

Thoughts about Tone, Educational Leadership, and Building Creative Climates in Our Schools

Ken W. McCluskey
The University of Winnipeg

Occasional Paper Series

Leadership Education, Number 1



Manitoba Education Research Network

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Since it would be both wrong and pointless to dissemble, I'll state at the outset that, in this piece, I have chosen to focus on topics well outside my area of so-called expertise. (A seasoned university professor, I have no hesitation holding forth on issues I know nothing about.) Still, during my time in administration—as coordinator of special services for a school division in my past life, and as dean of a faculty of education at present—I've had occasion to reflect long and often upon the importance of tone in the workplace and, by extension, upon how educational leaders can move to create climates for innovation in their buildings.

A Philosophical Backdrop

Let me go back further. To a large extent, of course, we are all products of our early environmental experiences. An old psychology professor of mine once told the class that “The most important choice you can make in life is who your parents are.” I chose wisely. I'm an only child (except for my sister) who grew up in an incredibly happy home—a home with good tone. Over time, I had the opportunity to observe my parents in “administrative” roles at their respective jobs. Dad owned a little florist shop, and, through my childhood and adolescence, I marvelled at the joy and warmth I found each and every time I entered Fred's Flowers. The team—old Mr. Pateman, older Mrs. Brock, and young Maggie Smith (not the actress)—loved coming to work and the time spent there. Dad sure knew how to encourage humour and create a positive ethos.

As I grew into young adulthood, Mom moved from the accounting department to take on the position of Supervisor of Cashiers with the Greater Winnipeg Gas Company. I learned something different from her—how to fight for those dependent upon you. Along with fostering joy in the office, Mom would tenaciously defend her entirely female staff, who—the corporate world being what it was (and still is in many places)—were consistently disadvantaged in terms of salary and promotional opportunity. Just a few months ago, I met one of her former employees, who proclaimed vigorously, “Your mom was the best boss I ever had.”

Some time later, when I came of age and secured an upper-echelon position in the schools, I could hardly let on that I was modelling my administrative behaviour after what I had seen in a small flower shop and a corporate cashier operation. So I read, learned, and tossed various views of leadership into my mental hopper. Of course, many perspectives had been offered up by many researchers over the years. There were studies on the effects of democratic, authoritarian, and laissez-faire (or should I say lazy-unfair?) leadership styles. There was the Great Man Theory (Hook, 1955; Wrightsman & Deaux, 1981), which emphasized how much the rank and file need a strong, decisive, goal-directed person at the helm. Kepner and Tregoe (1981), who became popular in our division, gave us their system of New Rational Management, where the goal was to provide all employees with the conceptual skills required to use their abilities to the fullest to meet the

objectives of the organization. Deming's (1986) Total Quality Management (TQM) was everywhere. Situational Leadership (Blanchard, 1985) stressed the need for flexibility—different types of leaders for different circumstances, or different behaviour from one leader depending on those circumstances. More recently, Isaksen laid the groundwork for a Facilitative Leadership approach to problem solving (Isaksen, 2000; Isaksen, Dorval, & Treffinger, 2000). And taking a rather unique perspective, Greenleaf (1991, 1998), in his influential Servant Leadership thesis, suggested that rather than being obsessed with power, influence, or money, truly effective, "legitimate" leaders should be altruistic and concerned primarily with "serving" the people they represent. Concomitantly, he encouraged the people they represent to refuse to follow leaders interested only in power, influence, and money. Many others, Fullan (2005) among them, made significant contributions to analyzing leadership on the educational scene per se.

Looking at the volume of work, it seemed only sensible to take an eclectic approach. Clearly, gems of wisdom can be extracted from "all of the above." I have many problems with the original "great man" formulation, not the least of which is that blindly accepting the vision of some anointed leader may well constrain the vision of others. We must be wary: Think of the suffering, conflict, and wars that have been caused by "great" military, political, religious, or cult leaders with psychotic visions. A theory that relies on the appearance of some mythical, godlike creature and that, by its very name, excludes more than half of the world's population, obviously leaves something to be desired. Nonetheless, although not a favourite of mine (or of anyone concerned with gender bias), even the "great man" notion has some value. Specifically, since most people seem to have a clear need to be directed by a strong guiding force in religion and/or in playing real-life follow the leader, this perspective should not be dismissed lightly.

Be that as it may, I found that, for me, the servant, facilitative, and situational leadership perspectives resonated most poignantly. I responded to the idea that to be a leader is to serve and facilitate for the good of others. Within this context, I began to recognize that every situation is different, and that personal, interpersonal, and situational variables must all be considered. A single-barrelled leadership style is limiting—flexibility is the key.

As something of an aside, I also became concerned about importing corporate theories willy-nilly into the educational system. This is not to say that we cannot learn from business: We can and should. At the same time, though, it must be remembered that our bottom line is not dollars, but students. The question becomes, should we, as school administrators, see our role as *educational management* or *educational management*? I vote for the former. It goes without saying that one of the only constants in our emerging world is, in fact, constant, accelerating change. As educational leaders, we must attempt, as much as possible, to be aware of new developments from many domains, and be prepared to predict and respond meaningfully to increasingly rapid paradigm shifts. However, we are not simply operators of a physical plant: We must remain educators first, managers second.

As well, it seems to me that focusing on efficiency while ignoring tone is a huge mistake. We know that when asked to think back and identify the traits of an educator who has had a major positive impact on their lives, pre-service teachers in training and veteran principals alike consistently choose “empathic” characteristics (such as kindness, caring, sense of humour, sensitivity, approachability, enthusiasm, and so on) over “efficiency” ones (like preparedness, responsibility, organization, thoroughness, reliability, punctuality, and professionalism) (McCluskey, Katz, Bergsgaard, & Isaksen, 2003). Intuitively, this response pattern makes sense.

