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Leadership for School Improvement: Cues from Organizational Learning and Renewal Efforts

by *Robert Mai*

Abstract

School improvement and school reform are about organizational learning and renewal. In successful efforts at organizational renewal, especially in business, leaders often play two related roles: critic/provocateur and learning advocate/innovation coach. Using examples from business corporations, the Army, and a college basketball team, this manuscript attempts to describe a model for leaders of school improvement based upon these two roles.

Creating and sustaining a culture of renewal is a challenge to leaders in all organizations. In education and business especially, organizational renewal has become a pressing concern for leaders who face mounting pressure to meet more demanding client expectations. In business management literature, there has been an increasingly distinct call for corporate leaders to attend to continuous improvement and innovation, and to operate more as a learning organization (Argyris and Schön 1978; Senge 1990). Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Kleiner, Dutton, and Smith (2000) and Michael Fullan (2001), among others, have echoed this theme for educational leaders; but ironically, the role of school leadership in building and supporting a learning organization has been much less defined.

Over the past decade, studies of business organizations have revealed a number of leadership strategies and behaviors that contribute positively to organizational learning and renewal. One recent book (Mai and Akerson 2003) described several such strategies in terms of critical leadership roles: namely, the roles of *critic* and *provocateur*, and of *learning advocate* and *innovation coach*. These roles also might be used collectively to define a two-dimensional behavioral model for educational leaders as school renewal champions.

Leaders as Renewal Champions

A learning organization is one that actively works to improve itself by casting present practices under critical scrutiny and by seeking new and better ways of doing things. Learning organizations are about constant self-evaluation and about developing new approaches and practices to deal with the challenges of an ever-changing environment. This, in turn, invokes a paradox: successful organizations must strive both to standardize their operations around “best practices” and, at the same time, to look constantly for more effective alternatives—better best practices, if you will—to achieve their goals. What this means for leaders in the field is equally paradoxical: support the methods that are getting results, while at the same time questioning them to seek better ways to accomplish objectives.

This second charge is a difficult one, but a critical task for leaders of dynamic organizations that continuously assess present practice and invent new pathways to success. For education in particular, it is important to extend this leadership task to teachers as well as administrators (just as in business—and, as we’ll see, in the Army and on a college basketball team—the expectation of “thought leadership” is increasingly extended to people without supervisory responsibility). In a growing number of organizations, including schools and districts, the need to challenge the status quo impels leaders to assume two related roles: *critic/provocateur* and *learning advocate/innovation coach*.

The Role of Critic/Provocateur

One of the hardest jobs to assume in an organization, particularly an organization that takes pride in the ways it presently accomplishes its goals, is to cast a critical eye specifically on those operating practices that define “the way we do things around here.” Many of the best practices currently in place have been around for a considerable period of time and were developed by respected professionals who might have enjoyed promotions because of them. Indeed, there are vested interests in any organization in maintaining the status quo, and they’re often personal as well as professional.

Yet, all too often the methods and practices in use today are driven by autopilot. They haven’t been examined seriously and systematically to determine whether they are still the most effective and efficient ways of reaching goals. The challenge for leadership is to raise critical questions when others might prefer not to. The questioning role of the leader as continuous status-quo critic can be addressed as an issue of both climate (how to make it safe and easy to raise questions) and technique (what are the best ways to pose critical questions).

