

Editor's Note:

This is a great article for both new and experienced Superintendents of Schools.

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**"The joke in the education recruitment industry is that all school-executive search committees are looking for 'God on a good day.'"**

## **Seven Surprises for School Leaders**

**By Patrick F. Bassett**

**The challenges of business leadership closely resemble those faced by school leaders.**

Twice a year, a dozen new CEOs, recently appointed to companies with at least a billion dollars a year in business, assemble at the Harvard Business School for a "boot camp" for new business leaders. The tutors for these chief executive officers are three of the business school's resident experts: strategist Michael Porter, leadership scholar Nitin Nohria, and governance expert Jay Lorsch. *The Harvard Business Review*, in its October 2004 issue, reported on this gathering. The article, called "Seven Surprises for New CEOs," is drawn from what these business professors say *they* have learned from their boot-camp classes—the elements that make a new CEO's job uniquely challenging.

I was struck by this list of seven troublesome elements in business leadership because it so closely resembled the kinds of challenges new school heads, principals, and superintendents face. So I offer my own reading of these on-the-job surprises, hoping that, for new school leaders, knowing the parallels with business may at least temper the disequilibrium each surprise is certain to cause.

### **1. You Can't Run the Company.**

While new CEOs generally have had plenty of experience running large and complicated components of their businesses and relish the chance to run the whole organization, they are often surprised by the fact that they can't monitor everything—and don't *know* everything—any more.

What CEOs discover is that much of the direct control has to be exchanged for more indirect control: through the setting of values, tone, and direction; by developing strategies and goals; and by hiring good people, pushing team development, and rewarding staff members.

First-time school heads, principals, and superintendents are often surprised that public visibility is so important in their jobs, and that it's hard in their new role to turn down invitations. Soon they discover that almost every daytime, evening, and weekend slot is taken up with public appearances or work with external constituencies. The revelation for these leaders is that they now must *schedule and refuse to cancel* the most critical obligations, such as weekly meetings with the leadership team to analyze successes and failures and develop the tactical approaches to defined strategies for improving the school. Weekly times for meetings with small groups of teachers or parents should also be scheduled, as well as periodic "town meetings" with larger groups of constituents.

## **2. Giving Orders Is Very Costly.**

Power may be concentrated in the hands of the CEO, but even judicious unilateral use of it comes at a stiff price. By the very exercise of power, a business leader loses it because progress is slowed. So the effective CEO must make certain that the mechanisms for shared power and consultation are finely tuned.

Nor has top-down, "command and control" leadership worked well in education. The culture of academe functions best when collegiality exists. And that kind of culture is dependent on the dispersal of power. Structure must be flat rather than hierarchical, and decisionmaking largely consensual. The school leader should mentor, model, and develop middle management to the point where the leadership team functions first and foremost as a collection of individuals: team members. The leadership team should develop a strategic posture, seek consensus around the table, and make decisions as a team. Then they must be publicly united on whatever issue is addressed.

## **3. It's Hard to Know What's Really Going On.**

CEOs are flooded with information. But finding it impossible to know *everything*, they sense how difficult it is to assess which pieces of information are reliable.

What they need are two vehicles of institutional honesty: external mechanisms that reveal the unvarnished truth about the organization, and subordinates who will share, without fear of reprisal, what the management guru Jim Collins calls in his book *Good to Great* the "brutal facts."

The history of organizations is all too often marked by turning points where leaders are oblivious to "what's really going on." School leaders should survey their constituents annually (asking, like former New York City Mayor Edward I. Koch, "How are we doing?"). Surveying staff members also helps check the pulse of organizational culture and climate. All leaders need at least one or two "confidantes, mavens, or connectors," as Malcolm Gladwell describes them in *The Tipping Point*, people who unflinchingly know what the buzz is and don't mince words in conveying it. The successful school leader will develop an open relationship with these "insiders."

## **4. You Are Always Sending a Message.**

It often comes as a surprise to new CEOs that their every move, inside and outside the company, is scrutinized and interpreted (or misinterpreted). Moreover, they find, different constituencies respond to the same message in various, sometimes confounding ways. For a CEO, the "microphone is always on," so that even informal, speculative, "trial balloon" remarks or ideas get amplified. Clear, consistent, simply crafted messages, brought to life with powerful stories, are the best means for them to communicate effectively.

