Being Boss Is Hard

The Emotional Side of Being in Charge

Educational leaders can cope with the difficulties of decision making by planning ahead and employing a few key strategies.

BY RICK GINSBERG

After this brief discussion with the school board chairman, I realized that there was absolutely no reason for me to stay. . . . I went back to my office and prepared a resignation. I had no job in mind, but I knew I could no longer work in this district with its board of education. They had violated every principle I knew in protecting children. I was emotionally spent mostly because of what happened to these kids. Now, I had no relationship with the board, and I had no job. . . . I am a Vietnam veteran who saw my share of misery and suffering, but those experiences, no matter how awful they were, don't compare to the disgusting feelings I still have about this incident.

— A small-district superintendent[1]

Principals, superintendents, deans, provosts, presidents, CEOs, all leaders make decisions that affect programs and people. They hire and fire, evaluate and

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assess, raise pay, cut pay, make budgets, slash budgets, start new programs, eliminate old ones. Being in charge carries a wide array of responsibilities and burdens, but it also places people in a position to have an incredible impact. So it shouldn't be surprising that so many aspire to being boss because of the power, prestige, potential for making a difference, and, for some, the added financial remuneration. Being boss can be very seductive.

Few, if any, leaders are prepared for the emotional side of making hard decisions.

Research on leadership is beginning to examine a side of the work that has been ignored for years. An inevitable part of being a leader is that some decisions are very hard to make. That isn't very surprising. But a curious reality is that few, if any, leaders are prepared for the emotional side of making hard decisions. Much like death and taxes, such decisions can't be avoided, yet leaders are left to their own sensibilities in trying to deal with the emotional fallout of making decisions that directly affect people or challenge their personal values. Naturally, the emotional side of leadership makes being the boss far more difficult than most leaders ever imagined. As aerospace engineer, corporate leader, and novelist Nevil Shute explained in his autobiography:

> I think this is the most miserable part of being the managing director of a growing company. One by one, I had to replace our earliest supporters. . . . It is a process which is inevitable in a growing business and which takes much of the fun out of it, so that after a few years of sacking one's old friends, one grows to feel that success may not be such a good thing after all, that possibly there may be other, less sorry ways of earning a living in this world. When success ultimately came to Airspeed, I was ready to leave the company, having come to the conclusion that I didn't much like my job.[2]

Why is the emotional side of leadership so troubling? Primarily because having to deal with these work-evoked emotions is a little secret that is kept very "hush-hush." No professional courses in educational leadership delve into this aspect of being in charge. No state licensure requirements for educational leaders even mention this in their standards. It is as if such emotions don't exist or, if they do, the implication is that they are simple to deal with or something that should be avoided. But just as the Tom Hanks character complained in the movie, *A League of Their Own*, "there's no crying in baseball," there is no allowance for crying by the person we call "boss." Leaders, after all, are strong. They have to show the right face, and that means not displaying emotions.

But reality is something else. Leaders are human. They continually face emotion-laden situations, and they often agonize over decisions and worry incessantly about the repercussions of what they decide. Head over to your state's administrators' meeting and you'll overhear principals and superintendents sharing their personal war stories. I attend several meetings of deans of education each year and can assure you that when we get together, we often ventilate about emotionally charged situations. It is helpful to get off campus to let this out, because you can share this information with very few people in one's own setting. Not just because the matter may involve private personnel information, but also because it is hard for any leader to honestly let on that they are struggling. And sadly, scholarship on organizations and leadership has for generations largely ignored the issue. As one writer put it: "The general neglect of emotions by contemporary writers on behavior in organizations seems largely due to an acceptance of the common managerial perception that 'feelings' (a term often used pejoratively) have no place in institutions that are committed to considering judgment and rational action. They get in the way and cloud the issues."[3]

