

The Artistry of Leadership

Bruce Beairsto
School District No. 38 (Richmond)
Richmond, British Columbia
In *Education Canada*, Spring 1999

Leadership is enigmatic. There is no grand theory that will explain how leadership works or how leaders should lead in all situations, and there never will be. Leadership is, and will remain, more of an art than a science.

However, there are important principles and insights that can inform the artistry of leadership. The concept of "bi-nocular" leadership provides a way of interpreting and discussing leadership experiences through reference to its two most fundamental concerns: organization and community. In the same way that we only gain depth perception through the use of both eyes, "bi-nocular" vision, so too do we only gain a three-dimensional understanding of leadership through the combined perspectives of organization and community.

There are many monocular models of leadership that promote a particular style or orientation. Many of these are interesting and valuable, but none is sufficient. They provide at best a flat view of the topic. Only by combining multiple perspectives can we appreciate the depth and richness of real-life leadership. This requires us to hold simultaneously in mind different, contrasting, at times contradictory, metaphors. Such conceptual plurality can be challenging in that it frequently involves ambiguity and paradox, but that is the nature of the real-life experience of leadership, and the reality we seek to represent, at least in part, with the "bi-nocular" metaphor.

One "eye" of binocular leadership looks out on an organization. Organizations are mechanisms; they prize reductionist, analytic reasoning which breaks complex tasks down into smaller roles that can be accomplished more easily by individuals. Organizational leaders provide the command and control which will maintain order and efficiency in the mechanism by ensuring that members comply with its rules and accomplish their individual roles. This

leadership style, which is based on behaviourism, is often termed *transactional* since it involves a transaction — work in exchange for payment and loyalty in exchange for security.

The other "eye" of binocular leadership looks out on a community. Communities are organic ecologies; they are based on a holistic, synthetic sensitivities which value connections and bind people together on the basis of shared values and purposes. Community leaders represent the values and articulate the vision which will invite voluntary commitment to the community and strengthen relationships between its members. This leadership style, which has been described in many different ways by different authors, was first identified by James McGregor Burns in 1978. He termed it *transformational* in order to contrast its personal character with the purely functional interests of the transactional approach.

There is in some quarters a willingness to dismiss transactional leadership as old-fashioned and unenlightened, and to promote transformational leadership as the way of the future. This, however, would only replace one insufficient model with another. The real world involves people working together in both organizational and community ways at the same time. It requires leaders, therefore, to be able to blend these points of view and to moderate their own behaviour to acknowledge both roles and relationships, uphold both rules and values, and employ both analysis and synthesis. Leaders must ensure compliance while inviting and building commitment. Organizational and community concerns are the yin and the yang of the full-bodied binocular reality of leadership.

The contradictions between these two views make it tempting to try and determine which one is "true" or "superior" and then to utilize it in preference to the other. It is difficult to sustain the tension between them and balance their opposing tendencies, but that is what leadership requires. Perhaps the central challenge of leadership is in "living the question" of a multi-faceted reality which embodies ambiguity and paradox. A leader who shrinks from this challenge, who seeks the comfortable pew of certainty in one perspective or the other, may

find personal peace of mind, but only by embracing both perspectives can one hope to view real situations in their full three-dimensional complexity. Leaders must face this challenge squarely.

It is important to understand that the binocular view of simultaneous transactional and transformational theories is not a situational leadership which picks one or the other approach according to a particular circumstance. It requires, rather, simultaneous use of both points of view. School systems are both hierarchical bureaucracies and moral communities, requiring leaders who attend simultaneously to both realities in a balanced way.

For example, consider the challenge of effective communication. (For the purpose of this example, I am using the term "communication" very narrowly in the expressive sense.) From a reason-focused organizational point of view, communication is achieved primarily through clarity, expressing oneself with precision and brevity to make the message accessible to the listener. This is clearly an important part of communication, but it is far from sufficient. Even a brilliant memo will not communicate effectively if it is not read, and the most eloquent speaker will have little impact on a distracted or hostile audience.

From an emotion-focused community point of view, communication is achieved primarily through connection, identifying common interests to make the message relevant to the listener. This is also an important part of communication, but it is also not sufficient. Even the most engaged and empathetic audience will be frustrated by a convoluted memo or a disorganized speaker.

