

Cultivating Ourselves as Leaders

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I believe that significant change in teaching and learning begins with significant change in leaders. Therefore, I want this presentation to make a big difference in your life and work, and for you to make a big difference in your work for the benefit of students. Today we'll think together about clarity, possibility, interdependence (teamwork/community), and courage.

How many of you think that your lives are too full, too busy?

I have been thinking about the words "spaciousness" and "enough."

I want us to create a sense of spaciousness about learning both here today and back home.

I want us to recognize that within that spaciousness we have enough time to learn things that can make a great deal of difference to us and to others with whom we work.

Silence is a tool that enables learning; it provides a space in which some of our most important thinking can emerge.

Learning only occurs in the present moment. Some understandings, I believe, are only available to us when we allow ourselves to become still and silent.

Let's take a few minutes in stillness and silence to bring ourselves fully to this learning, to create a sense of spaciousness and time for those things that are most important.

Silence . . .

A cardiac surgeon's advise to new surgeons: "Go slow at the beginning."

Silence offers us access to the clarity and power of our own "voice"—which is the wellspring of our authenticity—when it connects us to our values and goals and to our sense of possibility. Authenticity, in turn, is our most important source of influence as leaders.

I realized that what we needed was not more words but to stop for a while. We needed no more information; we were swimming in it. . . . Being quiet together is a profound acknowledgement of the interior life of each of us. It provides space to breathe, to remember, to question, to feel compassion, to connect to each other and ourselves.

—Catherine Gerber, middle school teacher (**Teaching With Fire**)

In my classroom, I have begun the practice of starting each class with silence. In the noise and busy-ness of the school day, I tell my students, we need time to stop and call our attention home in order to be ready for our work together. I began this practice of silence with trepidation, in fear of adolescent ridicule. . . . I knew I needed something to lift, to carry me out of the feeling of racing from one class to the next. The silent time allowed me to start "here, right in this room." Surprisingly, after initial discomfort, the students report the same feeling of calm readiness for the work at hand.

—Lucile Burt, high school English teacher (**Teaching With Fire**)

Consider ways in which stillness and silence can be used to begin meetings, as a transition between topics of discussion, or to help participants in meetings reflect on what they have learned, gather their thoughts, calm their emotions, or ponder next steps.

I offer the following assumptions to you in the spirit of dialogue. From these assumptions will flow seven requests.

- **I believe that significant changes in teaching and learning begins with significant change in ourselves.**
- **It is essential that we develop clarity regarding our fundamental purposes and the key ideas that inform our work.**
- **Skillful leadership “reconfigures brains” and palpably changes relationships—what I call “the final two percent”—to improve teaching and learning.**
- **To that end it is important that we simplify and focus our efforts.**
- **We already know enough to make a large difference.**
- **The most important and lasting learning occurs in community.**
- **It is essential that leaders cultivate the heart (their interior lives) as they co-create the world.**

1. Begin by changing ourselves.

You are a leader no matter what your position. Leaders matter. Your clarity matters. What you think, say, and do matters.

We begin by changing ourselves, what's in our head and in our heart. We change what we understand, believe, say, and do wherever we are. We change our habits of mind and behavior.

You make a difference by who you are and how you "show up," the relationships you form, and the knowledge and skills you cultivate.

You address in yourself and others the major barriers of resignation, dependency, and lack of clarity—you turn resignation to possibility, dependence into interdependence, and confusion into clarity.

You are contagious. Your learning is contagious. Your emotions are contagious. Your sense of possibility and hopefulness is contagious. Your positive emotions can create an upward flow of energy in the organization; likewise, your negative emotions can create a "slow death spiral."

Use of strengths for important purposes, feelings of gratitude, and connections to others are important sources of positive energy.

Think of a leader whose positive emotions were contagious. Describe his or attributes in those situations.

Reflect times when you were positively contagious for others. Describe your attributes in those situations and ways they can be cultivated in the future.

