

“Degrees of Freedom:” A Five-Part Framework for School Leadership

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A few years ago, a reporter for *The State* newspaper in Columbia, South Carolina, asked a number of local elementary school children why the United States celebrates the Fourth of July. Most of the answers were predictably personal. “So we can eat hot dogs,” said a young boy. “Because we get to watch fireworks,” a girl answered. One child even thought the entire nation celebrated the Fourth of July because it was his brother’s birthday.

Another student, a fourth grader from Nursery Road Elementary School named Vante Lee, gave an answer that was noticeably different. “We celebrate the 4th of July,” he said, “because we celebrate freedom and the chance to make our own decisions.”

Think about those words for a second. Keep in mind that these children were not hand-selected by their principals; they were randomly stopped on a summer day in their hometown. Now, think back to when you were nine, and ask yourself which child’s answer yours would most closely have resembled.

Only Vante’s words connect the event, Independence Day, to the greater meaning behind it—the birth of a country committed (on our best days) to “freedom and the chance to make our own decisions.” What impresses me most is not that he knows why we celebrate a national holiday. It’s that he understands the right to choose is freedom’s greatest gift.

To some degree, we can attribute the rarity of Vante’s insight to the age of the kids being interviewed; how many fourth-

graders would talk about anything other than hot dogs or fireworks? And yet, if a journalist were to randomly ask teenagers in your community the same question, what would their answers be? What if the question was asked of you, at a time when you weren’t expecting it?

What does it mean to be free? And what is Vante’s community doing to inspire such thoughtful fourth-graders?

Historian Eric Foner believes our attention to freedom is the defining characteristic of American life.¹ Yet as those of us who lived through 9.11 also know, an equally strong theme defines us—the desire to balance our love of freedom with our need to feel safe and secure. This is among the more delicate balances for an open society to manage—particularly when, as now, our commitment to freedom is partly what threatens the security of our citizens. But striking the right balance between freedom and order is not just the concern of presidents and prime ministers. It is among the most universal challenges of societies, schools and the individuals who inhabit them.

One of the great paradoxes of human beings is that we feel two pressing needs at the same time—the freedom that comes from defining ourselves as individuals, and the security that comes from feeling connected to one another. Sometimes, this paradox leads us to satisfy one need at the expense of the other. But these two impulses are not mutually exclusive. To join an orderly community, we are not required to abandon the freedom to express our individuality. And to be free, we do not need to sacrifice our sense of security or the meaningful connections we make in our relationships with others. This tension has important implications for all of us, but it is particularly relevant for our schools, which often struggle to balance the need for individual freedom with the responsibility to create order and serve the greater good.²

Honoring individual freedom in a school setting doesn’t mean turning the asylum over to the inmates. To create a climate where people feel both empowered and protected, you don’t start by just telling everyone that they are free. You do, however, make helping people learn how to exercise freedom responsibly your ultimate goal. As I’ve observed repeatedly, when educators work together to create open, accountable, relationship-driven climates, schools achieve measurable improvement in everything from



This First Amendment exhibit, at the McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum in Chicago on April 6, 2006, is one of many designed to help visitors, particularly teenagers, understand the First Amendment freedoms. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)

school safety to faculty engagement and student learning. But before schools can honor and protect the paradoxical tendencies for freedom and order in all of us, educators must first understand how to create shared cultures that nurture our need for individual freedom as a means of forging stronger collective bonds, and engender environments that create unity in the interest of our diversity, instead of at the expense of it.

How do schools create such environments? How do we foster cultures that honor individual freedom and civic responsibility, and ensure that all members of the community have the understanding, motivation, and skills they need to become active, visible contributors to the common good? The key, I believe, is leadership. And the five-part framework for school leadership that follows is designed to help educators start to create the conditions that will engender more free and orderly schools.

This approach is not meant to serve as a straight-forward checklist for change. It is, however, meant to provide an orientation map that will help any person, no matter their age or current position,

begin to think about the key factors that must be in place for an individual to become an effective leader, and for a school to honor each person's irrepressible, paradoxical need for both individual freedom and a sense of safety, community and order.

