

The Art of Leadership

Linda Nathan

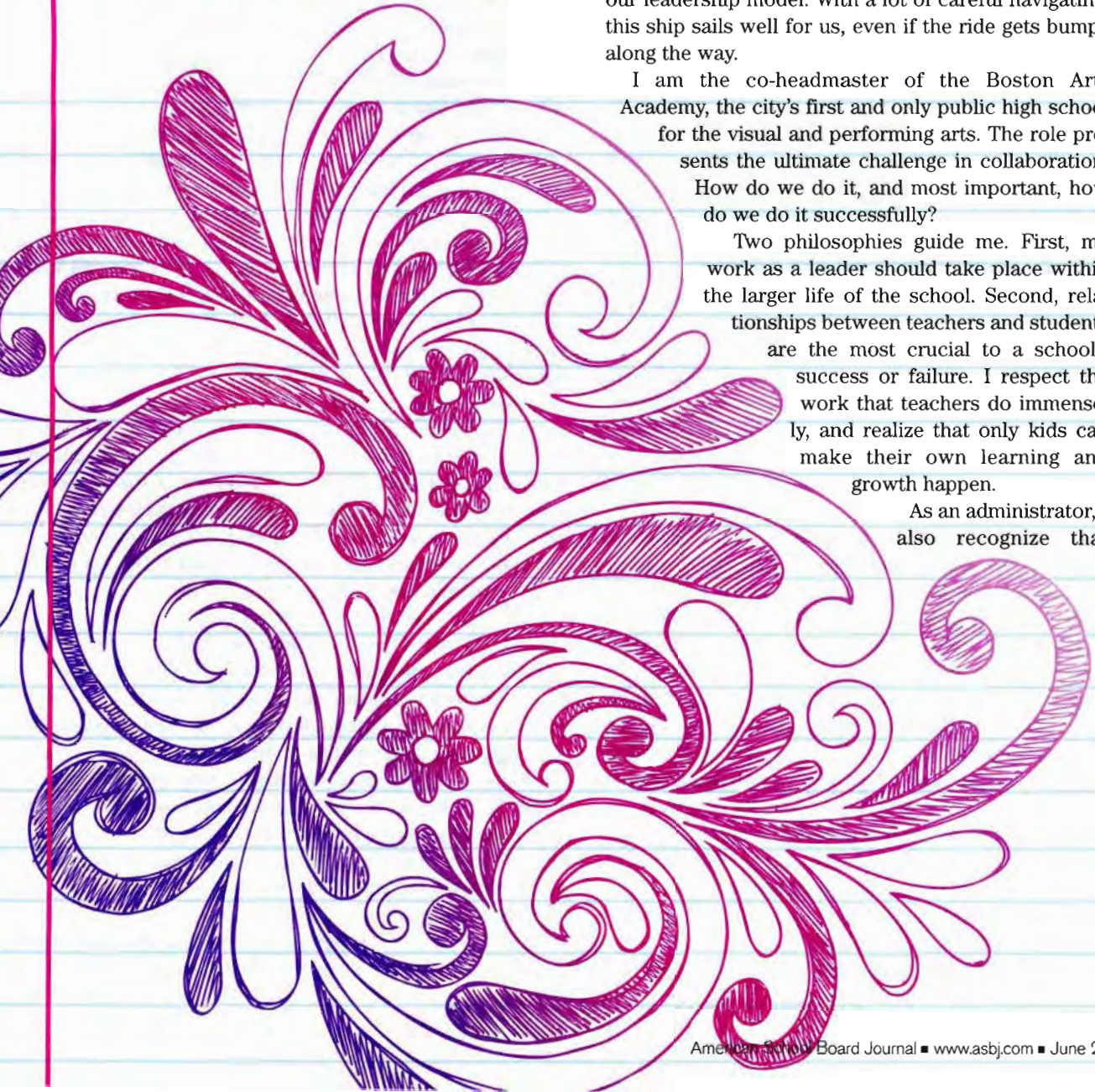
The co-headmaster of a Boston high school for the arts says the role of school leaders is to make connections, to be responsive, and to play the parts of referee, facilitator, and questioner

We don't lead the easy way at my school. The process is often a work in progress, as is the product. Collaboration and input are big and important words in our leadership model. With a lot of careful navigating, this ship sails well for us, even if the ride gets bumpy along the way.