Thankfully, psychologists have recently turned their attention to the significance of this in emerging areas like emotional intelligence. Popular writers such as Daniel Goleman have argued that emotional intelligence has a dramatic effect on individual success.[4] Other researchers are somewhat less enthusiastic about the degree of impact,[5] but most agree that having some degree of emotional intelligence, emotional competence, emotional awareness, or some similar sort of emotional expertise can positively affect one's performance. And Goleman and others have ventured into the leadership world, arguing that emotional intelligence, or what others refer to as one's EQ, is significant for leadership success.[6]

None of this, however, helps with the reality that leaders face when making decisions that affect employees and co-workers. In *The Human Side of Leadership*, I report the results of my recent study that examined the prevalence of such emotional situations for leaders, collecting data that included stories of

sleepless nights, intense anxiety, and situation after situation where leaders were unprepared for the emotional fallout from their decisions. In his autobiography, former Chrysler CEO Lee Iacocca describes his feelings this way: "Our struggle also had its dark side. To cut expenses, we had to fire a lot of people. It was like a war: We won, but my son didn't come back."[7]

THE AGONY OF DECISION MAKING

For the study I worked on, we collected data from over 100 principals, superintendents, and community college, university, and business leaders about the personal impact of making hard decisions. The findings were incredibly consistent across all fields and leaders — making difficult decisions, most often about personnel or budget issues, can take a heavy emotional toll with which few are prepared to deal. The "agony of decision making" means leaders are continually confronting issues that are difficult to navigate. We also found that many leaders felt the need to display the right "corporate face," so they hid their emotions to appear strong and confident. But this took its toll as well. Here's how one community college president described his turmoil when confronted with budget and program cuts:

> For me, I was in a state of higher anxiety. I knew I had started a process that was now beyond my power to stop. I bore the responsibility but none of the control. I took long walks at night to try to unwind and sleep. I couldn't confide in anyone on campus, and I was too new to the state to have established a support network among the other community college presidents. I remember being gripped by my own fears: for faculty who would have to be released, for their families, for the college's community image, and in all honesty, for my own professional position. Could I, would I be made the scapegoat for this problem? (p. 41)

Another leader we spoke with described a similar emotional experience. She was adamant in arguing that leaders must be strong in periods of high anxiety. Recall that President George W. Bush and New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani received high marks after 9/11 for showing strength in the midst of one of the most horrifying acts in American history. The leader in our study described her feelings regarding a crisis situation she dealt with:

> In this situation, one must steel oneself, because you must act on behalf of others, making sure of their well being and safety. You cannot do this if you abdicate your leadership by indulging your emotions. If and when you decide to fall apart, you must do it someplace else, and later on. People need to know that whoever the leader is, he or she is operating from a position of strength. When they lose that confidence, where can they turn? So I think the leader must be steadfast, must be strong. (pp. 44-45)

Keeping emotions bottled up can have devastating health consequences. Every situation has its share of idiosyncrasies calling for specific responses, and some circumstances call for displays of strength. Emotions researcher Arlie Hochschild argued that emotional work is the effort individuals put into keeping their private feelings suppressed or expressed appropriately, while emotional labor relates to wearing the right "mask" given the context you work in.[8] Other experts suggest that this gets especially tedious when one has to express emotions that clash with inner feelings. It can lead to negative attitudes about work, emotional overload, burnout, physical ailments, or withdrawal.[9] We discovered that leaders of all organizations — schools, university departments, businesses, etc. — shared the common characteristic of struggling with making many decisions and then dealing with the onslaught of often blistering reactions to those decisions. They usually couldn't predict what those reactions might be, but even when they could, it was hard to be the one constantly scrutinized and criticized. One principal said his teachers always remind him that he shouldn't complain because he earns the "big bucks."

He lamented that he never realized how incredibly heavy those darn bucks would turn out to be. A superintendent complained about personal attacks every time he closed schools due to inclement weather — especially when the weather forecasters messed up and the bad snow storm never materialized or was

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worse than predicted. Parents blamed him when they had to miss work or if he left schools open and put children are risk. "Either way, I can't win with a contingent of the parents and teachers. I've been called an idiot so often that sometimes I start to believe it myself," he said.

