



THE COURAGE TO DISMISS

An Act of Stewardship

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A good teacher is critical to the academic success of students. Although we might prefer to hold onto the myth that a student's socioeconomic status or home life is the primary reason for success or failure in school (Haycock, Jerald, & Huang, 2001, p. 3), "the most important factor affecting student learning is the teacher" (Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997, p. 63). Schmoker (2006) added: "The single greatest determinant of learning is not socio-economic factors or funding levels. It is instruction" (p. 7). The truth of these simple statements about the importance of effective instruction from a quality teacher should not surprise anyone who has attended school, nor to those who have had a child pass through the system. Haycock (1998) noted that "parents have always known that it matters a lot which teachers their children get." She elaborated that those parents with the resources of time and skill utilize informal networks to determine who the best teachers are and use that knowledge to assure their children are placed with those teachers (p. 3).

Similarly, Waintroub (1995) noted: "Everyone connected with school knows who the incompetent teachers are, including the other teachers, the parents, the kids, and the custodial staff" (p. 20). Even though research has demonstrated that an effective teacher is critical to student learning, Bridges (1992) and others estimated that between 5 and 15 percent of all teachers are incompetent (p. 15). McGrath (2006) used informal surveys of nearly 75,000 administrators to place the estimated number of teachers whom administrators identified as incompetent at 20 percent (p. 34). In contrast to the number of teachers administrators formally and informally identify as incompetent, Tucker (2001) found that "[d]espite conservative estimates that 5 percent



of teachers are incompetent, the termination rate, which includes dismissal of tenured teachers, and non-renewal of probationary teachers, is less than 1 percent” (p. 52). Confirming this low rate of teacher termination, the 2009 study conducted by The New Teacher Project, *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness*, found that few if any teachers are removed annually for poor performance (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009, p. 6). The study found that instead of terminating those who are performing poorly and rewarding those who are performing at an exceptional level: “When it comes to appraising performance and supporting [teacher] improvement, a culture of indifference about the quality of instruction in each classroom dominates” (p. 2).

Given the important role teachers play in the academic success of students, why are so few ineffective or incompetent teachers removed from classrooms? This paper explores some of the research conducted on administrator perceptions of the personal barriers to teacher dismissal, and offers the servant-leadership quality of stewardship as a moral touchstone that can sustain an administrator who undertakes the Herculean task of removing an incompetent teacher. For purposes of this paper, an incompetent teacher is one who has failed to meet minimum performance standards despite intensive efforts to remediate the inadequate performance.

GOOD TEACHING MATTERS

Bridges and Groves (1990) found that as early as 1969, Gallup Polls of the public’s attitude toward the public schools identified serious concerns with teacher quality as one of the biggest problems facing public education. “On one occasion 45 percent of public school parents indicated there were teachers in the local school who should be fired” (p. 1). Hanushek (as cited in Haycock, 1998) found: “The difference between a good and a bad teacher can be a full level of achievement in a single year” (p. 3).

Impact of Incompetent Teachers on Students

A growing body of research makes it clear that ineffective administrator response to incompetent teachers, which is anything short of effective remediation or dismissal, harms students (Schmoker, 2006). Bridges (1992) cited a study of Fortune 500 companies that noted “97 percent of the responding administrators indicated they were currently supervising an



ineffective subordinate” (p. 11). While tolerating incompetent staff may be a shared leadership failure that spans organizations of all types, there is urgency to removing an incompetent teacher. Unlike employees who labor in a corporation or factory with an incompetent colleague or supervisor, children are both compelled to attend school and highly dependent on the adults in charge for their learning. As Painter (2000b) observed, an incompetent teacher may be irreparably harming 25 to 150 students per year. For this reason, effectively addressing incompetent teachers presents a significant moral imperative for principals to take action to protect students. According to Painter (2000b),

Although the proportion of poor teachers might arguably be no higher in proportion to other fields, the social effects are considerably greater as these teachers affect larger numbers of children year after year. Thus the problem is serious because it has widespread effects on a population largely unable to protect itself from the effects of mistreatment. (p. 368)