Consider new habits of mind and behavior that would enable you to achieve your most important goals.

2. Be clear.

It has been said that people with clear minds are like magnets and that people and organizations move toward that which they are clearest about.

Your clarity multiplies your influence because clarity about who you are is at the heart of authenticity. Authenticity is a source of tremendous influence.

Take the time to clarify your purpose, values, and goals. Be clear about your next actions by engaging "next action thinking"—know what you will do next.

Be clear about your fundamental choice—a basic orientation toward your life that affects all aspects of it and from which your goals and actions flow. Without a fundamental choice to create or do something, there's always a reason not to do it.

Some examples: having an A+ day everyday, being the predominant creative force in your life, living life as if everything matters, choosing to care and engage, being truthful and genuine.

If it feels overwhelming to identify a fundamental choice for your entire life, choose one for your work. For instance, my fundamental choice is to help co-create schools in which everyone is both a teacher and a learner. I want us to create a system of schools to which we would send our own children to any classroom in any school. I want teaching and relationships in every school to be as good as the top 20 percent of schools today.

My aspiration was formed by John Dewey, who wrote, *"What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must be what the community wants for all its children."*

My aspiration was also informed by a father of an immigrant family who, along with three of his children, graduated from college on the same day in May 2005 with various degrees. Of his family he said, *"We have a motto: You are not too old too learn. You are not too young too teach."* Schools can be like that—places in which teaching and learning can flow in all directions.

Describe your fundamental choice toward life and/or your work.

(Guidelines for small group "dialogue"—speak in simple, declarative sentences, speak from your truth not THE TRUTH, let others speak without interruption until they say they are done, don't "step on" the speaking of others, let speaking fall into and arise out of silence, no "cross talk" or "ping pong," listen fully without advising, debate, or "setting straight")

What the human heart really wants is not to be fixed, but to be heard and received.

Parker Palmer

It's also very important that you develop a succinct, powerfully expressed point of view regarding high-quality professional learning because high-quality professional learning and strong teamwork in schools are driven by a compelling purpose and clearly expressed ideas and values.

Lead a *teaching organization* by developing *teachable points of view* regarding important ideas and values and using them to *engage with others throughout the organization in the spirit of dialogue*.

VISA founder Dee Hock has said, "*Have a simple, clear purpose which gives rise to complex, intelligent behavior, rather than complex rules and regulations that give rise to simplistic thinking and stupid behavior.*"

I want high-quality professional learning to produce complex, intelligent behavior in all teachers and leaders rather than simplistic thinking and stupid behavior. Teachers learn on the job each day as they work closely with others on the core tasks of teaching. Professional learning and teamwork will be seamless with teaching.

The quality of professional learning in a particular school can be significantly improved in a year. As teachers' learning improves, teachers will report improvements in student learning within weeks.

Kim Marshall wrote in a recent issue of *Phi Delta Kappan* that "*The engine that drives high student achievement is **teacher teams** working collaboratively toward **common curriculum expectations** and using **interim assessments** to **continuously improve teaching** and **attending to students who are not successful**.* (areas of emphasis are mine)

Write a "teachable point of view" for high-quality professional learning.

3. Affect "the final two percent."

A great deal of effort is expended in the name of staff development—plans made, events scheduled, people hired, job descriptions written. But the only thing that really counts is "the final two percent"—when the most powerful learning experiences create new neural networks in the brain and develop relationships that sustain us and our work. Learning reconfigures the brain.

In contrast, Mortimer Adler observed: "*The notes of the lecturer are passed to the notes of the listener—without going through the mind of either.*"

Some educators view staff development as "conveying information." I see it as "changing neural networks" or "reconfiguring brains." The brain is active in its own reconfiguration as it expends energy to develop new habits, adopt new beliefs, and elaborate and connect ideas in new ways. It's not about what the trainer or coach does but the effort invested by teachers or leaders as learners.

