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Just what is educational or school leadership? Seriously. There are courses, degrees, videos, books, workshops, experts, and professional development sessions on it, but what exactly is it? Is school leadership innate? Can it be taught? Is my principal or superintendent a leader? Do school boards decide who gets to be a leader or do they simply decide who gets the position? There are and have been as many opinions and answers to these questions as there are fish in the sea. Allow me to be one of those fish.

My perspective comes from that of a classroom teacher who has critically analyzed the approaches and styles of school principals with whom I've worked, though none of them will be mentioned here, just the lessons I've learned. My perspective also comes from that of an individual who has held managerial positions at a nonprofit, with primary oversight over children and youth programs along with their respective staff members. Additionally, my perspective comes from that of a former school-based union representative and from one who has held various leadership positions at my local church. So while I admittedly have not held any official school district leadership titles, as someone who appreciates true leadership and mentorship, I have a few opinions about the qualities that I believe school leaders should possess.

The organizational rank of a person determines their delegated authority status within that organization. That's about it. They hold a rank and a position and they get paid to hold it. They may be persons who have such titles as superintendent or building principal or perhaps even academic coaches, curriculum directors, human resource directors, and the list goes on. If the school board or some other authority determines there is reason enough for the revocation of said delegated authority, then that is what will happen. It happens all the time, every day of the week somewhere in these United States. What they cannot revoke is the extent to which the person in the position may have had influence over those they were charged to lead.

Rank and position in an organization do not translate to de facto leadership, it's *boss-ship*. Leadership, and in this case, educational or school leadership is authentic, not appointed; it's meaningful, not mandated, it's about the relationship, not the rank. My beloved Pastor used to make a strong connection between leadership and influence, often saying, "leadership is nothing more than influence and everyone has a degree of influence." No one can appoint a leader, neither can a leader's influence be revoked by a governing body. It would be like appointing influence or relationship and that makes no sense. My philosophy of school leadership is built upon these and a few other guiding thoughts.

First, school leaders have an authentic rank and file followership. The relationships are forged, developed almost intuitively out of the bond and trust between leaders and followers, between mentors and mentees. While the principal may be the boss, true school leaders understand that just because they are the boss this does not mean they are a leader. School leaders gain the trust and confidence of the rank and file educators within their charge. They understand the rewards and challenges of teaching and learning and seek to provide the supports necessary for student and teacher success. Additionally, school leaders maintain a willingness to learn from all of the individuals in their space, including from the professionals who are not teachers and from the families and communities they serve.

Secondly, school leaders must have actually spent time engaged in the work of teaching and learning. One cannot truly lead an educational organization, a school in particular, with any degree of legitimacy without having trod the journey of the followers. Legitimacy of a leader of teachers is lost when the leader has not taught, or has not taught for any substantial length of time. The dynamics of the classroom, the nuances of teaching and learning, especially with historically disenfranchised populations, namely Black and Brown youth, and the intricacies of teaching and learning are critical to the work of leading a school where the mission is education. A school leader who had been engaged in this work prior to leading those who remain engaged in this work scores several points! They, presumably, understand and get it! I'm sorry, but two years is not enough time in the classroom. A two-year-old has a long way to go before she or he can lead anybody into anything.

School leaders must also be inspirational. Peter Senge opines, "leadership is strongly associated with inspiration...in a sense, leadership is inspiration, the creation of new life and energy in organizations."¹ The school leader understands the realities of the work, including its rewards and challenges, but inspires and energizes the school's educators to charge on; to face, meet, and overcome the challenges of this work for the purpose of educating our youth. They inspire the faculty, staff, and students to become better versions of themselves. The educational leader also supports the faculty and staff and seeks to mitigate the effects of negative outside influences as much as possible. Teachers and other school personnel are more likely than not to develop a sense of inspiration and loyalty knowing the leader has their best interest at heart and

¹ Senge, P., Smith, B., Kruschwitz, N., Laur, J., Schley, S. (2008). *The necessary revolution: Working together to create a sustainable world*. New York, NY: Broadway Books

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has their back. With this assurance and confidence, teachers will be less stressed and will likely be more present and in the moment with their students.

Additionally, an educational leader must also have a sense of where the school is and where the school is headed as an organization. Their vision is the ultimate goal, the end game of the organization. Their mission is an evaluation of where they are and their path forward, the means to an end. If not developed in concert with the school's educators, the school leader must at least be able to adopt and communicate a vision and mission that are clear and achievable. To this end, school leaders understand that the school personnel play a vital role in the achievement of the school's vision and mission and seek to include their followers in the achievement the stated goals.

It is important to realize that not every school leader holds the title of principal or vice principal. There are teachers, school secretaries, grounds keepers and others who have gained the confidence and loyalty of the faculty and staff within the school. Let's call these leaders, title-less. They tend to lead from behind. Depending on the dynamics of the school or educational organization, this could lead to building up or tearing down of a school. This is a leader that emerges respected from the cocoon of the rank and file of their colleagues. Charlotte Danielson refers to this title-less leader as an *informal* [teacher] leader². These informal teacher leaders are vital to the health and sustainability of a school. "The unprecedented demands being placed on schools today, require leadership at every level"² The school leader understands this and wants to form alliances with those who lead from behind. Very often, these informal teacher leaders will be the first to gauge colleagues' sentiments and changes in school culture and climate. Working with these individuals and the rest of the faculty and staff, the school leader can work to ensure that the learning environment is a warm, safe, and welcoming space for all who should enter into it.

While everyone may acknowledge the school principal or building administrator as the boss, not everyone will accept that the person with the title is their leader. In all truth, not everyone may be looking for a leader and mentor in their school principal. That is fine, especially since followers *choose* whose influence to be found under. School leaders have an authentic followership. They've spent time engaged in the work of teaching and learning, are inspirational, have sense of vision and mission, and understand they, themselves may share the

² Danielson, C. (2007). Teachers as leaders. *Educational Leadership*, 65(1), 14-19.

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role of leader with those who do not hold a title. In the end, real school leadership is about the influence and relationship between people, rank notwithstanding.