

First Time in a Position of Authority

Beginning school administrators face a predictable set of professional challenges that are very personal. By addressing these challenges as opportunities for learning and growth, new administrators can become leaders.

BY BARRY JENTZ

The word “boss” often carries a negative connotation, while the word “leader” is positive. All of us aspire to be leaders, not bosses. But using the word “leader” here would invite attention away from a seldom-explored reality: To be a leader in an organization, you must first be comfortable in a position of authority — as a boss. To gain comfort, as well as confidence and competence as a boss, you’ll face a number of predictable interpersonal and emotional growth challenges that you must use to expand your mind-and-skill set rather than retrench into defensiveness.

1. THE DYNAMICS OF AUTHORITY

As a first time principal or administrator, you’ll be on the receiving end of the dynamics of authority in your interaction with others, those who report to you and others whose lives are touched by your decisions. How will you know the dynamics of authority? When you’re with people who work under you, you’ll see, hear, and feel conversation change from inclusion to exclusion in words, tone, demeanor, and content. People will:

- Wait for you to speak;
- Speak to you, not others in a meeting;
- Change the subject when you enter a room;
 - Talk in a different tone, often about different content than before you were boss;
 - Constantly interpret what you say, often attributing conscious negative intent;
 - Scour your words for inconsistencies, contradictions, double-meanings, misstatements, and mistakes;
 - Quote you mistakenly and out of context;
 - Give you feedback that makes no sense and is very hurtful;

- Attribute words and ideas to you that you don't recognize;
- Assume that you have much more power to change people and things than you actually do; and
- Say to you, "And what are you going to do about that!"

When you interact with people who don't report to you but must live with the consequences of your decisions (parents and others in the community), you'll find that people will sometimes:

- Demand that you do what they want, quite apart from reason;
- Threaten to "go over your head";
- Invite you to events solely because of your role;
- Expect you to be instantly available and always accessible;
- Gang up on you to exercise influence;
- Criticize you in public e-mails, letters to the editor, etc.;
- Defer to you in public and work against you in private; and
- Say wonderful things about you and give you gifts.

2. CONFUSION IS THE NAME OF THE GAME

In your intrapersonal world, you'll suddenly spend a lot of time with the onerous task of wondering whether others are reacting to you or to your role as an authority figure. The task is onerous because you'll inevitably be thrown back on yourself as never before and experience a heightened questioning of how much of what is going on is "me" and how much is "them responding to my role" or the "situation."

Answers to the questions raised by the dynamics of authority won't come quickly or easily, so you'll spend more of your internal time confused. Your confusion will be exacerbated by the simple fact that you'll face lots of problems that are inherently confusing because they don't have easy, technical answers (Heifetz and Linsky 2002). Initially, you'll tend to be unaware of your confusion or ashamed of it, so you'll hide it and bluff, deny, blame, or take charge, reacting to complex problems with easy, technical answers, which won't work. As a result, you'll be more confused. So, you'll need to look inward and take on the task of discovering and changing your attitude toward confusion so that you experience it not

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as a liability but as a resource, as a starting place for personal and organizational learning (Jentz and Murphy 2005).

3. FEELING POWERLESS IS PREDICTABLE

Your confusion may be compounded by the unsettling discovery that a position of authority actually leaves you feeling powerless to accomplish the significant things that led you to take the position in the first place. Occasions for this unsettling discovery will be the refusal of people who report to you to respond to your positive intentions, directives, and powers of persuasion. Such occasions can be many and varied. Only a few examples are: You may be an outsider who is taking over a position in a system where insiders were regularly promoted; you

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may be an insider who must supervise your friends or a young person who must supervise older people; you may not believe in political appointments and yet work where political appointments are the norm; and, without fail, you'll have to supervise poor-performing people who will have power to frustrate your efforts to get them to change. All of these situations arouse feelings of powerlessness that are jolting, not because you can't anticipate them in your mind, but because of the depth of the pain.