Climate: Making It Safe to Be a Critic

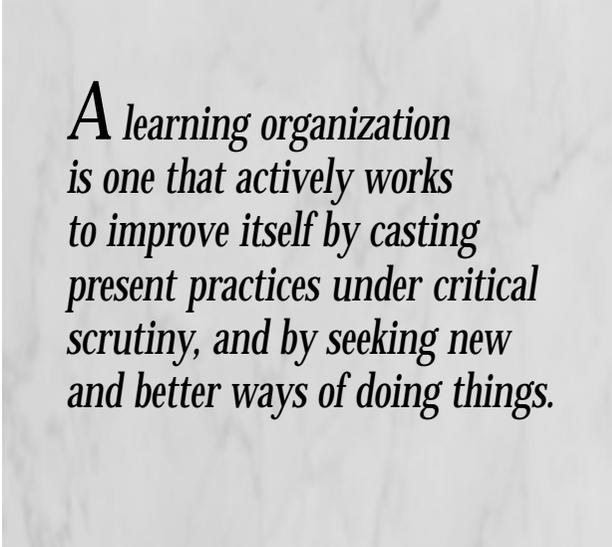
For some time the United States Army has employed a systematic method for questioning its own operations. Called “After Action Review” (Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja 1997), this method enables teams of soldiers who have just completed a specific operation to look back on it analytically and suggest better ways to accomplish similar objectives in the future. After Action Review is a *group* discussion process that invites participants to routinely dissect a military operation in the context of its objectives, with all participants having an equal voice and right to be heard, regardless of rank. While this

might seem highly unlikely given stereotypes of the military model of management—where Rule Number One is to obey your superior and there are no other rules—the Army has invested in the process and made it work. Critical perspectives are demanded and valued within the ritual of After Action Review; so, in this process, it's acceptable for enlisted men and women to criticize their superiors.

The After Action Review process always points to improving strategies and tactics for the next such engagement. Participants understand that they're incorporating continuous improvement into the way the Army goes about its business. New or refined solutions to an operational challenge, once agreed upon within the group, are submitted for incorporation into the preparation plans for future soldiers.

Officers who facilitate these sessions work at creating a climate of openness and respect for offered criticism. In organizations that have enjoyed similar successes in establishing safety zones for challenging conventional wisdom and the status quo, leaders use a variety of communication tactics that include:

- acknowledging their own natural tendencies to “go with the flow” and not to question embedded routines and operating practices;
- using outcome data to prompt critical discussion and identify practice areas that might warrant critical review;
- emphasizing the dangers to the organization from ignoring discrepant data or simply sweeping bad news under the rug;
- making learning from our mistakes as important as learning from our successes; and
- building a routine for doing regular operational postmortems.



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For school and district leadership, some equivalent of an After Action Review procedure might be a valuable way to engage more people as thought leaders and install critical assessment of program operations as a priority for group discussion. The most relevant dimensions of this process for school leadership would include the following:

- Regularity, and the expectation that such regularity creates for critical perspective. In schools, such review sessions could be prompted by test findings, completed curriculum units, or special projects.
- Emphasis on input from anyone who participated, and the expectation that all participants can add value to the discussion. In schools, such a process would help formalize the involvement of teachers in the school's most important decision-making.
- The premise that professional performance invites active group evaluation and that leaders who model critical evaluation behaviors (like questioning methods and sug-

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gesting alternatives) also are defining a critical role for all practitioners. For schools, this suggests the importance of faculty collaboration on issues that pertain to school performance and performance improvement.

Technique: How to Pose Potent Questions

Good questions cast a critical focus on areas that might be improved. They open up areas for examination that perhaps have been closed to scrutiny in the past. Questions can put heretofore best practices into play as items for improvement or even replacement by alternatives. Timely and well-crafted questions from leaders can prompt others to rethink old habits that previously have been either off-limits or simply so routine as to make them invisible.

When the chief executive officer (CEO) of a major building-products company asked his senior management team, “What are the top five things we could do away with?” he created an unusual opportunity for critical examination of old practices. In the ensuing discussion, the group identified more than five targets for improvement. The real discussion, and critical questioning, resulted when they were asked to prioritize the top five. Effective questioning of the status quo by corporate leadership frequently displays these attributes:

- Questions invite thinking and opinion rather than just information. More open-ended questions give respondents opportunities to think on their feet, to be more expansive in their discussions, and to feel that critical responses are in keeping with the intentions behind the questions.
- Questions build on one another as well as on the responses of participants in the dialogue. A sustained sequence of questions gives shape to a critical examination, suggests logic for addressing a given topic, and conveys respect for the opinions of other participants.
- Questions invite other questions and reinforce a critical stance toward the subject.

