



From Left: Marg Connor, Barbara McMorrow, Patty Orecchio

THE HARVARD EXPERIMENT

Exercising Leadership

This is the third and final instalment of a series of articles written by Barbara McMorrow, Marg Connor and Patty Orecchio about their experience at the Harvard Executive Education course, The Art and Practice of Leadership Development. In this final article the authors connect their Harvard learning with the Ontario Leadership Strategy.

“Where do we begin?” We thought we knew the answer. After all we had read the book by Sharon Daloz Parks *Leadership Can Be Taught*. The question was asked by Marty Linsky co-author with Ronald Heifetz of *Leadership on the Line*. Both books are about leadership - how to be a leader and how to teach leadership. Today these topics are at the forefront of education in Ontario. The *Ontario Leadership Strategy*, released on October 3, 2008 places emphasis on effective leadership as an important criteria for school success. The experience of Harvard’s *The Art and Practice of Leadership Development* aligns well with what is currently happening on the provincial education landscape.

At the recent mentoring workshop in Toronto, Premier Dalton McGuinty said that all great organizations whether they are in the business, government or non-profit sector are “learning organizations.” In the Harvard course, participants came from countries all over the world, from business, government, military, non-profit and education fields. They were all highly successful in their own areas, yet they came to learn more about leadership. They wanted to learn how to teach leadership. We are sure many thought, as we did, that this would be an experience similar to other leadership development courses. We were not prepared for how powerful an experience, “case in point” learning is. Case in

point is an experiential methodology that uses the group to illustrate a point around what is relevant to the learning at the core of the lesson. In our group there were two men - one Israeli and one Palestinian. Their relationship was polite and cordial, but we began to notice that each time the Israeli spoke, the Palestinian was the first to respond to his comment, often in disagreement. This cultural tension was not ignored or glossed over but was used by the instructors as a concrete example of how leaders need to be fully aware of their biases and assumptions. Bringing disparate voices and opposing points of view together and not allowing one faction or another to marginalize or “assassinate” the other is an essential skill of leadership.

The second day Ron Heifetz debriefed a very emotional experience from the first evening. We learned our first Harvard lesson. Learning requires a fair amount of humility and acknowledging that we often do not know as much as we think we do (even when we have read the book!). Ron was talking about the inability of the group to respond to Marty Linsky’s question, “Where do we begin?” without breaking into factions and avoiding the work. The previous evening, the group’s response to that question and the subsequent withdrawal of Marty as a figure of authority, was to quickly move from polite, meaningless participation to disorganized, tense inaction. In response to Ron’s debrief, I spoke up and expressed what others were thinking noting that perhaps the chaos of the previous evening would not have happened had the question been clearer and more specific. Ron’s response to my intervention was incredibly rude. He paused to see if I would respond but I was silent.

At the time I felt a sense of failure in allowing the authority in the room to overpower my opinion. However in reflecting on the Harvard experience, I realize that learning should challenge our sense of competency. Knowing something intellectually is not enough, we need to know it “below the neck” as well. Throughout the course we were constantly learning how to “handle the heat” and develop a “stomach for conflict.” Leadership is about being able to make decisions under fire. Learning about leadership takes place in the heart, not only in the head because leadership is personal to individuals. You cannot exercise leadership without having a strong understanding of yourself and your internal motivations. Over the past few years, research on leadership has made learning and leading synonymous.

In our Harvard experience, the instructors did not talk about being a leader but rather about exercising leadership. Heifetz stated that

when you tackle issues beyond your authority you are exercising leadership. Of course, it is always easier to exercise leadership when you have the authority, but it is also important for others to recognize that authority if they are to follow your leadership. In the first edition of *In Conversation* Ontario’s Deputy Minister of Education Steve Marshall stated,

School leaders have a unique and profoundly important role to play in shaping both their own school communities and the quality of the education system. We have all heard that the school leader is second only to the teacher in influencing student outcomes in the school setting. The critical question is what we will do with that insight and how we will take action to realize our full potential.

