



# Sinking Ships, Emerging Leadership: A True Story of Sustainability (or the Lack Thereof)

by Bill Mulford and Juan Manuel Moreno

## **Abstract**

*Sustainable educational leadership—leadership which leaves a legacy that lasts beyond the leader’s professional lifetime—is very much in fashion nowadays. A recent edition of this journal was devoted entirely to the topic (Hargreaves 2005a). However, it is important to ensure that, together with leadership itself, the impact of leadership is sustainable. The self-aggrandizement, silver bullets, short-term big-bang approaches, procedural illusions, witch hunts, failures to communicate, and lack of accountability evident in the story of the building of the Swedish 17th century warship, the Vasa, do not sit well with sustainable and effective leadership. In this article, lessons learned from the Vasa are compared and contrasted with those put forward by the contributors to the recent themed edition of this journal. The authors then identify what they believe, on the basis of North American and international research evidence, to be the emerging priorities for sustainable and effective educational leadership.*

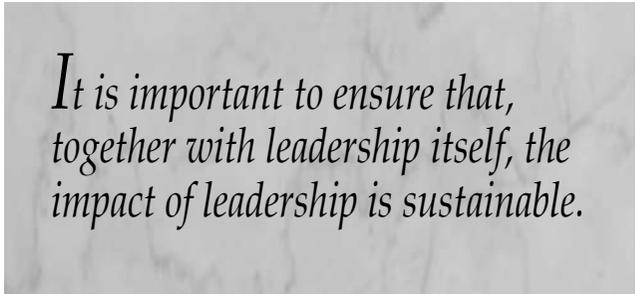
Aware that the welfare of his kingdom depended on his navy, King Gustavus II Adolphus of Sweden signed a contract on January 16, 1625, for the building of the warship Vasa. The Vasa was to be the most expensive, largest, most fearsome, and most richly ornamented naval vessel built in Sweden. The King was anxious to acquire a ship with as many guns onboard as possible, and wanted to have the ship completed very quickly.

For three years, 400 men worked on the ship. The hull was constructed mostly of oak, 64 large guns were cast, masts more than 50 meters high were raised, and hundreds

of gilded and painted sculptures were carved. The total length of the *Vasa*, including the bowsprit, was 69 meters. The height of its magnificently carved stern, which celebrated the power of the king, was 19 meters.

In 1628, when it was nearly completed, the *Vasa* was moored below the Royal Castle. There, the ballast was loaded, along with the ammunition and guns required for the maiden voyage. The new ship aroused the admiration and pride of the citizens of Stockholm and, as was intended, intimidated the country's enemies.

By Sunday, August 10, everything was ready. The task of building a mighty war ship had been completed. At the King's insistence, it had been built in half the normal time. The weather was fine and the wind light. Approximately 100 conscripted crew members, but also women and children, were onboard. This was to be a great occasion with pomp and circumstance, so crew members were given permission to take their families on the first voyage.



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As the *Vasa* set sail, countless Stockholmers stood along the shore to wish the ship good luck and follow her departure. The wind was from the southwest and, for the first few hundred meters, the *Vasa* had to be pulled along using anchors. The Danish captain then issued the order to set sail. A sailor climbed the rig and set four of the *Vasa*'s 10 sails. The guns fired a salute, and slowly, serenely, the *Vasa* set off.

After sailing proudly for another 1,300 meters, the *Vasa* capsized and sunk inside Stockholm harbor. Approximately 50 people followed the vessel into the deep.

News of the disaster did not reach King Adolphus, who was waiting impatiently in Prussia, until two weeks later. He wrote to the Council of the Realm in Stockholm that imprudence and negligence must have been the causes, and that the guilty parties must be punished.

The captain was taken prisoner immediately, and just 12 hours later stood before the Council of the Realm. As the transcript of the interrogation, which is displayed at the *Vasa* Museum in Stockholm, Sweden, showed, the captain answered, "You can cut me in a thousand pieces if all the guns were not secured. . . . And before God almighty, I swear that no one onboard was intoxicated. . . . It was just a small gust of wind, a mere breeze that overturned the ship. . . . The ship was too unsteady, though all the ballast was onboard." Thus, the captain placed the blame on the ship's design—and, accordingly, the shipbuilder.

