Can a Leader Admit Confusion and Still Lead?

"Embracing Confusion: What Leaders Do When They Don't Know What to Do" by Barry Jentz and Jerome Murphy in *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 2005 (Vol. 86, #5, p. 358-366)

"[C]onfusion is not a weakness to be ashamed of but a regular and inevitable condition of leadership," say Barry Jentz and Jerry Murphy in this article in *Kappan*. They describe a five-step process for taking advantage of "Oh, no!" moments to "embrace confusion," open up better lines of communication, test old assumptions and values against changing realities, and develop more creative approaches to problem solving.

The authors present a case study of a school leader hit with unexpectedly low test scores (25 percent of eighth graders are non-readers!), followed by demands from parents and community groups to *do something* and defensive reactions from teachers who are not about to be blamed for poor student achievement. Like others in this kind of predicament, the leader feels under tremendous pressure to act and churns with the following thoughts and emotions:

- Shame and loss of face: "I'll look like a fool!"
- Panic and loss of control: "I've let this get out of hand!"
- Incompetence and incapacitation: "I don't know what I'm doing!"
- Shame: "I'm at a loss here. I'm not fit to lead."

The last thing the leader is inclined to do is admit confusion, which seems like weakness.

Looking at this situation from the point of view of the school leader's subordinates, the last thing they want is a boss who:

- Instinctively blames circumstances or other people when things go wrong;
- Claims to be open to input but sees feedback as criticism and doesn't listen;
- Hates uncertainty and opts for action even when totally confused;
- Believes that anything less than take-charge decision making is weak;
- Habitually resorts to the "art of the bluff" to avoid looking stupid.

Yet when leaders are disoriented and confused by developments that just don't make sense and have no idea what to do, these tendencies often take hold. After all, leaders are supposed to know what to do! In a crisis, they tend to deny their confusion and reflexively and unilaterally impose quick fixes to solve the problem. These kind of shoot-from-the-hip decisions, say Jentz and Murphy, "rarely address underlying causes. More often, they lead to bad decision making, undermine crucial communication with colleagues and subordinates, and make managers seem distant and out of touch. In the long run, managers who hide their confusion also damage their organizations' ability to learn from experience and grow."

How can a leader get out of this box? Jentz and Murphy suggest a five-step process for turning confusion into a resource, maintaining your authority, avoiding premature closure, and enlisting your team in finding the best way to move forward:

- *Step 1 – Embrace your confusion*. "When confronted with disorienting problems," they write, "you need to do the one thing you least want to do – acknowledge to yourself that you are confused *and* that you see this condition as a weakness… You might take a

deep breath and say to yourself, 'I'm confused and that makes me feel weak.' Paradoxically, fully embracing where you start will not lead you to wallow in your confusion, but rather frees you to move beyond your inner conflict." Doing this is difficult, and Jentz and Murphy recommend developing a personal mantra for crisis moments, for example, "Leadership is not about pretending to have all the answers but about having the courage to search with others to discover solutions."

• *Step 2 – Assert your need to make sense*. Sit down with your colleagues and say something like, "This new information just doesn't make sense to me. Before I can make a decision, I need help in understanding this situation and our options for dealing with it." It's critically important to 'fess up to your confusion: "Unless you unambiguously assert, with conviction and without apology, your sense of being confused, others will fulfill your worst expectations – concluding that you *are* weak – and they will be less willing to engage in a shared process of interpersonal learning." If the leader is faking confidence and competence as the ship goes down, the crew will be in no mood to admit their own distress and find new ways to plug the leaks.

• *Step 3 – Structure the interaction*. "Without skipping a beat," say Jentz and Murphy, "you must next provide a structure for the search for new bearings that both asserts your authority and creates the conditions for others to join you." The leader needs to state the purpose for the joint inquiry, lay out specific steps to fulfill that purpose, provide a timetable, and identify the criteria and methods by which decisions will be made. These actions show team members that although you have admitted you are confused, you are not incapacitated; you may not know what course to take, but you know the next step, you are "asking for directions" (difficult for some guys!) but you are still in charge of a process that will produce a clear outcome, and you give suggestions about the type of data you need to clarify and resolve the problem.