As in other professions, principals’ responses to ineffective employees are not always productive. The “dance of the lemons” is a term used to describe the tactic of inducing incompetent teachers to leave by transferring them to unpleasant assignments. Unfortunately, this tactic often shifts the burden of dealing with the incompetent teacher to those who are least able to endure it, the students. When poorly performing or incompetent teachers are rotated from one school to another, it is often to an assignment with the most difficult students in the most undesirable schools. This tactic heaps additional harm upon an already troubled situation, both for the teacher and for struggling students (Nolan & Hoover, 2005, p. 315). Wright, Horn, and Sanders (1997) concluded that for some students the harm is irreparable (p. 63). In addition, Thomas and O’Quinn’s 2001 study of the black-white achievement gap noted:

A string of particularly effective or ineffective teachers can have a huge positive or a disastrously negative effect on students’ learning...The effects of even a single ineffective teacher are enduring enough to be measurable at least four years later. Good teachers in subsequent grades boost achievement, but not enough to compensate for the effects of an earlier ineffective teacher. (p. 9)

The harmful impact of incompetent teachers upon the least privileged students is a serious and compelling reason for administrators to take action to remove these teachers.



Impact of Tolerating Incompetent Teachers on the Principal's Leadership

Bryk and Schneider (2002) noted that teachers have confidence in the leader when there is a match between spoken and enacted values, and when the administrator's "actions authenticate his vision" (pp. 79–80). Conversely, teachers lose confidence when a leader pays lip service to values and avoids the conflict required to take on the tough issues related to poor teacher performance. "Relational trust atrophies when individuals perceive that others are not acting in ways that are consistent with their understanding of the other's role obligations" (p. 51). Consequently, principals who espouse the value of effective instruction for every child, yet fail to recommend dismissal for incompetent teachers, undermine their own credibility and thus effectiveness.

In this age of accountability, principals cannot call for excellence while tolerating incompetent teaching that is, as Waintroub (1995) observed, apparent to students, parents, and other staff (p. 20). Rasmussen (1995) noted that "[l]eaders' commitment to and follow-through in consistently role modeling the desired values is the single most important lever for influencing or changing an organization's culture" (p. 295). Likewise, district-level administrators must stand by principals who demonstrate the courage to address incompetent teachers (Painter, 2000a, p. 23). Referencing Schein's *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Rasmussen (1995) concluded that "leaders who refuse to take corrective action with people who contradict the values [of the organization] send a message that avoiding conflict is more important than espoused values" (p. 291). Within a school organization, an incompetent teacher stands in sharp contrast to the espoused values of a quality teacher and effective instruction for all students.

Barriers to Removing Incompetent Teachers

Long (2007) used the term *dismissal gap* to describe the discrepancy between the number of teachers recommended for dismissal and those superintendents identify as incompetent (p. 10). If, as both research and informal surveys estimate, between 5 and 20 percent of teachers are incompetent, then the question becomes, Why are so few teachers recommended for dismissal? A review of the literature identified that administrators perceived a wide range of barriers to removing incompetent teachers. These barriers included collective bargaining agreements and state laws that give teachers additional legal protections (Thompson, 2006, p. 47; Ward, 1995, p. 16),



as well as the time and effort required of principals to provide remediation and document performance (Painter, 2000c, p. 260). Principals in Painter's study also cited the stress an improvement plan for one teacher places on the entire staff. A principal in Painter's study noted that "qualified teachers [become] concerned that you are thinking of dismissing them" (p. 261), meaning that even those who are performing well become fearful that they, too, may be subject to similar scrutiny and action. As Platt, Tripp, Ogden, and Fraser (2000) noted:

Confronting mediocre teaching is so time consuming, so intellectually challenging, and so threatening to many established and accepted school practices that only principals who are truly convinced that student learning should be their primary goal will take on the challenge. (p. 156)

Principals' perceptions of the daunting task of removing an incompetent teacher are repeated throughout the research literature. For some principals, the effort and length of time required to simultaneously assist the teacher in improving, while also documenting for dismissal, is too great and the promise of payback for this effort too uncertain (Painter, 2000b, p. 260).

Thompson (2006) also found that "dismissing teachers for performing at an unsatisfactory level is perceived as a daunting, if not impossible task" (p. 2). He identified three categories of barriers that affect the likelihood that principals will take action to remove an incompetent teacher: procedural barriers, logistical barriers, and personal barriers (p. 2). Thompson defined procedural barriers as those that exist because of "the educational code, district policy, or the collective bargaining agreement." Logistical barriers were identified as those issues "not regulated by education code, district policy, or collective bargaining agreement, but are beyond the control of individual principals" (p. 29). Personal barriers were defined as the principal's professional competency and willingness to take action to remove an incompetent teacher (p. 55).