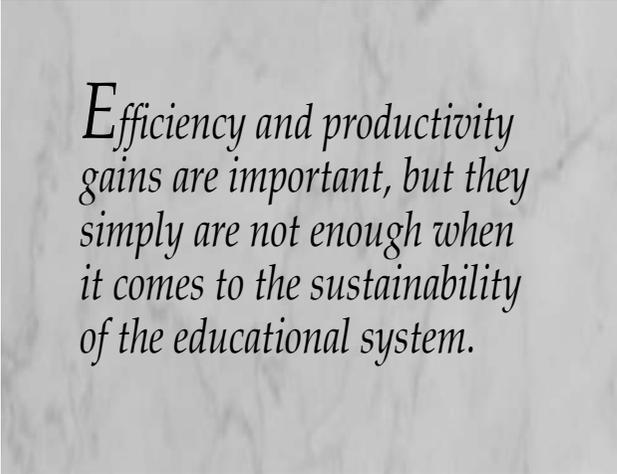
When crew members were questioned, they agreed. No mistakes were made onboard. The maximum amount of ballast was loaded. The guns were properly lashed

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down. It was Sunday, so many people had been to Communion, and no member of the crew was drunk.

The shipmaster revealed that the *Vasa's* stability had been tested before sailing. Thirty men had run back and forth across the *Vasa's* deck when she was moored,

but had to stop after three runs—otherwise, the *Vasa* would have capsized. The admiral, who was one of the most influential men in the navy, suggested that the King would have taken responsibility for its instability, and perhaps postponed its sailing when he commented, “If only his Majesty were at home.”



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Those responsible for building the *Vasa* also were questioned. The actual builder of the *Vasa* had died the year before; however, his replacements swore to their inno-

cence. The *Vasa* conformed to the dimensions approved by the King himself. “Whose fault is it then?” asked the interrogator. “God only knows” was the answer.

God and King, both of whom were equally infallible, thus were drawn into the case. No guilty party was ever identified, and no one was punished for the disaster. The great, beautiful warship was too large and too strong. It was more massive and had more heavy guns than previous ships. It was an experiment, an innovation that failed spectacularly (Mulford 2003c).

### *Lessons Learned*

Some people think that this true story of the *Vasa* has little to do with effective educational leadership. However, before agreeing too quickly with that position, reflect on the possible parallels and links to the issues presented in the recent edition of this journal on sustaining educational leadership (Hargreaves 2005a).

- *The artificial pressures created in a political environment where one of the social sectors, such as education, is said to be the key to individual, community, and national competitiveness.* This approach assumes that the world’s best outcomes will be achieved through a single, simple silver bullet delivered as quickly as possible—for example, large-scale standardized testing, decentralization, or enforced teacher accountability—or by using a big-bang approach to educational change and reform. Ironically enough, the currently accepted measure of national education development and education quality—Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results—is not really a gauge of what schools are achieving. Yet, schools are the only institutions held publicly accountable for the results.

- *How leaders deal with accountability pressures and, at the same time, shape and enrich the school community's perceptions and beliefs as to what counts as good education.* As Elmore (2005, 138) made clear, "Accountability is a delicate dance between policy makers, whose expertise is limited to particular aspects of law and politics, and practitioners, whose expertise is—or should be—bound by finer features of classroom practice and organizational culture and structure." From an understanding of accountability and improvement, he outlined the basic tenets of a leadership practice model as the development of internal school accountability; individual and collective agency; a focus on the technical, social, and emotional dimensions of improvement; and distributed leadership according to expertise.
- *The illusion that best practices can be identified and then transferred to any context.* In this scenario, vast, short-term, specifically targeted resources are committed, activity is frantic, procedural illusions of effectiveness abound, and impressions replace substance. For example, spin doctors raise the admiration, even pride, of the community while intimidating competitors, and use great fanfare to launch new products or processes. Contrast this big-bang approach with the advice of Hargreaves (2005b, 102) that "a leader best makes a difference by taking restorative action through small, but persistent efforts." The process is about, as Tyack and Cuban (1995) so eloquently stated in the title of their award winning book, *Tinkering toward Utopia*. Moreover, procedural illusions of effectiveness had no place in Starratt's (2005) description of a different kind of leader—one that has a proactive moral vision and takes responsibility not only as an educator, administrator, public servant, and leader, but also as a human being.
- *The myth implicit in always needing bigger ships in the drive for ever-increasing productivity and efficiency in the delivery of public services.* Efficiency and productivity gains are important, but they simply are not enough when it comes to the sustainability of the educational system. A crucial trade-off between sustainability and the relentless pursuit of ever-increasing levels of efficiency in education may exist. In the area of educational leadership, Hargreaves (2005b, 101) made clear that "we must understand what sustainability means and what it demands of us, and we must identify and commit to the strategic work that will bring it about."
- *One-sided emphasis on what works, such as more and bigger ships and guns, sometimes leads us to forget what it is we need and why, and vice versa.* Contrast this situation with Sergiovanni's (2005) call for the four leadership virtues of hope,

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trust, piety, and civility. Sustainable leadership is about going beyond the purely pragmatic emphasis on what works to encompass a critical vision of what we need and why. As Jansen (2005, 211–12) concluded after reflecting on his time as the first black dean of a faculty of education in a South African university, “If the [leader] . . . preoccupies himself or herself with narrow managerial and administrative tasks, the cost is huge in terms of broader strategic and positioning functions that have become increasingly crucial in a globalizing world.”

