

Seize the Day

by J. Ogden Hamilton

When Lowell Rose addressed the participants of Pi Lambda Theta's leadership conference in July 2003, he gave what in my opinion is the best advice to come from any of the four very powerful speakers who took the podium.

Seize the day

In effect, Lowell told the participants that the only constructive function of No Child Left Behind is to serve as a common adversary against which people of goodwill can unite. Faced with the truly Malthusian calculations of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), he said local school leaders should not waste any effort working to make AYP; they should pay no attention to NCLB.

Rather, they should have some very serious discussions with their faculties and staffs and determine for themselves what goals and performance measures to adopt: what they will try to accomplish and how at the end of the year they will know whether they have succeeded.

After that, they should go to every community leader they can find and say candidly that under NCLB their community schools will be labeled failures—or whatever euphemism for failure the federal government may be using when the announcement is made. Tell them that some of the schools may not fail in the first year of NCLB, but they will in the second year; and if they don't fail then, they'll go down in the third. Help them to see that given enough time and any diversity at all, virtually every school and every district in the country, no matter how good it may be, is mathematically doomed to failure under NCLB.

But don't stop with a complaint! Merely discrediting NCLB is no more worthy an undertaking than any other manifestation of negative politics; more important, it will leave the real opportunity on the table. Instead, show the community leaders the goals and measures the faculty came up with and get buy-in on those goals and measures as short-term alternatives for NCLB.

And then, the *pièce de résistance*: schedule a big wingding for the day the federal government is to release the AYP figures. Invite the mayor, the city and county councils, state legislators, the press, the chamber of commerce, the taxpayers association, the local clergy—all the community leaders who could be constructive forces in support of the community schools. Announce your performance in achieving the goals the faculty set; celebrate your success. Ignore the NCLB press release; shrug it off if you cannot ignore it.

This goes beyond being feisty

As one with a penchant for iconoclasm and the *tour de force*, I like Lowell's idea of the wingding a great deal. However, as a private-sector CEO for more than a quarter-century, I recognize that the power of his advice—what gives it the potential to revolutionize education district by district—does not lie in the in-your-face defiance, as fun as that may be to contemplate. The advice is powerful because the school system that follows it will have taken responsibility for determining its own goals and performance measures.



For years, most of them spent outside education, I have argued that a school or school district cannot achieve excellence unless it has decided for itself what excellence is and what constitutes success. Among capable managers that rule is axiomatic, and contrary to what many think, excellence in the private sector is not merely “the bottom line.”

For sure, if a business loses enough money over a long enough period, the bottom line becomes the only measure of success. And if a manager’s job is defined in terms of earning short-term profits, the bottom line is the key measure.

But most managers in business don’t have direct profit responsibility, so the bottom line cannot be used to measure their performance. To assess the performance of those managers it is necessary to understand the workings of the business: what are the determinants of organizational success?

Success may depend on many things: achieving low employee turnover, achieving high employee productivity, limiting the investment in equipment, generating repeat business from established customers, limiting business to only certain kinds of customers, navigating regulatory shoals, making the people around you more productive—the list goes on and on, and there certainly is a comparable list for schools, school districts, and teachers.

The most successful managers I have known have had a clear understanding of what determines organizational success and, therefore, what determines whether or not they have done good jobs. They know those things for their own jobs, their boss’s job, and the jobs of everyone who works for them (at least). The knowledge is not just the raw material of an art form: it is basic to their ability to do a good job. With the knowledge, they are in command; they are leaders. Without it, they are drones.

Two managers may hold the same rank and title, but one is the captain of his own ship and the other has condemned himself to rowing in the waist of his own galley.

So it is with educators. Those who are confident in their knowledge of what makes for success are in command; they are leaders. Those who are not give face validity to the caviling of those who promote unflattering stereotypes of teachers.

At the lowest level it’s about vulnerability . . .

When someone says, as many seem to be saying to our schools, “She is doing a lousy job: she’s failed at this, she’s failed at that, employee morale is low, and the customers are complaining,” what’s the constructive reply? In my experience there is only one: reference to measured job performance against wisely chosen goals and measures.

You can disagree, negotiate, joust, and argue, but unless you have the objective data you reduce yourself to the level of your critic, and that means giving away your decisive advantage. After all, it's you (or your employee or your school system) who is the focus of criticism. Surely you should have the home-court advantage in any such debate!