Using Confrontation to Provoke Critical Review

When David Farr, the CEO of Emerson (a *Fortune 100* manufacturing company), brings in the leadership team from one of its operating companies for a planning session, the tenor of the conversation is often confrontational (Mai and Akerson 2003). Farr and his corporate leadership team want to know what the operating company thinks it can earn and what it will have to spend, as well as the assumptions underlying these plans and the data that back up the assumptions. An aggressive questioning strategy is used that, to an outsider, might resemble a tough prosecutor’s inquisition of a defendant.

The way Farr’s team typically responds to a presented plan is to challenge the speakers to show compelling evidence that they’ve done their homework, considered alternative scenarios, and used sound and informed judgment. “When you bring forward a proposal that gets aggressively challenged by your CEO, you need to have your stuff together,” explained an Emerson corporate executive (Mai and Akerson 2003, 192). There are two rules that govern these discussions at Emerson. The first is that no personal attacks are allowed. The second is that “discussion must always lead to an action recommendation, with both groups invested in getting there” (Mai and Akerson 2003, 192).

The provocations issued by corporate management are understood to be at the service of a consensus-driven process where “everyone owns the decision.” As Farr (in Mai and Akerson 2003, 197) concluded, “This process of involving all the key stakeholders in hammering out decisions helps make Emerson a ‘blameless organization,’ where implementation can’t be hampered by residual doubts and people waiting to say ‘I told you so.’”

The role of the leader-as-provocateur aims to prompt deeper questioning—going beneath the surface of conventional wisdom to get at those basic beliefs that inform actual decision-making. For educators, these can be fundamental beliefs about how children learn or effective pedagogical practices. Given the extraordinary developments in cognitive and evolutionary psychology over the past 20 years—to cite but one influence on teaching practice—it would seem incumbent on educational leaders to want to provoke challenging discussions about present practice in light of new findings in learning and development.

Aggressive challenges to fundamental assumptions, however, are uncommon in most organizations, and schools are no exception. Most of us shy away from confrontation. As Roland Barth (2001, 62–63) candidly admitted while speaking about the culture of schools, “I can think of no other profession in which the voices of its own members are mute in discussions about its reform. . . . What is desperately needed in deliberations about the reform of our nation’s schools is a continual conversation between social science research and craft knowledge, and between social scientist and educator. Each has tough and important questions to ask the other.”

The need to create these conversations, to establish forums where such dialogue can occur, is a paramount leadership challenge for educators. There’s a well-known anecdote about Alfred Sloan, the pioneering General Motors executive, who was unhappy about his management team’s reluctance to rock the boat. “I take it,” said Sloan-as-provocateur, “we are all in complete agreement on the decision here. Therefore I propose we postpone further discussion of the matter until our next meeting to give ourselves time to develop disagreement and perhaps gain some understanding of what the decision is all about” (Garvin and Roberto 2001, 115).

For school administrators and teachers, the need to step up and raise serious questions about “the way we’re doing things now” has never been more urgent, and more appropriate. With a national agenda to set standards and measure performance based on these standards, the professional imperative to provoke discussion and experimentation about how to improve school performance is clear. But if such discussion doesn’t occur, school leadership will have missed an opportunity to stimulate healthy rethinking of the status quo in our schools.

More specifically, the school leader as provocateur must manage a dialogue of contention and debate so that the best thinking of a school staff can be let loose on priority issues and not be held back by a historical reluctance to disagree or criticize. We need, in the words of Alfred Sloan, to be able to “develop disagreement,” and then harness it to

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bring alternative thinking into play in our school planning efforts. Two ways to put legs on this model are to first create an expectation for debate within the faculty and then to skillfully manage it.