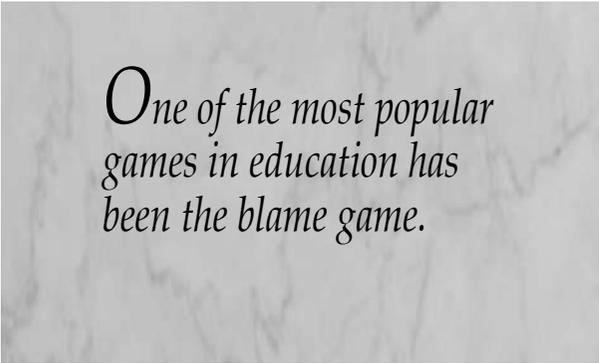
- *The assumption that scaling up is always possible just by building bigger and allegedly better versions of existing ships, and that the scaling up process is chiefly a matter of bureaucratic engineering.* Contrast this situation with Fullan’s (2005)

call for “turnaround leadership” with its focus on capacity building. Fullan (2005, 180) argued that, rather than merely scaling up existing activities, capacity building “must become a core feature of all improvement strategies.”

- *The unwillingness to accept failure in experimentation despite the fact that it is a major element in effective and continual learning.* Lieberman and Miller (2005) advocated that teacher leaders must be

willing to go public in communities of practice that support risk-taking and experimentation.

- *The inevitable changes in builders and, when all is said and done, the complete absence of accountability.* Accountability is a highly relevant aspect of an effective leader’s role. As Elmore (2005) pointed out, a significant aspect of accountable leadership is its distribution across the community involving not only individual and collective agency, but also the development of collective internal capacity.
- *The absent leader.* This type of leader engages in self-aggrandizement and, when things go wrong, disappears and witch hunts for culprits farther down in the organization. Success is attributed to those at the top, and failure is blamed on others. Absentee leaders often are off fighting their wars and use outsiders or consultants who can be blamed when things go wrong. One of the most popular games in education has been the blame game. Policies of increased school autonomy have reinforced central control and decentralized the blame for allegedly bad results. Contrast this situation with Hargreaves’s (2005c, 172) argument for “succession planning and building leadership communities that are not dependent on single individuals” and the call for leaders from “the first day of their appointment . . . to give thought to the leadership capacity they will build and the legacy they will leave.”
- *The failure of middle management to communicate and pass crucial disquieting evidence, such as the instability of the ship, up the line.* In a strongly hierarchical chain of command, where compliance with standards is the norm and the stakes are high, nobody wants to be the bearer of bad news—perhaps because chances are

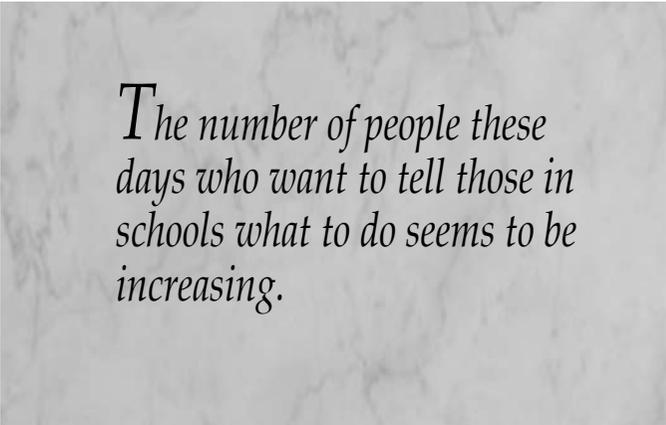


*One of the most popular games in education has been the blame game.*

good that the messenger walks the plank. Contrast this situation with Spillane's (2005, 144) emphasis on distributive leadership as practice arising from "the interactions of school leaders, followers, and their situation" and Sergiovanni's (2005, 122) advice that "Few leaders have the competence, time, and information needed at any given time to get the job done. Wise leaders try to rely on others and build upon their leadership capacity."