Other occasions will arouse feelings of powerlessness, in particular those occasions where you discover that your new position doesn't give you the freedom to act alone, for example, to correct the obvious mistakes you saw made by your prior boss or the ridiculous deficiencies in the organization that were so clear to you in your position as an individual contributor. Where you expected to get things done independently through the authority of your position, you'll find instead that your ability to get things done depends on people outside of your unit of the organization, over whom you have no control. Expecting the freedom of acting alone, you'll encounter the restriction of interdependence (Hill 2007) and the consequent need to consult and build relationships. That reality of interdependence and its restrictions will trigger frustration and feelings of powerlessness.

Feeling powerless doesn't have to result in behav-

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ing as if you are, in fact, powerless and must forfeit your hopes for improving performance. Curiously though, you must respect your unwanted feelings of powerlessness. Accept rather than reject them. To get started in doing so, remember that leadership requires courage. Think of your feelings of powerlessness as a by-product of your courage and commitment to learn the realities of leadership, instead of automatically assuming that your feelings are a self-evident sign of your failure to act independently. Use your feelings as a prompt to stop, step back, get feedback, and open yourself to questioning the as-

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sumptions that you inevitably bring to your first leadership position, such as, "I'll be able to act independently." Question and change such assumptions, and as a result you'll feel powerless less often, and, when you do, you'll have a perspective from which you can change your view of yourself from being a self-evident failure to a person with the courage to learn about the reality of interdependence.

4. AM I A FRAUD?

When you've exhausted your repertoire of ways to get a poor performer to improve, you may feel powerless. On the other hand, when you tell someone to do something and the person salutes, you may be surprised that you feel like a fraud. Feeling like a fraud is predictable because even though you haven't been a boss, you must behave as if you have, right from the outset. Your behavior must necessarily be "out ahead" of your emotions. In the gap between your required, authoritative behavior and lack of emotional readiness, a fraud voice often inserts itself. For example, you might give someone advice about a difficult matter and watch as if you were but an onlooker as the person thanks you and leaves to act on your advice. Momentarily, you might begin to think, "Is she really going to do that? I'm not sure I believe what I said!" When people do what you say only because you said it, your emotions can say silently, "Hey, it's just me. You don't have to take my word for it!"

Comfort yourself by remembering that, on occasion, you can't avoid feeling like a fraud any more than you can avoid feeling powerless. The feelings themselves aren't a problem, but your relationship to them can be. Feeling that you are fraud can become problematic if you bow to the voice in your head that accuses you of not being fit for leadership,

because you'll start trying to get rid of the feeling, and that futile effort will rob you of energy. Alternatively, you'll feel compassion and renewed energy if you say to yourself, "Feeling like a fraud isn't a sign of weakness or unfit for leadership. Emotional readiness for authority lags behavior, necessarily. I need time to develop the emotional muscle to stand behind myself."

5. WITH SEPARATION COMES LOSS

More subtle but no less problematic, you may experience a sense of loss and sadness that accompanies separation as other people's actions exclude rather than include you. You can recognize the dynamics of separation within yourself if you hear yourself thinking, or perhaps even saying, "But I'm the same person I was yesterday, before I took this job!?"

Naturally, you'll likely yearn to be included as you sense exclusion. Put differently, you might feel isolated and alone as you yearn for connection. To use a psychological phrase, do not "act out" your yearning for connection. In fact, you aren't "just me" anymore, and if you express such thoughts other than to intimates, you'll lose trust and credibility and the opportunity to lead. People under you will think that you're the only one among them who doesn't get it, and those who take the risk of saying so won't tend to repeat themselves after you talk more about being "just me" or "I'm only another member of the team." They'll know what you don't: That you're blind to the dynamics of authority and your own lack of readiness and, as a result, are dangerous.

6. PAIN DOESN'T HAVE TO MEAN SOMETHING IS WRONG

Listen to your inner voice to see if you recognize:

- Yearning to be included as you sense exclusion — put differently, you might feel isolated and alone as you yearn for connection;
- A sense of confusion about a lot of things;
- Feelings of powerlessness (or inadequacy or doubts about your abilities);
- Wondering if you're a fraud;
- Feeling sad and experiencing loss even as you think (and people tell you) you should be happy; and
- Doubting your decision to take the position, wishing that you could throw off the "robes" of authority and rejoin — to be again a "just me."

