Leading in an Unequal World: Is Capability Enough?

Outline of Keynote Address to the 7th International Convention of Principals

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Sources of authority

I speak today as a leadership practitioner. I will not refer to textbooks or manuals on leadership. Rather, I will draw on three sources of "data" from personal experience as an education leader. These sources are:

1. my experience as a black Dean in a former white, Afrikaans university—this record will be published shortly in the Harvard Educational Review (Fall 2005).

2. my work with a University of Pretoria research project team on white principals of conservative Afrikaans schools who have dramatically transformed their schools—this study is being done solely through the medium of video- and film footage to capture the dynamics of racial integration in these schools. This study should be published shortly in the journal School Leadership and Policy.

3. my community work with high school youth, mainly matriculants, in all nine provinces and from both black and white, urban and rural schools; I have in the past 15 months addressed more than 30,000 young people through talks and workshops in South Africa.

The problem of viewing leadership as technology to be mastered

In almost any airport bookshop or local shopping mall you are likely to find books promising seven (or eight or nine) steps to effective leadership; what all these books have in common is a concern with *capability*. In these books leadership is portrayed as a technology that can be mastered by following discrete "steps". Yet, as Professor Pam Christie will show in her later presentation, leadership is much more complex than what these technical guidebooks tend to portray.

My concern in this paper is not with *capability* but with *credibility*. In this regard, authors tend to associate capability with management and credibility with leadership. I am uncomfortable with hard distinctions between management and leadership or between capability and credibility. We clearly need credible managers and capable leaders. But I wish to shift attention from

a preoccupation with capability, and argue that this important attribute is simply not enough in the context of a dangerous world.

Ask yourself this question: how is it that the world's most powerful nation, in terms of military technologies, could be held hostage by a rag-tag bunch of terrorists in places like Fallujah? It certainly is not a problem of capability; at heart, this is a problem of credibility.

By the way, I cannot help thinking that if the same coverage and compassion that accompanied the recent London bombings were granted to the almost daily bombings encountered by ordinary Iraqi civilians, there would be no so-called 'war on terror.'

The limits of capability in the face of inequality

But what does capability mean when the challenge confronting school leaders is the problem of leading for educational change and social justice in an unequal world?

I wish to make this concrete, given the many national contexts represented in this conference. What could it possibly mean to lead as a principal in Rwanda, a country in which more than 800,000 people were killed as a result of ethnic hatred? What does it mean to lead schools in the USA where the verdict on Brown seems to be that schools have backslidden into segregation against the ideals of this landmark constitutional case? What does it mean to lead in Europe in the face of new immigrants with different languages, religions and cultures challenging the status quo? What does it mean to lead in South Africa, where the evidence is clear that while racial desegregation was relatively easy, racial integration has proven much more difficult?

South Africa, despite the triumphalist Christian metaphors of change---the rainbow nation of God, Damascus road experiences, transition miracles---still has all-white churches, all-white company executives, and all-white schools. It is not that the leaders of such schools are not capable—in fact, they balance their budgets, nurture their school properties, and show-up to teach on time. Their problem is not capability but credibility in the face of the huge inequalities still facing this country.

Lessons learnt about leadership and credibility

There are several lessons that I have learned about credible leadership in my own life and through observations of school principals who lead against the grain, such as the principal Anita Maritz in the video clip that you just saw.

1. **that managerial capability is not enough; what is crucial is "the capability of being believed"—in other words, credibility**

In this regard the integrity of the leader is crucial. Over the years of I have taken groups of children to school with my own and always relish asking one

single question: "who is your favourite teacher?" I have yet to hear any one of these primary or high school children refer to a competent mathematics teacher or a skilled language teacher. Invariably, the children regard teachers highly who are "nice." Good teachers, to children, do not shout at their students; they make time for them as human beings; they care for their academic and personal progress; they are accessible. Increasingly, your role as a principal will be to demonstrate credibility to not only students, but to parents, to teachers and to the community at large. Stakeholders expect capability; they appreciate and cherish credibility. In divided communities and unequal societies, diverse people need to know that you as school leader can be trusted with their futures. The two most common reasons why communities in South Africa occasionally eject principals (or teachers) from schools by force has to do with dishonesty with the school finances and sexual relations with children. In these cases, a sacred relationship of trust has been breached and credibility is lost. My point here is that your role as leaders depends less on 'what you can do' and more and more on 'who you are.'

