Leadership in Post-Secondary Education: Reconnecting with Who We Are

Kevin Barksdale, Ph.D., Professor of Management, Marilyn Davies College of Business, University of Houston, USA

ABSTRACT

Modern higher education in the United States is facing greater pressures from all directions than perhaps any other time in its existence. As state revenues generally decline during any economic downturn public institutions face increasingly severe budgetary constraints. The constituency believing they have a stake in higher education has grown ever larger. Parents, students, accrediting bodies, industry and political leaders have all taken positions on the state of all levels of education. The global economy and the literal explosion of the internet have given on-line education real traction in the marketplace. The time is ripe for educators to take stock in their leadership and to ask some very hard questions of ourselves. Drawing from principles of quality management (Deming, 1982) and organizational learning (Senge, 2006), a thought provoking point of view from which sustainable change and improvement may be possible is presented.

“No word on printed page, or spoken word, can teach like the teacher himself.” Dr. J. A. Barksdale (approx. 1975)

PROLOGUE

“But if you place a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will immediately try to scramble out. But if you place the frog in room temperature water and don’t scare him, he’ll stay put. Now if the pot sits on a heat source and if you gradually turn up the temperature, something very interesting happens. As the temperature rises from 70 to 80 degrees F the frog will do nothing. In fact he will show every sign of enjoying himself. As the temperature gradually increases, the frog will become groggier and groggier until he is unable to climb out of the pot. Though there is nothing restraining him, the frog will sit there and boil. Why? Because the frog’s internal apparatus for sensing threats to survival is geared to sudden changes in his environment, not to slow gradual changes…The problem is our minds are so locked into one frequency, it’s as if we can only see at 78 rpm; we can’t see anything at 33 -1/3. We will not avoid the fate of the frog until we learn to slow down and see the gradual processes that often pose the greatest threat. (Senge, 2006, p. 22-23)”

INTRODUCTION

A recent report on the state of leadership in elementary through secondary schools made an interesting comment: “Great schools have great leaders (U S Department of Education, 2004, p.10).” Given the nature of our current task here before us, there is no better starting point that with ourselves, the leaders of post-secondary education.
W. Edwards Deming is widely considered by many to be the father of modern “quality management” and its subsequent plethora of measurement and quality standards, just-in-time inventory methods and the ubiquitous concept “kanban” or continuous improvement. What is not so commonly known is that in his later years, Deming spurned the concept of quality management and focused his words and thoughts on “transformation of the prevailing system of management (Senge, 2006).” Deming believed that a “common system of management governed modern institutions (including governmental bodies and public institutions) and in particular formed a deep connection between work and school. He would often say we will never transform our prevailing system of management without transforming our prevailing system of education. They are the same system (Senge, 2006, p.xiii).” Deming believed that prevailing system to be one that emphasized individual achievement and recognition to the detriment of the whole. Consider the following excerpt from one his letters to Senge:

“Our prevailing system of management has destroyed our people. People are born with an intrinsic motivation, self-respect, dignity, curiosity to learn, joy in learning. The forces of destruction begin with toddlers – a prize for the best costume, grades in school, gold stars -- and on up through the university. On the job, people, teams, and divisions are ranked, reward for the top, punishment for the bottom. Management by Objectives, quotas, incentive pay, business plans, put together separately, division by division, cause further loss, unknown and unknowable (Senge, 2006, p. xii).”

Before we reject Deming’s ideas as wrong or wrong-headed, it may be wise to consider the potential costs of outright rejection. I often remind my students that the modern day results of Deming’s ideas are Honda and Toyota whereas rejection of them resulted in General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler.

What can we take from Deming’s ideas? Aside from the depth of management and leadership topics Deming addressed over the years, perhaps we can peer behind the veil of his words to see a different picture of what he had in mind. What parent among us has not asked the following question? How do we take a child who in younger years is excited and interested in school and by the time they enter third or fourth grade develop them into a person who is not excited and not interested? The leadership corollary is to ask how do we take the best and brightest and convert them from motivated, creative and engaged educators to unmotivated, disingenuous, and disengaged so that they no longer feel able to bring their very best to work with them every day? The end finds them fighting for their mere survival. Furthermore, how many of us have lost our memory of what it was like when we first knew we wanted to become educators? Do we recall the excitement of those early learning moments? Has the system we have created drained us so that what we have left is less than our very best? Has what we believe to be battling the system taken us out of the true war? As we proceed, we will be unfolding the process of getting back to that point when learning was important, fun, and exciting.

