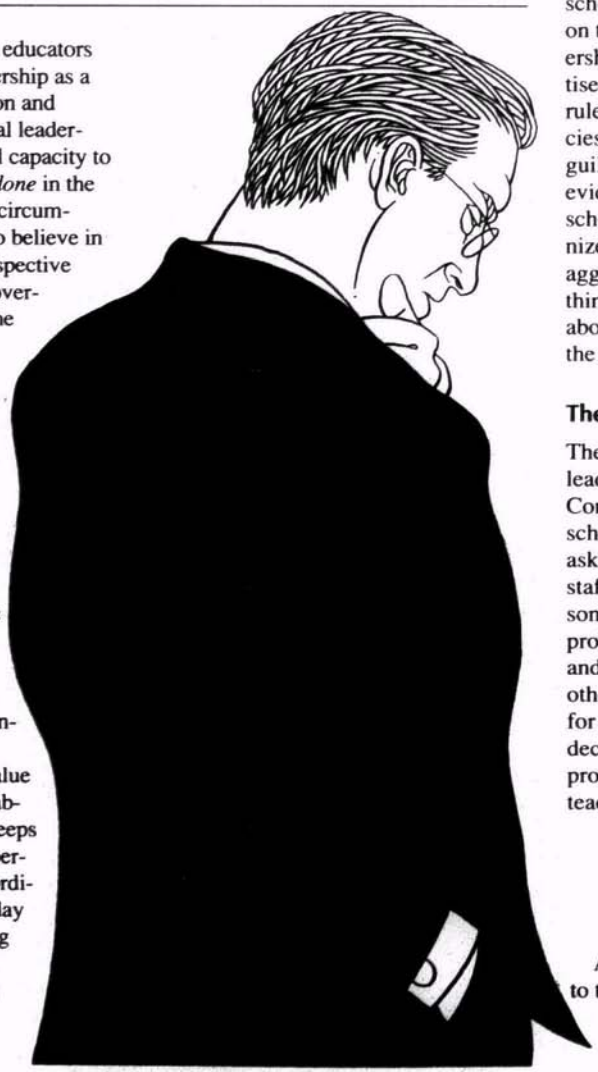
Leadership as a Way of Thinking

Leadership is only one ingredient school executives need to serve our schools well.

DOUGLAS E. MITCHELL AND SHARON TUCKER



Like most Americans, educators tend to think of leadership as a matter of taking action and getting results. They see real leadership as a rare and wonderful capacity to *take charge* and *get things done* in the face of complex and trying circumstances. Leaders, those who believe in this typically American perspective argue, are people who can overcome resistance, shore up the weaknesses of their followers, and produce effective action — accompanied by a great sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

For public education, this view is doubly wrong. First, the assumption that individual leaders can produce quick and dramatic differences in school performance keeps us from focusing on the importance of teamwork and comprehensive school improvement. Second, emphasizing the value of melodramatic, media-grabbing, high-profile actions keeps people from providing desperately needed guidance for ordinary programs and day-to-day school operations. In urging risk-taking behavior, this view of leadership distorts our understanding of the thought processes and concrete actions that make up the real dynamics of school effectiveness.

All too often, today's most popular school improvement policies are based on the assumption that effective leadership is a matter of effort and expertise or that legal mandates and formal rules can produce it. While these policies certainly do create anxiety and guilt among educators, there is little evidence that they produce effective schools. Perhaps it is time to recognize that leadership is less a matter of aggressive action than a way of thinking and feeling—about ourselves, about our jobs, and about the nature of the educational process.

The Spirit of Leadership

The thinking that lies behind effective leadership is complex and varied. Contrast the following comments by school superintendents who were asked to describe how they motivate staff to perform effectively. For some, the dominant leadership problem is one of responding to ideas and program proposals put forward by others. With little study or analysis, for example, one superintendent decides to provide major funding to a program proposed by a group of teachers and says of his decision,

> "Support is the key thing. I wouldn't care if they were trying to turn seawater into ice cream, I would have supported it."

A second superintendent, responds to the same situation by saying,

> "In this district, when teachers, parents, or administrators decide a problem needs to be addressed, we form a study group. Everyone is assigned research articles to read, and when they come together to share what they have learned, they debate, talk about the idea's application, about where we are headed. We bring in outside experts to speak to the group. Only then do we financially support a change and make it part of the district's program."

For other superintendents, staff leadership means finding ways to draw attention to their own versions of good program and policy ideas, rather than reacting to ideas or pressures arising from others. One superintendent in a mid-sized urban school district visits every classroom in the district four times a year. It is a major undertaking, but he makes this "big commitment" in order to interact informally with staff and engage them in discussions of possible new directions. On his visits he makes a point of talking about innovations currently under way in the district.