2. that leadership credibility comes primarily through public actions taken, not only through words espoused

One of the most misleading documents in South African schools and universities is something called the Mission Statement. All our institutions declare that they are non-racist and non-sexist, that they seek to hire persons disadvantaged by our apartheid past, and that they promote equality of opportunity. Yet in the privileged schools and universities of our country, you would be hard pressed to find women and black South Africans in leadership; you would be hard pressed to find black teachers in what is too glibly referred to as 'former' white schools. After 11 years of democracy, South Africa remains deeply divided in its education sector. Many of our privileged schools are still narrowly embedded and insulated within an English elitist school culture or an Afrikaans-exclusive culture. Our schools are still run as Christian churches, if the Monday morning Assembly is anything to go by; and until recently, some of our universities still opened their ceremonial events in a Christian prayer. As a Christian I am deeply offended by such practices, because they deny the growing diversity of faiths within the education community, and prefer to ram Christian faith down the throats of what is often so conspicuously a diverse body of students, teachers, lecturers and administrators in our educational institutions. My faith as a Christian is diminished when it is mean-spirited and exclusive; it is fortified when it is generous and inclusive. It is important that as school leaders in diverse and divided communities, your credibility is at stake with respect to how you act with respect to different ways of believing, living, learning and leading. Your words mean little to observant youth; your actions speak loudly.

3. that leadership credibility is attained through the affirmation of, and affiliation with, people on both/all sides of historic divides

As school leaders you gather in a city which, despite its unparalleled physical beauty, remains deeply divided by race, religion, language, culture, politics and economics—as recent events in the Western Cape have demonstrated so powerfully. The problem with leadership, this city shows, is the lack of leadership that speaks powerfully and credibly across these divisions. People lead by charters and by constituencies, rather than by credible lives that demonstrate care and compassion across historic divides. As a school leader in a divided society, it is imperative that you be seen to be affiliated with and committed to all those you serve; and this must be demonstrated in the ways you appoint teachers, in who gets recognized in the curriculum, and in the criteria by which awards are allocated. In this respect your identity as a leader is not trivial or immaterial. And making the nonsense claim in a racially divided society that "our teachers see children and not colour" is not only misleading, it is provocative—and serves leadership poorly. I often ask myself as a black Dean in a former white university—"why would my white colleagues, after three centuries of colonialism and apartheid, believe that a black leader would work in their own best interests as academics?" You need to ask the same question of those whom you serve, and who are constructed as different from the dominant or privileged culture.

4. that leadership credibility, in divided societies, is essentially an act of emotional balancing

Leadership in divided societies is not easy. As I have indicated elsewhere, it requires a constant balancing act between reconciliation and restitution, between caring and confrontation, between social integration and social justice, between accommodation and attribution.[1] It is not easy because as an education leader you have your own struggles to deal with, your own memories and emotions, your own socialization. And make no mistake, there will be pressure from both/all sides to move in one direction over another, and favour one group rather than another. And yet your credibility will ultimately rest on how you incorporate rather than isolate. I do not believe that as a leader in a post-apartheid society that I have to make a choice between quality and inclusion, for example. This is a false dichotomy that is wielded far too often in the protection of privilege. Both are needed. A close friend, on hearing my presentation at a recent conference of the American Educational Research Association, asked in the question time: 'I hear you, but whatever happened to critical theory.' I responded that critical theory takes its form and meaning from the context of application, and that by polarizing humans into 'oppressor' and 'oppressed' one creates the grounds for alienation and anger, rather than conciliation and justice.

5. that leadership credibility is significantly enhanced through collective leadership

In once authoritarian societies or institutions, it is easy and seductive to replicate models of coercive or charismatic leadership. What disrupts this kind

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[1] The Educational Forum of Phi Delta Kappan, 2005; and the Harvard Ed Review piece.

of behaviour, and gains the trust of people, is the distribution of leadership. I should say that I am not a fan of the literature on distributed leadership for it is silent on the politics of distributed leadership i.e., who distributes what to whom? And it is a rather colourless literature. But the concept has some very powerful notions of shared leadership. My core leadership team consists of an Afrikaner woman and a Nigerian man, in addition to 8 other very diverse leaders by race and gender. It would be near impossible to lead a large and diverse Faculty with any credibility among followers if the leadership did not resemble the kinds of people who occupy the campus, and did not signal to prospective academics and students that this was a place that in symbol and substance strives to be a home for all, within and beyond the borders of South Africa. It is simply not possible to lead credibly by leading alone; but who makes up the team is as crucial as having a team.

6. that leadership credibility is impossible without enthusiastic leadership

There are many people running schools who do not want to be there and, worse, who might not realize why they are there. In South Africa it remains the case that promotion to the principalship is still the primary vehicle for improving conditions of salary. This must change for in the absence of alternatives, school leadership at this level runs the real risk of attracting the wrong kinds of principals for the wrong kinds of reasons. What this invariably means is that there is a lack of enthusiasm and energy emanating from the school leaders' office. Colleagues, you simply cannot lead credibly without spreading infectious enthusiasm for your school, your students, your teachers, your curriculum, your community. The best leaders "talk up" their people; they promote their students; they constantly seek development opportunities for their staff; they advance their schools in the local and national media. As leader, you set the tone for the school. A deflated, complaining, cynical and negative school leadership will, sadly, produce a deflated, complaining, cynical and negative school followership.