Teachers who radiate a positive tone have a particularly powerful and enduring influence on students who have been rejected, isolated, or otherwise disadvantaged. Pestalozzi (1951) suggested that trust, affection, and “love” are critical ingredients in reclaiming vulnerable young people; Bronfenbrenner (1986) declared that all children need at least one person in their lives who is “irrationally crazy” about them; and Long (1997) has spoken of “the therapeutic power of kindness” in working with at-risk populations. In our own in-the-trenches projects with marginalized children and youth, it quickly became clear just how much relationship-building matters (McCluskey, 2000a; McCluskey, Baker, & McCluskey, 2005; McCluskey & Mays, 2003). And relationships don’t just happen; they take time. Fromm (1956) noted that relationship is not a feeling, but an action, while Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990) point out that relationship building is an “endurance event.” I categorically concur.

I would submit that tone-setting impacts on teachers as much as on their students. It’s contagious: Principals who set a positive tone in their buildings end up with teachers who set a positive tone in their classrooms and with students who are more positive toward learning (and who, when they get home from school, are less likely to kick their dogs).

Actually, fairly early in my musing stage, I began to think about the connection between tone, relationship-building, and creativity in all things, to the point where I hope it has become the hallmark of what I am about as an administrator. Today, more than ever, I’m convinced that Mom and Dad had it right. It’s just that now I have the theoretical background to focus my thinking and to help me to create a research-based context for positive, productive problem solving (McCluskey, 2000b).

Establishing a Creative Climate

Although my first impulse is often to consign business-world theories and all that comes with them to a place of great heat, I must confess that—in my quest to build pleasant environments that stimulate innovation—I have indeed been profoundly influenced by the corporate literature on “organizational climate.” Ekvall (1983, 1987, 1996), as part of his analysis of Swedish companies, identified ten specific factors that contribute to creativity in the workplace. He and his

colleagues attempted to measure creative organizational environment in a tangible way by developing the Climate for Innovation Questionnaire (Ekvall, Arvonen, & Waldenstrom-Lindblad, 1983). Building on this foundation and using their own Situational Outlook Questionnaire, Isaksen and his team went on to refine and reformulate the climate factors into the following nine environmental dimensions conducive to creativity (Isaksen, Lauer, & Ekvall, 1999; Isaksen, Lauer, Murdock, Dorval, & Puccio, 1995). These dimensions are as relevant for schools as they are for business.

Challenge and Involvement

In a high-challenge atmosphere, employees are intrinsically motivated: They are involved, and see their work as meaningful. In contrast, in a low-challenge setting, people are indifferent, unengaged, and perhaps even alienated.

Assembly-line jobs are frequently profitable, but rarely inspiring. Education, however, should—by definition—be inspirational. Educational leaders can make a grassroots beginning in this direction by listening to all members of their organizational family (other administrators, teachers, educational assistants, secretaries, custodians, bus drivers, parents, and students), and by making everyone feel validated and involved.

Another way to foster challenge in a school is to delegate. Figuratively speaking, the administrative landscape is filled with the corpses of ex-principals who insisted on trying to do everything themselves. It is essential that we respect the abilities and the turf of vice-principals, resource teachers, lead teachers, and department heads. And although certain senior administrators I have known frown at the term, “perks” are important. I realize that the number of assistants/directors/and so on I surround myself with has caused comment in the schools and at the university. But there is a reason. It’s amazing how much work gets done if we divvy up the load and recognize people’s efforts by providing them with titles, administrative allowances, professional development opportunities, leaves or “time in lieu of,” office space, regular slots on the staff meeting agenda, or whatever. If you want educators to take on onerous tasks such as restructuring or transforming schools for talent development (Treffinger, 1998, 2003), you have to energize, enable, and empower them to meet those types of challenges.

Freedom

In a creative climate, people are encouraged to use their own judgment and discretion. In other words, a freedom-rich workplace allows employees to define their roles and duties to a certain extent—they have some degree of autonomy and independence. In the opposite environment, people must work within very strict parameters. They are expected to abide by rigidly prescribed and enforced guidelines, with little room for personal input or task redefinition.

At the student level, how can we expect to teach young people responsibility if we don't give them some? I've visited one kindergarten class where a large number of "rules" were enlarged to poster size, copied, and placed prominently in several locations about the room. At the bottom of this overwhelming, frightening list was the highlighted *pièce de résistance*, "An obedient child is a happy child." This oppressive approach isn't likely to do the trick.

Similarly, if we don't want the workplace to become confining, we have to leave some wiggle room. To put it even more succinctly, we must let people do their jobs. Under a differentiated staffing approach, all players have their roles and duties. A trustee, for example, is the trustee. She or he does not do the job of the superintendent, who in turn does not preempt or diminish the vision of the principal, who ought not to encroach haphazardly upon the world of teachers, resource teachers, or educational assistants.

When people are treated as professionals, when they are given flexibility, and when they have input into defining their jobs, they are more likely to show interest, take time to participate, offer suggestions, and write proposals. Some administrators, exhibiting a praiseworthy but misguided penchant for fairness, are hesitant ever to bend the rules. You know what—they should try bending them every now and again. Not that I would ever do such things, but there is something to be gained by backdating documents to cover up someone's innocent slip, by letting a clinician sneak out early to wallpaper when they have out-of-town guests descending upon them, or by surreptitiously moving budget lines around for the greater good. Sometimes, by interpreting the rules liberally, you can mobilize person-power. Administrators who allow their employees a healthy dose of freedom usually get it back a thousand fold in terms of loyalty, extra time and effort, and productivity.

Trust and Openness

In a trusting, open environment, employees feel safe enough to offer up their thoughts and opinions. They can try new things without fear of reprisal or ridicule. In settings where this trust and emotional safety are lacking, however, the cost for making mistakes is high—people are fearful of floating untested ideas or launching new initiatives.

