



Christian Perspectives in Education

Send out your light and your truth! Let them guide me. Psalm 43:3

Volume 2

Issue 2 *Spring 2009*

2009

Common Sense is Not Common. So How Can A Leader Make Good Decisions?

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Recommended Citation

Barber, David G. (2009) "Common Sense is Not Common. So How Can A Leader Make Good Decisions?," *Christian Perspectives in Education*, 2(2).

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cpe/vol2/iss2/2>

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“Common Sense is Not Common”: So How Can a Leader Make Good Decisions?

For years now as both a private and public school administrator, I have said, “Common sense is not common...especially in education!” When was the last time a decision was made by the board of education and then lauded as practical and really making sense? So often decisions come down from “the powers that be” and one has to scratch his proverbial head and wonder if there is any connection at all between the decision-making process and those who are most impacted by the decision: students! Let us not forget about the other stakeholders that are affected as well, including our teachers and parents. Educators have long had a somewhat jaded opinion of school boards and administrators and their decision-making processes. So, what does effective decision-making look like? What sets apart leaders who “get it” and those who do not? How can we roll back the veil that has long clouded the process of making good decisions and develop a process that will engage support, build team spirit, and create “buy-in” at the implementation level? The key is in a leadership style and a philosophy of decision-making.

Leadership is working with and through other people to accomplish organizational goals (Owens & Valesky, 2007); thus, leaders must be able to motivate others with a vision, bring out their personal commitment to that vision, organize the working environment, and facilitate the work so that the vision becomes reality (p.277). This concept of participative leadership in which decision-making is shared illustrates the importance to the organization for having a sound model of decision-making in place.

A decision is a judgment (Drucker, 2006), and thus, one would think a good decision would flow out of the good common sense of the leader. I am more and more convinced every

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day that common sense is not common, and there is a need to establish a paradigm for decision-making that is in line with the commonly held values and beliefs of the organization and that involves the stakeholders in the organization. “Administrators are thinking all the time,” according to Owens & Valesky (p. 312). Based on their study of administrators’ thinking, Owens and Valesky assert that the formal decision-making models with a sequence of steps seem to have little relevance to the real-life, day-to-day situations in which administrators find themselves, so they totally discount them. What paradigm will ensure good decisions, buy-in from staff, and effective implementation?

Drucker (2006) sets forth several principles that will guide the leader to good organizational decisions. To begin with, one starts with opinions or untested hypotheses. Then, if there is to be a decision made, there must be a clashing of divergent opinions and the serious consideration of all competing alternatives (p. 143). At one point Drucker asks if the decision is really necessary. Choosing not to address a problem can be a viable solution at times. His first rule of decision-making is not to make a decision unless there is disagreement (p.148). From my perspective with over 30 years of experience in both private and public education, that should not be a difficult rule to follow in most schools. The disagreement, if organized and guided properly, will yield alternatives to the decision and stimulate the imagination of those involved in the process.

What is the right forum for this disagreement and the verbal sparring that gets creative juices flowing and thinking processes focused on the “big picture” of which the decision in question is a part? Every school is different in its structure and personality. For many, leadership teams that focus on particular areas of the operation prove to be the most effective decision-making bodies. These teams, made up of individuals with different perspectives (and sometimes

their own agendas) are the heart and soul of the shared decision-making process. For one team to attempt to handle the vast expanse of issues in a school would be overwhelming, at best. A good model seems to be having one leadership team that totally focuses on curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and another team that would address the day-to-day operational needs of the school. Other teams can be organized in other areas when it has been determined this would be best for the organization. One could easily imagine how a group of teachers could get bogged down in dismissal or other safety procedures and run out of time to address major concerns raised by the latest assessment data. To be sure, the teams operate under the same vision and goals for the school. The division of labor just enables them to zero in on their specific areas of concern and make the best decisions for the whole school. A warning: The biggest challenges for the leader utilizing this model of dual leadership teams for one's school include maintaining the team's particular focus, coordination of possible overlapping areas of responsibility, and communication of decisions to the rest of the organization.