There are many ways to frame the questions facing educational leaders today. The approach we will take is drawn from the book Reframing Organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2003) and The Fifth Discipline (Senge, 2006). Bolman and Deal (2003) wrestle with why some of the best and brightest work their way to leadership positions only to “do really dumb things (p.6).” Tapping the concept of self-destructive intelligence syndrome (Feinberg & Tarrant, 1995), they question whether pride and arrogance (among other things) lead to failure. Taking the high road, Bolman and Deal choose to argue that the manner of thought rather than personality flaws or lack of intelligence lead to what they term “the curse of cluelessness…” derived in part by how we think and make sense of the world around us (p.6).” Our manner of thought is driven by the way we mentally organize our world. People develop mental maps or schema (ideas or assumptions) that govern how they think and see the world (c.f., Fiedler,
These maps drive our thinking and decisions. We will move now to just how we might break through those mental maps educational leaders have created.

**THE FIRST STEP: GETTING IN TOUCH WITH WHO WE ARE**

“Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind, so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half truths… so must we create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism (King, 1986).”

It is incumbent upon us as thinkers and learners to recognize change as an inevitable force that rumbles toward us like a force of nature. Some of us claimed web-based education would never take root while present reality shows differently. *On our quest to play to our strengths, thinking and creating vision should be our strength. Above all others, post-secondary educators and leaders should lead the way.* As the late Dr. King drew on Socrates to describe creative tension, let us also draw on Socrates to recognize the bondage of myths and half truths within our own minds. As educators we recognize both the importance and limitation of testing, yet we see published test results of high school students and draw conclusions regarding their fitness for post-secondary education. If test scores were the only mechanism for entry to doctoral education, I would not be where I am today. Had it not been for a visionary graduate school advisor who saw through my test scores to my work ethic, passion, and potential, my personal dream to be an educator would be largely unfulfilled. This sounds a bit like Deming’s criticism in the opening remarks of this paper. We begin the process of destruction early and if he was correct, the loss is unknown and unknowable. Oddly enough, we statisticians have our way of explaining someone like me… outliers. Hence we use mathematical explanations to cling to our view of the world.

In graduate school, the professor charged with teaching linear regression models (ANOVA through multiple regression analysis) had a unique way of helping us deal with difficult or challenging mathematical problems. As most of us learn (and quickly forget), there are often serious conflicts between the mathematical assumptions of methods used for our research and the actual application of those methods to types of data available in our own specific fields. From a pure mathematical point of view, one might be compelled to determine those methods were mathematically inappropriate and that no elegant means to analyze data existed. Then, our professor would offer up what he called a vitamin or the mathematical cure if you will for those assumptions re-opening the door to their application to our research. While there is no single vitamin for topics discussed thus far, there are many approaches to begin our journey. Senge (2006) points out that if we are to have significant impact upon our organization, we need to learn to “connect with the core of the organization—at the deepest levels of individual and collective identity—and how the organization most naturally creates value (p.303).” While much can be done at the organizational, college, and departmental levels, let us begin at the personal, individual level. Senge (2006) calls it finding out who we are.

Working on the notion that our post-secondary institutions most naturally create value through our students, let us reconnect with our own individual core as educators. What follows is my own journey to reconnect with my core. Perhaps it will stir within each of us a reconnection with our own core. Becoming an educator is a daunting but meaningful task. Many come from long lines of educators. As for me, my grandfather’s brother, J. A. Barksdale (Uncle Alton) was the first in our immediate family to achieve a college degree and ultimately a doctorate. I will use his story as the starting point for my reconnection. It was this uncle who first introduced me to the power of a real teacher. As a young boy,
my family would travel to his hometown to see my grandparents. Like many close-knit families, Uncle Alton and his wife Eleanor would come over for lunch or dinner. Uncle Alton was a master story teller. During one of those visits, he spoke of the cornerstone of the history building at the University of Colorado where he earned his M.A. in history. I listened intently and being the good young boy, promptly forgot it and went outside to play. On the next trip when he and Eleanor arrived for lunch, he unwittingly embarrassed me in front of the whole family by asking me to recall those very words. Patiently working with me during the meal (which meant it was of high value because conversations at meal time were treasured), he helped me learn the words which for nearly forty years I have not forgotten… “He who knows only his own generation remains forever a fool.” These words have followed me through the years. They arise in virtually every course I teach to illustrate the importance of background information or the history underlying whatever topic we may be covering. It was this same uncle who later in life spoke the words “No word on printed page, or spoken word, can teach like the teacher himself.” Uncle Alton was an educator who understood the value of timing, compassion, and knowledge…how else can we explain the depth of his impact on my life. While I have been blessed with many other great teachers in my life, none seem more prevalent than this example.