Personal Barriers

Although procedural and logistical barriers represent real concerns for administrators seeking to remove an incompetent teacher, it is the personal barriers that may present the greatest challenge to school principals, especially if they aspire to servant-leadership. Personal barriers are those most connected to the interpersonal relationships between the principal and



staff. It is these relationships with both the incompetent teacher and the wider school community that Painter (2000a) and McGrath (2006) found can be strained during the remediation and dismissal process. As Painter (2000a) noted: “The very qualities of team building, caring and responsiveness to staff, students and parents that make a successful building leader can work against the principal engaged in a tough evaluation problem” (p. 23). Principals’ reactions to these personal barriers manifest in a number of ways.

Being Too Nice and Too Understanding

Waintroob (1995) noted that principals are often their own worst enemies. In expressing their compassion for failing teachers, administrators can lose sight of their moral obligation to students and the rest of the staff (p. 5). While leaders in other professions also may be conflicted when faced with terminating an employee, principals are especially susceptible to “going too far” in their efforts to salvage an incompetent teacher. As she observed:

Administrators are usually nice, often gentle people. They chose to go into education because they like people, want to help them, and like to teach. Their natural inclination is to praise, not to criticize.... These inclinations are reinforced by their training. Educators are trained to build self-esteem...to be positive, and not to give up on anyone. (p. 24)

Because principals are trained to be encouraging and supportive, when faced with staff members who will not look critically at their own performance, the remediation challenge can be especially daunting. Whereas effective teachers engage in reflection as part of a cycle of continual improvement, the incompetent teacher does not. Waintroob (1995) observed that the difference between the teacher who is experiencing a temporary setback or lag in performance and the one who will end up being terminated is a failure to respond to encouragement and support with self-reflection. Instead, “the non-remedial teacher argues endlessly that any problems the administrator identifies do not exist or are the fault of the students, the parents, the administrator, or the other staff” (p. 1).

Discomfort with Criticizing Performance

Bridges (1992, p. 20), Painter (2000c, p. 261), and McGrath (2006, p. 253) each related that one of the biggest barriers to leaders addressing incompetence is the unavoidable social discomfort inherent in criticizing



another person's performance. "Individuals are predisposed to avoid unpleasantness in social encounters. They prefer to be spared the emotional ordeal entailed in criticizing and finding fault with the behavior of others" (Bridges, p. 25). Across professions, rather than have honest conversations with underperforming or incompetent staff, leaders frequently engage in avoidance behaviors such as transferring the employee, moving them to nonessential jobs, or, in some cases, giving in to frustration and lashing out in anger (Autry, 2006; Bridges, 1992; Painter, 2000b; Peterson & Peterson, 2006).

Concern for the Personal Life of the Teacher

In addition to the natural inclination to avoid conflict, principals who set out to terminate an incompetent teacher's employment also may carry an enormous emotional burden. Concern for the teacher's welfare, the teacher's dependents, and, possibly, the welfare of co-workers are real concerns. According to Bridges (1992), in addition to the loss of self-esteem and employment, incompetent teachers recommended for dismissal often face a myriad of other personal problems, such as pressing financial problems, divorce, alcoholism, or other mental health issues. Bridges noted that it is not unheard of for an employee, whose life may already be in turmoil, to engage in destructive behaviors, including workplace violence and suicide (p. 59). However exasperated the principal is with an incompetent teacher, it is hard to ignore the teacher's human needs. "Even though an incompetent teacher must be removed for the sake of students, there is a struggle to separate the teacher's personal issues from job performance issues" (Painter, 2000a, 22).

Isolation of the Principal

As Schmidt (2002) noted, principals who undertake to dismiss a teacher may face the loneliest job in education. According to Schmidt: "The most expensive and underrated aspect of evaluation is the high emotional price administrators pay if they attempt to dismiss, or even put a weak teacher on a long over due improvement plan" (p. 99). Bridges (1992) also observed that principals who recommend dismissal can expect a negative response from staff in general. Bridges observed: "Expect to be called inhuman, a maniac, and not be trusted. Expect teachers to view 'you' as the problem, not the teacher with the problem" (p. 87). As one principal in Painter's (2000a)



study indicated: “You are always surprised how popular a teacher becomes when you begin the dismissal process and how unpopular you become.” When principals take on an incompetent teacher, they risk loss of relationship within the school community, even from teachers or parents who may have complained about the failing teacher (27).