Another superintendent organizes a yearly management retreat with principals. She explicitly addresses the issue of districtwide goal setting and insists on discussing with everyone district program priorities and strategies for achieving them. She believes that it is crucial that everyone be able to philosophically "buy into" the district priorities and that all have a feeling of "being in it together."

So much variability exists among these superintendents and in their work settings that it is difficult to get a handle on the characteristics of successful influence over instructional programs. Settings range from large to small districts, from urban to rural environments. Occasionally boards of education or labor problems make some climates contentious. Others have relatively peaceful settings where board members have long tenures or have broad agreement on basic goals.

The superintendents, both men and women, some in their 40s and some in their 60s, also vary in personality and style. Their personal characteristics, their organizational environments, and the kinds of communities in which they work influence their leadership style and emphasis.

One common feature is clear, however. These superintendents, like the principals in each of their districts, seek to control, or at least significantly influence, school performance. How they seek to gain influence varies, as do the goals toward which they direct their efforts. If we could clarify the sources and aims of executive influence in public education, we would add much to the current debates over how school performance can be improved.

Superintendents' leadership springs from the way they think. Effective action follows from effective thinking in ways that are far too richly textured and varied to be captured in any list of supposedly effective leadership strategies. For this reason, recent studies of school effectiveness have often found it necessary to talk of the "ethos" or "culture" of the school. Cultures guide thinking and feeling and influence behavior by helping people to get a "feel for" the situation in which they find themselves. Cultures create and constrain executive behavior by generating values rather than directives. They create social norms and draw attention to opportunities for action; they do not specify exactly what to do or how to do it.

Leadership is less a matter of aggressive action than a way of thinking and feeling — about ourselves, about our jobs, and about the nature of the educational process.

School performance is just as closely tied to competent administration, effective supervision, and dynamic management as it is to aggressive leadership. Indeed, educators who succeed in producing a balanced integration of the work orientations and actions implied in these four concepts are much more likely to stimulate high performance in their schools than those who give themselves to a one-dimensional leadership or management emphasis.

Transactional vs. Transformative Leadership

As vividly expressed in James McGregor Burns' seminal analysis of leadership,[1] some cultures emphasize transactional control through the distribution of incentives, while others work by transforming the goals and aspirations of organization members.

The first type of culture creates a system of economic, political, or psychological incentives for hard work and successful performance of assigned tasks. Transactional leadership only works, unfortunately, when both leaders and followers understand and agree about the important tasks to be performed. To acquire leadership in such a cultural setting it is also necessary to get control over the incentive system — to be able to

reward high performance or, if necessary, to punish those who refuse to cooperate.

Transformational leadership, by contrast, arises when leaders are more concerned about gaining overall cooperation and energetic participation from organization members than they are in getting particular tasks performed. If leaders are working in cultural settings where goals are unclear or organizational members do not agree about them, effective leadership requires an approach that transforms the feelings, attitudes, and beliefs of their followers. Compliance is not enough under these circumstances; it is important to get followers to believe in themselves and in the goals of the organization. Transformational leaders are "people oriented"; rather than focus on tasks and performance, they build relationships and help followers develop goals and identify strategies for their accomplishment.

The difference between transactional and transformational control systems can be seen in superintendents. Transactional superintendents seek indirect control through attention to the design of district organizational structures. They give careful thought to how organizational structures serve to facilitate or impede the work of the school staff. Transformational superintendents think quite differently. They give primary attention to the staffs rather than the structures.

Transactional superintendents, concerned with structures, concentrate on defining job functions and on developing district policies and procedures. They believe that if they succeed in improving organizational operations, school instructional improvement will follow. They concentrate on creating and stabilizing district programs. They have a high sensitivity to hierarchy and standardization of practices.

Transformational superintendents, concerned with staff skills and beliefs, direct their efforts to building and strengthening organizational norms and attitudes. They strive to establish common meaning systems, believing that quality education will arise when professional staff agree about educational goals and the most effective strategies for their attainment.

School performance is just as closely tied to competent administration, effective supervision, and dynamic management as it is to aggressive leadership.

Frontier vs. Settled Cultures

Cross-cutting the transaction/transformation dimension of relationship between leaders and followers is the cultural role of the school organization. The primary issue in this second cultural dimension is whether the schools are seen as part of an established, successful system for the socialization of the young or as institutions in need of redirection and reform, restructuring to meet new conditions or reach new goals.

