

“The Principal Connection”
Leadership and Popularity
By Tom Hoerr

Is leadership the same as popularity? Must good leaders be popular? For that matter, *can* good leaders be popular? Conventional wisdom is these are very different qualities, and popularity can contribute to as well as interfere with leadership. Perhaps this tension is best captured in the admonition “If everybody’s happy, then you’re not doing your job.” Popularity is not the same as leadership and being popular doesn’t mean you’ll be a good leader.

Recently a principal talked to me about some steps she had taken which had upset her teachers. In talking about the enmity that came her way, she said, “It gets old, but I was hired to lead them, not be their friend.” Most principals can cite times when they’ve made decisions which caused them to be unpopular. It’s simply an unavoidable part of the job, and possessing a thick skin becomes an integral part of leadership. We are supposed to lead, to do the big and little things that create a setting in which students will grow. Unless we are prepared to make those hard decisions, to be the one who says no or keeps on saying yes, we will compromise our effectiveness by pandering for approval.

However, knowing and doing are two different things. While it’s easy to say that leaders make hard decisions and while we recognize that our employees won’t always be pleased with us, it’s hard not to take the rejection personally. How does it feel to walk in the teachers’ lounge and the room gets quiet? Is the TGIF invitation only for teachers? We understand this dynamic but none of us likes being rejected.

We need to guard against making decisions based on whether they will increase the affection that others have for us. Consciously or not, seeking approval is a natural tendency, particularly in organizations which are characterized by an ethos of camaraderie and nurturance – like schools -- so we need to be aware of it. I try to focus on the difference between being liked and being respected. If I do my job well, including making the hard choices that are necessary, I will be respected, whether or not I am popular. My teachers will respect me because they know that I am guided by what’s good for our school, not just what is easy – for them or for me.

I wondered how others grappled with this tension so I asked some school administrators for their observations. “How are leadership and popularity different,” I asked, “or are they?” No surprise, their responses valued the respect that stems from the leader’s performance.

The interactions between popularity and leadership can be subtle. Sande says, “Good leaders build good relationships. This may appear on the surface as popularity, but if one looks closely, the approval stems from very specific and measured actions. People respond positively because their needs have been met, their work has been valued, and they are led to see the cause and effect of their actions.”

“Leaders lead from mission or principle, not popularity,” notes Keith. “Leaders earn respect when they help everyone in their institutions define the paths they need to travel, are consistent in their decision-making, communicate well, and model in their personal and professional life the ideals the institution stands for.”

Great principals help create a school culture in which everyone learns. Regardless of the quality of a school, no matter how high the test scores or how joyful the learning, good leaders want it to be better, even though that pursuit comes with a cost. Mike observed, “We need leaders who push the dialogue to move beyond status quo.” Similarly, advancing the school’s mission is also an important consideration for Sarah. She replied “If a leader is focused on a set of goals which we admire, we will like what that leader is doing. Means to admirable ends may vary, but we will follow with acceptance.” This was echoed in Billy’s comment, “If our work as administrators is grounded in our mission, then we must do what is right whether it’s popular or not.”

I can recount numerous times when I’ve *had* to say hard things to teachers about their performance. I use the term “had” because, really, it wasn’t an option. If I was to be true to our school’s mission, true to the teacher, and true to myself, I had to give them the feedback they needed to learn and grow. Hopefully I did it well and hopefully they respect me regardless of whether they were pleased with what I told them.

Good leaders aren’t satisfied and good leaders make hard choices. They push people, including themselves, out of their comfort zones. While this comes with a cost, it also earns respect for the leader. Vince noted this when he said “In a strange way it is only through the risking of popularity that a leader can actually build trust and confidence among his colleagues. Leaders who strive for the popular decision run a greater risk of losing the support of the risk-takers in the group who are willing to support unpopular decisions in times of need.”

Year ago, in writing about the role of newspapers, Finley Peter Dunne made a statement that applies to good leaders in every setting. Their role, he said, is to “Comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.” I like passion, intensity, and tension captured by “comfort” and “afflict.” Good leaders make hard calls, but they are sure to also affirm and make decisions that are popular. They seek opportunities to support teachers and champion minority voices. Finding that balance is necessary for survival and for emotional health. And remember, being a good leader means that someone will always be unhappy with you. Consider the comment of Baseball Hall of Fame manager Casey Stengel: “The key to being a good manager is keeping the people who hate me away from those who are still undecided.”