Here's an example that could apply as easily to a school as it did in fact to my own business. Periodically my marketing manager would come to me and complain bitterly about the failings of my operations manager. To hear her tell it, the employees were about to rebel or quit, customers were leaving in droves, and I had to act right away.

In response I would do nothing more than show her the reports that I ran regularly showing the company's critical performance measures. The facts were that we had a very experienced staff with almost zero turnover, fantastic productivity for our market, a minuscule error rate, and superb customer retention.

I never knew if the complaints were a manifestation of employee rivalry or simply the Chicken Little syndrome. The important thing is that it didn't matter which. I could demonstrate that things were fine, so the criticism and doubts went away.

But without clear performance measures at hand I would have been vulnerable to the criticism, my business would have been vulnerable to it, and so would my operations manager.

How would that vulnerability have manifested itself? I'd have been worried and distracted by the reported problems. I would have spent time investigating that I should have spent otherwise. Although I would have found no symptom, I could not have been sure that I hadn't just missed something. I would have annoyed the operations manager and generated insecurity by demonstrating that I could not protect her definitively. And despite all that, I never would have convinced the complaining manager that her fears were unfounded.

In effect I would have been reduced to taking sides because I would have allowed what should have been an objective determination to deteriorate into a matter of opinion: whom I trusted rather than whom I knew for sure to be performing precisely how well.

. . . and schools are amazingly vulnerable

I have known teachers who really understand the goals and measurement thing, and they are really good at what they do. Students love them, parents love them; as a rule they can tell you what each student has accomplished on their watches. They exude the relaxed confidence that I associate with good supervisors.

But I have never known an entire school, much less a district, to have achieved that state of grace. (I'm not saying it doesn't happen, only

that I have no firsthand knowledge of it happening.) On the contrary, I'm told that at the school level there is little interest in goals and performance measures, and a lack of consensus or even open hostility when the ideas are broached.

The results have not been pretty. The lack of agreed-upon goals and performance measures has left schools vulnerable to all manner of criticisms and deprived them of any response much more sophisticated than "Is *not*"; "That's not *fair*"; "It's a lot more complicated than that"; or "Trust us."

"Nature abhors a vacuum" applies in human social behavior as well as the physical sciences. When no goals or measures are set out for a high-profile social institution like a school system, people will tend to set their own goals and measures. The unstated threat is "Do it yourself or we'll do it for you," and in the absence of action by schools, the community has made good on that threat.

The wrong goals and measures

When someone sets goals for you, you can be reasonably sure they will be the wrong goals. How could they not be, if you really know your business better than the person setting the goals? The same is true of performance measures.

Sure enough, when we look at what our schools are being held accountable for by society, what we see would be laughable if it weren't so scary.

And I am not speaking only of NCLB: that is merely the latest refinement of a process run amok in the face of abdication by school officials. Just look at any newspaper article from the past thirty years reporting on schools and the problem will jump off the page at you. For example:

- SAT scores are down.
- This year's fourth-graders did better on the state tests than last year's . . .
- . . . but this year's eighth-graders did worse.
- The graduation rate is 73 percent.
- Minorities now make up 45 percent of the student body.
- Thirty percent of the students being tested in a certain school this year were not enrolled in the school last year.
- The football team lost.
- The basketball team should be a contender.

Cast into the vacuum that exists, every one of those statements takes on the majesty of a performance measure with an implied goal, and collectively they establish what the public thinks of its schools.

It matters not whether the measure is valid, whether the school has any control over it, whether it reflects performance in any way, or whether it even matters a hoot. *Unless the schools have stated clearly what they are trying to accomplish and how they performed against those goals, factoids introduced by others will assume the mantle of legitimacy* and collectively they will comprise the schools' goals and performance measures.

And then the true horror of the vulnerability asserts itself: there is literally no limit to the performance measures that people can dream up, and no limit to the number of implied goals that the school can fail to reach. It's the management equivalent of Custer's Last Stand, except educators don't get to die and make it be over.