A good teacher—and anyone else who remembers what it was like to be a child—understands that making mistakes is a vital part of learning. Children learn from mistakes and must have the freedom to make them. So must adults. In any busy operation, countless issues arise and scores of decisions must be made on a regular basis. Naturally, there will be errors. For an administrator to take an unforgiving, holier-than-thou stance toward honest mistakes will, sooner or later, result in the eating of a large helping of humble pie. No one is perfect; we will all screw up on occasion. Quite simply, staff need a safe environment where they can make and admit mistakes.

Let's consider two real-life illustrations of openness and trust. The first involves a usually supremely efficient resource teacher of ours, who—while working frantically to get a whack of funding applications in before the deadline—inadvertently left a confidential psychiatric report about a child atop the photocopier. An environmentally friendly custodian came by, found the sensitive document, and tossed it into the recycling bin. From there, a segment of the said assessment somehow found its way, as scrap paper, into the classroom of the boy in question. Imagine the surprise of the mother of one of his close friends when she found some very disturbing identifying comments on the back of her son's artwork. She immediately called the other parents and delivered the offending piece of paper into their hands. By the time all this information reached me, the justifiably outraged couple was marching on the school. This was not good.

What was to be done? The resource teacher, dismayed by her faux pas, was literally afraid for her job. Invoking Twain's contention that the office of a true friend is to help when you are wrong (everyone will be on side when you're right), I attempted to assuage her fears, or at least stem the panic.

When push came to shove during the dreaded parent interview, however, there wasn't much for us to do but go the *mea culpa* route. Initially, the aggrieved parents were not in a forgiving mood. As the administrator in charge of the funding process, I sought to address their concerns without completely destroying our staff member. During the preliminary period of small talk, it came out that the individuals before us were professionals in their own right. Seizing upon this glimmer of hope, I made the point that even I (over the course of an otherwise blameless career) had occasionally forgotten documents in the copier. So had they. After the inevitable and necessary time of venting, the parents agreed that—rather than indulging in punitive, go-for-the-jugular recriminations—it would be best to move into positive problem-solving mode. We did.

Once in a while, it's necessary to be sharp with staff. But if educational leaders hope to earn that precious commodity called trust, they have to stand firm and avoid hanging their employees out to dry—even when those employees may be technically in the wrong. I'm not talking cover up here, but support. Some senior administrators seem insufferably pleased with themselves whenever they have the opportunity to put a dreaded letter of reprimand in a teacher's file. Remembering both the "There but for the grace of God go I" comment and the "You who are without sin, cast the first stone" admonition, I'd rather not go there. If I'm forced to issue a mandatory letter of this sort, I'll try to arrange for it to be purged after a period of exemplary behaviour. Attempting to rule by fear is simply not the way to build trust. At the administrative level, school leaders who feel safe and comfortable are more likely to seek partnerships—in and outside their divisions—with other administrators, school board members (imagine that), the ministry of education, cooperating agencies, and national and international networks.

In any case, the second example of mistake-making and trust-building occurred when I, as a relatively new university faculty member, was giving a "final" in one

of my courses. After handing out the test, composed of a mixture of multiple-choice, definition-type, and essay questions, I proceeded to enter my “relaxed state of invigilation.” I was suddenly shaken from my reverie by a student who pointed out that I had mistakenly copied and distributed the master form, with the correct multiple-choice answers already circled. I have a reputation for flexibility, but that was ridiculous. Fortunately, I always set a makeup test along with the original, so I had one with different questions on my computer. Instructing the students to leave the multiple-choice in favour of the written questions, I ran up to our Dean’s office, and blurted out what had happened. Without hesitation, she bolted down to supervise while I made a dash for my office. On the way, I gathered up another faculty member, who—once the backup test was printed—took charge of the photocopying while I ran back to the class. In some universities, such a mistake would be met with grim disapproval at best. In ours, people rallied—in nonjudgmental fashion—to get me out of a jam. That’s the way things ought to work.

Some educational leaders are always looking for the magic approach to administration. Not that I intend to rain on anyone’s parade, but that magic solution doesn’t exist. None of us have climbed the mountain and seen the tablets. People are complex: What works for some administrators won’t work for others. And what works with some employees will leave others profoundly unmoved.

Nevertheless, it amazes me that—in their search for the magic technique—administrators often overlook one extremely uplifting and easy-to-deliver option. Be nice! As Long (1997) made clear in his aforementioned article, “kindness” itself is a powerful strategy. I know that my administrative style has been consistently criticized because I am seen as being “too nice.” The implication is, of course, that an overabundance of kindness gets in the way of my making the tough decisions. That’s a crock! I can make tough decisions all right, but I only have to make them infrequently, say two or three percent of the time. Why, then, should I create a prison-camp atmosphere just to show what a tough, efficient leader I am? When I have to make the unpleasant decisions, I’ll make them. In the meantime, though, I’ll do my best to ensure that trust is a part of our educational world taken for granted, and that our personnel go out of their way to be nice to students, staff, and anyone else who may enter our purview.

Idea Time

In a creative, intellectually liberated environment, people have time to formulate and to elaborate upon new ideas. Opportunities exist to bounce around suggestions and possibilities, and to think about how to make things better. When, on the other hand, everyone’s calendar is chock-full day after day, divergent, outside-the-box thinking becomes difficult.

It begs the question, if every minute is booked in pressure-cooker fashion, when does one think? I was disappointed some years back when our Prime Minister

of the day, Jean Chretien, was criticized after saying something to the effect that he hoped, occasionally, to go home a bit early, relax, read the paper, and think. Certain detractors suggested he was wearing down, slacking off, and neglecting his duties. From where I sat, though, it seemed to be a good idea to have a prime minister who wanted to think.