Setting Expectations for Disagreement and Debate

The notion of inviting disagreement in faculty conversations runs against the professional grain, so leaders need to carefully state the case for “developing disagreement” as a requirement for a broad, thorough review of operating practices (as well as of assumptions that underlie those practices). A leading reason for inviting debate is to open up the field to new ideas, alternative thinking, and novel solutions to ongoing problems. If nothing else, every school might want to incorporate some kind of competing-alternatives requirement that leads to its annual performance-improvement plan.

Setting expectations for debate could involve, for the school leader playing the role of provocateur, strategies such as the following:

- Reminding colleagues about the rationale behind debate and disagreement. It’s about testing the way we do things now against possible alternatives and developing the means to make an informed decision about which is best.

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- Positioning yourself as a person whose own ideas can be challenged without recrimination (“I’ve been doing some things the same way for so long . . .”).

- Inviting the perspectives of everyone—especially those who don’t often get heard (let the inclusive classroom model transfer over to an inclusive faculty).

- Making participation a rewarding experience. Praise their efforts if not their ideas, and thank people for challenging status quo thinking in the name of the higher mission of school improvement.

Managing the Debate Process

A well-conducted debate over alternative, or perhaps competing, ideas is a discussion that focuses on substance and not on people. The leader’s paramount role is to solicit alternative views and different perspectives in the service of richer, more comprehensive treatment of an issue. The common purpose of the faculty team is to shape and reshape continuous improvement—to make the school more successful in fulfilling its mission. That’s the platform we stand on when we invite dissent and disagreement. Here are some other tactics used by effective business leaders:

- Keep the playing field level. Help new (or reticent) colleagues find a voice and speak their mind at meetings while balancing the views of more outspoken and powerful team members.

- Keep the end in sight. It's about agreeing on a course of action that everyone can support after the meeting.
- Keep the floor open for debate. This is not a brainstorming activity where ideas cannot be criticized, but an opportunity to challenge positions and the rationale behind them.
- Find ways to socialize after a debate-oriented meeting. You reinforce both the ties you have as colleagues and the spirit of collegiality on which you want continuously to trade.

The Role of Learning Advocate/Innovation Coach

Companies that stay competitive in the face of evolving market conditions and new technologies (often pioneered by new competitors) are organizations that learn on-the-go and translate that learning into improved operating practices. Leaders of such organizations actively support a variety of learning activities, especially team problem-solving, the sharing of craft knowledge, and the use of data to guide innovation. The role of leader as learning advocate in business—as well as in education—is defined by two strategies in particular: facilitating productive shoptalk, and encouraging informed experimentation and innovation.

Facilitating Shoptalk

The historical reluctance of school professionals to embrace aggressively the implications of school reform was alluded to earlier, especially the rethinking of educational practices in which all must play a part. Part of this reluctance is no doubt related to a larger workplace phenomenon: the tendency for practitioners in all fields to not *articulate* their methods and techniques and hence to not share this craft knowledge with others. Referred to as “tacit knowledge” by philosopher Michael Polanyi (1966), these unshared methods and techniques represent undeveloped potential for the organization to improve itself.

The challenge for leaders is therefore to draw out valuable, tacit knowledge so that it can enrich the thinking of the others in the organization, and possibly advance the agenda of continuous improvement. In organizations across the country, making tacit knowledge explicit and more widely usable has been helped by challenging people to see themselves as important problem-solvers and innovators, or thought-leaders on behalf of organizational renewal.

For example, after it had virtually reinvented the buying and servicing experience for automotive customers, Saturn (Wood and Mai 1997) decided it needed to know more explicitly what was actually happening in its leading dealerships to create such unprecedented levels of customer satisfaction. Saturn convened representatives from a dozen different functional roles, working in leading dealerships across the country, to reveal the specific tactics they had used to garner the highest ratings in a syndicated customer satisfaction survey. A parallel set of meetings was held with Saturn customers. Discussions probed for detail: what exactly did salespeople do to make customers feel so comfortable, and how did service managers actually extend this customer goodwill? Output from those facilitated sessions was collected, edited, and shared across the Saturn dealer network, not only to share techniques but also to prompt more shoptalk.