Howard Gardner describes how brains are changed: *"There is now a massive amount of evidence from all realms of science that unless individuals take a **very active role** in what it is that they're studying, unless they learn to ask questions, to **do things hands-on**, to essentially **recreate things in their own mind** and **transform them as is needed**, the **ideas just disappear.**"*

Your work is to use all that you know about human learning and community within classrooms and schools to create conditions in which teachers' brains are reconfigured and relationships perceivably altered.

Describe two or three learning methods that you believe truly change brains—establish new habits, create new beliefs, deepen understanding, establish new links between ideas, etc.

4. Simplify and focus.

The vast majority of our results flow from a few of our activities. 80 percent of results flow from 20 percent of our activities; 50 percent of our what we do produces only five percent of our results. That means that it's possible to quit doing some things to focus more on those things that make the largest difference.

Phil Schlechty once said, *"If you don't have time to read, you don't have time to lead."* I would alter that slightly: *"If you don't have time to read, study, and reflect on your learning and actions, you don't have time to lead."*

Identify your "20 percent" areas (those few actions that make the largest difference).

Identify your "80 percent" areas (those things you do that contribute little to the results you wish to achieve).

5. Recognize that you already know enough to make a larger difference.

You already know enough to make a larger difference in your school. In addition, within your schools teachers exist who are already producing the results you desire with the same resources available to all teachers.

Peter Block has argued, *"If we are waiting for more knowledge, more skills, more support from the world around us, we are waiting too long."*

To that Block added, *"What matters to us does not suffer from lack of knowledge or skills. To say we need more skills before we can do anything is usually an excuse."*

Rather than primarily "learning about" things, "do" and reflect on the doing to create the next set of actions. Whenever possible, have the learning be embedded in the doing.

Identify a problem or situation about which you are delaying acting because you don't quite yet know everything about the solution. Consider what you can do now to create momentum and to stimulate a cycle of action and reflection/learning.

6. Learn in community.

The most important learning occurs through relationships in community. That means that learning and change is intensely interpersonal. It draws on our emotional intelligence and relationship skills as well as our knowledge of teaching, curriculum, and assessment.

Parker Palmer has observed that "*A meeting for learning is, in the first place, a **genuine encounter** between persons. . . . In a meeting for learning the individual is always in relationship, and knowledge emerges in dialogue. It is not only what the student hears but what the student says back that counts.*"

Recall and describe such a genuine encounter for you.

7. Cultivate the heart to co-create the world.

Good teaching is more than a set of pedagogical skills and knowledge of curriculum and assessment. It's about spirit and heart.

While Charlie Parker wasn't thinking of education when he said, "*If it's not in your heart, it's not in your horn,*" but the same thing could be said of teaching and leadership. It might also be said of good staff development.

We know that high-quality professional learning deepens teachers' knowledge, expands their repertoire of instructional strategies, and affects their beliefs in ways that empower them and their students.

But just as importantly, it fosters integrity, authenticity, and courage, qualities we can cultivate in ourselves and others.

A significant part of our influence comes through those qualities. Others can sense its presence or absence, and it influences their motivation and persistence in doing difficult, demanding tasks.

Cultivate those qualities through solitude and silence, meditative reading, and journal keeping. Take "mini-sabbaths" (Wayne Muller) for rest and restoration.

Spend time with a friend or in community with those who will listen carefully to you without analyzing, fixing, advising, or setting you straight.

Parker Palmer describes it this way: *"We are co-creating the world every day, in everything we do—for better or for worse. If I walk into a classroom to teach from a place of fear or resentment, I am helping to co-create a world of fear and resentment. If I walk in with hope and a vision of possibility, I am helping to co-create quite a different thing."*

Describe things you do or could do that would cultivate your heart, your spirit. Describe things you could do to cultivate the heart, the spirit of your school or school system.

In conclusion . . .

One hundred and thirty years ago Sitting Bull said, "Let us put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children." That remains our task today.