Leadership and Excellence in Schooling

Excellent Schools Need Freedom Within Boundaries

by Thomas J. Sergiovanni

It is in and through symbols that man, consciously or unconsciously, lives, works and has his meaning.

—Thomas Carlyle

Is your school a good school? When Joan Lipsitz posed this question to principals of the excellent middle schools she studied, she found that they had difficulty defining what made their schools special or what the dimensions of excellence in schooling were. "You will have to come and see my school," was the typical response.[1]

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Excellence is readily recognized in our ordinary experiences. It is difficult to put our finger on what makes a particular athletic or artistic performance excellent. But we know excellence when we see it. The earmarks of an excellent piano performance may be found not in the notes played but in the pauses between them. Clearly, excellence is multidimensional, holistic.

Competence, by contrast, is marked by mastery of certain predetermined, essential fundamentals. The piano student achieves mastery and thus is able to play the notes flawlessly and deliver a performance recognized as technically competent.

Similarly, we know excellent schools when we experience them, despite difficulties in definition. In excellent schools things "hang together"; a sense of purpose rallies people to a common cause; work has meaning and life is significant; teachers and students work together and with spirit; and accomplishments are readily recognized. To say excellent schools have high morale or have students who achieve high test scores or are schools that send more students to college misses the point. Excellence is all of these and more.

EXCELLENCE, NOT COMPETENCE

Should we expect more from our schools than the satisfaction of knowing they're performing "up to standard" and that students are competent performers? Most surveys indicate that basic skill learning and developing fundamental academic competence—the indicators of effectiveness common to the school effectiveness literature—are paramount goals in the minds of most parents and teachers. But, pushed a bit further, parents and teachers provide a more expansive view of excellence, which includes developing a love of learning, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, aesthetic appreciation, curiosity and creativity, interpersonal competence, and so on. Parents want a complete education for their children. Indeed our society requires it. Our young need to become cultured, educated citizens able to participate fully in society, not just trained workers with limited potential for such participation.

> To say excellent schools . . . have students who achieve high test scores . . . misses the point.

Important differences exist among incompetent, competent, and excellent schools and their leaders. Schools managed by incompetent leaders simply don't get the job done. Typically, such schools are characterized by confusion and inefficiency in operation and malaise in human climate. Student achievement is lower in such schools. Teachers may not be giving a fair day's work for a fair day's pay. Student absenteeism,

discipline, and violence may be a problem. Conflict may characterize interpersonal relationships among faculty or between faculty and supervisors. Parents may feel isolated from the school. Competent schools, by contrast, measure up to these and other standards of effectiveness. They get the job done in a satisfactory manner. Excellent schools, however, exceed the expectations necessary to be considered satisfactory. Students in such schools accomplish far more and teachers work much harder than can ordinarily be expected.

LEADERSHIP FORCES AND EXCELLENCE

Leadership has several aspects, each of which contributes uniquely to school competence and to school excellence. The current focus in leadership theory and practice provides a limited view, dwelling excessively on some aspects of leadership to the virtual exclusion of others. Unfortunately, these neglected aspects of leadership are linked to excellence—a revelation now unfolding from recent research on school effectiveness and school excellence.

Aspects of leadership can be described metaphorically as forces available to administrators, supervisors, and teachers as they influence the events of schooling. Force is the strength or energy brought to bear on a situation to start or stop motion or change. Leadership forces can be thought of as the means available to administrators, supervisors, and teachers to bring about or preserve changes needed to improve schooling.

At least five leadership forces can be identified:

- *Technical*—derived from sound management techniques
- *Human*—derived from harnessing available social and interpersonal resources
- *Educational*—derived from expert knowledge about matters of education and schooling
- *Symbolic*—derived from focusing the attention of others on matters of importance to the school
- *Cultural*—derived from building a unique school culture.

The first two forces have dominated the leadership literature in recent years and loom large in training programs offered through ASCD's National Curriculum Study Institutes.

1. *The technical leader assumes the role of "management engineer."* By emphasizing such concepts as planning and time management technologies, contingency leadership theories, and organizational structures, the

leader provides planning, organizing, coordinating, and scheduling to the life of the school. An accomplished management engineer is skilled at manipulating strategies and situations to ensure optimum effectiveness.

