

Looking for Leadership: Longing for a *Führer*

Here is the skinny on educational leadership. No matter how good school leaders are, they can never be good enough. America's diversity generates immutable disagreements regarding what schools should teach and how they should teach it. The only way to generate consensus is with vague slogans—for example, "Every school a good school!" Since we don't agree on what these slogans mean, however, implementation quickly bogs down in endless disagreements.

What we *as individuals* want from schools also changes with our circumstances. So does what we want from administrators. In certain situations we want schools that are temples and educational leaders who are moral leaders—high priests of rectitude and knowledge. In other circumstances we want schools to be business-like and school administrators to be executives or production managers. In still other circumstances we want schools to be town meetings where policies and procedures are subject to negotiation, politics, and compromise. Here administrators are arbitrators mediating disputes. Even the most gifted administrators find such different roles difficult to play. And when they must be played simultaneously, the balancing act becomes impossible.

Irreconcilable organizational conflicts are also built into schools. Every time leaders make choices, they generate new problems. To the extent that leaders exercise power, they under-

mine morale. To the extent that they follow policy, they must ignore individual differences. To the extent that they pursue authorized goals, they must give short shrift to delegating authority. In short, it's a no-win situation. What does all this mean for educational administrators? They must inevitably fall short of expectations.

Despite these harsh realities, the transformational educational leadership theorists pretend that school administrators can be miracle workers—pedagogical shamans who magically reconcile our irreconcilable expectations for schools and schooling through the purity of their motivations and the force of their will. The literature on "transformational" school leadership is replete with solemn assurances that visionary change agents, expert at dealing with complexity and ambiguity, can successfully convince everyone to serve goodness, righteousness, duty, and obligation.

Such humbug may seem harmless—more of the wishful thinking that often substitutes for thought in education. But actually it's dangerous to expect charismatic educational leaders to achieve the unachievable. As evidence I point to Hoy and Miskell (1996). These popular transformational leadership gurus say that transformational leaders:

- Define the need for change
- Create new visions and muster commitment to them
- Concentrate on long-term goals
- Inspire followers to transcend their own interests for higher-order goals
- Change organizations to accommodate their own visions rather than work within existing ones
- Mentor followers to take greater responsibility for their development and that of others

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These traits sound appealing, but stop and think. They fit some of history's major monsters. Adolf Hitler's style of leadership, for example, fulfills every one of these criteria.

- Hitler convinced a critical mass of Germans that things must change. "Germany awake!" was emblazoned on Nazi banners.
- Hitler offered a new vision for Germany and was able to muster the public support necessary to implement it. He instituted a "new order" and more than 20 million people paid with their lives.
- Hitler pursued long-term goals. In fact, he claimed to be creating a "thousand-year Reich." What is more, he inspired Germans to set aside their private wants in favor of his public vision.
- Hitler altered the organization of German government to fit his own vision, rather than changing his vision to fit German government. In fact, his *Law for Alleviating the Distress of People and Reich* is a blueprint for precisely that sort of alteration.
- Hitler made certain that Germans not only took responsibility for their own development (as Nazis) but also monitored their neighbor's "development" as well.

Hoy and Miskell aren't the only transformational educational leadership advocates to inadvertently prescribe elements of Hitler's leadership style. Glickman (1990), for example, emphasizes that a transformational leader develops as a primary focus a "cause beyond self." Hitler did this too—in spades. In fact, his frighteningly successful demands for self-surrender were a defining feature of National Socialism. "Führer command, we follow!" was the motto that led millions to their doom. In like manner Jim Jones, with his cyanide-laced Kool-Aid, and Marshall Applewhite,

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the self-neutered Heaven's Gate cult leader, inspired their followers to embrace causes beyond themselves. But to what end?

To be fair, many aspects of transformational leadership theory contradict the Hitlerian style of leadership. Its advocates say schools should be safe places for everyone. They champion open and trusting relationships. They celebrate collaboration and introspection. Nevertheless, their relentless insistence on the need for charismatic leadership betrays a dangerous myopia. They fail to recognize that transformational leadership can go very wrong, very quickly.

What is more, in urging that we search for messiahs they distract us from this simple fact: our schools mirror our nation. What is wrong with them is wrong with America. Ultimately, we don't need educational *Führers*; we need a less-savage nation where the rich can't buy the government and where the young, the old, the sick, and the poor have a voice and dignity. Achieve these objectives and our schools will be more productive. Fail to achieve them and they will remain troubled.

References

- Hoy, W., and Miskel, C. (1996). *Educational administration: theory, research and practice*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Glickman, C. (1990). *Supervision and instruction: A developmental approach*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.