Some managers are obsessed with time. In fact, so is our society at large. It might pay for us to step back and heed the words of Charleston (1989), who talked about the “tyranny of time.” Although, as he pointed out, time is but a construct, we persist in living our lives and running our businesses by the clock. We borrow, waste, and spend time; we manage and invest it. On dates, we try to “make time” and, even at rest, we speak of “down time.” Sadly, parents often rationalize neglecting their children by saying they are providing them with “quality time.”

Educational leaders really ought to encourage some of their more driven teachers to “get a life” beyond the classroom. The “organization man” syndrome is not something we should strive for. It’s healthier to have leisure activities outside of school—friendships, travel, sports, and hobbies are all necessary. And family time is crucial: How many teachers, in an effort to meet the needs of all their students, give their own children short shrift? Certainly, my wife and I, in our article “Gray Matters: The Power of Grandparent Involvement,” emphasize the importance of participating and getting actively involved in the lives of our grandkids (McCluskey & McCluskey, 2000). (After all, we know their parents are idiots.)

There is research that highlights the link between time and altruism. A classic study undertaken decades ago at a theological seminary brings this connection home with a vengeance (Darley & Batson, 1973). In the experiment, participating seminarians were asked to walk from one building on campus to another, a nearby recording studio, to deliver a brief, extemporaneous presentation on the Good Samaritan parable (one would assume not an overly taxing task for students of religion). For the fellows in the first group, everything went smoothly: They had plenty of time to saunter leisurely to the session. En route, though, they encountered a “victim”—a confederate—who lay collapsed and groaning in a doorway. Not surprisingly, the majority of these theology students stopped to offer assistance. Those in group two, however, were placed on a very tight schedule: They were informed they had to hurry to make it to the studio on time for the talk. When these harassed, time-pressured individuals came across the same victim, only about ten percent stopped to offer a helping hand. Several circled; a few even stepped over him! As Myers (1987) noted, this is one of the most absurdly ironic moments ever captured in a social psychology experiment—students of theology, mentally rehearsing a speech about the Good Samaritan, ignoring a victim directly in their path!

You can often tell when individuals have too much on their plates; their last-ditch stand against anxiety usually involves making “to-do” lists. But think about it. When people reach the self-absorbed, preoccupied, list-making stage, how much

do they have to give to others? At those times, how effective are they in their caregiver roles?

It gives one pause. Some misnamed “efficiency experts” often argue that, given the amount of flesh on the bone, there is room to make further cuts in our hospitals and our schools. Technically, they may be correct; perhaps if people would work harder and use time more productively, we could make do with fewer staff. However, what happens when, in the name of efficiency, we reduce nursing care in hospitals? What happens when we cut back and leave beleaguered teachers with ridiculously large class sizes? Are we addressing issues of waste and mismanagement, or squeezing out caring? Demanding work, work, and more work does not necessarily pay dividends. People need a chance to chat, engage in friendly gossip, wind down, and have some fun in the workplace. Administrators attack those human indulgences at their peril: Tightening up too much creates situations where employees indiscriminately take every “sick day” available to them by contract.

So where does that leave us? As educational leaders, perhaps we should consider running less and thinking more. Planning is a big part of the job, but far too often—immersed as we are in day-to-day survival—the big picture gets neglected. Of course, the immediate demands must be met. I sometimes find myself focusing too much on the future and not enough on the present. Luckily, our granddaughter Kail, a very forthright young lady, has taught me to live for the moment while simultaneously planning ahead. Since my son is the offensive coach of a high school football team, my wife and I often drive out to watch the games. After one such event, Miss Kail—as is her wont—ran across the field and jumped into my arms. At seven years of age and much more of a load than in the past, however, the abrupt arrival caused me to stagger back. Reeling, I gasped, “Kail, will you still be doing this when you’re thirty years old?” Her blunt response: “Yes, if you’re still alive.”

With an apparently limited shelf life, it wouldn’t do for me to be planning too far ahead. Still, there must be balance, and good administrators look to the future. Without doubt, we should take the time to prepare staff to make decisions in our absence; in a well-managed operation, everything should run tickety-boo even when the “boss” (I hate that word) is away for a spell. We should also, in relaxed, unhurried sessions, craft our long-term vision—which ought, by the way, to include bringing other people along and setting the stage for a seamless succession when we depart. It is not wise to have all knowledge contained in only one brain.

As well, we must take time to listen to our employees (and not open mail in mid-conversation with someone). Naturally, we should expect people to work hard and do their best, but recognize when they are overwhelmed and need a break or some other sort of pick-me-up. We should accord them the luxury of flex time, perhaps an interval to kick back and reflect around the coffee table. Eureka moments and pivotal ideas are just as apt to surface during relaxation than during “work” time.

Administrators really ought to refrain from micromanaging. Long, long ago in a school division far away, the powers-that-be ordained that all clinicians were to come together on the first Monday morning of every month to lay out their daily schedules for the coming four weeks. Those schedules were to be set down in detail and circulated to the schools. While some may deem this to be an efficient *modus operandi*, it is not. In special education, extreme flexibility is required. Emergencies arise, and clinicians have to deviate from the master schedule. As well, professional development opportunities or impromptu meetings come up on a regular basis, forcing further deviation from the grand plan (involving contacting the schools, rescheduling, and shifting things around *ad infinitum*). Besides wasting one Monday morning per month and plenty of secretarial time, this attempt at tight management puts people in a system-imposed strait jacket. There are better alternatives.

Today, we must also guard against being swept away by ever-present, all-pervasive technology. New high-tech equipment allows us to do many worthwhile things, but it has become absolutely intrusive. Answering cell phones in meetings is rude and subtly dehumanizing for those present. And emailing someone who has an office right next door seems rather pathetic. Yes, email if necessary, but—whenever possible—take time for people. Meeting the social-emotional needs of employees should be very high on the leadership priority list. Like several other administrators of my acquaintance, I endeavour to take care of the people things by day—going for coffee with staff, listening to their concerns and accomplishments, and basically staying in touch. Reports, memos, and emails are dealt with during open nine-to-five times or, if necessary, in the evenings or on weekends. If anything is to be left undone, let it be paper, not people. It's sometimes daunting, but this people-first dictum makes a tremendous difference to the organizational ethos.