Clearly, then, communication requires both clarity and connection, precise expression and common interest. An effective leader must be able to get to the heart of things and say exactly what he or she means in a way which employs the perspectives and interests of the audience so that they will be willing and able to hear the message. Bold face, point form, underlining, and graphics will not improve a communication unless it addresses topics that the reader sees as

relevant. And passionate discussion of issues important to people will not communicate effectively unless it is clear and to the point.

The example of expressive communication is a relatively comfortable one because the organizational and community perspectives are quite compatible and thus easily blended into a superior whole. Frequently, however, the binocular view is more challenging. Consider, for example, the matter of honesty in leadership.

From a rule-oriented organizational perspective, honesty means not telling lies. A relationship-oriented community perspective also requires that we share our personal feelings with others. Complete honesty, in the binocular sense, involves both facts and feelings. It requires not only passive honesty, the absence of deception, but also active honesty, self-revelation which honours relationship. Leaders need to tell not only the truth, but also the whole truth and nothing but the truth — about the situation and about themselves — in order to be trustworthy in both their roles and their relationships.

But wait a minute. Do we really want the superintendent to burden teachers and parents with her personal turmoils, or a principal to include a report on his emotional state as a standing item on the staff meeting agenda, or a teacher to regale students with the stress he is feeling as a result of their diverse needs and challenging behaviours? Perhaps. It depends on the balance of relationship and role in the situation. Sometimes students may indeed benefit from knowing how their actions affect a teacher, sometimes a staff should understand what the principal is going through, and sometimes it is important for principals to know what confuses or concerns their superintendent.

Of course, in order to be truly honest, such acts of self-disclosure must also be genuine rather than contrived, although they are often quite intentional. Depending on the audience and the circumstances, we may choose to emphasize roles or relationships, our reason or our emotions. Sometimes a steady, rational focus on the facts is what is called for, while at other times it is important to talk about our dreams, our joys, our fears, and our disappointments. Overall,

binocular leadership requires a fluid balance of thought and feeling, rational analysis and passionate engagement, but there are times when a leader may decide to accentuate one or the other. The balance is dynamic and affected by context and purpose. It is struck with design, but it must be free of artifice

This is slippery ethical terrain. It would be much easier if complete personal openness were the right thing at all times, or if honesty had no personal component at all and was simply a matter of not deceiving others about the facts of the matter. At least it would be nice to imagine that the balance was consistent and not a matter of conscious assessment and response, which can so easily become contrived and manipulative. The binocular view offers no respite from this sort of dilemma. It requires us to acknowledge the true complexity of situations and to exercise judgment under difficult circumstances with full attention to the simultaneous realities of organization and community, and our own multiple and often conflicting roles and relationships. The benefit of the binocular view is not that it delivers us from the complexity of leadership, but that it reminds us of it.

Perhaps the most important and complex leadership question of all is how to behave ethically. On the one hand, schools and school systems are organizations, governed by rules and defined by roles. From this perspective, the primary ethical focus for leaders is on justice, the impartial assignment of merited rewards and punishments in a manner which upholds the organization's basic policies and principles. On the other hand, schools and school systems are communities defined by relationships, within which the primary value is not abstract principle but situated caring. From this perspective, the primary ethical focus for leaders is compassion, caring for individuals in a manner that reflects the community's core values. In every instance, leaders must concern themselves simultaneously with both justice and compassion.

Think of a situation you have recently experienced: a student who bullied another, a custodian who stole cleaning supplies, a teacher who took sick days under false pretence to complete personal tasks, or a parent who attempted to intimidate you in order to get what they wanted. How did you react? A

binocular view requires that you not only deal justly with the situation by fairly applying whatever rules may govern it, but also that you deal compassionately with the person. Once you accept that challenge and seek to understand with empathy the reasons for the behaviour of the bully, custodian, teacher or parent, fairness becomes a much more challenging standard and the right course of action is generally much harder to identify.

True leadership requires us to face each situation with both our organizational and our community eyes open so that we can perceive its full, layered complexity. The binocular metaphor of organization and community does not reduce that complexity, in fact it may add to it, but it does provide a framework which can help us to maintain the fluid balance of insights and interests which leadership requires.

End