- *Little wind for change and the need for others to be pulled along by their anchors to get started.* Contrast this position with Elmore's (2005) call for leadership that builds on individual and collective agency, Sergiovanni's (2005) conclusion that wise leaders rely on others, and Lieberman and Miller's (2005, 161) position that teacher leaders "plan to continue to assume responsibility for deepening their own practice and that of their colleagues. They are determined to become the architects of vibrant professional communities in which teachers take the lead in inventing new possibilities for their students and themselves."

An important "wind generator" for change is, as Lewis and Caldwell (2005) and Jackson (2005) demonstrated, the creation and wise use of quality evidence. As Mulford (2005) suggested, the quality of evidence can be judged in a number of ways, including its integrity, predictive validity, and clarity of definition in the variables employed. First, evidence can have integrity to the degree that it is complex enough to reflect the realities faced by schools, has been gathered from people other than school principals (who tend to overestimate effectiveness when compared with their teachers), and has been collected by people other than those involved in the design or implementation of the reform. Second, evidence can have predictive validity when it attempts, for example, to link leadership with school and student outcomes. The link to student outcomes is a rare event, indeed, in the research literature on school leadership. Finally, clearly defined variables can help practitioners through a morass of often unhelpful and sometimes self-seeking debate, such as might be the case in current discussions about transformational and distributive leadership.



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### ***Rising Expectations and the Priority for Educational Leadership***

As with King Adolphus of Sweden and the building of the Vasa, the number of people these days who want to tell those in schools what to do seems to be increasing. However, many of those doing the telling often are unwilling to accept responsibility for their advice, blaming everything and everyone else for the lack of success. Budget cuts, changes in government, and the Minister of Education are common excuses. Furthermore, many of those responsible for policy making are not around

long enough to take responsibility for their directives. In many instances, this leads to a frantic succession of reforms that reform previous reforms. Moreover, current emphasis on accountability and impact evaluation is adding even more pressure to school leaders and practitioners, who, apart from being constantly reformed, may now end up being evaluated to death.

How do these multiple, rising, and often inconsistent expectations for reform and accountability compare with recent reviews of the research literature examining school leadership? The extensive work of Leithwood and his colleagues (2003; 2004), based mainly on North American research, is helpful. Leithwood and Riehl (2003)

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described the following six claims that they believe can be defended by the research evidence, are applicable to most school contexts, and are deserving of future research.

- Successful school leadership makes important contributions to the improvement of student learning. Leadership primarily affects work indirectly through the school mission or goals and through variables related to curriculum and classroom instruction.
  - The primary sources of successful leadership in schools are principals and teachers.
- In addition to principals and teachers, leadership is and ought to be distributed to others in the school and school community.
  - A core set of basic leadership practices is valuable in nearly all contexts. This set includes setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization.
  - Successful leaders also must act in ways that acknowledge the accountability-oriented policy context in which nearly all work.
  - Many successful leaders in schools that serve highly diverse student populations enact practices that promote school in families and expand the amount of students' social capital valued by the schools—quality, equity, and social justice. These practices include building powerful forms of teaching and learning, creating strong communities in school, and nurturing the development of educational cultures.

From an extensive review of the effects of leadership on student learning, Leithwood et al. (2004) concluded:

- Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school, accounting for about a quarter of total school effects.
- Leaders mostly contribute to student learning indirectly, through their influence

on other people or features of their organization. Thus, their success depends a great deal on their judicious choice of the parts of the organization on which to focus time and attention.

- Three sets of practices are the basics of successful leadership: developing people, setting directions, and redesigning the organization.
- All successful leadership is contingent on the unique contexts in which it finds itself; but leadership effects usually are greatest where they are needed most, such as in schools that are in more difficult circumstances.

Other international research evidence (e.g., Mulford 2003a) clearly demonstrated that leadership which makes a difference is both position-based (principal) and distributive (administrative team and teachers). However, both are related only indirectly to student outcomes. Organizational learning (OL)—a collective teacher efficacy involving three sequential developmental stages (trusting and collaborative climate, shared and monitored mission, and taking initiatives and risks) supported by appropriate professional development—is the important intervening variable between leadership and teacher work and then student outcomes. That is, leadership contributes to OL, which in turn influences what happens in the core business of the school—teaching and learning. Leadership influences the way in which students perceive how teachers organize and conduct their instruction and educational interactions with, and expectations for, their students. Students' positive perceptions of teachers' work directly promote their participation in school, academic self-concept, and engagement with school. Student participation is directly related and student engagement is indirectly (through retention) related to academic achievement. School size is negatively linked to these relationships, while socioeconomic status and student home educational environment are positively linked to these relationships.

