

Marshall Memo 171

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education

February 5, 2007

In This Issue:

1. Peter Senge and colleagues on four key leadership capabilities
2. A description of how authentic leaders develop
3. Writing for freedom
4. An English school's "best practices" for its highest-risk students
5. Keys to importing the best ideas to your school
6. Effective use of computer animations to teach science concepts
7. Which is more important, package delivery or a child's education?
8. Short items: (a) Arts education handbook online; (b) Molecular microscope images; (c) A podcast on Byzantine rulers

Quotes of the Week

"Words on paper confer a kind of immortality. Wouldn't all of us love to have a journal, a memoir, a letter, from those we have loved and lost? Shouldn't all of us leave a bit of that behind?"

Anna Quindlen (see item #3)

"We have a few stunning successes and lots of failures. But if we didn't have failures, we wouldn't be learning anything."

Marcia Linn, a UCLA professor working on computer animations (see item #6)

"Only when leaders come to see themselves as incomplete – as having both strengths and weaknesses – will they be able to make up for their missing skills by relying on others."

Deborah Ancona, Thomas Malone, Wanda Orlikowski, and Peter Senge (see item #1)

"Even the most talented leaders require the input and leadership of others, constructively solicited and creatively applied."

Deborah Ancona, Thomas Malone, Wanda Orlikowski, and Peter Senge (*ibid.*)

"Character is like a tree and reputation like its shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing."

Abraham Lincoln, quoted in "Reputation and Its Risks" by Robert Eccles, Scott Newquist, and Roland Schatz, *Harvard Business Review*, February 2007, p. 108

"No one can be authentic by trying to imitate someone else."

Bill George, Peter Sims, Andrew McLean, and Diana Mayer (see item #2)

1. Peter Senge and Colleagues on Four Key Leadership Capabilities

In this thought-provoking article in *Harvard Business Review*, a group of M.I.T. Sloan School professors (Peter Senge, Deborah Ancona, Thomas Malone, and Wanda Orlikowski) say it's time we let go of the myth of the perfect leader – “the flawless person at the top who's got it all figured out.” In fact, they continue, “the sooner leaders stop trying to be all things to all people, the better off their organizations will be.” Leaders who try to master every aspect of a complex organization, often out of fear of appearing incompetent, end up exhausting themselves and damage their enterprises, say Senge and his colleagues. “Only when leaders come to see themselves as incomplete – as having both strengths and weaknesses – will they be able to make up for their missing skills by relying on others.”

Based on their work with hundreds of business executives, the authors suggest that there are four key leadership capabilities – *sense-making*, *relating*, *visioning*, and *inventing*. The challenge for wise leaders, say the authors, is to perform well in the areas in which they excel, beef up *some* capabilities in which they are weak, and distribute leadership in areas where there are strengths elsewhere in the organization.

Here are their ideas in each of the four areas, followed by suggested self-assessment questions to see if this might be an area for outreach to others:

- *Sense-making* – *understanding the context in which your organization and its people operate and explaining it to others in simple terms*. Without this, there's no common view of reality to build on. Sense-making is like creating a map, which involves knowing what features are important and relating them to your goals. Key elements include:

- Getting data from multiple sources;
- Involving others in the “cartography” to check your perspective;
- Constantly asking, “What am I missing here?”
- Using early observations to run small experiments to test your conclusions;
- Remaining open to new possibilities: “Try not to describe the world in stereotypical ways, such as good guys and bad guys, victims and oppressors...”

Signs of weak sense-making: “You feel strongly that you are usually right and others are often wrong. You feel your views describe reality correctly, but others' views do not. You find you are often blindsided by changes in your organization... When things change, you typically feel resentful. (That's not the way it should be!)”

• *Relating – building relationships within and across organizations.* Without this, people work in isolation or, worse, strive toward different ends. The old “great leader” paradigm didn’t put much stock in human relations. This is why many leaders, say Senge and his colleagues, “attempt to foster trust, optimism, and consensus [and] reap anger, cynicism, and conflict instead. That’s because they have difficulty relating to others, especially those who don’t make sense of the world the way they do.” The key to better relationships is striking a balance between:

- Inquiring – Suspending judgment and listening to others with an open mind. It’s important for leaders to encourage people to voice their opinions, say what they care about, and explain how they interpret what’s going on.
- Advocating – Explaining your point of view without aggression or defensiveness, and explaining your thought process as well as your conclusions.