1. Reflect (or, take the time to know "who's there")

When I was a teacher, my favorite task was reading *Hamlet* with high school seniors.

We read the play together in the spring, just as my students' high school careers—and childhoods—were coming to an end. The conversations were uniquely charged because the title character and my students were kindred spirits. Hamlet was, like any teenager, deeply introspective. He had visions of his future that didn't align with the adults in his life. He was an artist, an actor, and a dreamer—a person more comfortable in the world of words than the world of actions. And he was in love.

But Hamlet was also the future King of Denmark, which meant he was bound by custom to avenge his father's murder—a

duty that led to his untimely death, in no small part because the act itself went against every essential nature of his being.

To read the play, therefore, is to watch a fellow human being struggle between staying true to his nature or accepting the role society has assigned him. This is part of the reason for the play's timelessness, and helps explain why *Hamlet* has attracted more commentary than any other work in English except the Bible. But Hamlet's struggle also illuminates an essential question of human nature, not coincidentally posed by the first two words of the play—"Who's there?"

This is not a question many of us ask of ourselves. Instead, we tend to keep busy with work and other distractions. We ignore the inherent, unarticulated contradictions between our internal passions and our external actions. And then we are left wondering why we feel unfulfilled. Everything we do is determined by who we think we are. And yet part of Hamlet's challenge is that throughout his struggle, his only recourse for greater self-understanding is to "unpack [his] heart with words."

Further Resources for REFLECT

Read: *Willing to Be Disturbed*, by Meg Wheatley. A powerful and practical essay about personal reflection—ideal for group processing.

Visit: www.paideia.org. The National Paideia Center helps schools incorporate reflective, collaborative discussion and intellectual coaching into the lives of students and adults.

Shakespeare’s exploration of the relationship between thoughts, words and actions has direct relevance to the challenges we face as educators. Before any of us can effectively help young people learn how to be seen and heard in meaningful and responsible ways, we must understand how to help them “suit the action to the word, [and] the word to the action.” And before we can ever hope to become the most effective teacher, parent, or school leader, we must be willing to do the internal, reflective work necessary to answer the question: “Who’s there?”

2. Connect (or, make the connections that let you “see the whole board”)

“From a very early age,” Peter Senge writes in *The Fifth Discipline*, “we are taught to break apart problems, to fragment the world.”

This reflex makes complex tasks seem more approachable. But the truth is we all pay a price for this delusion. In the same way a reassembled broken mirror cannot yield an accurate reflection, “we can no longer see the consequences of our actions.” Absent that capacity, “we lose our intrinsic sense of connection to a larger whole.” To rebuild this capacity, we must acquire the second foundational skill of leadership—what Senge calls “systems thinking,” and what I call “seeing the whole board.”

As Senge explains it:

A cloud masses, the sky darkens, leaves twist upward, and we know that it will rain. We also

know that the storm runoff will feed into groundwater miles away, and the sky will clear by tomorrow. All these events are distant in time and space, and yet they are connected within the same pattern. Each has an influence on the rest, and influence that is usually hidden from view. You can only understand the system of a rainstorm by contemplating the whole, not any individual part of the pattern.³

The same principles hold true for the other networks we encounter in our lives:

Business and other human endeavors are also systems. They, too, are bound by invisible fabrics of interrelated actions, which often take years to fully play out their effects on each other. Since we are part of that lacework ourselves, it’s doubly hard to see the whole pattern of change. Instead, we tend to focus on snapshots of isolated parts of the system, and wonder why our deepest problems never seem to get solved. Systems thinking is a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools that has been developed over the past fifty years to make the full patterns clearer, and to help us see how to change them effectively.⁴

Further Resources for CONNECT

Read: *Leave No Child Behind*, by Dr. James Comer. A treatise on the close connections between child development, school culture, and student achievement.

Visit: www.pegasuscom.com. The annual Pegasus Conference provides extensive training in systems thinking.

Because it helps people see how their personal actions contribute to the world around them, systems thinking is crucial to any healthy, evolving school community. “At the heart of a learning orga-

nization,” Senge continues, “is a shift of mind—from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something ‘out there’ to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience.”