In education, much gnashing of teeth surrounds the question of which decisions are "owned" by the faculty and which are not. The wise school leader makes clear periodically those things that are to be decided collectively, and those that the leader will decide with input from the administration and the board. Effective school leaders should ponder the following: What stories about us capture our essence, our mission, our value system? What story can I tell that will embody and convey a principle we need to embrace if we are to prosper and grow?

## **5. You Are Not the Boss.**

While the CEO may be top dog within the company, he or she still reports to a board that has the ultimate power. They, in the end, hire and fire the CEO; set evaluation procedures and compensation schedules; countermand strategic directions; and more. Corporate boards have

grown in strength and assertiveness recently, given the legal and governmental expectations for greater transparency and accountability.

The wise CEO makes board meetings an exercise in developing a shared vision and shared responsibility for strategy-making.

Like CEOs, school leaders are increasingly at the mercy of more assertive boards. The skill with which they “manage up” determines not only the forward movement of their schools, but also their own longevity in office. The school leader should view the board chair as a mentor or coach, recognizing that sharing both the vision and leadership with that person—and through him or her, with the board—is the game plan most likely to produce victories for all.

## **6. Pleasing Shareholders Is Not the Goal.**

When new to the job, CEOs tend to assume that pleasing shareholders is what counts most. Unfortunately, defining the job’s goal this way may not be in the long-term interests of the company, either financially or strategically. Shareholders are transient, holding financial interest in a given company, on average, for less than a year. So the perspective they offer can be very short-term.

The CEO has to lead the board to a mutual agreement about the long-term strategies and goals—and must know when board members’ short-term second-guessing can be ignored.

Schools don’t have “stockholders” or “shareholders,” but they certainly have investors and “stakeholders.” And they, too, often are more interested in the current operation than the future of the educational enterprise. School leaders have literally thousands of people offering them “insights” and “strong recommendations” on the scores of operational and programmatic matters that arise daily in schools. What they need is a small group of dedicated people—a board—to see that their job is future-focused. Board members should establish the policies and funding that create better schools for the next generation. For a strategic school board, the focus of leadership is on its members’ children’s *children’s* schools.

## **7. You Are Still Only Human.**

CEOs are seen as, or are expected to be, superheroes. The power and prestige of the job can be seductive, and can encourage overly ambitious goals. Power can even lead to acts of hubris. Ambitious new CEOs can seriously underestimate the demands of the job and the toll they take on personal and family life.

Top business leaders have to come to terms with the fact that they can’t do everything well, and that the job is more bruising (physically, psychologically, and emotionally) than they ever imagined. Finding outlets outside of work is essential to their well-being and balance.

The joke in the education recruitment industry is that all school-executive search committees are looking for “God on a good day.” The danger is that, once “anointed,” a school leader can begin to believe his or her good press. Even more destructive is martyrdom to the job: Some school leaders just do not make time for themselves or their families, and the cost can be very high. They should make specific commitments to themselves and their families: “No matter what, I’m going to exercise every morning before work.” “I’m going to let my kids choose something for us to do together this weekend.” It’s also a good idea for new school leaders to keep in touch with their mentors, even to invite them to be their “executive coaches” for the first year on the job.

The *Harvard Business Review* article concludes that CEOs “must manage context, rather than focus on daily operations.” They must learn to exercise influence indirectly, by way of strategy, mentoring, and communicating values, so that they “create the conditions that help

others make the right decisions." CEOs set the tone and example, so others can see what is expected and how they should behave. The leader must understand that position doesn't convey power; example does. In business, the expectation is that perpetual demonstration and modeling earns one the "moral mandate to lead."

School leaders must do the same, in spades. The good news is that most school boards recognize that, beyond budgets and fund raising, personnel decisions and zoning-board meetings (not to mention the daily conflagrations that erupt in those volatile places called schools), the responsibilities of school leaders involve maintaining a salubrious climate and building a culture that supports teachers and makes it possible for children to learn.

If the new school leader gets that right, most else will follow in due course.

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