Another key element is staying connected with a network of colleagues who can help think through difficult problems and support the work as it unfolds. Self-assessment is important: “How well do you relate to others when receiving advice? When giving advice? When thinking through difficult problems? When asking for help?”

Signs of weak relating: “You blame others for failed projects. You feel others are constantly letting you down or failing to live up to your expectations. You find that many of your interactions at work are unpleasant, frustrating, or argumentative. You find many of the people you work with untrustworthy.”

• *Visioning – creating a compelling picture of the future.* “Fundamentally,” say the authors, “visioning gives people a sense of meaning in their work.” Without this, there’s no shared direction. Leaders need to reach down deep and ask, “What do I want to create?” It has to be something that inspires them, because their enthusiasm will motivate others. Some key points:

- If a leader senses that the vision isn’t getting through to people, turning up the volume is not the solution. It’s time to listen, probe, and seek what others find exciting and important, striving for a shared vision.
- Leaders shouldn’t feel that they have to come up with the whole implementation plan themselves. “If [the vision] is compelling and credible,” say Senge and his colleagues, “other people will discover all sorts of ways to make it real – ways you never could have imagined on your own.”
- Once the vision is clear, it’s important to use images, metaphors, and stories to describe the future.

The authors use South Africa in the 1990s as an example of visioning. In the country’s dark days, with a bloodbath seemingly inevitable, people joked that there were two options, one practical, the other miraculous. “The practical option was for everyone to pray for a band of angels to come down from heaven and fix things. The miraculous option was for people to talk to one another until they could find a way forward.” Leaders from all sides sat down with little hope of coming to a solution and imagined three outcomes, each represented by a metaphor:

Ostrich: a non-representative white government sticks its head in the sand, trying to avoid a settlement with the black majority; *Icarus*: a constitutionally unconstrained black government comes to power and crashed the economy with unsustainable public spending; and *Flamingo*: the government adopts a set of sustainable policies that put the country on a path of growth, democracy, and reconciliation (the image was a flock of beautiful birds all taking flight together). This third image was what ended up motivating the leaders of South Africa's warring factions to arrive at their remarkably successful course of action.

Signs of weak visioning: "You feel your work involves managing an endless series of crises. You feel like you're bouncing from pillar to post with no sense of larger purpose. You often wonder, 'Why are we doing this?' or 'Does it really matter?' You can't remember the last time you talked to your family or a friend with excitement about your work."

• *Inventing – developing new ways to achieve the dream*. Without this, the vision remains illusory. "Even the most compelling vision," write the authors, will lose its power if it floats, unconnected, above the everyday reality of organizational life." To make the vision real, people have to stop doing things the way they've been done – in other words, they have to invent new ways of working. The authors' suggestions:

- Don't assume that the way things have always been done is the best way to do them.
- Encourage creative ways of addressing new tasks.
- Experiment with different ways of grouping and linking people.
- Keep asking, "What other options are possible?"

Signs of weak inventing: "Your organization's vision seems abstract to you. You have difficulty relating your company's vision to what you are doing today. You notice dysfunctional gaps between your organization's aspirations and the way work is organized. You find that things tend to revert to business as usual."

Senge and his colleagues say that most leaders are strong in one or two of these areas, not more. It's crucial that leaders self-assess on what they're good at and find others in the organization who can pick up the ball on the other areas, both in delegation and in hiring. "Leaders who choose only people who mirror themselves are likely to find their organizations tilting in one direction," write the authors, "missing one or more essential capabilities needed to survive in a changing, complex world... It's the leader's responsibility to create an environment that lets people complement one another's strengths and offset one another's weaknesses."

It's time to end the myth of the superstar leader, conclude Senge and colleagues, "not only for the sake of frustrated leaders but also for the health of organizations. Even the most talented leaders require the input and leadership of others, constructively solicited and creatively applied."

"In Praise of the Incomplete Leader" by Deborah Ancona, Thomas Malone, Wanda Orlikowski, and Peter Senge in *Harvard Business Review*, February 2007 (Vol. 85, #2, p. 92-100), no e-link available

2. A Description of How Authentic Leaders Develop

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, a team of professors and former executives reports that more than 1,000 studies of leadership over the last half-century have failed to pin down a single formula for success. “Thank goodness,” say the authors. If there were a formula, everyone would try to copy it, with debilitating consequences. “No one can be authentic by trying to imitate someone else,” they write. “You can learn from others’ experiences, but there is no way you can be successful when you are trying to be like them. People trust you when you are genuine and authentic, not a replica of someone else.”