2. *The human leader assumes the role of "human engineer."* By emphasizing such concepts as human relations, interpersonal competence, and instrumental motivational technologies, she or he provides support, encouragement, and growth opportunities to the school's human organization. The skilled engineer is adept at building and maintaining morale and using such processes as participatory decision making.

3. *The educational leader assumes the role of "clinical practitioner," bringing expert professional knowledge and bearing as they relate to teaching effectiveness, educational program development, and clinical supervision.* The clinical practitioner is adept at diagnosing educational problems; counseling teachers; providing for supervision, evaluation, and staff development; and developing curriculum. One wonders how such essential concerns of *school* leadership could, for so long, have been neglected in the literature of educational administration.

In an earlier era the *educational* aspects of leadership were center stage in the literature of educational administration and supervision. Principals were considered to be instructional leaders, and an emphasis on schooling characterized university training programs. However, advances of management and social science theory in educational administration and supervision soon brought to center stage technical and human aspects. John Goodlad has been a persistent critic of the displacement of educational aspects of leadership in favor of technical and human. He argues, "But to put these matters at the center, often for understandable reasons of survival and expediency, is to commit a fundamental error which ultimately, will have a negative impact on both education and one's own career. *Our work, for which we will be held accountable, is to maintain, justify, and articulate sound, comprehensive programs of instruction for children and youth.*"[2]

He states further, "It is now time to put the right things at the center again. And the right things have to do with assuring comprehensive, quality educational programs in each and every school under our jurisdiction."[3]

The technical, human, and educational forces of leadership, brought together in an effort to maintain or improve schooling, provide the critical mass needed for competent schooling. A deficit in any one of the three upsets this critical mass, and less effective schooling is likely to occur. Recent studies of excellence in organizations suggest that despite the link between these three aspects of leadership and competence in schooling,

their presence does not guarantee excellence. Excellent organizations, schools among them, are characterized by other leadership qualities, forces described here as symbolic and cultural.

4. *The symbolic leader assumes the role of "chief" and by emphasizing selective attention (the modeling of important goals and behaviors) signals to others what is of importance and value.* Touring the school; visiting classrooms; seeking out and visibly spending time with students; downplaying management concerns in favor of educational ones; presiding over ceremonies, rituals, and other important occasions; and providing a unified vision of the school through proper use of works and actions are examples of leader activities associated with this fourth force.

Purposing is of major concern to the symbolic force. Peter Vaill defines purposing as "that continuous stream of actions by an organization's formal leadership which has the effect of inducing clarity, consensus, and commitment regarding the organization's basic purposes."[4] Students and teachers alike want to know what is of value to the school and its leadership; desire a sense of order and direction; and enjoy sharing this sense with others. They respond to these conditions with increased work motivation and commitment.

Of less concern to the symbolic force is the leader's behavioral style. Instead, what the leader stands for and communicates to others is emphasized. The object of symbolic leadership is the stirring of human consciousness, the integration and enhancing of meaning, the articulation of key cultural strands that identify the substance of a school, and the linking of persons involved in the school's activities to them. As Lou Pondy suggests, "What kind of insights can we get if we say that the effectiveness of a leader lies in his ability to make activity meaningful for those in his role set—not to change behavior but to give others a sense of understanding what they are doing, and especially to articulate it so they can communicate about the meaning of their behavior?"[5] Providing meaning and rallying people to a common cause constitute effectiveness in symbolic leadership.

Leaders typically express symbolic aspects of leadership by working beneath the surface of events and activities and searching for deeper meaning and value. As Robert J. Starratt suggests, leaders seek to identify the roots of meaning and the flow and ebb of daily life in schools so that they might provide students, teachers, and members of the community with a sense of importance, vision, and purpose about the seemingly ordinary and mundane. Indeed, these leaders bring to the school a sense of drama in human life that permits persons to rise above the daily routine. They are able to see the significance of what a group is doing, and indeed

could be doing. They have a feel for the dramatic possibilities inherent in most situations and are able to urge people to go beyond the routine, to break out of the mold into something more lively and vibrant. And finally, symbolic leaders are able to communicate their sense of vision by words and examples. They use easily understood language symbols, which communicate a sense of excitement, originality, and freshness. These efforts provide opportunities for others in the school to experience this vision and to obtain a sense of purpose so that they might come to share in the ownership of the school enterprise more fully.[6]

Warren Bennis argues that a compelling vision is the key ingredient of leadership in the excellent organizations he studied. Vision refers to the capacity to create and communicate a view of a desired state of affairs that induces commitment among those working in the organization.[7] Vision, then, becomes the substance of what is communicated as symbolic aspects of leadership are emphasized.

