An Enlightened Leader
Applying the Theory of Self-Interest Rightly Understood to Schools

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The Principalship

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School leadership is clearly a highly complex, extremely challenging task regardless of the lens one views it through. In their article on Rethinking School Leadership, Bolman, Johnson, Murphy and Weiss (BJMW herein) emphasize the need for school leaders to unite people and resources in order to find solutions to daily difficulties. Along with meeting the day to day challenges, these authors feel that an affective school leader must also be mindful of and acutely focused on the larger instructional and community goals of the institution. As with every other writer on school leadership, these authors suggest that good school leaders must face the many diverse challenges that bombard them in any give day, while still navigating a path for the school to move forward. While these authors have presented their own argument as to which qualities of leadership make for a good principal, it is clear from them all that the ability to balance many varied responsibilities is a minimum requirement. What does vary greatly between these different accounts however is the language used to describe this “bi-focal” leadership and the level of mindfulness of the varying contexts between different schools.

Although it is extremely valuable to come to a consistent definition of effective school leadership, before one can make such a blanket proclamation, the varying school contexts must be stressed. While certain leadership styles and characteristics may be completely successful in a largely homogeneous, affluent suburban school, the same style and tactics might fail miserably in an urban institution. It is therefore just as important to remember that schools are unique as it is to come up with a unique definition of school leadership. This is not to say that there are not
many traits that are common across the spectrum of school leaders, but it must not be assumed that there is a complete set of “best practices” that will work for everyone in every situation.

While BJMW’s article elucidated the multiple constituencies and complexities of a principals daily life, Deal and Peterson and Sergiovanni both were more successful at capturing the essence of effective school leaders. In their melding of the artist and technician, Deal and Peterson begin to paint a vivid picture of the competing forces pulling at school leaders and how good principals can acknowledge and direct these various interests. For them, the truly talented and successful leader is mindful of the daily management tasks necessary within a school, but creative and resourceful in building relationships and directing the school along a path with a higher purpose in mind. It is this awareness and concern for the higher purpose of schools that resonates most clearly through Sergiovanni’s writing as well. For him, the institutions of schools are indeed sacred and require a level of understanding and commitment different from any other organization. “Instead of treaties and contracts, schools need compacts and commitments. Instead of calculated connections, schools need moral connections for things to work well”¹ It cannot be stressed enough how important it is to look at the entirety of the school community and to realize how sacred an institution it is. For a school leader to be successful, he or she more than anyone needs to understand and live this philosophy.

In thinking about school leadership, it is easy to think of Alexis de Tocqueville and his analysis of democracy in America during the early 1800s. One of his most lasting observations was of Americans’ conception of and apparent solution to the tension between liberty and equality. According to Tocqueville, Americans possess a philosophy of “self-interest rightly understood.” In other words, it is acknowledged that humans are inherently self-interested, yet

conversely, they are equally aware of their interconnectedness in society. The manifestation of
this for Tocqueville presented itself in the many voluntary associations created throughout
America that tied people together in a common purpose. While each individual may have
possessed extremely different, personal reasons for coming together, the reality that a larger
common purpose could be accomplished drew people together in service. Although it must be
noted that Tocqueville’s conception of self-interest rightly understood is grounded in a notion of
people coming together to do what is “right” as defined by a higher belief in humanity, the same
foundation should be expected of schools in serving the higher purpose of education. Therefore,
while a religious notion of goodness supported self-interest rightly understood in 1830s America,
an equally strong concept of goodness needs to underlie schools in present day America.

If we begin to think of schools as communities of learners drawn together for the higher
goodness of education, we need to expect leaders of these institutions to have a similar
understanding and realize the importance of their endeavors. Therefore, with this understanding,
it is even more important to ensure that whatever the situation, the creation and support of a
strong learning community be the primary mission of an effective principal. It is imperative that
in accomplishing this lofty goal, the learning needs of all members of the community must be
addressed. While the primary focus needs to be on the students, in order to support and foster
the enlightened community that was addressed previously, school leaders need to be aware that
each member of the team, although ideally selfless, still have individual interests and
subsequently want to satisfy them. Therefore, the ultimate role of the principal needs to be that
of a mindful mediator. By keeping the overall goals of the institution clearly in mind, a good
school leader needs to find ways to take people’s seemingly conflicting self-interests and direct
them toward the higher purpose of education. As much as it would be ideal to create an
institution where everyone was able to individually transcend themselves for the higher common
good, barring that unlikely possibility, it remains the role of the talented school leader to ensure
that such a system exists and flourishes.

While I have thus far endeavored to explain a larger philosophy in which schools should
be envisioned, it remains to be seen the exact characteristics that effective school leaders need to
embody. Keeping in mind the previous argument that school leadership is highly contextual, a
few key roles can be determined that are widely applicable. First and foremost, principals need
to embody the higher purpose of education that is at the core of this philosophy of schools.
School leaders need to understand and exhibit a personal commitment to learning as the ultimate
goal of schools. To this end, they must be advocates of everything and anything that will
enhance the learning of students, teachers, staff, community members and themselves. This
would include, at a minimum, a principal who is an advocate of multiple styles of teaching and
learning, social and emotional growth and an array of learning opportunities for teachers.
Equally important, principals need to be a vivid symbolic leader to all members of the school’s
learning community. By precept and example, principals need to model the kinds of good
teaching and learning necessary to ensure a strong commitment to the higher purpose of
education. Again, this would include, at a minimum, teaching, both students and faculty, truly
understanding the needs and desires of individuals when making decisions and creating and
following their own learning path.

As much as it may seem like this description of an ideal school leader would be even
more unattainable than those described by the authors in this course, it must be stated that many
of the daily management duties that consume much of a principal’s time need to be delegate to
others. Principals do indeed have too many competing demands for their time and therefore need
to divide up their responsibilities. As much as I have been averse to borrowing ideas from the corporate world and applying them to education, one concept is necessary to adopt. Just as a corporation is managed by many individuals and not the CEO alone, so too should schools diversify their leadership. Schools would clearly benefit from positions similar to CFOs, COOs, and other managers. While the principal as CEO (Chief Education Officer), should be directing the higher purpose of the school, an equally capable individual could be in charge of the budgeting and someone else could tackle student discipline issues. There are indeed too many varied constituencies involved in schools, yet that is not going to change. What needs to be modified is the expectation that one person can address them all. Yet, while one person alone cannot effectively manage everything, an enlightened leader is definitely necessary to ensure that schools fulfill their higher purpose of education