After conducting their own research on 125 leaders, the authors were also relieved to find that great leadership traits are not innate. They traced the following path to authentic, successful leadership in these successful men and women:

- *They learned from their own life story.* “The journey to authentic leadership,” write the authors, “begins with understanding the story of your life.” This includes the positive contributions of parents, teachers, athletic coaches, and mentors, as well as overcoming hardships and challenges.

- *They knew themselves.* Inauthentic leaders are so driven that they don’t make time for self-exploration, and denial was often the greatest barrier to self-awareness. After his second marriage fell apart, an executive bemoaned the fact that he had a “wife-selection problem.” His counselor gave him a different perspective: “The good news is you do not have a wife-selection problem; the bad news is you have a husband-behavior problem.” The feedback helped him change his ways.

- *They articulated their values.* This was more than just writing down a list of values and principles, but testing and solidifying them under fire.

- *They balanced extrinsic with intrinsic motivation.* Their desire for recognition and worldly goods was mixed with genuine enjoyment of their work.

- *They built a support team, including colleagues and family members.* “Those teams,” write the authors, “counsel them in times of uncertainty, help them in times of difficulty and celebrate with them in times of success... Authentic leaders find that their support teams provide affirmation, advice, perspective, and calls for course corrections when needed.”

- *They are the same person in different settings.* “Authentic leaders have a steady and confident presence,” write the authors. “They do not show up as one person one day and another person the next.” This is not easy, especially in times of stress and turmoil, but authentic leaders accomplish it by staying grounded, spending quality time with their families, getting physical exercise, engaging in spiritual practices, doing community service, and returning to the places where they grew up.

- *They empower others to lead.* “Authentic leaders recognize that leadership is not about their success or about getting loyal subordinates to follow them,” write the authors. The key is giving away power and getting team members join in organizational accomplishments.

“Discovering Your Authentic Leadership” by Bill George, Peter Sims, Andrew McLean, and Diana Mayer in *Harvard Business Review*, February 2007 (Vol. 85, #2, p. 129-138), no e-link available

3. Writing For Freedom

In this *Newsweek* column, Anna Quindlen describes the new movie, “Freedom Writers,” and the book on which it was based. It’s the story of Erin Gruwell, a young teacher struggling to connect with her students in a tough Los Angeles high school, and the breakthrough that occurs when she gives them marbled composition books and asks them to write about their lives:

“When I was younger, they would lock me up in the closet because they wanted to get high and beat up on each other.”

“The words ‘Eviction Notice’ stopped me dead in my tracks.”

“Sorry, diary, I was going to try not to do it tonight, but the little baggy of white powder is calling my name.”

This teacher, says Quindlen, “embraced a concept that has been lost in modern life: writing can make pain tolerable, confusion clearer and the self stronger.” Quindlen bemoans the fact that writing in school has become largely utilitarian, that writing is seen as the province of writers, that so much of our telephone discourse is evanescent, and that most of us have stopped writing letters.

“Think of all those people inside the World Trade Center saying good-bye by phone,” she says. “If only, in the blizzard of paper that followed the collapse of the buildings, a letter had fallen from the sky for every family member and friend, something to hold on to, something to read and reread. Something real. Words on paper confer a kind of immortality. Wouldn’t all of us love to have a journal, a memoir, a letter, from those we have loved and lost? Shouldn’t all of us leave a bit of that behind?”

Writing, says Quindlen, is also a way of talking to ourselves, a kind of therapy – which describes how Gruwell used it to put her students in touch with themselves and their dreams. “Growing up,” wrote one Latina girl, “I always assumed I would either drop out of school or get pregnant. So when Ms. G. started talking about college it was like a foreign language to me.” Writing those words down may have been the moment when she started talking that foreign language. In any case, she’s a college graduate now.

Gruwell had her students read *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank. One student resisted picking up the book at first, saying it was too alien, but after reading it, this student wrote, “At the end of the book, I was so mad that Anne died, because as she was dying, a part of me was dying with her.”