5. *The cultural leader assumes the role of "high priest," seeking to define, strengthen, and articulate those enduring values, beliefs, and cultural strands that give the school its unique identity.* As high priest the leader is engaged in legacy building, and in creating, nurturing, and teaching an organizational saga,[8] which defines the school as a distinct entity within an identifiable culture. The words clan or tribe come to mind. Leader activities associated with the cultural force include articulating school purposes and mission; socializing new members to the culture; telling stories and maintaining or reinforcing myths, traditions, and beliefs; explaining "the way things operate around here"; developing and displaying a system of symbols over time; and rewarding those who reflect this culture.

The net effect of the cultural force of leadership is to bond together students, teachers, and others as believers in the work of the school. Indeed, the school and its purposes are somewhat revered as if they resembled an ideological system dedicated to a sacred mission. As persons become members of this strong and binding culture, they are provided with opportunities for enjoying a special sense of personal importance and significance. Their work and their lives take on a new importance, one characterized by richer meanings, an expanded sense of identity, and a feeling of belonging to something special—all highly motivating conditions.[9]

Before further pursuing the powerful forces of symbolic and cultural leadership, let's view the five forces in the form of a leadership hierarchy as depicted in Figure 1. The following assertions can be made about the relationships of these forces:

1. Technical and human leadership forces are generic and thus share identical qualities with competent management and leadership wherever they are expressed. They are not, therefore, unique to the school and its enterprise regardless of how important they may be.

2. Educational, symbolic, and cultural leadership forces are situational and contextual, deriving their unique qualities from specific matters of education and schooling. These qualities differentiate educational leadership, supervision, and administration from management and leadership in general.

3. Technical, human, and educational aspects of educational leadership forces are essential to competent schooling, and their absence contributes to ineffectiveness. The strength of their presence alone, however, is not sufficient to bring about excellence in schooling.

4. Cultural and symbolic aspects of substantive leadership forces are essential to excellence in schooling. Their absence, however, does not appear to negatively affect routine competence.

5. The greater the presence of a leadership force higher in the hierarchy, the less important (beyond some unknown minimum presence) are others below.

CULTURE AND PURPOSE: ESSENTIALS OF EXCELLENCE

Culture building and practicing the art of purposing are the essentials of symbolic and cultural leadership forces. Culture can be described as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one school from another.[10] Cultural life in schools is constructed reality, and leaders play a key role in building this reality. School culture includes values, symbols, beliefs, and shared meanings of parents, students, teachers, and others conceived as a group or community. Culture governs what is of worth for this group and how members should think, feel, and behave. The "stuff" of culture includes a school's customs and traditions; historical accounts; stated and unstated understandings; habits, norms, and expectations; common meanings and shared assumptions. The more understood, accepted, and cohesive the culture of a school, the better able it is to move in concert toward ideals it holds and objectives it wishes to pursue.

All schools have cultures: strong or weak, functional or dysfunctional. Successful schools seem to have strong and functional cultures aligned

Figure 1.1   The Leadership Forces Hierarchy
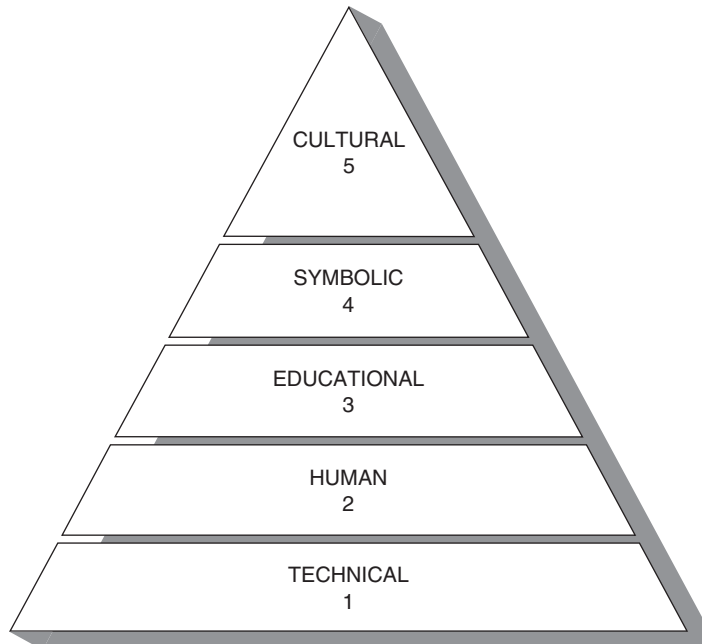
with a vision of excellence in schooling. This culture serves as a compass setting to steer people in a common direction; provides a set of norms that defines what people should accomplish and how; and provides a source of meaning and significance for teachers, students, administrators, and others as they work. Strong, functional cultures are domesticated in the sense that they emerge deliberately—they are nurtured and built by the school leadership and membership.