3. Create (or, recognize that “people only support what they create”)

See if any of this sounds familiar:

You are attending a professional meeting with a large group of colleagues. Shortly after it begins, you are broken up into smaller groups and given a task that is in some way related to the larger goal of the meeting. Your instructions are to discuss the assigned issue with your smaller group and then report out what you learn. Once the conversation begins, a few voices tend to dominate. One dutiful person assumes the responsibility of taking notes. After the allotted period of time, each group summarizes its conversation for the whole group, while the main facilitator takes notes on a flipchart. After each group has reported out, a master list is created. The facilitator takes this list and posts it somewhere on the wall.

Almost everyone has had the experience of participating in this sort of meeting—and reviewing a master list that has failed to capture the collective wisdom of the group. Now, imagine the same sort of meeting being conducted in a different way:

You have been called together to discuss how to create a healthier, more inclusive climate at your school. This time the facilitator does not leave you to your own devices; she uses a dialogue protocol to guarantee equity of airtime and provoke more authentic responses. The protocol begins with each person being asked to spend five minutes writing about the best learning community they have ever experienced. It may be a school, a church, or a summer camp. The location doesn’t matter, or the age at which the person experienced it—only that it was deeply meaningful and real learning occurred.

In smaller groups, each person shares his or her personal story, while the rest of the group listens actively for key attributes that emerge. The teams are reminded that the purpose is not to whittle away valuable staff time telling stories, but to use personal narratives as a powerful source of data that can shape both personal approaches to teaching and future decisions about school priorities. Once everyone tells their story, the central facilitator asks each group to reflect on their list and come up with the 3-5 most important attributes. Each list is then shared with the whole group. As this is done, the facilitator creates a central list on a flipchart, which she posts on a wall and then asks the participants to reflect on its contents.

Further Resources for CREATE

Read: *The Long Haul*, by Myles Horton. The autobiography of one of the country's greatest educators.

Visit: www.nsrharmony.org. The National School Reform Faculty provides training in the use of Critical Friends Group (CFG) protocols, which are available online.

These two approaches are similar, yet they tend to produce vastly different results. In the first scenario, the effort to encourage broad participation falls flat, whereas the second process results in a list people are more likely to find meaningful. Why is the second method more effective? According to James Zull, the author of *The Art of Changing the Brain*, it has to do with how the different processes apply what we know about cognitive science. "We might say," Zull writes, "that our best chance to help another person learn is to find out what they want, what they care about."⁵ In other words, whereas one scenario leaves the role of personal stories and equal participation to chance, the other is structured to ensure that everyone speaks, and that all contributions are anchored in personal memories.

The more you learn about cognitive science and organizational theory, the more you realize how much slight nuances in structure and strategy can make the difference between a productive meeting or lesson and a wasted afternoon. Simply put, *we have no choice but to invite people to participate in the decisions that shape their lives*. It's not about "buy-in," either—despite the huge popularity of the phrase. (If anything, the phrase itself is a reminder of why it's so important we recognize how the words we choose shape our interpretations of what is and isn't necessary.) People will insist on the freedom to participate, whether we ask them or not.

"For the past 50 years," consultant Meg Wheatley explains, "a great bit of wisdom has circulated in the field of organizational behavior: People support what they create."⁶ But Wheatley believes the maxim needs to be slightly restated: *People only support what they create*. This insight has profound implications for how we structure group conversations, events, and planning sessions. Instead of getting our colleagues or our students to "buy into" something, we should be creating opportunities for people to discover what matters to them, and then follow the meaning.

Evoke contribution through freedom, not conformity. Or, as leadership consultant Myron Rogers puts it, "*Start anywhere and follow it everywhere*."⁷

4. Equip (or, equip people with what they need to see their new ideas through)

Thus far I've outlined three foundational skills of leadership—self-awareness (Reflect), systems thinking (Connect), and shared decision making (Create). Each skill is necessary and insufficient by itself, and, in an organizational context, each is continually influencing and shaping the others. It is through the combination of these abilities that educators become more effective leaders, and there is no strict and surefire order one should follow in order to cultivate these skills in himself and in others. As with everything else, human beings

refuse to behave so predictably.