Anne Frank never imagined that her diary would be read by millions of people after her death in a Nazi concentration camp. “She wrote it,” says Quindlen, “for the same reason the kids who called themselves Freedom Writers wrote in those composition books: to make sense of themselves.”

“Write for Your Life” by Anna Quindlen in *Newsweek*, January 22, 2007 (p. 74), no free e-link available

4. An English School’s “Best Practices” With Its Highest-Risk Students

In this article in the (London) *Times Educational Supplement Magazine*, reporter Fran Abrams shares a surprising statistic: of all subgroups in the U.K., low-income white boys do the worst on national examinations. Abrams reports on one school whose exam results are much better than other schools serving poor populations: Middleton Technology School in Rochdale. “Much of what the school does is simply what any good school would do,” she reports, “but is it done every day, without fail.” Here are the practices that Abrams noticed on a visit to Middleton:

- Ensuring that all students in all lessons know the learning objectives – and whether they have attained them.
- Ensuring that there are enough positive male role models, both staff and student.
- Using assemblies to preach good behavior and challenge boys to strive for high achievement.
- Encouraging more boys to take part in traditionally “female” projects, e.g., music and drama productions.
- Being constantly vigilant that a macho, anti-school culture does not develop; this includes insisting that street culture is left at the school gate, keeping all students in uniform, forbidding shaved heads and bangs, and not allowing large groups to congregate during recess and other unstructured times.
- Identifying students whose behavior is causing concern and keeping them under close monitoring.
- Targeting peer leaders for special attention, praise, encouragement, and support from senior staff in hopes that they will set a good example for others. The school focuses on three categories of boys: (a) rebels, who may disrupt lessons and intimidate staff; (b) clowns, who can incite others to misbehave; and (c) stars – successful and popular boys who can help others.

“Rescuing the Lost Boys” by Fran Abrams in *The TES Magazine*, January 12, 2007 (p. 14-19), no e-link available

5. Keys to Importing the Best Ideas to Your School

In this *Education Week* article, Houston-based consultant Jackson Grayson, Jr. says that schools should use “benchmarking” the way business, health care, government, and the military do. The fact that the national educational agenda has shifted from process to results, he says, makes this even more vital. The article answers three questions:

- *What does he mean by benchmarking?* It’s a four-step process, says Grayson: (a) Finding best practices outside your own organization that really get results; (b) Figuring out how and why these practices work; (c) Transferring them to fit your situation; and (d) Implementing them on the ground.
- *Must best practices be based on scientific research?* Educators should not use impossibly high standards for determining what a best practice is, says Grayson. The gold

standard for educational research – control groups, randomized trials, and repeatable events – is nice but impossible in most settings. Grayson thinks we should gather as much evidence for promising practices as possible and not reject ideas because the research isn't perfect. "Other sectors are not nearly as squeamish over the use of 'best,'" he says. "They, too, want as much evidence as they can get that a practice works, but they accept that what is best now may not be best in the future and that best may be different for different users, depending on a lot of on-the-ground variables, like context, timing, resources, poverty levels, culture, size, and history." Most educators, he says, just want to know whether it works, why it's effective, and how it might work in their own school.

- *Who should be involved?* The best way to successfully import best practices, says Grayson, is to send teams of colleagues to other sites. A team is most likely to be able to spot helpful practices in other organizations, dig for the details, and figure out how to adapt and implement them "back home." Sending a team also helps empower people, set ambitious goals, and convince skeptics and blockers.

"Benchmarking: What It Is, How It Works, and Why Educators Desperately Need It" by Jackson Grayson, Jr. in *Education Week*, Jan. 31, 2007 (Vol. 25, #21, p. 44, 33), no e-link available

6. Effective Use of Computer Animations to Teach Science Concepts

Do computer animations help students learn science concepts better, asks this article in *Education Week*. You'd think that fancy animations would be a no-brainer for increasing students' motivation, making it easier for them to visualize structures that are too small to be seen by the human eye (DNA, for example), and giving students an intuitive feel for abstract concepts. But researchers have found that animations don't help if they are flashy, complicated, and move so quickly that students can't understand what's going on. "We have a few stunning successes and lots of failures," says Marcia Linn, a UCLA education professor who has been working in this area. "But if we didn't have failures, we wouldn't be learning anything."

