



On Leadership: A Conversation with James MacGregor Burns

Ron Brandt

James MacGregor Burns is author of a number of books about political leaders, including Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox and Presidential Government: The Crucible of Leadership, as well as his newest, Leadership. In this interview, he explains how his ideas apply to leaders in education.

Brandt: How do your ideas about leadership apply to education?

Burns: Very directly. After all, I'm mainly a teacher myself, at a college that emphasizes teaching.

My theory is based partly on the work of Maslow,¹ who said in brief that as fundamental needs are satisfied, higher needs develop. I'm interested in what happens when leaders—in this case teachers—deal with followers (students) in such a way as to help raise them through higher and higher stages of self-realization.

Brandt: So a teacher must be sensitive to the level of needs a particular student might have and try to respond?

Burns: That's right; partly because of what happens to the teacher. Leadership is an engagement between the leader and the follower. As the student (follower) rises to a higher level

of needs, that in turn affects the teacher (leader) and in some degree changes the teacher.

An example from political leadership is Franklin Roosevelt. He became more focused in philosophy and launched the enduring New Deal in 1935 after having felt responses from the public generally in 1933 and 1934. In a school situation, the teacher has to respond to the student in a personal way. Of course, it takes time to deal with a student as an individual. I don't mean on a "cream puff" basis; it's not just "being nice." I'm talking about getting beneath the surface to the real person underneath.

Brandt: What about supervisors? If they display leadership in their relations with teachers, does that carry over?

Burns: Let me say first that leadership is found at every level; among "followers" as well as leaders. The ultimate engagement between leader and fol-

lower is where the followers become leaders. There is a good deal of evidence from humanistic psychology that leaders can have that kind of dynamic impact on people. So supervisors can produce leaders among teachers if they—the supervisors—themselves act like leaders.

Brandt: You make a distinction between a leader and a powerholder. Some educational administrators feel they are hemmed in by teacher unions, community groups, state and federal governments, and local boards of education. In short, they feel powerless. Do you have to have power to be a leader?

Burns: I think so, but it depends on how you define power.

First, I concede that in the American system we have unduly bound our leaders. It's inherent in our federal Constitu-

¹ Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954.



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tion and at other levels of government. One thing we should do in this country, if we believe in democratic leadership, is to re-evaluate our institutions; to ask whether we give enough leeway to the gifted leaders—to able principals, for example.

Sometimes, though, leaders are overly intimidated by what appears to be the power of the opposition. For example, a politician may court success by appealing to voters' concerns about material things: taxes, spending. Occasionally, someone—John Kennedy did this in his inaugural speech—wins support by asking us to rise above material needs.

What I'm getting at is the way the great leader, instead of responding to the superficial attitudes and conventional views of followers, the way an opinion poll would, gets through to the whole complex of basic motives and attitudes that make up the individual.

Brandt: You could be interpreted as saying, "I know better than you what you really need." That sounds like paternalism.

Burns: No, the leader cannot play God. That can be avoided by pitting leaders against other leaders in conflict situations. I think Roosevelt responded to the basic needs of the American people in 1936 because he faced competition from business and newspapers in a fair and open election. In a sense, that election validated the argument that Roosevelt was appealing to a more authentic level of needs than his opponents. That doesn't always work, of course, but it usually does.



Brandt: Suppose a superintendent of schools is told by members of the local board of education to tighten controls; to see that teachers either *make* students learn or be fired; in short, to act as a powerholder. The superintendent believes that what you are describing is a more productive approach, but is legally accountable to the board. What is leadership in such a situation?

Burns: Well, you're describing a conflict situation. I can't play God there myself. I would say that as long as the issue is out in the open and there is a rough balance of power between the two—one or the other doesn't just decree what is to be done—I would expect that reasonably intelligent decisions might result.

Brandt: So if people have a sense of what is needed, they needn't just bow to what they are told to do, but speak out for what they believe is right?

Burns: Sometimes leaders are so preoccupied with the obstacles they face that they forget

the potential they have to appeal to the public as a whole. Members of the school board appeal to the public; that is to be expected because they are elected officials. But the superintendent has the right to do the same.

The usual response to that is, "Oh, gee, that means a fight. We don't want a fight." I think that in a democracy fights are exactly what we *do* want. I'm not talking about violence in the streets. I'm talking about open debate over fundamental questions. It may be tough for a particular administrator who loses out, and I don't make light of that, but sometimes leaders forget the power they have in appealing to the fundamental and enduring needs of the people.



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