However, when these three skills start to take root in individuals and the organizational culture of which they are a part, a palpable shift takes place. Transformational change, and the collective will needed to achieve it, becomes possible. *This does not mean transformational change will necessarily occur, only that the proper conditions will have been created*. At this point a fourth leadership skill becomes necessary—equipping people with the understanding, motivation and skills they need to continually work with the forces of change.

Working with the natural forces of change is very different from "managing change," just as co-creating a common vision is distinct from getting people to "buy in." In one approach, schools and the individuals who inhabit them are managed like machines, and people are given pre-packaged "solutions" that contain no community input; in the other, people and organizations are seen as complex, living systems, and the inherent creativity and commitment of the people being asked to change is what drives all decisions.

The fact that so many schools struggle to change core behaviors or processes is particularly troubling when one considers that, in essence, learning itself is change. But the greater truth is that people don't resist change. They resist being changed. Knowing what will be easy and what will be difficult when it comes to whole-school renewal is essential for working with the natural forces of systemic change. And although there is no single way to be successful, there are different stages of the change process that can guide your community in its work together.

Generally speaking, human beings must experience organizational change in three areas—the mind, the heart and the voice. Before we are willing to change anything, we must first understand why the change is necessary and what it will require of us (mind). To participate in a major change initiative, we must feel motivated in some way to contribute (heart). And to follow through on our

individual and shared visions of an ideal learning community, we must have the skills and capabilities to not only demonstrate new behaviors, but also ensure greater alignment between our internal passions and our external actions (voice).

Further Resources for EQUIP

Read: *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, by Jim Collins. A useful frame for understanding organizational change.

Visit: www.wholechildeducation.org. Learn more about ASCD's effort to help schools focus on developing students who are academically proficient *and* physically and emotionally healthy *and* respectful, responsible, and caring.

Often, what happens in school renewal work is we pay attention to some, but not all, of these stages. Teachers are asked to adopt a new teaching style before they fully understand why the change is taking place. Schools in search of more parent participation fail to explicitly consider what it will take to motivate greater numbers of adults to get involved. And students are encouraged to play a more active role in school governance before they've been equipped with the skills they need to do so effectively and responsibly.

Addressing all of these needs still doesn't guarantee major change will take place. It does, however, greatly increase the likelihood that people will participate in the co-creation of a more equitable, high-functioning school culture. That's why understanding how to work with the forces of change is the fourth foundational skill of leadership.

Take the time to know "who's there." Make the connections that help you "see the whole board." Remember that "people only support what they create." Ensure that people are equipped with the understanding, motivation and skills they need to work with the forces of change. Reflect. Connect. Create. Equip.

There's still one foundational skill left.

And it's perhaps the most important—and difficult—to honor.

5. Let Come (or, let the group's shared vision naturally come into being)

"If we could change a society like we can change the position of the furniture in a house, it would be fantastic," said the educator Paulo Freire in a 1987 address. "It would just be a question of muscular power. But history is not like this."⁸ Freire believed educators were particularly burdened by the challenges of change, because so many are "much more traditional and fear the students' possibilities more than they should. They could believe much more in the abilities of the students, of the people, but they are ... conditioned by a very old fear, which is the fear of freedom."

What unnerves us most about freedom, I believe, is its unpredictability and capacity for disorder. In the classroom, this fear of the unknown has misled many of us into thinking that the relationship between freedom and order is an either/or proposition. But there's a difference between being *authoritative* and being *authoritarian*, a point Freire clarifies:

The teacher has to teach, to experience, to *demonstrate* authority and the student has to experience freedom in relation to the teacher's authority. The authority of the teacher is absolutely necessary for the development of the freedom of the students, but if the authority of the teacher goes beyond the limits authority has to have in relation to the students' freedom, then we no longer have authority. We no longer have freedom. We have authoritarianism.⁹

Freire recognized the creative tension that exists between individual freedom and group order. This challenge is particularly resonant in the teacher-student dynamic (although it's central to all relationships, both personal and professional). But the solution is not to choose one over the other; it's to strike the right balance between the two.