So what works? Linn and other researchers have found several key characteristics that make some animations more effective than others:

- Keeping animations simple: pruning extraneous words and pictures;
- Including on-screen explanations that help direct students' attention, and putting the words close to what they are describing;
- Synchronizing the spoken narration so students see and hear at the same time;
- Having narration spoken in an informal, not formal, style;
- Giving students the ability to stop and replay an animation.

A study by Linn found that grade 6-12 students who viewed animations with these characteristics excelled in written tests that asked them to explain scientific ideas and link them to other concepts. The study also found that students who were shown animations did just as well as a control group on basic science knowledge.

But other factors were involved as well. Linn noted that when researchers gave students real-world problems – like choosing an energy-efficient car, interpreting global-warming claims, and judging effective cancer treatments – students were better able to learn deeply and transfer their knowledge. “I think the personally relevant problems are probably even more compelling than the animations,” she said.

A consortium of educators has created more than 200 interactive units that use computer animations to teach science concepts. The units can be downloaded for free at: <http://www.concord.org> (pull down the menu at the bottom and try “Molecular Workbench” and explore other parts of this website).

“Computer Animation Being Used To Bring Science Concepts to Life” by Debra Viadero in *Education Week*, Jan. 31, 2007 (Vol. 25, #21, p. 12-13), no e-link available

7. Which Is More Important, Package Delivery or A Child’s Education?

“From the moment we entrust a package to an overnight delivery service,” says this Edison Schools ad in the current *Education Week*, “sophisticated technology tracks its every move. We can go on line the next morning and watch its progress toward the final destination. If something goes wrong, we know in an instant – and can take immediate steps to address the problem.” But we don’t do the same to monitor the learning of most students, the ad continues. “Imagine how helpful it would be if all teachers could monitor student learning in real time – so they could respond to learning problems as they occur.” The technology for this kind of formative and interim assessment exists, says Edison, so why aren’t we using it more widely?

“Is Overnight Delivery More Important Than Our Children’s Education?”- an advertisement placed in *Education Week* (Jan. 31, 2007, Vol. 25, #21, p. 2) by Edison Schools

8. Short Items:

a. Arts education handbook online – The Insider’s Guide to Arts Education Planning is now available online at <http://www.artsed411.org/insiders-guide/intro.stm>. Created by the California Alliance for Arts Education for schools and districts, the guide offers field-tested best practices, new ideas, templates, and strategies for implementing effective arts programs in four key areas.

Spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, Feb. 2, 2007

b. Molecular microscope images – Try this website for an extraordinary variety of images from electron microscopes; you can adjust magnification and focus on images of honeybees, grasshoppers, dust mites, cockroaches, etc. Quite amazing!

<http://micro.magnet.fsu.edu/primer/java/electronmicroscopy/magnify1/index.html>

Spotted on the Concord Consortium website (see item #6 above).

c. A podcast on Byzantine rulers – In his *New York Times* column, Samuel Freedman tells the remarkable story of Lars Brownworth, a high-school teacher in Stony Brook, New York, who sends out a podcast on Byzantine kings that reaches 140,000 people. Brownworth's 12-part series routinely ranks among the top five educational podcasts on iTunes and is in the top 50 of all podcasts. To hear these recordings, go to:

http://www.anders.com/lectures/lars_brownworth/12_byzantine_rulers/

“History Teacher Becomes Podcast Celebrity With Tales of Byzantine Empire” by Samuel Freedman, *New York Times*, January 31, 2007 (p. B-9)

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/31/education/31education.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

© Copyright 2007 Kim Marshall

Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo,

please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 36 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 44 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the memo to subscribers every Monday (with occasional breaks; there are about 50 issues a year).

Subscriptions:

Individual subscriptions are \$50 for the school year. Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and information on paying by check or credit card.

Website:

If you go to <http://www.marshallmemo.com> you will find detailed information on:

- How to subscribe or renew
- Why the Marshall Memo?
- Publications read
- Article selection criteria
- Topics covered
- Headlines for all issues
- What readers say
- About Kim Marshall (including links to articles)
- A free sample issue

Marshall Memo subscribers have access to the Members' Area of the website, which has:

- The current issue (in PDF or Word format)
- All back issues (also in PDF or Word)
- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- How to change access e-mail or password

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs
Atlantic Monthly
Catalyst Chicago
CommonWealth Magazine
Daily EdNews
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
NASSP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine
Teachers College Record
TESOL Quarterly
Theory Into Practice
Times Educational Supplement, Magazine