One oft-told story brings home the point. An elderly lady entering a bank, after first looking askance at the ATM, turned and headed toward the teller. Assuming the woman was intimidated by the newfangled device, a well-intentioned young man by the machine offered to walk her through the mechanistic money-accessing process. The old woman demurred, insisting that she preferred the old-fashioned way. The fellow offered more encouragement, stating kindly, "You know, it's really not that hard. I'll help you." The woman answered, "No sonny, you don't understand. If I use that machine, who will ask me about my arthritis?"

Playfulness and Humour

Some energizing workplaces feature a relaxed, spontaneous atmosphere where joking and merriment are commonplace. In other, less friendly settings, the atmosphere is usually serious, stiff, and heavy. Laughter is rare and often forced.

There are implications for schools. As I've asked elsewhere, "Who would you rather learn from—a highly skilled, well-organized professional who is a negative

sourpuss, or an enthusiastic, happy person who tends to view the world and students in a positive light?" (McCluskey, 1986, p. 5). While it may not be absolutely obligatory to be positive and fun loving in education, it sure as hell helps.

Many educational consultants, clinicians, and other itinerant-type units assert that they can quickly "feel" the vibes in the buildings they frequent. Count me among their number. Shortly after walking into the staff room, I believe sensitive visitors get a strong sense for the prevailing tone of a school. And humour is one of the biggest indicators.

Some years ago, I was disturbed to discover that the special education centre I headed up was under attack from a couple of teachers in the system. Their criticism: My clinicians were too happy! (What stupid dorks would criticize that?) Apparently, their argument was that our levity and light-hearted approach somehow diminished clients and colleagues. We just didn't understand the seriousness of the issues before us. I countered with an observation from Hermann Hesse that one can smile and still be serious. The expectations, standards, and accomplishments of positive, cheerful people are likely to be just as substantive as those of the formal, dour crowd. Indeed, in my view, because of their ability to set a happy tone, the optimistic, pleasant folk are more likely to motivate and spur themselves and others on to greater creative heights.

As educational leaders, we have a responsibility to see that the building ethos is, in fact, positive. It should not be too much to expect that the first-contact person, usually the secretary/receptionist, radiate good humour. Many students are nervous about visiting the office, and many recalcitrant parents—perhaps remembering their own negative educational experiences—are hesitant to approach. One simple way to ease the path of engagement is to be friendly and welcoming. That's why in any operation I have anything to do with, infernal, user-punitive voice mail systems will be used only as a backup, and never as the primary front-office connection.

Absence of Conflict

Actually, along with others before me, I have taken certain liberties with the original category here, which both Ekvall and Isaksen identified simply as *Conflict*. However, in an effort to be consistent and state positives first, I'm going with the *Absence of Conflict* heading. Regardless, the point is that in organizations where the level of conflict is low, people tend to behave in reasoned, mature fashion. They listen and consider other points of view. In situations characterized by interpersonal tension and ongoing psychological warfare, nasty gossip, backbiting, and sabotage rule the day.

Since we see so much of it, school administrators must find ways to deal effectively with conflict. Every principal is familiar with the conundrum that, in any student/teacher/parent/administrator dispute, all parties believe passionately

and absolutely that they are right. The phenomenon of “self-serving bias” (Myers, 1987), essentially the tendency most of us have to perceive ourselves favourably, accounts for this impossible sort of standoff. Because the majority of people tend to distort reality in their own favour (it would definitely be depressing to see ourselves as others see us), it’s frequently hard to get them to walk a mile in someone else’s moccasins. Indeed, this subtle I-am-the-most-right-and-the-most-moral bias is an exceedingly powerful factor affecting human behaviour and conflict. In athletic contests, for example, players typically accept credit for their wins, but disclaim responsibility for losses by blaming adversity on the weather, the officials, the artificial turf, or bad bounces. Myers, in another example, notes that when people win at Scrabble, one can almost hear them thinking, “What intellect! What verbal dexterity!” If they lose, however, one does in fact hear the emerging refrain, “Who the hell can do anything with a Q and no U?” Another illustration, offered by Freud, tells of an elderly man who says to his wife, “If one of us should die, I think I’ll go and live in Paris.”

It’s not easy to help people “step out of themselves” and appreciate opposing viewpoints. But we must. Part of the process is to understand individual differences in behaviour and problem solving. The seminal research here was produced by Kirton (1976, 1989, 1999), who designed his KAI (Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory) to identify two distinct creative styles. Borrowing from and extending Kirton’s work, Selby, Treffinger, Isaksen, and Lauer (2004) produced *VIEW*, another instrument to assess problem-solving preferences. While one must be cautious not to read too much into the results (for respondents can change over time, and react differently depending upon their current reality), these questionnaires do serve to generate data about how people consistently interpret information and solve problems quite differently from one another. They also provide us with useful cognitive maps and a way to get at some of the issues involved in conflict and its resolution.

Anyway, *VIEW* considers differences on three major dimensions. The first, “Orientation to Change,” identifies two distinct creative styles—Developer and Explorer. Developers are people who are most comfortable working within the existing organizational structures: They provide soothing stability, and are viewed as reliable, thorough, and consistent. Explorers, by contrast, are inclined to push the limits and challenge the normal way of doing things: They prefer to seek new combinations, redefine systems, and “Go where no one has gone before.” Of course, one also encounters more moderate problem solvers who fall closer to the middle of the continuum.

As might be expected, there are positives and negatives associated with both styles. On the upside, Developers do their homework, move ideas through the channels in an expedient manner, and mobilize others by using tried-and-true approaches. In short, these goal-oriented individuals get things done. Looking at the dark side, under certain conditions some Developers can become boring, obstructionistic “bean counters.” For these by-the-bookers, the means too often

become the end. They tend to ignore people while over-focusing on the budget, collective agreements, and other assorted minutiae. Typically, these Developers reach their own personal end of the road much faster than is necessary—there is simply no light at the end of their tunnel vision.