School leaders have the authority and it is in their actions that

they demonstrate leadership. There are no easy answers when exercising leadership. There is only the complexity of understanding the people and the system, and discovering what losses we are asking people to sustain as we encourage them to change and grow. Leadership, as Heifetz describes it, is not about power and authority. It is about moving people to make progress on tough adaptive challenges that make or break organizations. The most common failure in leadership is a diagnostic failure when we have not identified the real reasons for resistance. Ron Heifetz says, “Leadership can be a low probability high stakes game.”

During our eight days at Harvard the discussion of the practice of leadership often led to a discussion of “the work” and “work avoidance”. In leadership the work is whatever an organization has set out to accomplish. The work in schools is improving student achievement for all students.

For Deputy Minister Marshall and Michael Fullan “the learning is the work.” Both focus on the need to ensure that professional learning is a part of day-to-day work in the school culture and an integral part of daily leadership practice.

In our Harvard discussions of work avoidance, we were chal-

lenged to look at what causes people to avoid the work. If learning is the work, what might be the reasons that people would want to avoid this work? What are the issues that they are running from? Why is it possible for some schools to have a culture of learning embedded in all areas while some schools continue to struggle with the most superficial of professional learning communities? It is in raising and answering some tough questions that the practice of leadership becomes dangerous. Making learning the work is an adaptive challenge that will require changing beliefs, habits and

In essence, we’re saying that the school principal needs to be thoughtful. No situation is so clear that you simply pull a technique off the shelf and use it. You have to ground it in the actual problem. You have to have insights; you have to be ready for surprises; you have to deal with the relationships involved, and all of that requires thinking.
Michael Fullan, 2008

Adaptive challenges require experiments, new discoveries and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community. Without learning new ways – changing attitudes, values and behaviours – people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment.
Ronald Heifetz, 2002

ways of working. Work avoidance activities such as trying to find a technical solution to the problem, blaming authority, creating a scapegoat, creating other distractions, insisting on maintaining established procedures or just tuning out, may need to be addressed. Heifetz said the key question in the practice of leadership is, "How can one counteract the expected work avoidances and help people learn despite resistance?"

Helping others learn and grow is at the heart of leadership in any organization. In education we often talk about the difficulty of change. Michael Fullan talks about managing change so that it will be sustainable. In his work on adaptive challenges, Heifetz focuses not on what needs to change, but on what needs to be conserved. There are three basic tasks in adaptive challenges: identifying what to conserve, identifying what to discard and identifying how to innovate to build capacity. The first task is especially important to ensure that people will accept the adaptation. When a change is too radical it often dies out quickly.

In the *Ontario Leadership Strategy* there is a call for the development of strong school leaders who are able to manage the learning of other adults in all parts of the community. As part of this strategy there is an emphasis on mentoring new school and system leaders. The kind of mentoring which is being called for is specific and intentional, focused on conversations around leadership practices, which influence student learning. Our new school administrators are chosen

for the role because they demonstrate the skills necessary for leadership. However as we learned at Harvard it is not enough to be born with talent unless this talent is refined through on-going teaching (mentoring). An analogy was made between teaching music and teaching leadership. While many musicians are born with natural talent, it can be crippled by poor teaching or it can be nurtured through coaching and mentoring. The Catholic Leadership Framework workshop being delivered across the province references the work of Heifetz through the emphasis on developing self-reflective practitioners who grow and learn in leadership skills, knowledge and attitudes.

Whether the terms "adaptive" and "technical" or "theory" and "technique" are used the concepts are the same. The practice of leadership challenges us to be thinkers, to consider each situation individually, to be aware of the relationships involved, to demonstrate presence and trust, and to not apply a quick-fix answer.

There are no easy answers for those who accept leadership. The emergence of the *Ontario Leadership Strategy* acknowledges the complexity and adaptive challenges involved in school and system leadership. It also reflects an understanding that for effective and sustainable leadership on-going supports are needed. Ontario is poised to embrace an educational culture where leading and learning are synonymous. At the end of the day it will be our students who will benefit enormously from such an approach.



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