



Executive Director Commentary

From Plato to Lincoln to Collins: relevant lessons for boards and superintendents

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I recently read a New York Times op ed piece from David Brooks called “All Politics Is Thymotic”. Board members and superintendents can certainly learn from his discussion of “thymos” and use their understanding to build better relationships with each other as well as with outside groups.

According to the article, Plato “divided the soul into three parts: reason, eros (desire) and thymos.” Thymos is the hunger for recognition. It “motivates the best and worst things men do... It drives them to seek glory and assert themselves aggressively for noble causes. It drives them to rage if others don’t recognize their worth. Sometimes it even causes them to kill over a trifle if they feel disrespected.”

Plato also suggested that people are not only sensitive “about their own self-worth, but they are also sensitive about the dignity of their group and that of others... thymos is the psychological origin of political action...”

What does this have to do with board and superintendent leadership?

Over the last few years, in looking at leadership, a number of different issues have come together and helped us better understand leadership. For example, David Goleman has written about emotional intelligence, that is, the importance of empathy, sensitivity and how we handle our relationships. In *Emotional Intelligence*, he wrote about how, while IQ and what you learn in school is important, for later success, emotional intelligence is *twice* as important as the other two factors.

Professor Jeswald Salacuse’s recent book is called *Leading Leaders*. He writes that to guide smart, talented, rich and powerful individuals when the leader has little authority over them, a situation that most superintendents and board chairs often experience, it is critical that the leader develop a one-on-one relationship with those other individuals. One key to

building this relationship and developing the trust that has a direct relationship on whether the other individual will follow is to get to know the follower. In this way, the leader can determine how to best work with the individual.

In *Good to Great for the Public Sector*, Jim Collins has again made it clear that in order to be successful, it’s critical that the “right people are on the bus”. As readers of *Good to Great* will remember, critical to success is having the right people (here, administrators, teachers and, yes, board members) who can work together consistently to achieve success.

One of my favorite authors, Doris Kearns Goodwin, recently published *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. Her take was that those who Lincoln put in his Cabinet were rivals of his for the presidency in 1860 and they had great followings themselves. But, by 1865, they realized that this man, with his jokes and his country background, had almost superhuman wisdom and ability to deal with the toughest issues faced by any president.

One of the characteristics that Ms. Goodwin stressed was Lincoln’s ability to put himself in the shoes of his rivals and his enemies. After the bitterest war in American history, he wanted to bring the South back into the country as brothers who had gone astray, not as foes to be humiliated once they had been defeated. That ability to empathize and to understand what others are going through, while not weakening your own principles, was a central characteristic of Abraham Lincoln... and helped him keep his Cabinet and the Union behind him.

While on a more modern and certainly lesser scale, these ideas can teach board members and superintendents important lessons for developing the relationships that they need to be successful.

Use the Lessons

Board members and superintendents are leaders by
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virtue of being elected or appointed. You are put in a position of responsibility and authority in the hope that you will make the important decisions needed to ensure that your district is as successful as possible. You are charged with increasing student achievement, which is the mission of our schools, whether you are in Salisbury or Stonington or any of the districts in between.

Successful leadership on a board of education is not very often what we might have thought of as we grew up. Leadership on a school board is not being the general telling other soldiers to take a hill. It is more in the spirit of Lincoln, building consensus and trust and then working together to move forward.

In order to be successful, the establishment of good relations whether with other board members, members of the town or city council or any of the other groups in your community is essential for you to carry out this leadership role. To do so, it is

important to understand that others need to be recognized, that almost all want to leave a positive legacy for their children and beyond, and they want to be remembered (as Lincoln did – very much so).

By developing a style that takes into account the interests of those you need “on the bus”, ensuring they get the recognition they crave and still holding true to your ethical principles, you will have a much better chance of being successful in your work in your district.

And by doing so, you will leave a positive legacy as a board member or superintendent for yourself.
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