I am the co-headmaster of the Boston Arts Academy, the city's first and only public high school for the visual and performing arts. The role presents the ultimate challenge in collaboration. How do we do it, and most important, how do we do it successfully?

Two philosophies guide me. First, my work as a leader should take place within the larger life of the school. Second, relationships between teachers and students are the most crucial to a school's success or failure. I respect the work that teachers do immensely, and realize that only kids can make their own learning and growth happen.

As an administrator, I also recognize that





some things I do occur only behind closed doors. The hardest is firing teachers who are not doing their jobs. I also spend time resolving issues between staff, students, and parents, in various combinations.

I hire new teachers, a happy and delicate part of the job that requires me to rely on my instincts and judgments about how this person will fit into this intense, quirky place. I must deal with discipline, which means living with tons of anger and resentment without taking any of it personally. I make choices about what gets funding and what doesn't, and what gets time and priority in the schedule and what doesn't. I have to be a teacher to my faculty. I create and work with an excellent leadership team.

Finally, and sometimes utterly in conflict with all of the above, I must take care and balance what I demand of myself.

Leadership as therapy?

I think of my office, sometimes, like that of a therapist. Everything usually comes in 30- to 40-minute intervals because there is a class to attend or teach. A box of tissues sits on the small table where I meet with folks. The subway line goes directly under this table. Often when I'm talking with someone, the chairs shake and so does the table.

This scene can be a bit intimidating when someone is baring their innermost thoughts and everything within them is shaky. "It's to make sure you are telling the truth," I tell a student with a smile when they think an earthquake is happening. Or, "It's a good way to resolve disagreements," I tell a teacher. "Everyone's eager to get out."

As a school leader, I have heard it all: a teacher's divorce, a teacher coming out to her parents, a teacher trying to care for his aging parents, a teacher needing to hospitalize a child for mental illness, even a teacher's breakdown. I have given advice to everyone. Half of my faculty sees my dentist or my doctor.

My job is to be a source of information, connect people, and keep everyone as happy as I can. My job is to be fair. My hope is to have "enough money in the bank" for those times when I don't get it right, so teachers will forgive me that time.

I don't expect thanks—ever. I also can't be the teacher. My job is to support the teacher. I must be available, even when I'm not. When I was a teacher at one school, my principal was always busy, no matter how early I arrived. I hated that situation, and learned from it. Always, I must seem like I want to hear what everyone has to say, even when I'm too busy and I don't.

I have to be responsive—always. This is a point of pride for me. Everyone needs to be heard and acknowledged—students, teachers, parents, and board members.

Choosing a leadership team

Usually, a principal gets to select her administrative or lead-

ership team since those positions tend to be less unionized. When I'm thinking about teams that really work, I use the "compass points" model. Each direction correlates with a leadership style, as a metaphor that captures the need for leaders to get a 360-degree view. North, south, east, and west are equally important.

I am a north personality—I want action. I'm always ready to implement a solution. I move quickly. I get things done. I need my co-headmaster to stop and ask, "Why?" She is a west. She needs to see how things fit together and to ask why we would take an action. "What are we trying to accomplish?" she always asks. "What's the relationship between the parts and the whole?" We complement each other well.

Sharing power with a co-headmaster is not always clean and easy. We must be critical of one another and still work together. We keep checking with teachers, parents, and students about how we are doing. Each year, on our respective evaluations, we ask all constituents to comment on our strengths and areas for improvement. We are a work in progress.

Our academic dean is an east. She wants to know how we will do something. What will the structure be in a linear way? This helps her think effectively about the scope and sequence of courses. Our artistic dean is both a north and an east. She is never afraid of taking action—even through uncharted territory. She is also very good at thinking about structures and schedules.

The head of student support is a south, or someone who thinks first about emotional aspects. How will people feel? What will the repercussions be? His perspective is absolutely crucial to me. Norths can make all the decisions in the world, only to have them blow up in our faces because we haven't counted on emotional responses.

