

## Misconceptions about School Leadership— or, Who Is Buried in King Tut’s Tomb?

*by Judith A. Zimmerman*

### **Abstract**

The author draws on personal experience and leadership literature to develop this story about learning from misconceptions. Specifically, comparisons are drawn between the author’s historical misconceptions and common beliefs about the nature and administration of schools. The article uses the dispelled historical fallacies as a vehicle for sharing corresponding insights about school leadership.

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**S**tories reveal the meaning of our experiences (Kouzes and Posner 1993). Personal experience and the education literature have both contributed to this essay about learning from misconceptions. During a recent sabbatical from my academic position, I had opportunities for enrichment and renewal beyond researching and writing. Among them was a two-week Mediterranean cruise I took with my husband. We were both thrilled to visit famous antiquities and other eastern-Mediterranean sites we had first learned about as children—Rome, Athens, Cairo! I was doubly excited because it was also my first trip to Europe.

However, during our cruise and shore excursions, my husband and I learned that we harbored various misconceptions about the sites we were visiting. Moreover, as a former school administrator and a current researcher-writer on school leadership, I couldn’t help comparing the misconceptions with common beliefs about the nature and administration of schools. First, however, I would like to stipulate that

the misconceptions mentioned in this article are my own and not the fault of any of my K–12 teachers or college history professors.

*We needed to learn Italian to visit and stay in Italy.*

Because we planned to arrive in Rome several days before embarking on our cruise, I borrowed some Italian language tapes from the local library to practice key phrases before we left (i.e., *Where is the bathroom? How much does this cost? How do I get to... ?*). However, English seems to be the universal language in the places we visited. For example, on the train from Rome’s airport into the city, two young German men and a young Chinese woman conversed with us in English. That held true outside Italy as well. Even Egyptian schoolchildren visiting the mosques in Cairo practiced their English phrases on us!

Likewise, I believe that leadership has a universal “language,” which includes more than our own educational terms and phrases. School leaders can certainly improve their practice by reading widely, even by consulting books and articles from the business world (see Collins 2001; Connor, Lake, and Stackman 2003; Dotlich and Cairo 2002; Heifetz 1994; Kotter 1996; Wheatley 1994).



*Julius Caesar was assassinated in the Roman Forum.*

Thanks to Rex Harrison's "death" in the 1963 movie *Cleopatra*, I thought that that was true. Actually, on March 15, 44 B.C., Brutus and his fellow assassins killed Caesar across town at the Senate's temporary quarters in the Theatre of Pompey. The Curia, located in the Forum and the regular meeting house of the Senate, was being rebuilt after a devastating fire (Julius Caesar 2001).

Caesar's assassination in a nontraditional meeting place roughly parallels its underlying cause: the wide discrepancy between his mental model of Rome's needs and that of other Roman leaders. Even today, we all use mental models to conceptualize our perceptions of reality (Calabrese 2002). Although mental models can promote efficiency and alleviate anxiety in the face of change, the same beliefs can also trap educators in outmoded ways of dealing with change and prevent them from adopting new methods. The result can be nonproductive behaviors in attempts to lead schools (Calabrese 2002; Senge 1990).

*The Mt. Vesuvius apparent in photographs is the one that destroyed Pompeii.*

What we call "Vesuvius" is really the younger part of the mountain complex that geologists call "Greater Vesuvius" (Visiting Mt. Vesuvius 2008). The older part of the mountain, now an extinct volcano, is called Monte Somma. A fresco recovered from Pompeii shows a single and much taller summit before the eruption of A.D. 79 (Visiting Mt. Vesuvius 2008).

Likewise, is it possible that a "mountain" school leaders may see is not necessarily the obstacle that has caused the problem? In other words, as systems thinkers caution, all parts of organizations are interconnected, and educators tinker with the obvious problem or symptom at the risk of affecting the rest of the system (Senge et al. 1999; Wheatley 1994).

*Pompeii was a mere hamlet obliterated by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius.*

Pompeii was actually a thriving city of more than twenty thousand when Mt. Vesuvius's eruption buried the city in some ten feet of ash in A.D. 79 (The Forgotten City of Pompeii 2008).

Beneath the ash everything, including buildings and artwork, was preserved as it existed before the eruption. As a result, visitors can visualize what life, both the positives and negatives, was like more than two thousand years ago.

What would archaeologists two thousand years from now uncover about our system of education if our culture and institutions, including schools, suffered a natural or human-caused disaster of similar magnitude? Among other things, they would learn that NCLB and other mandates required twenty-first-century teachers to focus on their subjects in isolation—even as futurists and environmentalists advocated expanding the curricula to include thinking, reasoning, and communication skills that leadership requires, and perhaps to prevent human-caused disasters (Friedman 2005; Marx 2006).