What was especially humbling to the leaders in our study was the rude awakening in dealing with their most difficult or "high maintenance" employees. Stanford business professor Robert Sutton had a recent best-selling book titled, *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't*. His remedy was to cut these individuals loose, just let them go before they make the climate too toxic. But in public K-12 and higher education, with tenure, due process protection, and union support of employees, letting someone go is far easier said than done. We need to learn how to create civilized work cultures that involve these characters. In the book I co-wrote, we borrowed a concept from our church leader friends who describe those parishioners requiring special support as being the EGRs — those with *extra grace required*. Priests and ministers are expert at providing such extra grace, though they, of course, have a higher source of power to draw from. School and university leaders aren't so lucky. They can try to change such individuals, perhaps isolate them, or just make it known that certain behaviors are unacceptable. But it can be a daunting task. Note the tension in the words of one of our leaders describing an especially difficult individual:

> Time and time again, he has caused problems with students and other faculty members, and it is always someone else's fault. Then he files a grievance and threatens a lawsuit. It is unnerving and incredibly painful. I took out personal liability insurance to protect myself. My wife worries that he might become violent someday and thinks I should be cautious about meeting with him. It is like nothing I've ever experienced in my life. (p. 51)

Interestingly, we learned that dealing with difficult employees can be especially emotionally draining when the protagonist is a friend. All principals who are promoted from within a school are painfully reminded that they quickly move from being one of "us" to being one of "them" when they assume the corner office. But when a former close friend or colleague is the one who is most demanding or difficult, this can create an incredibly anxious time.

FINDING ORDER OUT OF CHAOS

So how do leaders cope? After analyzing over 100 stories we collected, we found that leaders employed three key strategies to deal with the emotional situations they confronted. The first we called *finding order out of chaos*. Leaders made it clear that many positives could be drawn from even the most emotion-laden situations they confronted. Open systems constantly adapt and reorganize to meet the needs of their environment, and that is exactly what leaders described to us. Even in the face of the most dramatic of emotional circumstances, these leaders learned something they could use in the future. They evolved. A businessman described this feeling as follows:

> At each level, I learned and I grew and I benefited. One of the lessons that I share with people all the time is that as a leader, don't be afraid to learn. Because you constantly will be faced with obstacles or situations that you have not faced before. You've got to deal with those. You are going to be facing people who don't believe in you, don't trust you, or for whatever reason are trying to tear you down. As long as you know you're making the best decisions you can make with the information you have and you're doing the best you can, you just keep doing it. Bring people together. Work with people because you are there because they put you there. (p. 69)

The self-reference we found among the leaders was remarkable. They examined what had transpired and drew lessons to improve their leadership. It helped them cope.

COMMUNICATION AND STRATEGIZING

The second means for coping with the emotional intensity of their job was the realization that c*ommunication and strategizing are keys*. The leaders all felt that open communication was healthy for the organ-

ization, and for themselves. One leader told us, "there was absolutely no reason at all that I had to keep this bottled inside of me" (p. 72). Many discussed the advantages of engaging as many employees as possible in working through situations. Indeed, many said that being open in communicating with colleagues was an ethical imperative. It was somewhat self-protective for leaders, who felt on their own in coming to decisions, and also brought larger numbers of people into the decision-making process. Several warned about having the grapevine spread the word, as that often leads to misinformation and very negative feelings across an organization. Some talked about using the media in the right circumstances to get information to large numbers of individuals. As one person explained about the media, "as they'll spin things any way they want to. . . you are better off working with them" (p. 74).

Open communication helps leaders get through difficult times and reduces their isolation at a time when finding any solace may be difficult. Open communication is both a form of support and damage control that serves an organization well, while also aiding leaders' own mental health.