Pluses for Explorers include stretching the system, generating ingenious, vibrant ideas, and moving others to loftier places. In the right situation, they breathe new life into the organization. But there is also a down side. Explorers can turn into undisciplined daydreamers, who generate one off-the-wall idea after another without ever producing anything concrete—the classic paralysis by analysis syndrome. Because they live in a soap bubble of impracticality, and because they have a tendency to become irreverent, abrasive, and intolerant of authority and the opinions of others, Explorers frequently end up being marginalized in the workplace.

While it may not be their first choice, it should be recognized that many people are able to move beyond their problem-solving preferences or comfort zones. Further, Developers and Explorers both are capable of tremendous creativity, although admittedly it may manifest itself in markedly different ways in the two groups. For example, while Explorers are more likely to think outside the box, Developers find ways to think better within it. To illustrate, the original work of an Explorer friend of mine, an artist, has given me untold pleasure. The creative labours of another friend, a Developer accountant, also bring me great joy.

For optimal problem solving to occur, we need both styles. A unidimensional group composed of only Developers may take a one-size-fits-all approach, and become so rule-bound that nothing meaningful ever occurs. In schools, Developers often demonstrate an unfortunate predilection for assessing students until the cows come home. Keeping with farm animal descriptors, these individuals need to be reminded that you don't fatten a pig by weighing it. But if there's no one to remind them, they can easily draw adversarial lines in the sand with at-risk students (making every hill the one to die on), jump unquestioningly aboard the "No child left behind" bandwagon (while simultaneously denying the flexibility necessary for talented youngsters to get ahead), and—sublimely unaware—toddle off down the path of stagnation. Similarly, Explorers alone are likely to spin their wheels endlessly. Self-indulgent philosophizing and pseudo-intellectualizing wear thin after a while, and sometimes immobilize the entire operation.

Obviously, we need to encourage different types of people to work together. A diverse group of Developers, Explorers, and middle-of-the-road folk is more likely to keep things balanced and broaden the scope. By combining the strengths and wisdom of the various perspectives, it is possible to have "flexible structure" and "kind firmness" in our schools (McCluskey & McCluskey, 2001).

The second *VIEW* subscale, "Manner of Processing," discriminates between External and Internal problem solvers. External people are inclined to seek input

from others, derive energy from interpersonal communication, and press for immediate action—sometimes without due reflection. Internals, on the other hand, are apt to prefer private quiet time, behave in “lone wolf” fashion, and think before acting. Sometimes they actually forget to act. While Externals love seminar groups, conference calls, and media hype, Internals typically want to be left to their own devices, free from outside interruption.

The third dimension, “Ways of Deciding,” recognizes the difference between problem solvers who attend more to Task variables and those who place the major emphasis on Person factors. Task-focused decision makers stress logic, objectivity, and quality of the results over people’s feelings—they’re not bent out of shape if their directives cause some employees to huddle crying in the corner. From the opposite perspective, Person-focused leaders are inclined to put people’s feelings first, to consider the personal impact of their decisions, and to promote harmony in the workplace.

Bales (1958) argued long ago that it’s nigh on impossible for one person to fill both leadership roles. In his opinion, groups require two types of leaders: One to focus on task functions, and the other to concentrate on meeting the social-emotional needs of the members. I’m not sure that I entirely agree; some administrators seem able to walk the middle ground successfully. However, there’s no denying that, in many cases, two differently constructed heads may be better than one. Some of the most effective educational pairings I’ve seen have come about when principals and vice-principals or superintendents and assistant superintendents with very different styles and strengths were placed together in a school or division office.

Getting back to conflict, the typical staff room houses some very different people: The law-and-order contingent (“You must maintain discipline, and—to be fair—treat all students exactly the same!”), the touchy-feely, lovey-dovey caregivers (“We have to meet the students’ social-emotional needs!”), the hyperactive go-getters (“Get in gear, time’s a wastin’!”), and the philosophical lounge lizards (“Let’s not reinvent the wheel or get too excited.”), who—if they decided to work to rule—couldn’t stand the pace. With such a diverse group, it’s not surprising that warring factions sometimes spring up. In some senses, however, it’s as it should be; it would be boring if we were all alike. The challenge is to respect the different perspectives and bring people together in productive collaboration.

“The peril lies not in diversity, but in stylistic inbreeding, where one group takes total control and imposes its will and way of doing things” (McCluskey, 2000a, p. 29). And in the absence of effective leadership, the law-and-order forces often take over. There are always those who, consciously or otherwise, try to force others to follow their lead. Unfortunately, 9/11 has given terminal Developers the opportunity to reshape the world in their image (including accounting, banking, border security, and educational systems). We must resist that onslaught.

During my time in the school division, I had occasion to hire an assistant for our centre. At first, I concentrated on seeking out someone who saw the educational

world the same way I did. In mid-search, however, I experienced what Firestien (1996) referred to as a BGO (Blinding Glimpse of the Obvious). Why would I hire someone who thought like me, when I already had me? What I really needed was a person who could bring something new to the party. As a consequence, I selected someone with a singularly different skill set from mine. Over time, I think I helped Jane take a global view and get a feeling for the big picture. She in turn helped me to focus on necessary details that I otherwise might have missed, like “There are children in the school!” Having different points of view can stimulate productive synergy. It is only natural for educational administrators to gravitate toward like-minded, kindred spirits who share their vision. However, when overdone, it’s a mistake that can result in very negative outcomes.

