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Leadership as Imagery: Creating Your Picture of the Future

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In my first years spent teaching others how to write, I would stand on my metaphorical soap box, finger pointed, nose in the air and profoundly state at the top of my highly educated lungs that “writing is never ending; it is a constantly changing ameba that fluctuates to meet the moment and the audience.”

I frequently followed those words of wisdom with the emphatic, self righteous belief that if “you, as a writer, are too stubborn to understand that each sentence needs to be crafted carefully, then you will only reach mediocrity in a world that demands perfection.”

Now, thinking back to those days, I have to shake my head at how pathetically simplistic I truly was. The cosmic irony that exists – while I was in the throws of my pomposity – is that I had failed miserably to reach my goal as inspirational muse. I truly believed that my students, after hearing me drone on and on about the wonders of Rhetorical Strategy and syntax, would be miraculously motivated (cough, cough) into becoming the next Maya Angelo or F. Scott Fitzgerald. It did not take me long to learn the truth. All I had to do was watch classroom after classroom, day after day, walk into the halls like the bored zombies I had forced them to become.

I would love to sit here, typing away and say that I came to this observation all on my own, quickly, efficiently, after the first marking period I ever taught. But, it would be a lie. Instead, my understanding did not start to sink in till years later – three, to be exact – after I started to draw an interesting connection between my classroom and my school’s administration.

After several years of bi weekly faculty meetings, I had had my fill of “School Leaders” dictating and telling us what needed to be done in order to meet state standards, raise test scores and improve student attendance. Each week we had a “new idea” tossed at us from above with the same fervor and enthusiasm that I shared with my students about writing. And, each week, my over loaded brain walked out of the faculty meeting criticizing the fact that I was being told what to do, but not why it was important that I did it. The constant back and forth, changing of opinions and ideas left me confused. Unclear. Frustrated.

After that last meeting I dropped my books onto my desk, grabbed my bag and walked out the door. Two steps down the hall and a plain and simple truth hit me: I was just like them. I made my students suffer through my grandiose ideas about writing that had no definition, no guidance, no purpose. Granted, my belief system was accurate. Writing is an ongoing process, yet my ability to share this vision with my students was flawed. Instead, my ideas came across as scattered beliefs that jumped from one place to the next with no structure. I failed to paint a clear vision of purpose for my students.

As I continued to analyze my epiphany, I understood that my frustration was not with the administration itself, but with their inability to provide me with a clear direction of where we were going. Simply put, and borrowing a line from *Spiderman*, Great Leadership comes from Great Vision. It comes from knowing where we are so that we can know where we are going. However, knowing is not enough. Leaders must effectively describe their visions so that they can create genuine pictures of the future.

And, what better way to creating this vision than to follow the basic principles of descriptive writing?

Imagery: Crafting Your Picture of the Future

Successful descriptive writing is the ability to use words in such a way that they invoke an image in the reader's mind. When descriptive writing is effective, the image is crystal clear with crisp, concise emotions and behaviors that are portrayed without prejudice or personal agenda. Usually, a mental picture is created that represents the desired actions, icons or deeply held beliefs of the author.

In other words, a well written piece of descriptive writing provides a clear vision for the reader. Great leadership follows the same principles; a great leader carefully crafts a series of directions and beliefs that she wants her organization to embrace. She asks for emotion, action and community to exist so that she can take her organization to the next level. By implementing the same rhetorical techniques of the world's best novelists – sensory details, alliteration, and synecdoche – a leader can design a powerful agenda that will guide her people to excellence.

The 5 Senses: Designing an Embraceable Climate

Any English teacher worth his salt will say the same thing when using the five senses in descriptive writing: Show, Don't Tell. The exact same assumption can be made in creating an open climate within your school.

The author does not tell his reader that the ocean looks dangerous during a storm. Instead, the author writes "The waves rose in growing fury, each over-topping its fellow, till ... the lately glassy sea was like a roaring and devouring monster. White-crested waves beat madly on the level sands and rushed up the shelving cliffs" (Stoker, 2008, Ch. 7). While each sense is not definitively touched upon – letting us see, smell, taste, touch and hear the crashing waves and salty spray – the reader can imagine sitting on the cliff, feeling the spray of the waves, the taste of the salt, and the smell of eon in the air. The author, to the best of his ability, makes the experience packed with sensation so that the reader has no choice but to become engrossed with the words. Leadership must do the same.

By creating honest, open tangibles that touch upon the common emotions that an employee encounters while at work, the leader can create a climate that is open and productive. The first step in creating this tangible climate is to make sure that each and every sense is being addressed. The supportive leader encompasses two key senses – sight and sound. Taking the time to listen to individual needs and the needs of the entire team will help her determine the support that her people need to be successful. However, listening is only the beginning. The leader must also observe her team closely to watch for the more genuine non verbal communication that belies a disengaged, segregated group. If the leader does see negative behaviors, she should tackle the problem by taking quick action. She can do so by starting at the emotional foundation. Take the time and energy required to routinely have departmental celebrations for the successes and achievements of the department. Make it a point to bring in donuts, boxed lunches or birthday cakes when the time is right. And, while everyone is celebrating, circulate and make sure that every individual is patted on the back for an individual job well done. If these celebrations are done consistently and with true sincerity, the tumultuous ocean described by Bram Stoker will calm. If, however, the celebrations are merely token actions to try and appease the grumblings, your employees will easily smell the rotten motivation behind your actions.