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School leaders, like their business counterparts, can support increased sharing of professional knowledge simply by putting it on the meeting agenda and making it a discussion priority. Many principals have turned over parts of their staff meetings to “professional learning” activities, which can range from presentations by invited speakers to dealing with specific instructional problems. Beyond this, the generation of more and richer shoptalk among staff members has been dependent upon organizational leadership tactics like these:

- inviting people to contribute opinions and ideas, not just descriptions and anecdotes;
- punctuating conversations about specific organizational matters with questions like, “Why do we do it this way now?” and “Are there other ways we could accomplish this objective?” (Such open-ended questions convey a higher level of seriousness, and invite more in-depth discussion.);
- using graphic organizers and process maps to add a visual dimension to discussion, and allowing people to sketch their ideas as well as tell them;
- providing positive reinforcement to those who offer ideas, or who simply extend the discussion; and
- tying ideas and recommendations to action follow-up, with assigned responsibility.

Timely and well-crafted questions from leaders can prompt others to rethink old habits that previously have been either off-limits or simply so routine as to make them invisible.

A related challenge for leaders is to make it easier for conversations to happen—with or without a manager present to lead discussion. Much has been said about the importance of water-cooler conversations for casually sharing information. In schools, faculty lounges or meeting rooms certainly can accommodate this kind of conversation; but whether or not the sharing of professional knowledge takes place depends on how leaders promote this kind of talk. In corporate environments that encourage shoptalk in the interest of organizational renewal, leaders have been observed to:

- consider how the workplace environment could accommodate

more casual meetings between professionals—what are the spaces where professionals prefer to congregate, and how might they be made more inviting for professional sharing (e.g., seating, whiteboards, and computers);

- determine if and how various “communities of practice” (in schools, they could be the English Department or the teachers on the third floor) manage to meet within normal work schedules, and consider how time might be managed differently to accommodate more meeting opportunities; and

- foster mentoring relationships to better support younger employees and to generate more reflective dialogue about professional issues. In many states, mentoring programs are routinely set up for new teachers, but they’re often one-way conversations; in

Professional Development Schools, for example, there is a greater potential for mentoring to generate a variety of learning opportunities for all participants.

Sponsoring Innovation

The growing public interest in improving educational outcomes has prompted school leaders to be challenged more often to be innovative in their attempts to raise school performance levels. Because many business arenas are experiencing increased competition, corporate leaders also are increasingly expected to experiment and innovate to sustain competitive advantage. Two leadership tactics in particular seem to hold promise for both camps: sponsoring dedicated innovation teams or task forces, and promoting the use of data to develop new strategies.

Since the 1980s, American manufacturing and service industries, with their campaigns to improve operating quality, have increasingly involved employee teams to drive organizational improvement. Problem-solving or “idea” teams have proven to be one of the most successful ways to generate new thinking. These teams typically meet over extended periods with a charge to generate suggestions for improving productivity or to recommend solutions to specific problems. Senior leaders in these organizations make sure that suggestions are reviewed fairly, responded to promptly, and rewarded appropriately. Companies that sponsor idea teams have enjoyed, among other things, enormous cost savings and operating efficiencies because they asked for, and listened to, the counsel of their frontline people (Mai 1996).

Schools have relied on teams of teachers to design curriculum and instruction for a long time. While there is still a tendency for teachers to work in relative isolation, there is sufficient precedent for collaboration within the faculty to make this strategy a natural recourse for schools. School administrators and teacher leaders need to yoke this tradition of collaboration more rigorously to the requirements of school reform. In business organizations, we have seen leaders attempt to make efforts at experimentation and innovation more deliberate and systematic through tactics like:

- invoking a sense of urgency (What are the consequences—to our clients and to us—if we fail to find ways to improve performance?);
- giving teams specific assignments and committing to following through on workable ideas;
- helping teams get started, or overcome logjams, with process assistance and empowering them by brokering the resources they need to get the job done; and
- using probing, open-ended questions to prompt alternative approaches to problems (How does this approach square with what we know about our clients? or We’ve always done it this way, but might there be a better approach?)

