

# Charles Cheng's Thoughts on Leadership in Education

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*Charles Cheng, a victim on American Airlines' ill-fated Flight 191, was a member of ASCD's Multicultural Commission. He was on his way home after making a presentation to Teacher Corps Associates, a leadership training program directed by Carl A. Grant, chairperson of the commission. His untimely death inspired the following article.*

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Charles Cheng believed that the exercise of leadership requires radical change.<sup>1</sup> He viewed contemporary leadership as a culmination of the historical trend toward professional management expertise, which he considered elitist to the extent that it focused upon individual or small-group decision making. Cheng challenged the legitimacy of the current orientation of leadership toward management objectives, questioning the ability of a manager-leader to fully perceive and respond to the needs of constituents. Since a leader's constituents often represent diverse ethnic populations, he questioned the efficacy of current leadership training programs that emphasize generalized preparation without specifically acknowledging that leadership will be exercised within a pluralistic society.

Cheng also recognized the importance of viewing leadership as a situation-specific orchestration of the values, goals, and interests of particular cultural groups. He advocated conceptualizing leadership as a collective enterprise that demands a reciprocal relationship between leaders and those working with them.

Cheng viewed pluralism as the undergirding of this collective venture, defining cultural literacy as a prerequisite for forming meaningful working coalitions.

<sup>1</sup> This discussion is based upon our re-creation of a speech Charles Cheng presented to the Teacher Corps Associates in Madison, Wisconsin, on May 24, 1979. This re-creation was greatly facilitated by notes which were contributed by the Teacher Corps Associates.



*Photo: Charles Cheng, The Washington Star.*

tions with diverse groups. He realized that collective effort necessitates the development of a political posture among prospective leaders. He urged leaders to become political advocates, attuned to both the interests of constituent groups and to an image of a more equitable society for all groups. He believed that collaborative working relationships could serve as a springboard for school change by fostering attitudes of altruism and cooperation that could combat the dominant educational ideology of individualism. Furthermore, he believed that collaboration could provide a forum for previously excluded groups.

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### The Leadership Literature

Inspired by Cheng's comments, and drawing upon his conception of leadership, we analyzed some of the recent literature on leadership to determine the extent to which it relates to our pluralistic society.<sup>2</sup> Our analysis revealed that writers are not explicitly addressing leadership from a multicultural perspective. Rather, they are usually doing one of the following:

1. They may implicitly be referring to racial diversity without saying what they actually mean. The following statement is an example:

On today's leadership scene the presence of difference is so visible that to speak of it seems unnecessary. But despite its obvious presence, there are those out front who have not yet learned to respect those who differ nor have they learned to institute practices and procedures which credit differences properly, keep them in perspective, and/or produce settings which maximize the constructive potential of difference. Those who choose to lead must nourish the strength inherent in variation.<sup>3</sup>

This statement leaves it to the reader to make his/her own interpretations of the author's intended message. What kinds of differences are being referred to—racial differences, sex differences, class differences, or other differences?

2. They use a human relations philosophy or moralistic foundation to express their way of dealing with differences. Whereas consideration of both of

these is important to the exercise of leadership, too often a human relations and/or moral philosophy has coexisted with disrespect for those who are culturally different. Such discussions tend to gloss over conflicts and contradictions within the educational system and fail to suggest appropriate and effective leadership action.

3. When discussions of leadership in multicultural settings are presented, they are often presented as atypical situations diverging from what is perceived as normative for the rest of society.

These orientations to leadership are inadequate because they do not directly address leadership for a multicultural society. We offer two important reasons why both theoretical and practical discussions of educational leadership must recognize cultural diversity.