As such, allow me to follow his life with you. There were no grants, no government loans, and no GI Bill in the early 1920’s when J.A. Barksdale entered tiny liberal arts Bethel College in Carroll County, TN. As the eldest son of a farmer, the only way he was able to go to college was through the sacrifices of his parents and his youngest brother (my grandfather) who stayed on the farm to help earn the money needed for my uncle to earn his degree. Later, while attending the University of Colorado earning his M.A. in history, he and his wife Eleanor lived in a tent for a time, just so he could afford the costs of his education. Just what did J.A. Barksdale do with his sacrifice? As a high school principal in 1942, after having served Grove High School in Henry County, TN for only a short time, the senior class wrote the following statement in dedicating the yearbook to him:

Dedication to J. A. Barksdale

Who in the short time we have know him, has grown dear to us because of his keen understanding, interest in us, tact, and guidance through the tasks of this year.

To him for his fine example of what a life should be, we, the Senior Class of 1942, dedicate our publication of The Tower.

Nine years later while serving as commissioner (from 1950 to 1953) of the State of Tennessee Board of Education, he presided over the granting of university status to Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State College (now Tennessee State University) in 1951 (the first HBCU to receive such status in the state and long before the apex of the civil rights movement). As he left the office of Commissioner of the Tennessee Board of Education, his colleague F.E. Bass, then the editor of The Tennessee Teacher said these words of him:

“He has been sympathetic and understanding with all school people, be they great or small. He has not assumed the attitude of knowing all but rather he has sought the advice and counsel of his fellow workers. He has not presumed to “hand down” a program but rather he and his staff have worked from the bottom up to arrive at programs which represent the cooperative efforts of all(Bass, 1953, p. 5).”

As J.A. Barksdale stepped down from his post, he gave the following as part of his benediction to the state educators of his day: “I believed then (upon accepting the position of commissioner), as I do this morning (upon leaving the office of commissioner), that the proper sort of a program of education is the
The only thing that stands between this nation and complete destruction. Either we will accomplish what we have said we believe should be accomplished in educating a generation of children year after year as they leave public schools to a complete understanding of the problems of this world and a means of solving those problems, or as a nation, such as you and I have enjoyed through the years and our forefathers dreamed about, will cease to exist. Because if we reduce our existence to a matter of power and numbers of people we have no chance to survive. Our only solution lies in our people knowing and understanding the problems of humanity. I have never felt, nor do I this morning, that the problems of this world are political nor are they economic. They are bound up in the living flesh of the two billion souls who inhabit the surface of this earth. If that is true, then education is our only answer….” (Barksdale, 1953, p. 6).

What drives a person to call upon family and self for sacrifice so that they can accomplish some specific goal or dream? We would have to confess that nothing short of a real passion would spell the answer. As for me, what lessons can I take from this story? This walk down memory lane reminds me that I am more than the most current paper I am writing. I am more than the most recent round of student evaluations or courses taught. This lesson takes me back to recall that I started this journey as an educator (not just a teacher or author) to touch lives and open minds. Somewhere in the midst of reports, submissions, exams, and if you will, the tyranny of the urgent, I have to get back to why I chose this path. As it is with me, so should it be with you.

As the water in the pot we call post-secondary education begins to heat up, I urge us all to take a moment to reconnect with our own reasons for becoming educators. In the final analysis, our solutions lie within. The starting point is asking ourselves what sacrifices have we made and how we have used those sacrifices?

**REFERENCES**