These methods seem appropriate for school settings and offer legitimate definition to the model of the school leader as renewal champion.

Using Data to Coach

The second tactic to support effective innovation involves aggressively gathering performance data and using that data freely and resourcefully to advance the work of

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the organization. Unfortunately, schools, as well as many companies, use data mainly for scorekeeping purposes and don't share it systematically with those people who might use it best for organizational improvement. Emerson provides a good example of how to use performance data as a planning tool, with management teams probing past performance data and future projections to create and agree upon a plan.

At a time when educators are being strongly urged to mount more extensive, if not more sophisticated, self-assessment efforts, one likely yield is a greater amount of performance data available for school leadership teams. How school leaders choose to use data for planning purposes can certainly make a difference in the quality and responsiveness of their school improvement initiatives. One of the best illustrations of just how powerful data collection and analysis can be in charting new courses of action is the recent experience of the Grinnell College men's basketball team (Klein 1999). The role of the Grinnell coach nicely illustrates how a team leader can use data in creative ways to chart true innovations, as well as how both data analysis and strategy development can be an effective shared activity.

Inheriting a 25-year tradition of losing seasons (at a school that really didn't hold intercollegiate athletics as a high priority), a new coach decided to invite his squad to rethink its approach to the game. They realistically assessed their strengths and weaknesses (they were bright with strong analytic skills and had a few good shooters, but were also short and relatively unathletic). Team members developed a cluster of new strategies that they tested in action and either kept or discarded, depending on results. The coach continually challenged his players to think nontraditionally about what might work to their advantage and what their capabilities would allow.

One outcome of this extended experiment was a basketball team that came to operate like a hockey team, throwing waves of five new players onto the floor every 1.5 minutes to wear down the opposition. Other strategies included taking mostly long-range shots and trying to steal the ball from the opposition all over the court. After several years of honing its strategies, the team was setting National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) records for team and individual scoring and winning its first league championship.

The Grinnell coach modeled a set of tactics that any leader as an innovation sponsor might emulate:

- Use data to question and reflect upon current performance and to sustain ongoing improvement conversations.
- Invite others to collect, analyze, and report on performance data—as an important dimension of professionalism and leadership.
- Hold sessions that prompt analysis and reflection based upon performance data. Challenge people to think about alternatives.
- Encourage people to take responsibility for testing new ideas and then reporting on them.
- Make experiments, data analysis, and related efforts a priority subject matter for team discussions.

•Defend and promote new ideas and recognize those who develop them (Mai and Akerson 2003, 242).

A Model for Guiding School Reform

This article set out to identify behavioral attributes of organizational leadership that correlate with successful efforts at organizational renewal. Its premise was that many of the leadership attributes that link to effective corporate renewal could be applied to effective school improvement and thus suggest a model for school leadership guiding school reform.

In business organizations, leaders who are noted for successfully managing transitions that keep their organizations vital and competitive in the face of changing conditions work from common strategies. These strategies—clustered around two critical leadership roles—address the same barriers to renewal found in most organizations and would seem to have the potential to serve school leaders as well as corporate managers, army officers, and college coaches. Simultaneously playing the roles of critic of the status quo and provocateur of critical review and debate can drive the process of challenging present practices and existing mental models that rationalize these practices. Playing the roles of learning advocate and innovation coach can support the thinking required to produce viable improvements and better ways to accomplish key objectives. These roles and the behavioral attributes describing them warrant consideration by both school administrators and teachers who want to address the challenge of continuously improving educational practice in their schools.

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