7. that leadership credibility is quickly secured when the leadership revolves around the development and advancement of followers

One of the most durable and valuable lessons that I have learnt as an education leader is that when people understand that you work for them, that you come to the office to advance their work, then performance follows. Allow me to pose a few pointed and uncomfortable questions. What kinds of investments do you make in the development of your teachers? What kind of coaching opportunities exist within your school for new teachers? What kinds of support strategies 'kick in' when a new challenge from inside or outside the school confronts your teachers? When last did your secretary or the administration staff participate in development and promotion opportunities? Do you regularly advance members of the staff for national or international awards in their fields? Do you use the school notice board only for routine announcements of upcoming events, or is there a reserved section advertising staff development opportunities and honoring meritorious service?

I can imagine any number of evasive responses to these questions, and yet our research shows clearly that highly regarded, credible leaders, are the ones who are constantly on the alert to the needs of their teachers and administrators.[2]

8. that leadership credibility is only sustainable when it becomes self-critical leadership

Credible leadership recognizes weakness, is open to criticism and remains responsive to challenge. What are the mechanisms that you have set in place to receive feedback on your performance? I am NOT referring here to the now ubiquitous attempts to measure performance centrally and bureaucratically the way one judges the quality of canned foods in a factory. I am, rather, referring to the meaningful, self-initiated ways in which you as a leader invite and receive critical commentary on what you do—not from those cynical or envious about your leadership, but from those who have a vested interest in your overall development as a leader. I recently told the Vice Chancellor of one of our largest universities: "your leadership is in trouble because you are beginning to believe your own PR." For leadership to remain credible, it must remain critical.

9. that leadership credibility is not possible without managerial competence

I have now come full circle. My aim was not of course to deny the importance of capability but simply to argue that it is not enough in leading for social justice. Yet it remains a crucial asset in leadership credibility. A friend and Dean of a local university recently asked me why he has so much trouble with his followers; 'they don't take me seriously," he complained. I answered that it was because he failed to do the basics of administration and management well. I recently did a survey of the most respected principals in one of our provinces and found that their ability to be creative and innovative in their leadership was because they delivered on the basics. Not a single one of these principals followed the letter of the law with respect to bureaucratic procedure in the province—because if they did, they would fail to accomplish anything significant in their schools. Yet, no official dared call their bluff, for these principals ensured that their schools attained 100% passes in the senior certificate examination with a significant proportion of matriculation exemption (university entrance) passes. By being a competent manager and administrator on your most basic responsibilities, you enhance your credibility to lead change and innovation among those to whom you account.

10. that leadership credibility rests, in the end, on the power of personal example

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[2] I refer here to our research on principals of the 102 select science and mathematics high schools in the Dinaledi Project, South Africa.

I have a rule that first-year students (as opposed to senior students, academics and university management) need not make an appointment to see me; they have 24-hour access to their Dean. On reaching the office one morning at 7.00am, I saw a meek and clearly nervous student outside my door. She asked to see me. I asked whether she knew the rules: only first year students without an appointment. She enthusiastically assured me that she qualified. I made her coffee and we talked about her upbringing on a rural farm with very conservative parents with very strange views about black people. I remember how much I appreciated her honesty even as the pain of her insular upbringing was etched on her face. And then she said something that I will remember for the rest of my life. She said this, nervously, in Afrikaans: "Dean, last night I thought about all the things you and your Faculty leadership do for us as students…the weekly first-year lunches, the visit to the movies, the intensive teaching….and I was very grateful. Then I thought, I wonder if you would allow me to pray for you as our leader?" I was in tears. What moved me about this event was the realization that this young student had walked a much greater distance that morning than the path from the student campus housing to my office. She had to cross a racial bridge that morning—a white first-year student meeting an overweight black Dean alone, in his office; that is a long distance to cover in a racially divided society. She had to cross a gender bridge in a very patriarchal institution where men still dismiss their female colleagues with the diminutive "mevroutjie" (missie). And she had to cross an authority bridge in an institution where the Dean—and almost any authority figure—is expected to issue an "opdrag" (order) rather than consult with those below him in a rigid and inflexible hierarchy.

I tell this story not to convey perfection for we have a long way to go in our leadership of education institutions and I am very conscious of personal weakness and frailty. I tell the story, rather, to convey progress amidst pain, passion alongside problems, people above procedure and, most of all, credibility beyond capability.