

Are You Too Alone in Your Work?

Kirsten Olson, Ed.D.
Old Sow Consulting
MCCPSE Charter School
Leadership Summit
November 19, 2009



Making safe space here



- Observe “double” confidentiality
- Expect welcome and extend welcome
- Bring as much of yourself as you can
- Practice listening, to yourself and others



“Leadership can sometimes bring grief, a sense of being alone and in limbo, the experience of being marginalized...”

-Dan Commish, Nebraska Educational Leadership Institute, 2004

Conditions of the work



- Presentism: responding in 30 second cycles
- Extreme, public accountability pressures
- Mission driven work
- Young, inexperienced staffs
- Isolation due to lack of connective tissue in our movement

What you said...

- “There is no one to bitch to.”
- “Put on your big girl pants.”
- “Everything that happens, you always see as a challenge. You can handle it.”
- “I started working with a coach. I was driving my wife crazy.”



Leadership means wounding



- The role of leader may not align with our other emotional needs
- Wounding is an *inevitable* part of leadership
- Wound can either be a growth catalyst or lead to further crisis

(Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski, *The Wounded Leader*, 2002)

Nature of the wound



- Some essential part of ourselves is misunderstood, misrepresented, maligned
- *“My staff thinks I’m a Nazi. I’m a progressive educator who is in the work to help children.”*
- *“They say I’m wishy washy. I thought I was being open, listening to them.”*
- We feel alone...

Positional authority comes with consequences



- Staff relate to *you*, but also your positional authority
- “There are mean princesses and kind princesses. The same is true of leaders.”
- “Because you have authority over others, you should not be surprised that your decisions and actions may be misperceived. At some point you will be seen as a mean princess.”

-Elizabeth Ann Hebert, *The Boss of The Whole School* (2006)

Hazards of isolation in leadership



“I found no characteristics of a good school more pervasive than a healthy principal teacher relationship. [It] has extraordinarily amplifying effect. It models what relationships should be.”

(Barth, 1990, p. 19)



- As a leader, when do you feel alone?
- Around what issues?
- What has helped you feel less isolated in the past?

Which bee are you?





Seeking critical feedback

- Greater awareness of self
- At the bottom of our aloneness: who am I?
- Aligning that answer to the job



“Leaders owe it to themselves and their organizations to continue their personal growth and learning throughout their careers. This includes seeking honest and, if necessary, painful feedback on their performance and the performance of their inner circle. *Leaders who fail, without exception, have a distorted view of themselves, as well as misplaced loyalty to underperforming team members.* I would challenge you to write your personal ‘user’s manual’ This is who I am and what I stand for. This is how to best interact with me to get results. This is how I

respond to a variety of situations. This is my personal style. Once written, summon the courage to have those closest to you at work (and if you dare, outside of work) critique your user’s manual and tell you where it’s wrong. It’s a humbling experience that could lead to greatness.”

-MarieAnn North, Navigant Consulting 2007

Find friends outside of school



- Critical friends group
- Doctoral group sharing
- Mentor
- Leadership network



Leadership style flexibility

- **Structural:** Analytical frames, Good during change/reorg. Can be seen as technocratic, cold.
- **Human Resource:** Empowerment of others, pushes decisions downward. May be seen as weak in some organizations
- **Political:** Clear on end result, use persuasion, negotiation, coercion. Can be seen as manipulative.
- **Symbolic:** Organization is a stage. Inspiring and great communicator, or smoke and mirrors.

-Bolman and Deal, Reframing Organizations (2003)



“The paradox of leadership is that you have to face many things by yourself, without feeling too alone. Knowing that there are others out there who feel the same way--that has helped.”



“I started to prioritize me.”