A one-time opportunity

Lowell Rose has correctly observed that NCLB has created a one-time opportunity. But for NCLB, schools would be irretrievably mired in a morass of their own making: a morass of third-party goals and performance measures, few of which are relevant, none of which are understood by the public, and most of which don't even lend themselves to rational discussion, much less valid performance measurement.

And now Lowell is challenging all educators—all, not just administrators, but teachers as well—to seize the day. Take this window of opportunity during which the public's long-nurtured perception of your shortcomings is eclipsed by the sheer chutzpah of a federal government that, on the strength of providing about 7 percent of the overall education budget, presumes to tell people what to do and consigns even the best schools to a status of "failure."

It isn't a job for principals, superintendents, school boards, or even state legislators. They can provide leadership and support, but without the enthusiastic participation of at least a core group of teachers, goal setting and performance measurement cannot be meaningful.

You should have until at least 2007, when NCLB is up for reauthorization. One might expect that by then the act's manifest weaknesses will be corrected and it will lose its value as a common adversary.

But maybe not. Given the way the act has been administered so far, the common adversary may be with us for quite a while.

The real agenda behind NCLB

It was a couple of months between the time Lowell agreed to write for our issue and the time he sent us the manuscript. During our initial discussion, I put the popular right-wing-agenda conspiracy theory to him: given that the math of NCLB is beyond dispute and therefore the failure of virtually every public school is guaranteed, is it possible that

NCLB is a plot by the political right to discredit and perhaps disestablish the public schools?

He answered without hesitation, "No." The flaws in the act, although fatal if left untreated, are easy to treat; they probably are nothing more than inevitable consequences of management-by-legislation and would be routinely corrected by administrative action.

Two months later Lowell had a very different opinion. His frustration and growing distrust are wholly understandable: you have a law that received substantial bipartisan support, and nonetheless it is fatally flawed. Someone didn't check out the math, or so it appears. The law is subject to the interpretation of administrators, and so is fixable, but when the rubber actually hits the road, the administration declines to fix it. Rather it moves forward like a robot, piously justifying the Alice in Wonderland scenario the law creates with an appeal to academic excellence.

That just *has* to be a conspiracy to disestablish the public schools, right?

Well, I say it's not. That belief denies the realities of the political process.

It's not about their agenda

Doubtless some of those supporting NCLB and guiding its administration would gladly disestablish the public schools. But certainly there are other motivations, too. NCLB presents a wonderful opportunity for those who support public education to shake up what they see as a Balkanized system so it better responds to the needs of today's society.

And judging from discussions with people who followed the debate prior to NCLB's passage, the largest group of supporters was motivated simply by frustration with the nonresponse of most states to the mandates of the previous education act (ESEA of 1995). Otherwise they had no agenda at all.

So as I see it, it's not logically possible to ascribe motive or agenda to "the federal government." The federal government, as manifest in NCLB, is an abstraction comprising many often-conflicting motives and agendas.

And as I see it, those motives and agendas don't matter anyway. What matters are the outcomes of the decisions and actions taken by those administering NCLB.

It's about your response

"Outcomes" exist on several levels, and only one of those levels matters: the response of America's educators to the situations created by NCLB.

To be sure, the existence of cynicism about the pursuit of a fatally flawed AYP schedule is an “outcome” of NCLB. So is the low morale that can be expected in schools as they “fail.” So is community outrage, whether directed at the federal government or the local schools.

But the outcomes that matter are not the outcomes that merely happen as logical consequences of events. The outcomes that matter are the initiatives American educators take in their efforts to turn those events to everyone’s benefit.

And what this politician or that bureaucrat intended in prosecuting the act just doesn’t matter, not even a little.

Seize the day

We’ve come full circle in this analysis of Lowell Rose’s Patrick Henry-like advice (“Give me liberty, or give me death!”). For decades now America’s schools have been buffeted by the forces of politics and public naiveté like a ship adrift, unable even to secure the helm, much less start the engines.

Now, thanks to the NCLB, America’s educators have a one-time opportunity to do more than bail. They can agree on a direction, start the engines, and develop the momentum that will give our schools the stability and security they will need to weather the waves that inevitably will continue to hit them.

Best of all, they don’t have to do it at the national or even the state level. The district level, to some extent even the school level, is where Lowell’s advice can be applied most powerfully. The opportunity is right there, right now.

All our educators must do is seize the day.

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