

THE HARVARD EXPERIMENT: Living 'The Art and Practice of Leadership Development'



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This is the first in a series of articles written by Marg Connor, Barbara McMorrow and Patty Orecchio as they return from an intense executive leadership course at Harvard University. The reason for three members of the Institute for Education Leadership (IEL) participating in the course was to support the IEL staying on the leading edge of leadership knowledge. This first article sets the stage as they begin to process and share their learning and the impact they hope it will have on Catholic school and system leaders.

Where do we begin?

That was the question that Marty Linsky posed to an international group of over 60 leadership practitioners and scholars gathered at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government for eight days of experiential learning on the "art and practice of leadership development." Without any comment Marty started to list the steady stream of responses from the group on the blackboard. Finally, one person commented rather abruptly that these were all motherhood statements and that this exercise was a waste of time. This unleashed a barrage of varying comments from the defensive to the supportive.

Meanwhile, Marty moved off to the side of the large lecture hall, letting the group flounder without the security of the authority at the front of the room. It was 8:00 p.m. on Friday May 23, 2008. Dinner had been served, introductions of all 63 participants and the faculty made, but rooms had not yet been allocated. A sense of fatigue and anxiety filled the room. The free flowing exchange disintegrated into a rather intense series of disconnected diatribes that continued until 9:00 p.m. Mercifully, the course director stepped to the front of the room and gave instructions regarding transporting ourselves and our baggage across the river to our lodgings. The experiment in case-in-point learning and adaptive leadership at Harvard in Ron Heifetz's and Marty Linsky's renowned and much sought after course had begun.

Three road-weary educators from Ontario each dispatched, on different buses into the rainy night, to separate spartan student residences were questioning their judgment. What were we thinking in giving up our May long weekend and adding to our workloads by signing up for eight days of purposeful discomfort? Reading about this leading edge leadership learning was far more intellectually comfortable than being immersed in it.

Resiliency is the hallmark of an Ontario educator. We were up early on Saturday and though once again greeted by lashings of cold rain, eagerly made our way to the campus and to our assigned seats anticipating that the brilliance of Heifetz, Linsky et al would enlighten not only us but the gray skies that seemed to have settled in permanently over Boston.

Over the course of the eight days we discovered that enlightenment does not come easy even if you are thrown into the deep end of learning with highly accomplished and intelligent men and women from around the globe. We were exhilarated by the opportunity of being in the company of like-minded individuals gathered together in the shared purpose of gaining knowledge and insight into the art and science of case-in-point teaching and learning. The exhilaration soon turned to disappointment as the

differences inherent in working on any activity involving observation, interpretation and intervention plunged us more often than not into confusion and frustration. Why couldn't these people stay elevated to the higher purpose? Why was there so much emotion and intensity?

Can leadership be taught? If the answer to that question is *yes*, the next question must be - How can leadership best be taught? From reading a book? Through a six-week course taught by professors at a university? From listening to an experienced practitioner tell war stories? Alternatively, is leadership taught by experiencing the *on the spot* challenges of dealing with people with diverse opinions and expectations? Is leadership taught by recognizing your reactions to *hot moments* and developing the *stomach* to deal with conflicts in ways that will not irreparably damage relationships and the work that needs to be done? Is leadership taught by listening to the music beneath the words that others are speaking? These were some of the complex questions, which we sorted through during our eight days at Harvard. Case-in-point teaching uses the experience of the group to demonstrate leadership issues and it does not take much disequilibrium to quickly generate situations, which become the *curriculum*. That does not mean that case-in-point is easy or comfortable for the participants, but it is engaging and memorable. It takes you to the limits of your learning where you either step out to challenge your own pre-conceptions about leadership or retreat to self-righteous blame of everyone from the instructors to the methodology to the participants.

An important learning for us was recognizing the difference between thinking you are a leader and exercising leadership. Authority is not leadership, although people with authority sometimes exercise leadership. More difficult and courageous, is trying to exercise leadership without authority. If we think of exercising leadership as raising issues which others may not want to deal with and trying to get a group of people to make changes and do work they are reluctant to do, then we can recognize why it is such a challenge. Heifetz says, "Leadership is a game you lose most of the time." Recognizing that problems do not come neatly packaged and labelled as technical or adaptive is key for anyone who wants to exercise leadership. The diagnostic work of asking questions, finding out the issues and consulting for solutions is the work of leadership. Too often we skip the diagnostic part of problem solving and move directly to trying to apply technical solutions to adaptive problems.

A key learning for us was that experiential learning involving the head *and* the heart along with case-in-point teaching are far more complex than we ever thought. The tremendous importance of acknowledging and attempting to meet the adaptive challenges of our time has become clearly apparent to us. The need to be far more purposeful and focused on defining the work at hand and the courage it takes to recognize the many distractors that systematically support work avoidance are also lessons deeply learned. We will be less inclined to gloss over the many differences that characterize any group, increase the opportunities for debate and allow space for different ideas that may lead us to better, more lasting collective actions.

A memorable statement that will stay with us: "Whatever plan you have is just today's best guess... leadership is more often than not an improvisation." (Heifetz) The theory and practice behind this statement, the music that lies beneath these words, is a deep respect for the complexity of every person. There is also a sense of recognition and gratitude for individuals courageous enough to step away from the pack and call us back to fully immersing our best selves in the work at hand – and helping us to create a new path and a more just and sustainable world.

In theory, and to some degree, in practice, we understand that teaching and learning, like leadership, are intensely complex endeavours. We know that telling is not learning. We know that the principles of adult education (indeed all effective education) require us to acknowledge prior experience and to be practical, relevant and connect the instruction to other disciplines and learning. We know that we all learn in different ways and at different rates. We know that we learn most when we are doing. Yet whether in the hallowed halls of our higher learning institutions or Ontario schools we have not strayed very far from where we were a century ago.

Armed with this prior knowledge, deeply held convictions and a passion for positive change, we three educators from Ontario supported by the Institute for Education Leadership, the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario and the Ministry of Education put ourselves at the frontier of our own learning. We opened ourselves up for the sense of disorientation that comes with confronting our own incompetence as we grappled with the unfamiliar. This was a noble and worthy challenge to enter into an experiment in a supposedly safe (although, we discovered, rather public and competitive) environment for the purpose of improving the quality of leadership learning at the formation level through better principal qualification programs and through ongoing professional development. This experience was truly valued.

We will explore further our deeper learning from our Harvard experience and how we hope it will serve Ontario school and system leaders in future articles.

The Art and Practice of Leadership Development (APL)

APL is an intensive and spirited executive education program offered at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government that is designed to engage leadership consultants, teachers and trainers from around the world as the learners and the leaders that they are. Participants work closely with experienced colleagues and a faculty of distinguished leadership educators as they examine a range of leadership concepts and teaching methods and investigate questions.

Case-in-Point

A unique feature of this program is its emphasis on a provocative delivery technique pioneered by program faculty that uses the class itself as a case from which everyone can learn about the dynamics of leadership. Taking part in this real-time case study enables participants to experience the *perspirational* as well as the *inspirational* aspects of leadership.