# Leadership That "Rocks the Boat," a Boat That Needs Rocking!

JOSEPH C. SOMMERVILLE*

IN A rapidly changing society, the need for administrative and supervisory leadership which meets the challenge of change is apparent. Leadership which operates to maintain the status quo for institutions and organizations that are obviously failing in goal attainment fails in the context of leadership herein discussed. Such leadership is ineffective.

Stogdill [1] defines leadership as a process of influencing the group in goal setting and achieving, while Hemphill [2] refers to effective leadership as "acts that have effected change which has itself solved a problem." Such leadership, addressed to the root cause of problems, is in the vein of effecting meaningful changes which "rock the boat," for such changes often upset the steady state of ineffectiveness found in many of our schools today.

The task which confronts the administrator and/or supervisor when he attempts to provide effective leadership is complex. Fac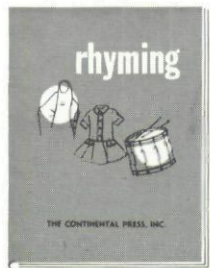tors affecting the administration of public schools are numerous, especially those within the framework for operation which includes the local and intermediate school districts, state department, and the U.S. Office of Education.[3] While one must operate within certain parameters regulated by the intermediate school district, state department, and USOE, the fundamental interaction for change must occur within the local school districts. It is this interaction which effects pertinent changes and represents a critical point of focus for the administrator and/or supervisor.

The problem of fostering change must be viewed in the light of the administrator's perceived role. If he perceives his role as that of providing leadership to maintain interaction which results in the perpetuation of the present state of the institution with only superficial modifications, he will have difficulty reconciling the needs of the institution with his perceptions. Leaders who fail to influence needed changes in the operation of the system contribute to its stagnation and failure to meet many of the challenges to
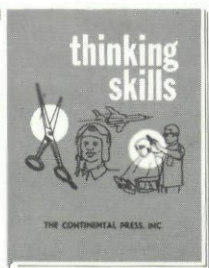
[1] Ralph M. Stogdill. "Leadership Membership and Organizations." In: C. G. Bracone and T. S. Cohn, editors. *The Study of Leadership*. Danville, Illinois: Interstate Printers, 1958. p. 38.

[2] John K. Hemphill. "Administration as Problem Solving." In: Andrew Halpin, editor. *Administrative Theory in Education*. Chicago: Midwest Administration Center, University of Chicago, 1958. pp. 105-106.

[3] Stephen J. Knezevich. *Administration of Public Education*. Second edition. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969. pp. 20-21.

* Joseph C. Sommerville, Associate Professor of Education, Department of Administration and Supervision, University of Toledo, Ohio

schools today. Thelen [4] describes such an administrator as conducting business as usual, spinning wheels in one place in face of dramatic changes in society and the clientele in the school.

## Zones for Leadership Behavior

Recognizing the fact that leadership must exist in the process of group interaction, the model in Figure 1 may be used as a reference in analyzing zone barriers which affect leadership and "rock the boat."

In the illustration, interpersonal interaction (the boat) is held in a suspended balance by the intensity of the varying forces acting upon it. The daily interaction between groups and individuals maintains an equilibrium which keeps the "boat" within the "zone of turbulence." Little or no meaningful change occurs within this zone; thus the

[4] Herbert A. Thelen. "New Practices on the Firing Line." *Administrator's Notebook*, Vol. 12, No. 5; January 1964.

varying forces, while exerting pressures to move the boat from time to time, do not move the balance out of the zone because of the counterforces which create turbulence. Administrative and supervisory leadership which acts in this situation is not likely to "rock the boat," for the status quo is maintained.

In this triple "T" (turbulence, transition, and turmoil) zone model, the relative strength of the counteracting forces varies from zone to zone. These strengths are represented by the weaker broken lines in the "zone of turbulence," the single straight lines in the "zone of transition," and the heavier reinforced straight lines in the "zone of turmoil," where the intensity of the resisting forces by groups and/or individuals is greatest.