In some communities and in some historical periods, schools enjoy broad community support based on a widely shared consensus about the purposes and processes of education. In the beginning of the 19th century, for example, there was a near-universal enthusiasm for schools as the source of economic opportunity and civic culture. Even today, schools serving middle- and upper-class families in many suburban communities continue to enjoy widespread support as a natural adjunct to family and community socialization. More typically, however, today's schools are troubled institutions — they are often labeled failures and challenged to change their goals while at the same time radically improving performance in traditional areas of emphasis.

The difference between these two cultural settings is much like the difference between frontier life and settled communities. In frontier cultures life is rough, danger is everywhere, and groups have to band together for mutual support and protection. Frontier leadership emphasizes culture building and problem solving — individual differences may be respected, but there is an obvious need for common experiences and a shared commitment to the emerging community.

In settled cultures, by contrast, well-established norms and shared beliefs interpret ordinary activities and guide the inhabitants. These same beliefs baffle newcomers and prevent minority group members from experiencing full membership in the community. Stable schools with settlement cultures develop programs that are sensible; tasks and relationships are both well-specified. Effective leadership in a settlement culture rests on coordination and expertise — programs can be planned in detail, and task assignments can be fully specified. In this type of cultural setting the most

productive approach to leadership often involves concentrating on recruiting good staff members and coordinating support services — leaving work on core tasks to staff experts.

Culture and Work Role

The two cultural dimensions just described intersect to define supervision, administration, management, and leadership — the four key terms in the lexicon of control over school performance (see fig. 1). When schools are well established and their cultural role is settled, supervision and administration are the dominant processes. When confidence is lost and new frontiers are being crossed, dynamic management and aggressive leadership are required. Supervision shares with management (rather than administration) a common reliance on incentive systems and transactional control. When organization members lack common incentives and goals and need to be energized and engaged in transforming interpersonal relationships in order to define or restructure their work activities, administration and leadership become dominant functions.

Transformational leadership arises when leaders are more concerned about gaining overall cooperation and energetic participation from organization members than they are in getting particular tasks performed.

Changing circumstances and changing beliefs about the schools encourage educators to give primary emphasis to one rather than another of these basic work orientations. As superintendents, principals, and other school staff respond to the underlying cultural dimensions, they change their thinking about how school performance should be controlled. With these changes in thinking about effectiveness come basic changes in conceptions of effective teaching, strategies for school improvement, and beliefs about how to influence the work behavior of school staff members.

Supervision. Educators who see the school as a stable, broadly supported social institution and who think about interpersonal influence in transactional, incentive-based ways, will give primary emphasis to supervision in defining their own role. Supervisors in these environments tend to assume that educational goals are obvious to everyone. If there is difficulty it is because some people are unable or unwilling to work effectively to attain them. The supervisory approach gives superintendents and principals responsibility for identifying specific tasks and directing staff in how each is to be performed. They closely monitor staff to ensure that directions are being followed and that performance is high.

The supervisory orientation to school effectiveness brings with it the belief that teachers can be effective if they will diligently implement good standard classroom practices. Within this cultural view, good teachers are seen as loyal laborers working on tasks defined by curriculum experts and overseen by principals. School improvement is a matter of teacher diligence and conscientiousness rather than creativity or spontaneity. Student achievement is equated with mastering materials, and teaching effectiveness with careful implementation of established programs. Supervisors subscribe to the world view expressed in most reforms adopted after the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) — better schooling results from longer hours, more requirements, stronger mandates, and, above all, an accountability system that ties incentives directly to measured student achievement.

FIGURE 1

CULTURE AND WORK ROLE DEFINITIONS

	Transactional	Transformational
Settlement Cultures • Standardized Work Activities	Supervisor	Administrator
Frontier Cultures Problem Solving Work Activities	Manager	Leader

Administration. Educators who feel that their control over meaningful incentives is weak, or who simply believe that school effectiveness rests more on the attitudes of teachers and students than on the implementation of specific programs, will adopt an administrative approach to influencing school performance. The administrative work orientation shares with the supervisory one the settlement culture's confidence that the overall goals of education are well understood and supported. These administrators do not feel a need to redirect teachers or students to new learning objectives or to reconsider the efficacy of existing school programs.