Leadership in this whole process is critical. It takes a leader with not only a "thick skin" but also the right kind of heart to direct effectively a group in making decisions that impact the entire organization. It takes a leader who views leadership as an act of service, and recognizes that his or her position is a trust given for a period of time for the benefit of those who are being led (Blanchard and Hodges, 2003). That kind of leader is a servant leader, and is particularly well-suited to take on the challenge of leading an organization in shared decision-making. When an individual can set ego aside and focus on the needs of others, he or she is on the road to becoming a servant leader. Servant leadership does, indeed, start in the heart, but from the heart, the decision-making process must go to the head. It is here that the leader's belief system and worldview will become evident. Philippians 4:8 ("Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever

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is noble . . . think on these things”) provides the “acid test” for thinking and decision making. In this one verse the apostle Paul addresses some of the most crucial elements of one’s thinking as he or she makes wise decisions. A mind immersed in a Christ-centered worldview will seek to make decisions that are true, honorable, and right. There will be singleness of purpose (purity) and the unity that seeks the best for the school. Could anything be lovelier? It is here, too, that the beliefs and values of the other members of the leadership team will come into play. The challenge for the servant-leader is to wrap his or her arms around the issue, the commonly held values of the members of the organization, and motivate the team in such a way that the decision-making process does not veer off on a path of pettiness or self-service, but will keep its focus on the good of the organization and in the case of a school, the students. All this is framed by the goal that every school embraces: excellence that leads to praise and a good reputation in the larger community.

Participative decision-making and the entire concept of shared leadership is “messy.” It is not to be entered into by the faint of heart. Getting a leadership team together to make decisions for an organization is not merely an attempt to take the pressure off the leader regarding decisions. It is not an effort to escape from taking responsibility for the outcomes of decisions, or “shifting the blame” when things go wrong. The goal of the process is to make good decisions through meaningful discussions that have weighed every possible concern brought by the leadership team, and to build consensus, to be sure, but it has another purpose as well.

This procedure has the indirect benefit of developing leaders from among the team. The servant-leader is always looking out for the interests of others, and leading others through this process with its accountability is a positive way to build in others qualities needed to evaluate,

assess, create, inspire, motivate, and decide. As a servant-leader views the task of making decisions that impact the entire organization, he or she is also considering the development of leadership potential from among those who have joined in this task. Just as my supervisory goal as a servant-leader is not to simply get teachers to comply or do things my way, it is to motivate, encourage, support, and develop that educator to become the best possible teacher he or she can be. Part of that process includes helping teachers break out of their classroom “shell” and become teacher-leaders.

Owens and Valesky’s skeleton decision-making paradigm makes the whole process seem tame and simple: (1) define the problem, (2) identify the possible solutions, (3) predict the consequences of the alternatives, and (4) choose the solution to be followed (p. 328). They also discuss a very important ingredient in the decision-making process that must be added: the “human capital factor” (knowledge, skills, abilities, motivation, commitment, attitudes, and work behavior) (p. 169-170). With this element the equation becomes more complicated, but no less important. This is where it gets messy, and this is where the servant-leader who understands the principles of shared decision-making and participative leadership can be the most effective. When decisions are made that have come from the heart of a committee that is focused on doing what is best for the organization, and have been tempered by the fires of honest, professional disagreement, they will be void of self-serving motives and well-suited to address the challenges of the organization. The organization depends on good decision-making. Good decision-making depends on effective leadership. Effective leadership begins as a philosophy in the heart of the servant-leader to focus on what is best for every stakeholder in the organization: students, teachers, support staff, parents and grandparents, and the community. John Quincy Adams, sixth president of the United States, said, “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do

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more, and become more, you are a leader” (Lewis, 2005-2009). It is almost as if he were describing the servant leader who uses the model of shared decision-making not only to develop the organization, but also to build up its individual members. While common sense may not be common any more, it certainly will be characteristic of schools and organizations that wisely implement shared decision-making under the leadership of a true servant leader.

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