Kate Quarfordt, a theater teacher at

Bronx Prep Charter School in New York City, knows what this delicate balance feels like. Asked to reflect on her school's ongoing work to value individual freedoms *and* improve student learning, Quarfordt observed:

Some of us have learned that—despite what intuition might suggest—structure actually creates freedom. Through experiences implementing First Amendment principles in the classroom and in the process of organizing special events and programs, it has become clear that the potential for looseness, play, free thought and creativity is generated when the structures are so tight and elegantly constructed that they become nearly invisible. This has been a fundamental revelation.¹⁰

Further Resources for LET COME

Read: *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations and Ideas*, by Peter Senge et al

Visit: www.fivefreedoms.org. A place to learn more about the productive role individual freedom can play in a school setting (the site officially launches in January 2008).

As teachers like Quarfordt have observed, order cannot be imposed from the top down or the outside in. Instead, order emerges as elements of the system interact and settle into patterns. And even then, the patterns are always changing. This is because every piece of a dynamic system that can move independently introduces another variable, or "degree of freedom," to the equation.

All of us—whether we are classroom teachers or school principals—must become more attuned to these "degrees of freedom," and to the individual and group needs of the people around us. When we do so, we create the types of schools that confer not just academic diplomas, but also "degrees" of individual freedom, of civic responsibility, and of shared respect for the power and uniqueness of each person's voice.

Apply this thinking to a school environment and you are likely to develop very different theories about the best way to establish order (as opposed to control) and support student learning. As Meg Wheatley argues, a paradoxical truism emerges: the more freedom the school has to organize itself, the more order it enjoys.

This is, for me, the most illuminating paradox of all. The two forces that we have placed in opposition to one another—freedom and order—turn out to be partners in generating healthy, well-ordered systems. Effective self-organization is supported by two critical elements: a clear sense of identity, and freedom. In organizations, if people are free to make their own decisions, guided by a clear organizational identity for them to reference, the whole system develops greater coherence and strength. The organization is less controlling, but more orderly.¹¹

In an open society committed to providing a robust marketplace of ideas, how we debate, not just what we debate, is critical. And in a school committed to honoring these principles and our biological “urge to speak,” civic or character or citizenship education is not just a class or a special program; it’s a way of life that informs every aspect of the school’s culture and shared philosophy. 🌐

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Notes

1. Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*. (New York, W.W. Norton, 1998).
2. This inattention to understanding what it means to be free has left its mark. In January of 2005, researchers from the University of Connecticut, funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, released the results of over two years of interviews with more than 100,000 students, 8,000 teachers, and 500 administrators at 544 high schools. Their purpose? “To determine whether relationships exist—and, if so, the nature of those relationships—between what teachers and administrators think, and what students ... know about the First Amendment.”

- Overall, the news is discouraging—and not surprising. In fact, write the study’s investigators, “it appears that our nation’s high schools are failing their students when it comes to instilling in them an appreciation for” the freedoms of religion, speech, press, assembly, and petition. Among their findings:
 - Students lack knowledge and understanding about key aspects of the First Amendment. Seventy-three percent say they don’t know how they feel about it or that they take it for granted;
 - Students are less likely than teachers or principals to think that people should be allowed to express unpopular opinions;
 - Perhaps most disturbing, more than a third of students think the First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees.
 - For more information about the Knight survey, visit firstamendment.jdeas.org.
3. Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York and London, Doubleday, 2006), 6.
 4. *Ibid.*, 7
 5. James Zull, *The Art of Changing the Brain* (Sterling, Va., Stylus Publishing, 2002), 48.
 6. Meg Wheatley, *Finding Our Way* (San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler, 2005), 89.
 7. Cited in Wheatley, 110.
 8. Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 217-18.
 9. *Ibid.*, 61-2.
 10. Kate Quarfordt, *Mid-Year Report for First Amendment Schools*, 2005.
 11. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science* (San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler, 2006), 87.



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