Weak cultures, by contrast, result in a malaise in schools character-ized by a lack of understanding of what is to be accomplished and a lack of excitement for accomplishment itself. Sometimes cultures are strong and dysfunctional. In this case, students may have banded together to build a strong culture directed at disrupting the school or coercing other students to misbehave or perform poorly. Teachers, too, can be sources of problems in strong, dysfunctional cultures if they place their own inter-ests first. In some schools, for example, an informal culture may exist with strong norms that dictate to faculty how they should behave. It might be unacceptable, for example, for teachers to take work home with them or to visit with students after school. Teachers who are working very hard might be considered as "eager beavers" or "rate busters," and as a result find themselves distanced from this culture. Cultures of this sort might be

referred to as wild. Wild cultures are not in control of administrators, supervisors, parents, teachers, and students as a cohesive group. They develop more informally or willy-nilly. When a dysfunctional wild culture exists in a school, excellence requires the building of a new, strong culture.

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Culture building requires school leaders to give more attention to the informal, subtle, and symbolic aspects of school life. Teachers, parents, and students need answers to some basic questions: What is the school about? What is important here? What do we believe in? Why do we function the way we do? How are we unique? How do I fit into the scheme of things? Answering such questions provides an orderliness to one's school life derived from a sense of purpose and enriched meanings.

"The task of leadership is to create the moral order that binds them— and the people around them," notes Thomas B. Greenfield.[11]

James Quinn states, "The role of the leader, then, is one of orchestrator and labeler: taking what can be gotten in the way of action and shaping it—generally after the fact—into lasting commitment to a new strategic direction. In short, he makes meanings."[12]

Leadership as culture building is not a new idea, but one solidly imbedded in our history and well known to successful school and other leaders. In 1957, Philip Selznick wrote:

> The art of the creative leader is the art of institution building, the reworking of human and technological materials to fashion an organism that embodies new and enduring values. . . . To institutionalize is to infuse with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand. The prizing of social machinery beyond its technical role is largely a reflection of the unique way it fulfills personal or group needs. Whenever individuals become attached to an organization or a way of doing things as persons rather than as technicians, the result is a prizing of the device for its own sake. From the standpoint of the committed person, the organization is changed from an expendable tool into a valued source of personal satisfaction. . . . The institutional leader, then, is primarily an expert in the promotion and protection of values.[13]

And in 1938, the noted theorist, Chester Barnard, stated the following about executive functions:

> The essential functions are, first to provide the system of communications; second, to promote the securing of essential efforts; and

third, to formulate and define purpose. . . . It has already been
made clear that, strictly speaking, purpose is defined more nearly
by the aggregate of action taken than by any formulation in
words.[14]

FREEDOM WITH RESTRICTIONS

Excellent schools have central zones composed of values and beliefs that
take on sacred or cultural characteristics. Indeed, it might be useful to
think of them as having an official "religion," which gives meaning and
guides appropriate actions. As repositories of values, these central zones
become sources of identity for teachers and students, giving meaning
to their school lives. The focus of leadership, then, is on developing and
nurturing these central zone patterns so that they provide a normative
basis for action within the school.

In some respects, the concept of central zone suggests that effective
schools are tightly structured. That is, they are organized in a highly
disciplined fashion around a set of core ideas, which spell out the way
of life in the school and govern behaviors. This is in contrast to recent
developments in organizational theory which describe schools as being
loosely structured entities. James G. March, a noted organizational theo-
rist, speaks of educational organizations as being organized anarchies.[15]
Similarly, Karl Weick uses the phrase loose coupling to describe the ways
in which schools are organized.[16]

Indeed Weick believes that one of the reasons for ineffectiveness in
schooling is that schools are managed with the wrong theory in mind.