When the interpersonal interactional balance moves into the "zone of transition," the intensity of the counterforces increases. The strength of the resistance to change is greater, thus it is more difficult to maintain

a balance between the varying forces. The job of the administrative leader becomes more difficult as a coordinator. If he is to move the system into this "zone of transition," two-way communication is most essential. A move into the transitional zone "rocks the boat," for the balance among the multitude of forces acting upon the "boat" is upset, since apprehension developing because of perceived threats to the loss of power, influence, and status of individual or group forces in the system intensifies. Effective leadership must so coordinate the organizational interaction that a move into the "zone of transition" does not create an imbalance of acting groups to the extent that the system moves into the "zone of turmoil."

In the "zone of turmoil," focus is no longer on the problem, but on personalities. Energy must be spent in dealing with individual problems, handling personality clashes, and trying to rectify a chaotic state of affairs. The administrative and/or supervisory leader may have difficulty maintaining his position, for many of the attacks will be directed at him. Operations in this zone are bordering on the breakdown of the system and the erosion of any rapport established by the administrator and/or supervisor. Leadership which influences movement into this zone tilts the "boat." The leader must then spend much time keeping his own head above water instead of influencing activity of the group.

## "Rocking the Boat"

Effective leadership consists of a multi-faceted interaction. It cannot be provided by the status leader alone, for he is usually not the source of influence, power, or the prime stimulus for group action in the organization. Indeed he is powerless as a facilitator unless he gains the confidence and support of significant groups and/or power figures within the system. The role of the administrator and/or supervisor is to work to create a climate and organizational arrangement in which personalities within the group who are influential enough to gain support for a significant change may effectively act to implement the change.

He is to facilitate meaningful interaction among groups and support many unpopular actions which allow the system to be directed by the powerless, including students, the poor, the so-called radicals who think differently from the generally accepted pattern, and those who are the victims of the institutions' past failures. To the extent he provides leadership which implements meaningful changes directed by the powerless, he "rocks the boat," for the organizational structure of our schools offers few opportunities for the victimized to determine their destiny.

The dynamics of the interpersonal interaction in a recent workshop series, which I served as director, may be illustrative of the forces impinging upon a change situation. The series entitled the "Crisis Situation Workshop" was sponsored by the ASSIST Center of Wayne County, Michigan, Intermediate School District.[5] It was initiated by the center, with high school principals and members of the county staff developing the early plans.
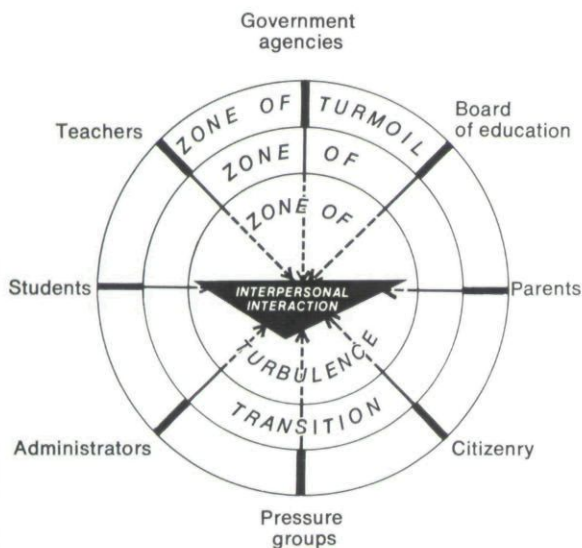


Figure 1. Model of Administrative and Supervisory Zone Interaction

[5] David L. Heinzman, editor. "Crisis Situation Workshop Summary and Recommendations." Detroit: The Wayne County Intermediate School District, April 1970. 31 pp.

Student representatives of activist movements were invited, through the participating principals, to serve as resource persons.

Initially there were 40 students, who elected 20 to represent them in a two-day training session directed by the Institute of Social Research of the University of Michigan, and to participate actively in the ten-week workshop series. Students selected were from schools ranging from inner city to the very affluent suburban area of Wayne County.

A few minutes before the first session of the series was scheduled to start, the 20 students presented an agenda for the session and demanded that the session follow their format instead of the one prepared by the sponsors, in which there were provisions for student participation. With 75 high school principals, most of whom had considerable administrative experience, waiting to gain new insight about working with emanating school crises, this really created a crisis for the staff and county administration since the financial support for the operation of the County District comes from the districts of those influential principals present. As the director who was accountable to the administration, the writer also realized the dilemma which this created.