Alliteration: Collaboration Combines Commitment, Compassion and Camaraderie

Everyone knows the concept of alliteration. Honestly, we've been singing it's songs since childhood – "Sally Sold Sea Shells by the Sea Shore" or , my personal favorite, "Peter Piper Picked a Peck of Pickled Peppers, so how many Pickled Peppers did Peter Piper Pick?" Granted, the lay person calls them tongue twisters. The trained writer calls it alliteration; by definition, alliteration is the intentional repetition of the first consonant sound in the same sentence. The most important concepts to understand in alliteration are 1, it is done consciously and with intention and 2, it is done no less than three times for greatest impact.

These same principles hold true in Collaborative Leadership. The Facilitation and Inquiry Centered Leadership approach (Perkins, 2003) intentionally creates an environment where employees are encouraged to question departmental practices. Through their questioning, they will be able to find answers and improve the efficiency of the department. A byproduct of this leadership approach is a cohesive team that values commitment and camaraderie. Unfortunately, creating this environment is easier than it looks.

Authors make alliteration sounds easy. They rattle off a series of words that begin with the same letter and the task is accomplished. Simple as that. And, when done well, the alliteration adds to the overall effect of sensory description. A classic example is another line from Stoker's novel, *Dracula*: "White, wet clouds, which swept by in ghostly fashion, so dank and damp and cold that it needed but little effort of imagination to think that the spirits of those lost at sea were touching their living brethren with the clammy hands of death" (2008, Ch. 7). His alliteration describes a common occurrence along the shore – fog. Stoker weaves his words carefully. Yet, he did not intertwine them quickly. Stoker completed more than 20 revisions on this one paragraph. He refused to quit "tinkering" with the words until he found the perfect combination that allowed his readers to see his vision.

Leaders must do the same. Each word must be considered in terms of how it relates to the big picture. Two, three or four ideas that "sound good" can not be forced together even though they might share the "same letter" or design. Instead, the Leader needs to think about whom she is and where she wants her organization to go. She needs to be clear in the image she wants her people to see (her core values and beliefs) and then begin to structure her leadership to fit her style. Only then will the Leader's words inspire. Each carefully chosen word shares the underlying philosophy. Side by side, they will flow as easily and genuinely as our childhood tongue twisters. More importantly, they will create the same result: smiles, laughter and the ability to laugh at our mistakes while working as a team to make a better tomorrow.

Synecdoche: Powerful Leadership that Represents the Whole

The days of the domineering Boss sitting in his Corner Office that towers above his minions is over. The Gen X's roll their eyes at this style of leadership, even though they are ultimately trained to behave respectfully and complete their tasks in a timely manner. Gen Y's are an entirely different challenge. Instead of complying through grumbled teeth, the Gen Y's will sit back, pull their sling shot out of their back pocket and launch line drives at the boss's glass walls until they shatter. The best part? Gen Y's do it openly and defiantly. They are not afraid to say "I don't think so" when a poorly presented idea comes their way. And, if the Boss does toss unfocused, disjointed ideas into the work environment, the Gen Y will openly challenge the thoughts in front of an audience. Once the meeting is over, the Gen Y

will spend their time seeking the one person in the office who has influence over everyone else because she is well liked and respected for her abilities.

No longer are the days of legitimate power. If any leader thinks that she is entitled to respect because of her position, she will fail. Status no longer determines success. Instead, the ability to create a collective whole within an organization where teamwork leads to genuine relationships determines victory. A great leader is able to inspire her people by sincerely respecting their abilities and allowing them to find, as a group, their shared purpose. No longer can we give lip service to the mythical “We”. If a leader wants to survive, she must create it.

The ultimate goal of today’s leader is to construct a group motto that represents the values, beliefs and actions for the whole. In figurative language, this adage is created through the rhetorical technique of Synecdoche. Authors frequently create a feeling of solidarity in their writing in order to engage the reader and sway their opinions. When this level of writing is achieved, the author has successfully created a phrase or concept that implies everything – and leaves nothing to chance. Common examples of Synecdoche include calling the hungry “mouths to feed” or a new car “wheels”. The most famous one we use every day is “White House” to name the entire U.S. government. Authors create this figurative definition by continuously referring to the all encompassing concept. They never sway from its belief and they are not afraid to speak of it through the voice of their characters, their character’s actions and the narrator’s summative thoughts that drive the point home.

The successful Leader’s vision becomes the Synecdoche of the organization. She is able to establish its credibility within the organization by giving her employees the voice to speak, question and hypothesize for the best possible solutions. Once their voices are heard, the Leader actively supports their actions by asking her own – “what do you need from me in order to be successful?” Only then, after she has heard and watched, can she begin to sing their combined success. After the continuous application of this process, the Leader’s motto will be fused with her vision.

In the end, the Novelist does not apply only one form of Figurative Language to his description. Instead, he blends them all – using his five senses to observe, listen to, touch, taste and smell his characters, plots, themes and ultimate vision. Once he has accomplished this small feat, knowing where it is that he wants to go, he begins to craft his actions and behaviors by bringing each of them together with his words. He seamlessly blends his expressions to craft alliterative philosophy that invokes emotion, engagement and commitment. And, if he is truly lucky, his words have crafted the ultimate in writing: a new language that everyone uses because it is so honest, so accurate that no one can deny its truth.

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