Again, remind yourself that these internal experiences don't mean something is wrong with you. Others have been there before, and still others will be in the future. To become comfortable, confident, and competent as a boss, you must struggle through

ARTICLE AT A GLANCE

Anyone who moves into a “boss” position for the first time faces a predictable set of professional challenges that are very personal. Recognizing and anticipating these challenges will enable these new “bosses” to adapt more quickly to their new positions and help them become leaders.

a transition from knowing and valuing yourself for your technical work (as a teacher, architect, computer technician) to knowing and valuing yourself for your managerial work. The two kinds of work are unimaginably different, and we can’t know that profound difference until we make the switch. (And after we make the switch, we can’t explain the difference to friends who have chosen not to be a boss.)

7. GROW UP TO BEING “ABOVE”

Choosing to be a boss results in having people under you in the organizational hierarchy. The phrase “people under you” makes some people who choose a boss position uncomfortable. If your insides squirmed when you read the word “under,” you may struggle with being “above” people, though you have chosen to be so by becoming a boss. “Above” in a hierarchy means that you have more power over others’ lives than they have over yours. So, naturally, they’re more vulnerable in their relationship to you than you are to them, *quite apart from how vulnerable you may actually feel.*

You must come to terms with the fact that you have moved into an “above” role and have no choice but to learn and grow the internal muscle required to be “above.” Such growth may be difficult because being “above” might connote “bad” and call to your mind a bad-boss experience before choosing to lead. If so, you run the risk of rejecting the bad-boss experience and, in the process, rejecting the very legitimacy of positional authority, often by trying to give it to others in the name of “empowerment.” Of course, you can go in the opposite direction, as well, where instead of rejecting the power that comes with the position, you relish it and abuse it by using it unilaterally.

8. ANTICIPATE BEING TOO AUTHORITATIVE OR TOO COLLABORATIVE

Particularly when you’re beginning an “above” position for the first time, you’ll unconsciously err to the extremes of being too authoritative or too collaborative. From a psychological perspective, your newness to positional authority can lead you to dominate others to get them “on the right track” or “disappearing” in an attempt to make room for others to be “involved” or “empowered.” From the per-

spective of leadership, you err to the extreme of acting as a Savior, Authoritarian — “I have the answers, follow me” — or from the opposite extreme, as a Pal, Egalitarian — “You have the answers and I am here to support you.” And, of course, you err to either extreme with good intentions, often in the name of the “children” or “students.” Parents know the authoritative-collaborative tension in the slang terms of hard-soft or tough-tender: What expectations do you set and hold to as boundaries, and when do you make exceptions because of extenuating circumstance? When do you put family goals, culture, needs, and rules first versus putting an individual child’s conflicting demands first?

No one would consciously adopt either of the “fictional” extremes in leadership described immediately above. Indeed, you’ll think that you strike the right authoritative-collaborative balance between extremes of exercising unilateral control or surrendering your authority to others. In reality, the internal and external pulls on you in a leadership position frequently result in your slipping into one of these positions or sometimes flipping back and forth between them. Since you’re blind to this dynamic, your actions fail to match your rhetoric and, despite your good intentions, you end up losing trust even as you assume its presence. If told that you say one thing but do quite another, you tend to reject the feedback because, given your blindness, you don’t see what others see in you and you begin to feel misunderstood or attacked by people who from your perspective are either misguided or ill-intentioned. Blind to discrepancies between your professed and actual practice and thus unable to close the gaps, you lose trust and fail to gain credibility, the very common ground that is necessary for others to join you in advancing your agendas for change.