First, academicians have a history of formulating theories of human development and human behavior, grounded in the values and thought-constructs of a particular culture, which are then touted to accurately depict humankind, cross-culturally. Too frequently it is not recognized or articulated that these theories are culture-bound.<sup>4</sup> For example, current leadership theories are rooted within middle-class Anglo-American culture; therefore, one cannot assume these theories to be universally valid models of leadership.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Our review included examining writings on development and use of instruments such as the LBDQ (See, for example: Ralph M. Stogdill and Alvin E. Coons, editors. *Leader Behavior: its Description and Measurement*. Columbus: Ohio State University, 1957); situational leadership (See, for example: Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard. *Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977); and current critiques of and new approaches to leadership study (See, for example: James MacGregor Burns. *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row, 1978; Morgan W. McCall, Jr., and Michael Lombardo. *Leadership: Where Else Can We Go?* Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1978; *Educational Leadership* 33: 1976; and *Educational Leadership* 36: 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Luvern L. Cunningham. "Educational Leadership: The Curious Blend." *Educational Leadership* 33: 323-26; 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Universal application of theories such as Piaget's regarding human cognitive development and Kohlberg's regarding moral development are currently being challenged on this basis. See, for example: Carol R. Ember. "Cross-Cultural Cognitive Studies." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 16: 33-56; 1977; Elizabeth Léonie Simpson. "Moral Development Research: A Case Study of Scientific Cultural Bias." *Human Development* 17: 81-106; 1974; R. S. Peters. "Moral Development: A Plea for Pluralism." In: Theodore Mischel, editor. *Cognitive Development and Epistemology*. New York: Academic Press, 1971. pp. 237-67.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example: Dorothy L. Miller. "Native American Women Leadership Images." *Integrated Education* 16: 37-39; 1978.

Second, it must be understood that the exercise of leadership that does not actively affirm cultural pluralism tends to reinforce existing power relationships and the existing single standard against which different cultures are judged. Although well-intentioned educational leaders continually attempt to "help" culturally different children, what often occurs is that the culture of the children is seen as deficient, or is too simplistically understood. Thus, leaders are often ineffective in fostering changes that are necessary for social equity.

### Suggestions For Action

Charles Cheng recognized the neglect of pluralism in leadership theories. He was in the midst of formulating a new direction for leadership based upon considerations that are similar to those we have raised here. In order to begin to actualize this vision of leadership, and in order to challenge and to alter the existing system, Cheng offered the following suggestions:

1. "Rise above your own ethnicity." Go beyond your individual ethnicity by examining and knowing your own ethnic turf. Recognize your values as a first step toward accepting and affirming those of others.

2. "Be willing to work collaboratively." Recognize that the ideology of individualism dominates our social norms. Acknowledge its limitations—you can't do it all by yourself. Learn not to be hung up on being the expert. Form collective working relationships with diverse groups.

3. "Become politically involved." Discover, for example, the values, beliefs, and interests of the immediate community with which you work. Also investigate and become familiar with organized groups that make up the political network of the larger community.

4. "Teach the powerless to organize." Develop leadership potential within excluded groups by helping them to organize and work collectively. Form reciprocal relationships between leaders and constituents.

5. "Be willing to take risks—you can't remain value-free." Decision making is not neutral. Question whose interests are being served by particular decisions.

6. "Become historically aware of the cultural definition of knowledge. What schools define as knowledge represents the Anglo-American experience. Question whose knowledge this definition leaves out. Wonder what these exclusions mean for the groups that are both included and excluded.

### The New Look

Beginning with this issue we are making some changes in the design of **Educational Leadership**. Most noticeable, of course, is the larger size. Other advantages of the new size include more flexibility in layout and a savings on paper costs. Your comments on any aspects of ASCD publications are always welcome.

The Editors

### A Legacy

Charles left a legacy for action. He believed it was critical that leaders begin to assess their own leadership behavior in order to illuminate the content of their decisions and the process of their actions. He suggested that leaders keep a diary in order to chronicle their decision-making behavior, asking such questions as: Where and how do you make decisions? Whose interests are represented in decision making? The diary should also compare leaders' collectivist and individualistic behavior. Relevant questions to ask might include: How often do you engage in collective behavior? Does working together make a difference?

The leadership beliefs that Cheng articulated do have implications for how leadership should be viewed in the future. He inspired the authors to analyze current thinking on leadership in order to evaluate the attention given to cultural pluralism. Leadership theories, for the most part, have not explicitly included cultural pluralism although the constituency of leaders is pluralistic. Leadership theories need to go beyond individual role and style to consider the potential of collectivist action. We commemorate Charles by joining him in advocating a reexamination of leadership from a pluralistic perspective.



Carl A. Grant (left) is Associate Professor, Marilynne Boyle Ridgway (center) is Project Assistant, Teacher Corps Associates, and Christine E. Sleeter is Project Assistant, Teacher Corps Associates; all at the University of Wisconsin—Madison.

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