*The Great Pyramids are in the midst of a vast, remote desert.*

The outskirts of the city of Cairo are literally across the street from the Sphinx and the Pyramids. Although those antiquities still tower over the sand behind them, the city has expanded to meet them.

Most of my career has been spent in rural school districts, where many educators and community members failed to see the relevance of multicultural education for their students. However, thanks to technology, the world has grown to “meet” rural children and adults, and preparing children globally has become more urgent (Friedman 2005; Marx 2006).

*The Great Pyramids were built with slave labor.*

The reality of the Pyramids’ construction is not what we observed in old Charlton Heston movies. The theory that slaves built them is no longer accepted (Construction of the Great Pyramid 2008). Actually, tens of thousands of paid workers, including farmers temporarily idled by the annual flooding of the Nile River and its tributaries, were enlisted to work on the Pyramids. It may have been a work of faith based on the Egyptian belief that their pharaohs lived on to help their subjects.

Similarly, I believe, school leaders give everyone meaning, a common purpose, and motivation to accomplish great things when their actions include teachers and other stakeholders in developing a shared vision and goals for reaching the vision (Fullan and Hargreaves 1996; Schmoker 1999; Senge et al. 1999). Moreover, principals and other school leaders who provide opportunities for teacher collaboration and participation in decision-making develop a supportive culture for change (Fullan and Hargreaves 1996).

*Tutankhamen (“King Tut”) was a famous pharaoh.*

Tutankhamen reigned for only ten years, and he died at age eighteen or nineteen (Tutankhamen’s Life 2005). “King Tut” is

known primarily through the discovery of his nearly intact tomb in 1922 (The Discovery 2005). While most other Egyptian royal tombs had been robbed and destroyed, Tut's tomb held a treasure trove of precious and gilded objects.

As short and seemingly unmemorable as King Tut's life evidently was, I think we can draw a lesson from Tut's fate: leaders need not be famous, flashy, or charismatic to bequeath a legacy. Collins (2001) found that less-charismatic leaders often produced better long-term results in their organizations. Hence, effective school leaders need to balance their need for control by bringing out the best in others to satisfy others' needs for autonomy (Clawson 1999; Dotlich and Cairo 2002).

And who knows? It's quite possible that Tut was a better ruler than the scanty records indicate.

*The Nile River near the Pyramids is lined with picturesque villages.*

The inhabited areas of Egypt, the fifteenth-most-populous country in the world, constitute only 6 percent of Egypt's total area; some 99 percent of all Egyptians live in the Nile Valley (Egypt's Population 2007). Many Egyptian farmers and "villagers" actually dwell in four- to six-story tenement buildings near or along the Nile, its tributaries, or canals.

Many educators, particularly in once-homogenous school districts, harbor similar misconceptions about the picturesque qualities of the way life used to be in their schools. Changing demographic populations, as well as greater social or emotional issues, mean that school leaders and other educators will require more diverse skills and abilities. Moreover, although test scores among traditional minority groups (particularly African Americans and Latinos) have improved through the years, the economic divide between haves and have-nots is apparently widening (Marx 2006). The challenge of improving achievement for all students will persist in such an environment.

*Travelers should respond to street vendors with a firm "no" to discourage them.*

My husband and I discovered that the merchants we encountered in Turkey and Egypt perceived "no" as just the *beginning* of negotiations! Perhaps school leaders can learn from the counterproductive tactics of those aggressive vendors in their own negotiation processes with constituents. Whether during formal bargaining with employee groups or in informal day-to-day negotiations, leaders are usually better advised to try another approach if the response is

“no.” Fisher and Ury (1991) urge undertaking principled negotiations that focus on common interests, not disparate positions, and separating the people from the problem.

*Where and what is Ephesus?*

I was unfamiliar with Ephesus, yet at one time it was not only the commercial capital of Asia Minor but also the second-largest city in the Roman Empire (About Ephesus 2008). Some of its residents were the recipients of the Epistle to the Ephesians, authored by St. Paul, who reportedly preached in the twenty-five-thousand-seat Ephesus Theatre (About Ephesus 2008). We also learned that this once-thriving port was plagued with a silt buildup and finally abandoned about A.D. 500. It currently sits more than five kilometers from the sea (About Ephesus 2008).

I worry that democracy is suffering from its own buildup of “silt.” Gary Marx (2006) has warned, “[O]ur responsibility as leaders in society is to constantly create the future we need, not just defend what we have” (p. 336). I believe that school leaders should lead their communities in broad-based conversations about what they want for their students and their future in a global society.

## Conclusion

Contemplating my erroneous historical notions has furnished me with new insights about the nature of schools and their leadership. Some misconceptions were dispelled by considering such concepts as a universal language; a disparity of mental models; the interconnectedness of systems; a shrinking world; a common purpose; noncharismatic leadership; a diverse population; and principled negotiation processes. Likewise, I believe, the same ideas could also be taken into account when administering schools and preparing students to take their places as the leaders of the future.

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