In addition to indirectly linking leadership and student outcomes, research also clearly illustrates that teachers will not stay and prosper in poor environments. A recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report (2005, 15) on attracting, developing, and retaining teachers concluded, "unless teachers are actively involved in policy formulation and feel a sense of 'ownership' of reform, it is unlikely that substantial changes will be successfully implemented." Continually improving leadership and school climate are paramount. Evidence (Mulford 2003d) showed that school leadership not only can buffer teachers from external pressures, but also can lead to greater teacher satisfaction. In turn, greater teacher satisfaction leads to higher teacher recruitment. School leadership and teachers' satisfaction lead to improved teacher classroom performance and wider use of distributive or teacher leadership. Improved classroom practices and teacher leadership lead to enhanced student outcomes. School leadership, improved classroom practices, teacher leadership, and enhanced student outcomes lead to higher teacher development and retention.

Leithwood et al.'s (2004) findings, combined with other international research, indicated that three major, sequential, and aligned elements clearly have emerged in successful school reform. An effective, sustainable school leader has an important

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role to play in each of these elements. Current pressures to make wholesale changes or to be innovative are not primary elements. Rather, the first element relates to how people are communicated with and treated. Success is more likely when people act, rather than react; are empowered; are involved in decision-making through a transparent, facilitative, and supportive structure; and are trusted, respected, encouraged, and valued. The second element concerns a professional community. A professional community involves shared norms and values, including the acknowledgment of differences and diversity; a focus on implementation and continuous enhancement of learning for all students; critical, reflective dialogue on practice; collaboration; and accountability, especially that which is based on performance data. The final element relates to the presence of a capacity for change, learning, and innovation. Each element and each transition between them is facilitated by an appropriate, ongoing, optimistic, caring, and nurturing professional development program.

### ***Conclusion: Deep Democracy***

The current world education scenario seems to be crowded with Vasa-like reform initiatives and quick fixes. Unfortunately, the accompanying self-aggrandizement, silver bullets, focus on short-term and big-bang approaches, witch hunts, failures to communicate, and lack of accountability so evident in the story of the Vasa have no place in emerging educational leadership. These responses may be founded on political worries about educational systems' perceived failure and, on the flip side, enormous potential to defend and enhance national competitiveness in an increasingly globalized world. In such a context and, with such high stakes involved, the role of educational leadership and, particularly, school leadership must emerge more fully into the spotlight. The concept of sustainable leadership is related to the sustainability of public school systems in today's world. Sustainable leaders—those who command ships which can stay afloat—are those who engage the school community in deep democracy.

What is meant by deep democracy? Furman and Shields (2003) argued that the concept of democracy needs to move from thin conceptions based in the values of classical liberalism and its concern with the right of the individual to pursue his or her self-interest and the resolution of conflict through democratic majority voting to a notion of deep democracy. Dewey (1916) saw deep democracy as involving respect for the worth and dignity of individuals and their cultural traditions, reverence for and proactive facilitation of free and open inquiry, recognition of interdependence, individual participation in free and open inquiry, and collective choices and actions in the interest of the common good.

Furman and Shields (2003) stated that deep democracy needs to be practiced in schools. However, because schools are afraid to risk chaos and loss of control, students typically "are expected to conform to hierarchically imposed decisions about what they study and teach and when, what the outcomes of instruction should be, how to behave and talk, and even how they look. [In fact,] learning democracy may be one of the least experiential aspects of K–12 curricula" (2003, 10). The results of a recent analysis of school principal training in the Australian state of Tasmania

(Mulford 2004) suggested that the same could be said about the adults in schools within bureaucratically designed systems. Practicing deep democracy is greatly needed, but it may be the least experienced aspect of the working world, especially with regard to professional development.

Achieving better balances in our world (Mulford 2003b; The World Bank 2005), including learning what the political and bureaucratic systems require of individual leaders and what practicing professionals require of themselves and their colleagues, is critical. Based on available student outcomes research (Leithwood et al. 2004), the authors believe that this balance can best be achieved by groups of educational leaders, or professional collectives and alliances, setting, negotiating, and delivering their own agendas. This position is consistent with the lessons from the Vasa, the sinking ship, and the emerging priorities for sustainable and effective educational leadership detailed in this article. After all, participation in policy making not only enhances efficiency in implementation, but also contributes to the creation of more pluralistic and democratic political systems (Lecomte and Smillie 2003).

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