Conflict is reduced and managed more satisfactorily when we celebrate diversity and hear all the voices. One case in point: A couple or three years ago at our university, a few of our hard-ass faculty members took a very firm approach in their courses. If students were more than five minutes tardy, they weren’t admitted to class; if term papers were submitted late, ten marks were deducted for each day that passed after the deadline; and if a test was missed, there were serious consequences. (The only excuse students had for missing a test was a death in the family—their own! Well, perhaps it wasn’t quite that bad, but you get the picture.) The rationale was that we are preparing pre-service teachers for the real world, a world in which they will have to be on time for work and appointments, prompt in preparing report cards and proposals, and reliable in the performance of all other duties.

I supported that voice—our students need to learn about the demands of the real world. However, other faculty members—especially those working in the realm of special education—argued for a different reality. They weren’t so concerned with deadlines and penalties, opting instead to allow students to take tests and hand in assignments at their leisure. From their point of view, if we are to be flexible and leave room for redemption for at-risk special needs students, perhaps we had better lighten up and practise what we preach. When the topic of standards came up, this group raised some telling questions: How many of us, if we only had a few extra days to study for some of our past exams, would have learned more and done better? How many of us were unable to produce our magnum opus simply because we didn’t have the necessary time to pursue a topic in depth before the due date? These special ed. professors were more than willing to match the final products of their students with any others in the program. My conclusion: Both voices were reasonable, both had merit, and—despite some acrimonious bickering between the camps—both had a legitimate place within our faculty.

Idea Support

In a supportive, constructive environment, new suggestions are received attentively by colleagues and people in authority. Individuals are willing to encourage and listen to one another, and the climate is accepting and conducive to idea exploration. In polar opposite settings, fault-finding runs rampant. New ideas are typically met with obstacle-raising and the reflexive “no” (e.g., “There’s no time” or “no money”).

Naysayers can do harm. However, we should be comforted by the words of Elbert Hubbard, who remarked that anyone “who says it can’t be done is generally interrupted by someone doing it.” For the most part, being supportive of staff will result in idea generation and a more creative tone. By the way, support doesn’t always mean saying yes; sometimes it’s all in how one says no.

In many school divisions, systems of dual control—where power is shared equally between the superintendent of schools and the business administrator—still hold sway. In general, I’m not particularly enamoured of this sort of arrangement. In my experience, the educational system all too often ends up being driven purely by financial considerations. No doubt there is a need to be fiscally responsible. As I’ve explained to some business administrators, however, educational leaders in the schools ought to be the ones playing the game; the financial people should merely keep score. Too often academics abdicate responsibility and give up control to the money managers. That’s not what schools ought to be about.

Idea support means getting back to the people-by-day, other-tasks-by-night mantra. Mentoring new teachers is another mechanism to provide support, a mechanism that can guide newcomers while at the same time re-energizing the old guard. When new suggestions are met with interest and respect, more and more ideas tend to be generated.

One quick caution: In some cases, success can breed failure. Many excellent programs have gone down the tubes because too many people wanted a piece of the action. By the same token, too many ideas can become overwhelming—there is a time to put on the brakes. Actually, it’s not all that difficult to generate ideas; Explorers in the school will come up with a profusion of them. The hard part is likely to be in the consolidation. Occasionally, then, there is a need to step back and say, “No more ideas!” (or rather, “Let’s pull things together and solidify the base before we move forward with more ideas.”). To establish creative climates, there is a need to generate a wealth of rich ideas. There is also a need to make sure that the ideas take root, and that initiatives are workable, paced, and sustainable.

Debate

In innovative climates, employees are excited about bringing forward their thoughts and suggestions. There are respectful exchanges, discussions, and opportunities for information sharing. In such a forum, many voices are heard representing a wide variety of perspectives. Where positive debate is discouraged or stifled, authoritarian patterns of leadership usually emerge. Questioning is frowned upon, and uncritical obedience expected.

Debate helps us hear all the voices, including ones that have hitherto been submerged. The term *groupthink* is relevant here. In essence, it refers to how—in overly cohesive and uniform groups—the dynamics can go sadly awry and cause creativity to be virtually obliterated. Janis (1971, 1972), the pioneer in this domain, has identified eight characteristics of groupthink:

- *Illusion of Invulnerability*, where people, considering the situation from only one point of view, believe they cannot fail
- *Rationalization*, where group members simplistically justify their actions and ignore any evidence that is inconsistent with their chosen path
- *Inherent Morality*, where individuals within the group become entirely convinced that their actions are justified—terrible atrocities have been committed by those who had no doubt they were “doing the right thing”
- *Stereotypes*, where players caught up in the process tend to belittle and diminish those who hold different points of view—such stereotyping is especially prevalent during wartime
- *Conformity Pressure*, where subtle and not-so-subtle pressure is applied by authority figures, who manipulate the agenda for their own ends
- *Self-Censorship*, where many individuals, succumbing to the circumstances, censor their own thoughts and refrain from verbalizing any of their concerns
- *Mindguards*, people who uncritically uphold the leader, to the point of withholding information, chastising dissenters, and limiting discussion—in business, we call such individuals assistant managers; in schools, vice-principals
- *Illusion of Unanimity*—when few questions are raised, most group members become even more hesitant to express their own doubts and, hearing none from anyone else, simply assume there is total agreement

Groupthink abounds. Examples include Janis’s initial description of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the Edsel saga, the ill-starred space shuttle disasters, and Vietnam and Iraq. At the school level, insecure administrators, comfortable with hiring nonthreatening colleagues, too often end up with a workforce of clones in a stifling climate. In stark contrast, strong leaders seek out diversity, encourage debate, and welcome those who will challenge the existing ways of doing things.