Contemporary thought, Weick argues, assumes that schools are char-
acterized by four properties: the existence of a self-correcting rational sys-
tem among people who work in a highly interdependent way; consensus
on goals and the means to obtain these goals; coordination by the dis-
semination of information; and predictability of problems and responses
to these problems. In fact, he notes, none of these properties are true
characteristics of schools and how they function. Effective school admin-
istrators in loosely coupled schools, he observes, need to make full use of
symbol management to tie together the system. In his words:

> People need to be part of sensible projects. Their action becomes
> richer, more confident, and more satisfying when it is linked
> with important underlying themes, values and movements. . . .
> Administrators must be attentive to the 'glue' that holds loosely
> coupled systems together because such forms are just barely
> systems.[17]

Weick continues:

> The administrator who manages symbols does not just sit in his or her office mouthing clever slogans. Eloquence must be disseminated. And since channels are unpredictable, administrators must get out of the office and spend lots of time one on one—both to remind people of central visions and to assist them in applying these visions to their own activities. The administrator teaches people to interpret what they are doing in a common language.[18]

Recent observations about the school effectiveness literature point out that effective schools are not loosely coupled or structured at all but instead are tightly coupled.[19] My interpretation of the school effectiveness excellence literature leads me to believe that these schools are both tightly coupled and loosely coupled, an observation noted as well by Peters and Waterman in their studies of America's best-run corporations. There exists in excellent schools a strong culture and a clear sense of purpose, which defines the general thrust and nature of life for their inhabitants. At the same time, a great deal of freedom is given to teachers and others as to how these essential core values are to be honored and realized. This combination of tight structure around clear and explicit themes, which represent the core of the school's culture, and of autonomy for people to pursue these themes in ways that make sense to them, may well be a key reason for their success.

The combination of tight structure and loose structure corresponds very well to three important human characteristics associated with motivation: commitment, enthusiasm, and loyalty to school. Teachers, students, and other school staff need to:

1. Find their work and personal lives meaningful, purposeful, sensible, and significant

2. Have some reasonable control over their work activities and affairs and to be able to exert reasonable influence over work events and circumstances

3. Experience success, think of themselves as winners, and receive recognition for their success.

People are willing to make a significant investment of time, talent, and energy in exchange for enhancement and fulfillment of these three needs.[20]

Figure 1.2 The Forces of Leadership and Excellence in Schooling

Force	Leadership Role Metaphor	Theoretical Constructs	Examples	Reactions	Link to Excellence
1. Technical	"Management Engineer"	• Planning and time management technologies • Contingency leadership theories • Organizational structure	• Plan, organize, coordinate, and schedule • Manipulate strategies and situations to ensure optimum effectiveness	People are managed as objects of a mechanical system. They react to efficient management with indifference but have a low tolerance for inefficient management	Presence is important to achieve and maintain routine school competence, but is not sufficient to achieve excellence. Absence results in school ineffectiveness and poor morale.
2. Human	"Human Engineer"	• Human relation supervision • "Linking" motivation theories • Interpersonal competence • Conflict management • Group cohesiveness	• Provide needed support • Encourage growth and creativity • Build and maintain morale • Use participatory decision making	People achieve high satisfaction of their interpersonal needs. They like the leader and the school, and respond with positive interpersonal behavior. A pleasant atmosphere exists that facilitates the work of the school.	
3. Educational	"Clinical Practitioner"	• Professional knowledge and bearing • Teaching effectiveness • Educational program design • Clinical supervision	• Diagnose educational problems • Counsel teachers • Provide supervision and evaluation • Provide inservice • Develop curriculum	People respond positively to the strong expert power of the leader and are motivated to work. They appreciate the assistance and concern provided.	Presence is essential to routine competence and is strongly linked to, but still not sufficient for, excellence in schooling. Absence results in ineffectiveness.
4. Symbolic	"Chief"	• Selective attention • Purposing • Modeling	• Tour the school • Visit classrooms • Know students • Preside over ceremonies and rituals	People learn what is of value to the leader and school, have a sense of order and direction, and enjoy sharing that sense with others. They respond with increased motivation and commitment.	Presence is essential to excellence in schooling though absence does not appear to negatively impact routine competence.
5. Cultural	"High Priest"	• Climate, clan, culture • Tightly structured values; loosely structured system • Ideology • "Bonding" motivation theory	• Articulate school purpose and mission • Socialize new members • Tell stories and maintain reinforcing myths • Explain standard operating procedures • Define uniqueness • Develop and display a reinforcing symbol system • Reward those who reflect the culture	People become believers in the schools as an ideological system. They are members of a strong culture that provides them with a sense of personal importance, individual significance, and work meaningfulness, which is highly motivating.	