FOLLOWING YOUR HEART

The final coping strategy we learned was what we referred to as *following your heart*. While doing the right thing isn't necessarily a remedy for dealing with emotionally tense situations, the leaders found some comfort in taking actions they intuitively felt were correct. Making tough decisions was never easy. But once they made the decision, they tried to never look back and second guess themselves. That, they said, can be devastating and very unfulfilling. Instead, the leaders said they had to let go of self-blame, move on, and, as already indicated, share information as appropriate with others in the organization. They also said they had to learn from the experience so they could grow. One dean described the experience:

> The whole affair was very hurtful, as I felt I was overly supportive of someone who didn't treat me with equal respect. I left the situation quite dismayed, but with a strong sense that I had done what was right for the college. . . in the end, I gathered a great deal of strength in the knowledge that I was doing what was right, and although it was okay to lend a colleague some help, the ultimate decision had to be related to the collective good. (p. 75)

MOVING FORWARD WITH A PLAN

Again and again, we heard that leaders should have a plan for dealing with emotions at work. Given the types of decisions that leaders make, we were told that leaders should expect some emotional fallout and that some simple planning could potentially derail the intensity of the reactions. As one university administrator said, "I can't go through anything like this again. I've got to figure out a better way to deal with these gut-wrenching situations." (p. 79)

Such a suggestion is certainly not revolutionary, as planning for success in any business or profession is vital. Think, for example, of the security planning your information technology staff must employ to protect your vital systems. Lapses in security can be devastating and very costly. Much the same is true with your emotional planning. Ignore it at your own risk!

Several lines of interesting research can prove helpful with such planning. Studies on emotional regulation point to the importance of being able to regulate your emotions in difficult situations.[10] Ideas for managing stress, such as keeping a diary, using humor to calm your nerves, or invoking mental imagery, can be employed as ways to settle you when emotions run amok.[11] The concept of *emotional competence* refers to the many skills that people can master to deal with their emotions. Goleman has been a leading advocate for the importance of mastering emotional competence abilities.[12] *Emotional awareness*, the ability to

understand your emotions and their impact on others, has been identified as a key skill related to occupational success.[13] The work of David Caruso and Peter Salovey[14] is especially useful here, as they describe the emotional blueprint for helping managers. Four steps are involved:

- Accurately identifying emotions;
- Using emotions to enhance thinking;
- Understanding the causes and progression of emotions; and
- Managing emotions to achieve intelligent outcomes.

In our research, we gleaned six important lessons to help leaders in planning to deal with inevitable job-related emotions.

1. **Accept that leadership involves emotional experiences.** Realize that these are inevitable.

2. **Prepare yourself.** Without some forethought, you likely will get caught off guard and potentially behave in ways that exacerbate problems. Think about your intuitive reaction to varying situations and understand how others may interpret those reactions. Your gut reaction may prove appropriate in some situations and totally wrong in others. Consider how you react to different situations and also how your colleagues or employees may react to your behavior.

3. **Take care of yourself.** There are dysfunctional ways to behave (e.g., drinking excessively, overeating) and healthy ways (e.g., exercising, talking things out, journaling). Find healthy strategies that work for you.

4. **Become emotionally mature.** Understand others' emotions, understand your own emotions, and learn how to regulate those emotions in constructive and appropriate ways. Without this sort of understanding and maturity, you will continually make decisions and take actions that cause problems.

5. **Understand your expressions.** People react to leaders. Learn that how you express your emotions makes a difference. Here again, not overreacting is probably a useful caution.

6. **Learn not to panic.** Sometimes, immediate responses are necessary. But in most instances, learning not to panic (remember the idea of not hitting the "send" button on an inflammatory e-mail response) and taking time to consider various options will pay dividends.

Finally, you can help yourself and promote your growth if you take time to develop a personal emotional plan. Think about how you react in various situations. Be honest with yourself. Set your goals for any particular set of circumstances and find the information you will need to make the best decision. Then develop the steps necessary to move forward. A little planning can go a long way in helping you to circumvent or stifle potentially dangerous emotional situations for you in your school or workplace.

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14. David R. Caruso and Peter Salovey, *The Emotionally Intelligent Manager: How to Develop and Use the Four Key Emotional Intelligence Skills of Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004). K