Janis and others (McCluskey, 2000b) have offered a variety of suggestions for guarding against groupthink, including

- sharing information about the phenomenon with all staff (forewarned is forearmed)
- forming subgroups (people are more likely to raise doubts in small, intimate settings)
- designating a devil's advocate to look for possible flaw or gaps in the plan (many of us don't have to assign people to this role—they surface on their own!)
- mixing and matching participants with diverse styles (so that different perspectives surface in the problem-solving groups)
- encouraging leaders to solicit and accept criticism of their ideas (in other words, to facilitate discussion and responsible debate)
- scheduling second chance meetings (While a few decisions have to be made on the spot, most don't. The world won't come to an end if we hold off for a bit. Many questionable decisions are made precisely because people rush impetuously onward without fully considering the alternatives or potential consequences. One tool for slowing the pace is to have second or last chance meetings. After the group decides on a direction, the leader should call for a period of unpressured reflection, so that members can bounce ideas around with their co-workers, friends, or families. The intent is give people breathing space—a chance to “sleep on it,” if you will. The issues will still be there a week or two down the line, and people will have had the time for sober thought before final implementation gets underway. The desire to move with alacrity cannot be allowed to supersede due diligence.)

In any debate or analysis, it's important to take “the other point of view”—and we can teach students to do it. In another work, I have presented an illustration where I tried to explain this notion to a small group of high school students on a northern Canadian reservation. Here's what happened:

Abruptly, a striking Native youth rose to his feet, and said confrontationally: “Okay, white man! . . .” Being an educator of incredible perspicacity, I realized that I was about to have a problem. The angry fellow went on to state: “You've taken our land; our language. Why should I listen to you? I refuse to be part of this. You talk big about the other viewpoint, but you haven't lived what I have!” Taken aback, I was at a loss how to respond. I was partly sympathetic, but also felt feelings of anger swelling up—after all, I didn't think that I personally should bear sole responsibility for past injustices. Happily, at that moment a young lady got up to answer with a powerful message of her own: “Okay, Indian macho. I'm Métis, and I've been bullied, beaten up, and frightened from the time I entered school—and you have been a part of that. Our families aren't even allowed to live in the community—you've got us stuck out in Back River. You talk about prejudice,

but it's alive and well right here." The young man, to his everlasting credit, stopped dead and replied: "You're right, I have been a part of that; it will never happen again." Taking the other point of view can have this kind of impact. Naturally, things don't always work out so perfectly (I see no reason to share any of my failures). However, it can frequently be extremely useful to calm down, step back, and look at things from a different perspective. (McCluskey, 2000b, p. 84)

It pays to schedule professional development sessions to discuss groupthink, and how to prevent it, with all members of the staff. Administrators should also encourage respectful debate and analysis of ideas on a regular basis. Remember, one way to build it into the system is to hire people who think and operate differently from one another.

Risk Taking

Where tolerance for ambiguity and risk taking is high, people can "go out on a limb" to float new ideas and launch bold initiatives, even when the outcomes are uncertain. They are liberated to push the envelope for innovation. In a low, risk-avoiding climate, people tend to play it safe. Rather than take a chance, they are hesitant, cautious, and inclined to set up cumbersome, ponderous cover-your-ass committees. To be as creative as possible, employees must feel secure enough to take chances. While it is essential to respect each individual's pace and comfort level, risk taking should be encouraged. Jonathan Swift once said, "He was a bold man who first ate an oyster." Educational leaders must make it their business to develop more intrepid oyster eaters.

One thing we do not want is to allow educators to hide behind philosophies such as "zero tolerance" (Curwin, 1998; Curwin & Mendler, 1997). A proviso. I surely understand that we must have organization, safety, and order in our schools. Although my wife and I are far too young to have it happen, we have six grandchildren in our stable. (We've found the only thing our kids do well!) We want all the little ones to be safe in school, on the playground, and on the bus, and we agree with coming down hard on gangs, bullying, and all dangerous behaviour. That said, as Curwin (1998) has asked, "Do we want our partner in life to have zero tolerance? Do we want to teach our own children to have zero tolerance?" If not, just what are we doing in our schools? An "arbitrary zero-tolerance policy, which fails to take into account the social (and personal) context, can limit options, box us in, and discourage creative thinking" (McCluskey, 2000a, p. 30).

Creativity in our approach to discipline, as in all things, demands we leave room to manoeuvre. Rather than insisting on lemming-like adherence to narrow, inflexible codes of conduct, we ought to set a tone where teachers are secure enough to take risks, assess the circumstances of each individual situation, and make reasoned decisions. Where risk taking is discouraged, lethargy and passivity set in—you end up with some personnel who have to be watered twice a week.

And make no mistake, burnout can result as much from oppressive boredom as from frenzied overactivity (thus, some people burn out who have never been lit). Giving permission for risk taking can inject some dynamism and liveliness into the mix. In highly dynamic settings, the atmosphere is replete with positive energy, electric excitement, and “psychological turbulence.” Things don’t just go their usual way: People take chances and make new things happen.

One last observation in this vein. In a safe climate, evaluation can become truly formative. Some principals, secure in their role, make it a two-way process by asking staff they are evaluating to evaluate them in turn (e.g., “Feel free to comment on whether or not I helped you achieve your goals”). Other administrators would rather die. But fair evaluation should not only be top-down; all participants ought to have a chance to offer input.

Final Thoughts

Ethos, leadership, and creativity are not hard-and-fast measures like age, height, and weight. By their very nature, tonal ingredients cannot be readily quantified—it may be best not even to try. Nevertheless, I will argue that to set the stage for innovative teaching and learning experiences, administrators must make a real effort to infuse these ethereal elements into their schools. It’s part of the job.

It’s not that I advocate forcing the issue or actively attempting to establish, one by one, each of the nine dimensions at hand. It doesn’t work that way. I do, though, urge all educational leaders to be consistently mindful of the fact that tone and environmental conditions influence attitudes, work ethic, and creativity. If, in our administrative roles, we simply begin to pay more attention to these variables, good things will happen. Naturally, I understand that tone isn’t the be-all and end-all in school leadership—I can think of many other important variables. However, I can’t think of any that are more important.

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