LEADERSHIP DENSITY

Figure 2 provides a summary of the relationship between the five forces of leadership and excellence in schooling. Included for each force are the dominant metaphor for leadership role and behavior; important theoretical constructs from which such behavior is derived; examples of the behaviors in school leadership; reactions of teachers and others to the articulation of leadership forces; and links of each force to school competence and excellence.

As leaders are able to better understand and incorporate each of the five forces, they must be prepared to accept some additional burdens. Symbolic and cultural forces are very powerful influences of human thought and behavior. People respond to these forces by bonding together into a highly normative-cohesive group, and this group in turn bonds itself to the school culture in an almost irrational way. The "cult" metaphor communicates well the nature and effect of extremely strong bonding. How strong is the bonding of excellent schools? Is it possible that there are limits beyond which bonding works against excellence? As bonding grows, one is apt to "think" less and "feel" more about work and commitments to school.

No easy answer exists to this problem. But the burdens of leadership will be less if leadership functions and roles are shared and if the concept of leadership density were to emerge as a viable replacement for principal leadership. The moral and ethical foundation for leadership will be strengthened if leaders place outer world concerns (such as the welfare of schooling) before inner concerns for self-expression and personal success. Leaders might select as their slogan Kant's admonition, "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only."

NOTES

1. Joan Lipsitz, *Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1983). (Available from the Center for Early Adolescence at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in Carrboro, NC.)

2. John Goodlad, "Educational Leadership: Toward the Third Era," *Educational Leadership* 35, (January 1978): 326.

3. Ibid., p. 331.

4. Peter B. Vaill, "The Purposing of High Performing Systems," in *Leadership and Organizational Culture,* eds., Thomas J. Sergiovanni and John E. Corbally (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

5. Louis Pondy, "Leadership Is a Language Game," in *Leadership Where Else Can We Go?* eds., Morgan W. McCall, Jr., and Michael M. Lombardo (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1978), p. 94.

6. See, for example, his "Apostolic Leadership," Jesuit Commission on Research and Development, San Jose, CA, June, 1977 (available from the Commission of Fordham University, Lincoln Center, New York, NY); and "Contemporary Talk on Leadership: Too Many Kings in the Parade?" *Notre Dame Journal of Education 4,* 1 (1973).

7. Warren Bennis, "Transformation Power and Leadership" in T. J. Sergiovanni and J. E. Corbally, op. cit.

8. Burton R. Clark, "The Organizational Saga in Higher Education," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 17, 2 (1972).

9. See, for example, Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., *In Search of Excellence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), particularly Chapter 4; and T. J. Sergiovanni, "Motivation to Work, Satisfaction and Quality of Life in Schools," *Issues in Education: A Forum of Research and Opinion* 1, 2 (1984).

10. G. Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980), p. 13.

11. Thomas B. Greenfield, "Leaders and Schools: Willfulness and Non-Natural Order in Organization," in T. J. Sergiovanni and J. E. Corbally, op. cit.

12. James B. Quinn, "Formulating Strategy One Step at a Time," *Journal of Business Strategy* (Winter 1981): 59.

13. Philip Selznick, *Leadership and Administration: A Sociological Interpretation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

14. Chester I. Barnard. *The Functions of the Executive.* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. vii.

15. Michael D. Cohen, James G. March, and Johan Olson, "A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 17, 1 (1972): 1–25.

16. Karl E. Weick, "Administering Education in Loosely Coupled Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 27, 2 (June 1982): 673–676.

17. Ibid., p. 675.

18. Ibid., p. 676.

19. See, for example, Michael Cohen, "Instructional Management and Social Conditions in Effective Schools," in *School Finance and School Improvement: Linkages in the 1980s,* eds. Allan Odden and L. Dean Webb. 1983 Yearbook of the American Educational Finance Association.

20. See, for example, Peters and Waterman, op. cit.; Sergiovanni, op. cit.; and J. Richard Hackman and Greg R. Oldham, *Work Redesign* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1980).