Needless to say, many principals were incensed by the students' challenge of authority and the power structure. Some were even more upset when they found that the students serving as resource persons were not the docile, "goody goody," ideal student-council-officer types. They were the articulate, self-directed, student leaders of a movement to bring about changes, and the type who possess the skills to organize and lead an effective student movement. For students, who were selected to help principals understand student concerns, to react by challenging their role as invited guests and the structure of the workshop "rocked the boat," but changes occurred.

## By-Products of Boat Rocking

The resolution of the problem evolving from student involvement and confrontation with administrators in the workshop included the development of two directional lines of communication among the students, the county staff, principal participants, and other school personnel. Though confrontation made many uncomfortable, especially principals who had served as the authority figure for many years, several developments followed which should be helpful to principals in our schools today. Paramount among these are:

1. Students planned and directed many of the activities for principals.

2. Many principals who expressed reservations about the use of students in leadership roles accepted and promoted their participation as activities in the series evolved.

3. Principals and students from varying schools operated as an effective planning committee, with students and principals having equivalent representation and influence.

4. A wholesome working relationship developed between principals and students in which student-expressed concerns were modified by students as they developed a better under-

standing of the principal's responsibilities. Similarly, principals modified their resistance to student-expressed concerns.

5. The news media representatives, including key persons who are assigned to cover school news in weekly and daily newspapers and on radio and television, served as resource persons to enhance mutual understanding among student representatives, administrators, and the news media for more objective releases to the public.

6. Superintendents and teacher representatives participated in the workshop with principals and students as teams from several school districts for cooperatively developing approaches for dealing with and understanding the factors contributing to student unrest.

7. Recommendations for utilizing potential crisis situations in effecting meaningful changes were cooperatively developed by students, principals, teachers, and other school administrators at the summary session of the series of workshop experiences.

## Approaches to Boat Rocking

Naturally, any approach to a major change in a dynamic system based on interpersonal interactions must consider the uniqueness of the personalities involved and the nature of the existing equilibrium. The administrator and/or supervisor has to assess the intensity of forces impinging upon the balance of interpersonal interaction and move to utilize the available resources to effect coordinated action which may move the "boat" out of the "zone of transition."

The forces and factors which affected the interpersonal interaction in the workshop situation were naturally different from those which act within a school setting. Though the circumstances were different, there were common barriers to change. The idea of bringing in students who are articulate, charismatic, shrewd, and perceived as power figures in a movement which threatens administrative authority is frightening to many administrators. Those who were really upset by the idea found ways of avoiding the situation and reacted in ways which threatened to move the balance into the "zone of turmoil." The result could have been the total collapse of the series. Bringing young people in who have been silenced by the bureaucracy of the institution and providing them a stage and power to direct the activity of the authority figure are looked upon with disfavor by many administrators. Several expressed the idea that one "opens a can of worms," since such acts threaten the administrator's authority.

Bennis [6] discussed planned change as a method which employs social technology in the problem-solving process. He indicates that it is the crucial link between theory and practice and between knowledge and action. If effective leadership is to become a reality, aspects of planned change must be implemented.

Since much of the leadership in an interactional system must evolve from groups, and individuals within these groups, the status leader may approach planned change by:

1. Seeking through effective communicative processes the identity of those who may be able to articulate the deep rooted concerns and needs of the school clientele

2. Promoting the development of an organizational structure such as committees, forums, and in-service activities where others, especially those in power positions, may interact in situations where their authority is not an influential factor

3. Supporting changes advocated by the powerless, including students, laymen, and the poor, which may enable the institution to meet better the needs of the victimized, though such changes may differ from the ones which he may propose.

Except in the crises or emanating crises, few administrators foster the development of an organizational arrangement by which the victimized, powerless, or those who are directly affected by our institutions may influence the power structure. Behavior by administrators and supervisors which focuses on changes of this nature will move the system into the "zone of transition" and thus "rock the boat," a "boat" that needs rocking. □

[6] Warren G. Bennis. *Changing Organizations.* New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966. pp. 81-108.