We are a strong team. We provide one another with tensions. We acknowledge the different approaches, as well as our strengths and weaknesses. We use Venn diagrams on a regular basis to show our various roles and responsibilities, where we overlap and where we are separate. A part of our agenda will always be building our own team strength.

You don't become a team just by snapping your fingers. We have worked through many disagreements and hurt feelings.



We also communicate to students, faculty, and parents about our roles. It's not easy to be transparent. It's often easier to just shut the door.

Schedule and time

The Boston Arts Academy is 13 years old. We have had 12 schedules. A school's schedule—how we organize our time according to what goes first, second, and for how long—symbolizes everything.

Schedule causes the most acrimony and tension, yet it is our most important annual work.

I must help teachers compromise about priorities. That's the real struggle. How can I get the arts teachers and the academic teachers to realize that they are fighting over students as opposed to working together for the health of the kids? Everyone wants more time to teach more content. Meanwhile, our students' wellness is suffering.

I'm the referee, the facilitator, and the questioner. Ultimately, the leaders will make a decision, but not before teachers have cried and said things to one another that they wish they could take back. Not before teachers have accused each other of not understanding what our students need. Not before we have fallen back into our fiefdoms. Out of this contentious mess, I must pull us back and let us observe ourselves.

With any luck, I can help us see the humor in all of this fuss, figure out a compromise, and determine how to pay for it. I am often tempted to make a unilateral decision. But as appealing as it seems, this has never worked well.

How do you pay for everything?

We never have enough money for everything that school leaders, teachers, parents, and students want and deserve, particularly in urban districts. In my first year as a teacher, I learned that writing grants was crucial to my work. If I wanted to do things that cost money not coming from the school or district, I simply had to find it myself.

This "Little Red Hen" approach worked, and I certainly encourage teachers to write grants, but we all can't be Little Red Hens. As soon as I could, I hired a staff person whose entire job is writing grants. The money this position brings to the school far outweighs the salary.

I scour all possible literature for grant announcements and

constantly put those opportunities in front of teachers. Some teachers want to run when they see me coming. I want teachers to continually expand their knowledge base and repertoire and explore new interests. This keeps teachers vibrant and fresh, both in the classroom and in the profession.

Collaborating with others also is a way to raise money to strengthen or expand existing programs, but it is a two-way street. You can't just ask from your collaborators; you must also give. Collaborations give students and teachers wonderful opportunities if done as part of a school's strategic plan.

The dark and light sides

Can I keep doing this job? I ask myself this in the sweaty days of late June, when the dailiness of it all grinds me to a pulp. My first instinct is to say no, because I don't want to be responsible for finishing one more evaluation or hiring one more person. Just as the teachers are leaving for summer break, I'm looking at several weeks of work. I must guard against making bad decisions in June or July.

As the co-leader of a school, I'm a vision maker, vision keeper, and ultimately the one responsible for making sure we act on that vision. Doing my job well means I need to feel productive, not just exhausted and angry.

I know the phrase "need to feel" can sound contradictory. How can we control our feelings? I use the phrase intentionally, because I have learned to take my own emotional state seriously. I must treat myself well, and give myself a break sometimes. I worry when I see new leaders driving themselves at a level of intensity that I doubt they can sustain for five years, much less the long career I hope they have.

It's not my job to have every great idea. It certainly is my job to articulate where we are going—our vision of where we will be in 20 years. My job also is to focus on the school's mission and to be wary of mission-drift. A built-in tension exists because I need to keep creating new opportunities and focusing outward.

Teachers are necessarily focused inward—on the kids. Teachers want and need to get better at their craft. They need my support, while I articulate what we are going to become.

Much of what I've learned about leadership comes from taking the low road with a short-term solution and coming back to a larger discussion later. Anything worth questioning and discussing will be worth it again. Waiting is not a weakness. Being transparent about the decision-making process is more important. Disagreement isn't a bad thing.

One teacher said it so well: "Sometimes we need to sit in a big circle and see our angry faces. You can't always fix that, and you shouldn't." Presiding over conflict is part of my job. ■

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