Sounding the charge for change

How leaders communicate can inspire or defeat the troops.

By Brooke Haycock

One of the most dramatic scenes in Shakespeare's "Henry V" occurs on the eve of the great St. Crispin's Day battle. The king stands before his ailing, battle-weary troops, and uses his words to renew their spirits and resolve: "That he which hath no stomach to this fight, let him depart; his passport shall be made, And crowns for convoy put into his purse; We would not die in that man's company . . . but we in it shall be remembered — we few, we happy few, we band of brothers; For he today that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother."

Henry communicated a clear course to victory to his band of brothers, marked by honor at all costs, bolstering the fighting spirits of his men while inviting the disillusioned to depart. The sheer strength of his words and conviction inspired his men to risk their lives for their country. The following day, he led them to victory.

School leaders could learn a lot from Henry V.

Listening to leaders

For more than a decade, I've had the privilege of spending time in schools and districts across the country. I'm not a traditional educator, a curriculum specialist, or a turnaround leader. I'm a playwright with a background not in pedagogy but in performance and communication. I create and perform documentary dramas based on interviews with educators and students to start conversations about race, class, and equity in schools. I'm often invited to share these documentary dramas at kickoffs for achievement gap initiatives and equity-focused school professional development days. Over the years, I've learned that these moments are ripe with opportunity for inspired leadership and that the way leaders talk about change matters — a lot.

Unlike Henry V's inspiring speech to his troops, what I've witnessed over the years often goes more like this:

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[Cue school bell]

[It's the first week of school. The principal stands at a podium in front of 40 teachers who are seated in tiny plastic chairs in the small library. The room is buzzing with conversation. This is the principal's first opportunity to harness the energy of his staff and focus it squarely on students, the school's mission, and the year ahead.]

PRINCIPAL: So, this is our first faculty meeting this year, but it already feels like we've been in school for months, doesn't it?

The first order of business is chairs. Some teachers have been saying they don't have enough chairs in their rooms. If you need chairs, please e-mail Mrs. Micks, and we'll put an order into Central. Second, I promised I would update you on the 8th-grade science books. They are still at the warehouse, but I'm told they'll be here next week.

As I think you all know, we didn't make AYP last year because of scores from our diverse students. We're going to be starting a new reading program this year as part of our improvement plan for raising test scores to get off the list. We'll talk more about who will be affected by that later. But first, I want to brief everyone on the new hall pass policy.

Would Henry's troops have been willing to risk their lives to follow this leader?

It's not that chairs or new programs are unimportant. Certainly, leaders must ensure that these details are handled. But great leaders don't get stuck on the details. Lessons emerging now from successful schools have much to teach us about the practices of dynamic leaders, everything from how they guide instruction to how they grow leaders within their ranks. Surely these practices are core

to good leadership. But if leaders can't talk about the what and the why of those practices in ways that inspire their staffs to action, they may change programs, policies, or chairs in classrooms, but they'll never change people.

HOW LEADERS TALK ABOUT CHALLENGES MATTERS. I can't get one superintendent's words out of my head, mostly because I hear some version of them all the time: "We do have some problems still. And you all know what they are: our subgroup populations." Now, this superintendent is a good man. And he cares about kids — all kids — a lot. He's dedicated his life to serving students. But intended or not, the implicit message he conveyed — that it's the kids and not adult practices, policies, or systems that are the problem — is damaging to students and to the district's mission.

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I listen to school leaders send versions of these messages all the time; messages casting kids, parents, and communities as obstacles to a school's otherwise inevitable path "back" to perfection, an ideal that, at best, is an unsubstantiated goal and, at worst, a desire to vanish certain sets of kids. The explanation I too often hear for why students can't read goes something like this: "These kids just don't like to read." Or, "Nobody at home reads to these kids. Parents would rather buy video games for their children than books." Comedian Bill Cosby said as much, so it must be OK for educators to say, right?

These are fictions woven from threads of truth, and spools of misunderstanding. Educators frequently talk about kids using the same clichés propagated by Hollywood directors: African-American kids come from multi-child, single-parent, drug-addicted, bullet-riddled homes while white kids play hopscotch in the two-car driveways of their two-parent, two-point-five kid, education-centered suburban homes.

These narratives are not only damaging, they're dead wrong. They drown out overwhelming evidence to the contrary: that a family's race or class tells us little about their circumstance, their values and aspirations for their children, or the academic potentials of those children. These corrosive myths disenfranchise students, families, and communities, and they demoralize and debilitate educators. When education leaders use narratives like these to explain away student performance, teachers are left without agency or urgency, powerless observers of an inevitable achievement gap, not the great equalizers of the American dream.