Jentz and Murphy illustrate this point with another case study of a leader in a pickle. *The alarm sounds in a nuclear power plant, signaling that something is seriously wrong. The manager makes an educated guess about what the problem might be, but then a team member reports a piece of data from the reactor that doesn't fit the manager's hypothesis – in fact, it's the exact opposite of what it should be. The manager is stunned and sits starting at the console as the team anxiously awaits a decision*. Following Step 3, here is what the manager might say: "Listen up! We've got two minutes, and then you'll get my decision. Between then and now, I'm going to talk about what's got me confused, and you are going to give me new information, feedback, or explanations for what is going on."

• *Step 4 – Listen reflectively and learn*. As your team begins to respond with data, ideas, and push-back, the leader needs to shift gears and engage in what Thomas Gordon called "active listening" – putting yourself in other people's shoes and, with an open mind, really listening to what they are saying (often reflecting it back to be sure you have heard it accurately). For example:

- "You seem to be saying that *x* caused *y*. Do I have that right?"

- "You're torn between two explanations. On one hand, you think *x* accounts for *z*; on the other hand, you think *y* does?"
- "So you're angry because I am saying one thing and yet doing quite another?"

Reflective listening doesn't come naturally and takes lots of practice, like hitting a backhand in a fast-paced tennis game.

The opposite of active listening is what bad listeners do all the time: reflexive responding. This happens when people immediately judge the worth of what was said and say whether they agree or disagree. "This typically leads to a confrontation, not a joint inquiry" say Jentz and Murphy. "Indeed, our habit of responding in kind is such a powerful force that it has a name: the Norm of Reciprocity. ('If you don't listen to me, I'll be damned if I'll listen to you.')"

• *Step 5 – Openly process your effort to make sense*. Having heard what your colleagues have to say (some of which may be puzzling and upsetting), it's important to think through your responses *out loud*. This works much better than what we usually do, which is think it through silently and then announce our decision. Here are some examples of open processing:

- "That's news to me. I haven't heard that before."
- "That really throws me. How did you get to that from what you were saying?"
- "That helps me a lot by pointing out *x*."

"When you find the courage to externalize your intellectual process," say Jentz and Murphy, "you invite others to engage in interpersonal learning. Working together, you can discover the limitations of one another's thinking – limitations that you cannot know as long as you process privately."

Returning to the case of the bad test scores, here is how these five steps might be applied. The leader meets privately with all parties (administrators, teachers, union representatives, board members) and asserts his confusion about the test scores. Listening reflectively to accusations, explanations, and demands from all sides (More phonics! Remedial reading for all students! A "shape up" memo to teachers!), he argues that they should not take action until they understand the mystery of such low scores. He uses a similar approach with parents, media, and community leaders (although with them he is not quite as open about his confusion). The leader then sets up a committee to analyze student achievement data and evaluate competing explanations for the results. The group is confused at first; none of their assumptions or preconceptions seem to explain the low test scores. Having admitted their confusion, members of the group keep working and finally figure out that:

- Most of the non-reading eighth graders entered the district after third grade, missing the district's exemplary phonics program.
- The non-readers all come from a particularly impoverished neighborhood.
- As students moved from one grade to another, remedial services were totally uncoordinated and these students fell through the cracks.

Based on this deeper and more nuanced understanding of the problem, the team implements a series of targeted programs that brings about significant gains in student achievement the following year.

Jentz and Murphy conclude with a broader message for leaders: "In the 21st century, as rapid change makes confusion a defining characteristic of management, the competence of managers will be measured not only by *what they know* but increasingly by *how they behave* when they lose their sense of direction and become confused. Organizational cultures that cling to the ideal of an all-knowing, omnicompetent executive will pay a high cost in time, resources, and progress, and will be sending the message to managers that it is better to hide their confusion than to address it openly and constructively… Managers can be confused yet still be able to exercise competent leadership by structuring a process of reflective inquiry and action."