From this perspective, high-quality

teaching depends on giving teachers more professional autonomy. Effective teachers creatively diagnose student learning styles and problems and develop their own techniques for encouraging achievement within established programs and practices. Indeed, those who adopt an administrative orientation to school improvement believe that teaching and learning are rather private and individualized processes — not amenable to either direct oversight or explicit rewards and sanctions. Curriculum and child development specialists help ensure effective instruction by identifying and helping to remediate children's special learning problems. To increase their effectiveness, professional teachers and specialists form into a cohesive team. Administrators give a lot of attention to interpersonal dynamics — they talk about the importance of good communication and emphasize their role in recruiting, supporting, and coordinating staff activities. When they identify performance problems, they make every effort to create a transformational relationship with teachers and students. They use counseling, staff development, and day-to-day interactions to ensure that their staffs fully participate in the established program.

Melodramatic claims about school failures are a basic ingredient in the shift from the management focus of the '70s and '80s to the emphasis on restructuring and transformational leadership in the 1990s.

Management. When educators sense that broad social support for education is no longer available, when change is more important than implementation of established programs, it makes sense to shift from supervision to management. Managers, like supervisors, rely more on transactional than transformational relationships. They see effective teaching as the result of competence and skill. Task definition is more important than nurturing interpersonal relationships. For the manager, teaching is a skilled craft and is improved by careful program design and application of sophisticated instructional techniques. Good programs are those that are fully researched and carefully planned. Where supervisors tend to think of getting people to work harder, managers think they need to work smarter. They value effective analysis of school performance problems and staff training. Managers are likely to emphasize the importance of performance indicators and to want explicit measures of school productivity.

Leadership. Where weakened social and cultural support for the schools is accompanied by a belief that high performance depends on transforming student and teacher attitudes and beliefs (not just redirecting their behavior), leadership becomes the dominant theme in school improvement. Leaders, like managers, recognize that support for their organizations depends upon making qualitative changes in their performance. Unlike managers, however, leaders do not believe that either the incentive system or the knowledge base for effective performance is adequately developed.

Transformational leaders see themselves as responsible more for redefining educational goals than for implementing existing programs.

A belief in the transformational leadership approach to school improvement leads easily to concepts like "restructuring" or "re-inventing" school organizations. Transformational leaders see themselves as responsible more for redefining educational goals than for implementing existing programs. They believe that high-performance teachers are more like creative artists than skilled craft workers. Teachers are talented experts. Because of their creative talents, they know what is important for children and how to make schools work. Leadership-oriented executives assume, however, that teaching talent becomes effective only when it is integrated into cohesive, coordinated activity. Their effectiveness depends on everyone working together, developing and then pursuing common goals.

Leadership-oriented executives think of high performance the way a drama coach or concert master does — the important thing is to solicit full engagement and release energy. School improvement is, therefore, a matter of realigning school programs with the needs and interests of communities, families, students, and school staff. These transformational leaders see the central issue as commitment rather than competence.

Of course, effective teachers will need to be competent, but the key problem for improved schools is harnessing teacher competence to a new set of program goals.

Leadership is Only Part of the Story

It is not surprising that today's education policymakers and school reformers are talking about the critical importance of leadership for principals and superintendents. They are reflecting their own belief that schools have to change program goals in order to prepare workers for an international economy and citizens for a turbulent and pluralistic civic culture. As the superintendents we studied made crystal clear, however, transformational leadership is not the only route to improved school performance. Melodramatic claims about school failures are a basic ingredient in the shift from the management focus of the '70s an '80s to the emphasis on restructuring and transformational leadership in the 1990s. It is vitally important to recognize that failures and shortcomings, just like success and high performance, come in many different forms. Where the problem is changing goals and redirecting belief systems, all shortcomings will be interpreted as comprehensive and catastrophic. The "little failures" of poor organization and technically weak programs may ultimately be the most important, however. And these little failures can be more easily remedied through energetic management, supportive administration, or directive supervision than by the melodrama of charismatic leadership.

Public education and the nation's children will be well served if school executives devote as much skill and energy to supervising well-established programs, administering to the needs of teachers and students, and managing the utilization of scarce resources as they are now being urged to spend on mobilizing and focusing energy on sweeping revisions and fundamental changes. As important as it is to redefine educational goals and restructure school programs to pursue them, this kind of frontier leadership is only one part of a balanced approach to creating and sustaining high performance in schools. □

Authors' note: The leadership concepts developed in this article are taken from our studies of principal and superintendent effectiveness. The focus of these studies have been on how these school executives succeed in influencing teacher behavior and school performance.

[1]J. M. Burns, (1978), *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row).

Douglas E. Mitchell is Professor of Education and Director of the California Educational Research Cooperative, School of Education, University of California, Riverside, Riverside, CA 92521. **Sharon Tucker** is Deputy Superintendent of Instructional Services, Riverside Unified School District, Riverside, CA 92521.