HOW LEADERS TALK ABOUT CHANGE MATTERS. "We need to raise our test scores or the [insert: state/feds] are going to come down on us."

Somewhere along the way, we seem to have forgotten that we assess kids to measure their *learning*, not to torture and terrify schools and teachers with scantrons, No. 2 pencils, and a spot on the dreaded "list." Test scores are an indicator of academic learning — and, in many states, a low-level one. If leaders talk about assessments as somehow disconnected from the work of schools to grow student learning, then they become meaningless measures. Indeed, when we discredit assessments, we leave leaders without one of the most powerful tools in their diagnostic toolbox for highlighting success and driving real achievement and outcome-oriented change in their buildings.

Similarly, when leaders frame achievement and accountability through a daunting lens of state takeover and federal sanction, they shift the impetus of change from being driven by what's right for kids to what will keep adults out of trouble. This — not any accountability policy — is the seed of drill-and-kill test prep, strangled curriculum, teacher disillusionment, and student disengagement. How leaders respond to external pressures and filter those messages for their staffs will determine how the school community internalizes and responds to those challenges.

THE RIGHT WORDS GET RESULTS. There are hard-charging school and district leaders across the country who know how hard change is and how much honor there is in this work. They know their staffs are critical to winning the battle. They know the power of their words — and choose them accordingly. And they get results.

There's the elementary principal in poverty-stricken, post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans who I witnessed bring a room of educators to tears — and to their feet — as she spoke of the importance of her school's mission, declaring education the best war on poverty this nation can wage.

"Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more . . ."

Just four years after Katrina, a time that seemed to wash away what little hope there was for this struggling school, achievement is soaring over state averages, surpassing mere proficiency and giving new hope to a community that has seen too many safeguards fail.

CHOOSE WORDS CAREFULLY. Good leaders know that they're the tone setters and meaning makers in their buildings. They choose their words to build urgency and collective agency.

A high school principal in the rural northwest took the reins of a school so devastated and demoralized that many thought it beyond repair. He marched past the graffiti-covered school sign, the teachers smoking in the parking lot, called a faculty meeting, and played the battle speech from "Brave Heart," declaring an end to the days of expecting less of the children of this community of farm workers and inviting any who wished to leave to make a clear path to the door.

"That he which hath no stomach to this fight, let him depart . . ."

The next several years were punctuated by leaps in achievement and graduation, staff retention, and parent engagement. And the results aren't evident only from looking at the data: You can feel the change in the classrooms and hallways and in the community outside the school doors where improved prospects for kids have resulted in drastic drops in juvenile crime.

TIE LANGUAGE TO BELIEFS AND GOALS. Good leaders send clear, consistent, mission-focused messages about expectations. They use language to unify their staffs around common beliefs and goals.

The superintendent of a district nestled in the Rockies, a district with high populations of migrant students and English language learners, addressed teachers and staff at the beginning of the school year, nullifying any excuse: "We are it. For these kids, we are it." And you could feel the sea of teachers before her sit up straighter in silent resolve. "It is on us." She then spent the entire professional development day sitting side by side with teachers in sessions, engaged in the instructional nuts and bolts of real change.

"For he today that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother . . ."

This kind of relentless, can-do, on-the-ground leadership is beginning to move the needle on student achievement. But, perhaps more important ultimately to the long-term success of the district, it has changed the way an entire system of adults think of themselves.

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NO EXCUSES. Good leaders constantly communicate to their staffs how critical they are to the mission and to the children they serve. They don't allow excuses to trivialize the importance of the work or the people who do it.

Like Henry V leading his troops into battle, these leaders focus relentlessly on the heart of the mission. They elevate the strength of their men and, in so doing, make them stronger. They don't waste breath on the obstacles or on conditions not in their control. They build within their ranks a true sense of honor, camaraderie, and duty. And they fight alongside them all the way to victory.

"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers . . . gentlemen in England now a-bed

Shall think themselves accursed they were not here, And hold their man-hoods cheap whiles any speaks That fought with us . . ."

What Henry knew, and what the principal in the scenario at the beginning of this article missed, is that, if he framed the battle ahead correctly — if he spoke to his weary troops' passions, their courage, and their better selves — his men would have gone charging into battle for him and for France even without armor. He did not linger on the details — the sharpness of their swords or strength of their shields. He did not shrink their purposes to the field combat in which each man would engage. He stood before his men — his band of brothers — and lifted their heads, hearts, and sights to their collective mission to serve a cause bigger than themselves.

Like Henry's troops, I would follow leaders like these into battle for kids any day.