achieving situational mastery, the exact fit of one's individual talents to the task to be accomplished.

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