Competing Values

Finally, principals who seek to remove an incompetent teacher may find themselves in a moral conflict between competing values: They want to value and encourage the teacher as a human being, but cannot salvage the teacher and also serve students’ best interests. According to Autry (2001), such a challenge requires leaders to

[d]ecide when a person so abuses or misunderstands the goals of the organization and the understandings of the community—or is simply not competent to perform the job at hand—that the person can no longer be part of the group. On the one hand, your compassion and sensitivity will inveigh against the act of firing the employee; on the other hand, your moral responsibility to the rights of the group will demand that you do it. (p. 109)

The personal price paid by principals recommending dismissal is high, but the negative and damaging impact of an incompetent teacher on student learning is serious.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AND THE MORAL COURAGE TO ACT

What Is Servant-Leadership?

For the principal aspiring to servant-leadership, the many personal barriers to the dismissal of an incompetent teacher may lead to the conclusion that termination and servant-leadership are incompatible. After all, how can the demoralizing effect of termination be reconciled with creating a climate in which the leader serves followers and contributes to their growth? As Rebore (2003) identified, the oxymoron of paring the two words *servant* and *leadership* can give some administrators the impression that servant-leadership is a weak or soft form of leadership. She noted that servant-leadership is a “paradox to many administrators because they are hampered by a mind-set



that views servants as people who are not leaders, or the mind-set that views leaders as people who are served by those they lead” (p. 24).

For leaders answering the call to servant-leadership, Greenleaf (2002) offered the following guidance:

Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit or, at least, will they not be further deprived? (p. 27)

However, he also identified that the role of the servant-leader is to “show the way for others” as they pursue the shared goal. The leader’s role is to know the goal and to remind others of it. “By clearly stating and restating the goal the leader gives certainty to others who may have difficulty achieving it for themselves” (p. 29).

Culver (2009) summarized the elements of servant-leadership as including: “listening, empathy, healing (self and others), awareness (of others, situation, and self), persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and building community” (p. 4). Of these leadership elements, it is stewardship, which entails keeping the shared vision and mission of the school in the forefront, that may help to sustain the principal as the remediation and dismissal process unfolds.

What Does It Mean To Be A Servant-Leader Principal?

Establishing a Climate of Trust

Bryk and Schneider (2002) identified establishing a climate of trust as an integral part of team building. Writing about servant-leadership in schools, Culver (2009) noted that teamwork “is only possible after a leader develops accepting and respectful relationships within themselves and with those around them. The intra-organizational relationship is that of a team working together through a group of individuals striving for the same goal” (p. 6). Servant-leaders understand the importance of relational trust. They match what they say with what they do, thus creating an environment of trust. The servant-leader principal recognizes that, as Bryk and Schneider noted, “[g]ross incompetence is corrosive to trust relationships. Allowed to persist in a school community, incompetence will undermine collective efforts toward improvement” (2006, p. 25).



Sergiovanni (1992) also observed that followers “must have confidence in the leader’s competence and values” (p. 274). For this reason, the principal must put his or her words about the value of quality teaching into practice and respond to inadequate performance. Matching words and actions is part of developing what Bryk and Schneider (2006) referred to as relational trust. Their research revealed that relational trust is established on a daily basis through social interactions. They found:

Through their actions, school participants articulate their sense of obligation toward others, and others toward them in turn come to discern the intentionality enacted here. Trust grows over time through exchanges where the expectations held for others are validated in action. (pp. 136–137)

Keeping the Vision

Leaders who aspire to be servant-leaders are charged with keeping the shared values and vision of the organization out in front as a beacon for others to follow. In schools, those values include quality instruction from a capable teacher for all students. Acting as a steward, the principal is duty-bound to keep all associated with the school, including students, staff, parents, and community, aligned with this vision. When a member of the school community fails in this duty, it is the responsibility of the principal to intervene in a truthful and unapologetic manner that makes clear the values and mission of the school, as well as the expectations for those who work and learn there.

A sense of stewardship toward the school and all of its values appears to be what compels the servant-leader principal to act with moral courage to remove an incompetent teacher. Sergiovanni (1992) defined the stewardship of the school administrator as “represent[ing] an act of trust, whereby people and institutions entrust a leader with certain obligations and duties to fulfill and perform on their behalf” (p. 285). For the servant-leader principal, dismissal can be viewed as a moral obligation. Dismissing an incompetent teacher who is not faithful to the shared values of the school is a part of the fulfilling the principal’s commitment to that community. Only those who abide by those shared values should be privileged to serve the schools’ children.