9. COMMUNICATE TO LEARN, NOT JUST TO CONVINCE, DIRECT, OR INFORM

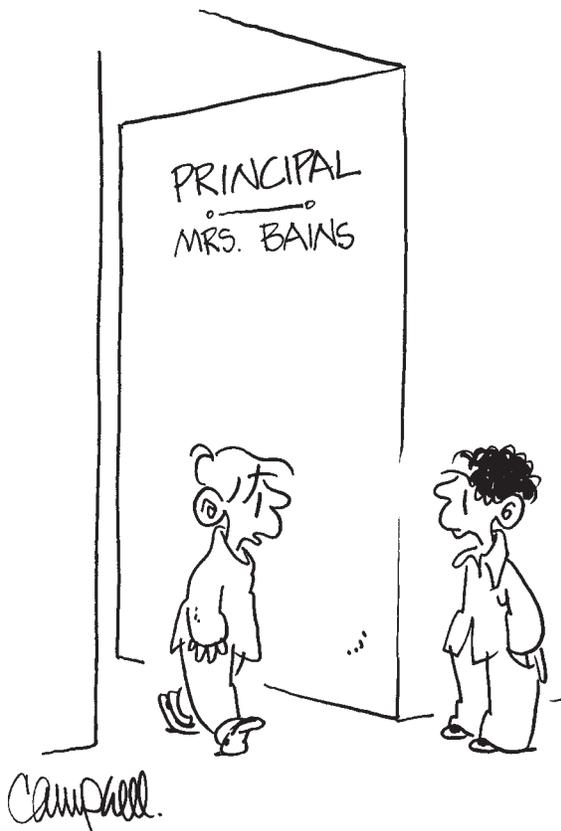
With occasional exceptions, by yourself, you can’t discover your own blind spots in regard to the authoritative-collaborative balance. By definition, there’s little sense or hope in sending a blind man to look for sight. So, it’s critical to your success at the outset that you commit yourself to learning how to communicate to learn, as opposed to communicate simply to persuade, direct, or inform. You must learn with and through others about your own practice, otherwise you can’t make needed adjustments on the authoritative-collaborative dimension of your leadership. Toward that end:

- Set an expectation that you want feedback.
- Seek feedback, even pursue it, if only because many people are temperamentally disinclined

See also John D’Auria’s article, “The Superintendent as Teacher,” in the digital *Kappan* about a first-year superintendent’s discoveries on the job.

(they believe it is not their “place”) to give feedback to people “above” them in the hierarchy.

- Force yourself not to react to negative feedback defensively; instead, discipline yourself to listen reflectively, particularly when you’re deeply hurt by what you hear. Part of your discipline will be to expect that potentially useful feedback will hurt badly in the moment you receive it and make no sense; in fact, it will seem downright wrong, and you’ll be inclined to attribute negative intent to the person who gave it.
- Find a trusted person with whom to make new sense of feedback, and make needed adjustments in your leadership practice on the authoritative-collaborative continuum.
- Read stories about leaders who receive feedback (sometimes jolting) and use it to make successful adjustments. For example, read “Triumph at Work, Trouble at Home,” “Are You Calling Me a Liar?!” and “They Come Back with the Same Problems!” in *Talk Sense: Communicating to Lead and Learn*, (Research for Better Teaching, 2007)
- Work with a leadership coach or join a support group that meets regularly.



“It’s hard to believe that at home, she’s a mommy.”

10. CONSIDER USING AN ENTRY PLAN

One way to quiet your apprehension about beginning an administrative position for the first time is to imagine walking your way, or “imaging” your way, through the first six months to a year in the position. Designing an Entry Plan is a form of imaging — of thinking (and writing) your way through the sequences of contact you plan to have with each of your key constituencies during your first day, first week, first month, first six months, first year — as you hold in mind a picture of where you want to be at the end of the year (or even three years) (Jentz and Wofford 2008; Jentz and Murphy 2005). The product, a written plan, benefits you in two ways:

- You’ll have a blueprint to guide you and to fall back on when you get confused and lost, which is a natural, unavoidable part of leadership work.
- You’ll have vicariously experienced some of what is ahead, so when it actually happens, you won’t be there for the first time.

Finally, this article errs in presenting the struggles rather than the satisfactions and joys of beginning a position of authority for the first time. Those positive feelings include the thrill of being chosen, the deep sense of personal satisfaction that comes with reaching and attaining a position of status and power, the excitement of launching ourselves on a new adventure, the thrill that comes with others taking our lead, and the personal sense of self-worth and hope that follows from improving the lives of the adults and children under our care. By not delineating the upside experience, I don’t mean to devalue it. I have written about the “growth tasks” because it’s much less likely that you’ll have someone to keep you company when you enter this internal territory. If you know something about the terrain, you’re less likely to feel alone when you doubt yourself and wonder if you’re losing your marbles. ■

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