Committing to Truthful Evaluation

Bridges (1992) noted that in many instances the incompetent teacher facing dismissal may have received years of satisfactory evaluations (p. 29). Consequently, when the principal notifies the teacher his or her performance is unsatisfactory, the reaction from the teacher may be one of disbelief, suspicion, and resistance (p. 51). Because servant-leadership is a “morally based leadership—a form of stewardship” (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 270), the principal must strive to conduct teacher evaluations with integrity and truthfulness. Although a quality of servant leaders is a commitment to the growth of others, part of contributing to that growth is truthfulness in addressing performance issues, especially when the feedback or assessment points to incompetence.

While stewardship to the vision of a quality teacher for every student requires truthfulness, it is not always easy to tell the truth, especially when the truth has implications that affect a person’s livelihood. Choosing words that provide constructive feedback without being unduly harsh, or which are too soft and misrepresent the truth, can be a difficult task. The servant-leader strives to be kind, patient, and sensitive, yet deliver a performance evaluation that is fair and honest. “Service-oriented leadership...must be conducted within the bounds of moral values—it must be truthful service....If you are committed to truthful service, you may not always tell people what they want to hear” (Nair, 1997, p. 60). Likewise, Autry (2001) concluded: “Ultimately, firing a person who either cannot do the job, or does not want to it for one reason or another, can be the most generous and loving thing you can do” (p. 110). Allowing a person who is incompetent, and who has not been willing or able to make the changes necessary to succeed, is a disservice to students, the organization, and the teacher.

When Persuasion Fails, Then What?

Sergiovanni (1992) observed that there is a strong link between moral authority and servant-leadership, and a link between moral authority and the use of persuasion. He noted that “at the root of persuasion are ideas, values, substance, and content, which together define group purposes and core values” (p. 289). For those who adopt the servant-leadership ethic, the decision to recommend dismissal may feel like a failure to serve the teacher, or at least a failure at effective persuasion. How does the servant-leader reconcile



the competing values of care and concern for the teacher as a person, but committed to providing a quality education for students?

First, the leader cannot care more about the welfare of the teacher than the welfare of students who stand to be harmed by an incompetent teacher. In addition, before getting to the point of dismissal, the servant-leader will have afforded the teacher the opportunity to improve and provided honest counseling about the consequences of failing to meet the school's standards. However, when persuasion and support fail, the servant-leader must act to preserve the school's shared values. As Bryk and Schneider (2002) stated:

As principals seek to initiate change in their buildings, not everyone is necessarily affirmed....Teachers who are unwilling to take on the hard work of change and align with colleagues around a common reform agenda must leave.--[Principals] must also be prepared to use coercive power to reform a dysfunctional school community around professional norms. (p. 138)

CONCLUSION: THE MORAL COURAGE TO DISMISS

Servant-leaders attempt to use persuasion over coercion to improve teacher performance, but when persuasion fails, they have the moral courage to act. The decision to recommend termination of another person's employment is a gut-wrenching one, even when efforts to salvage the teacher have been made. The servant-leader has compassion for the teacher, but also possesses the courage to act to assure that the shared values of the school community are preserved.

As Beckner (2004) observed: "A prerequisite to good decision making in any leadership context, and particularly so when ethical considerations are involved, has to do with 'seeing the big picture' or as Greenleaf (1997) put it 'seeing things whole'" (p. 148). Even though the servant-leader may fear loss of relationship with the rest of the staff, it is clear that ignoring the performance of an ineffective and incompetent employee affects the culture of the entire system, even more than the temporary upset that may result from a termination (Rasmussen, 1995, pp. 284–285). The principal who is a servant-leader sees how all actions are interrelated. The servant-leader can see beyond the temporary emotional discomfort of the dismissal and envision a better, strong school where the least able to defend themselves, the students, are served by competent, committed teachers. The principal can see how exercising the moral courage to remove an incompetent teacher



can improve the quality of the staff and serve the students, parents, and community who depend on the leadership of a true steward to fulfill their shared mission.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carole Kitamura has more than twenty-five years of experience as a public school administrator and human resources director. In addition to an interest in servant leadership, Carole's academic focus has been on public sector collective bargaining, school law, and dispute resolution.

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