




Commentary: The Role of Leadership in the Twenty-first Century

Myer Horowitz, Professor Emeritus: University of Alberta

ABSTRACT

Dr. Myer Horowitz, Professor Emeritus University of Alberta, shares his experiences as an educational leader and administrator in an interview videotaped in the fall of 2007 in Montreal. Horowitz traces his career path beginning in 1951 and then, using examples from his past, characterizes the essence of effective leadership today. He stresses the importance of establishing clear goals, accepting responsibility in helping people to implement goals, and the need to do this in a sensitive, caring, and holistic manner.

The first thing I'd like to ask you is describe the various leadership roles you have had over the years, and I know there've been many, and how are these the same and how are they different? (Link to videotaped interview by pressing on each question.)

 think my interest and my commitment goes right back to 1951 when I went to teachers' college at Macdonald School for Teachers and then in 1952 when I started teaching at Victoria School just a stone throw from here, no longer an elementary school but the building is still there. Formal leadership positions ... well, when I returned from Stanford to McGill, Macdonald and McGill, in 1963, I was asked to accept responsibility for the Student Teaching Program. I was responsible for the Graduate Program in Educational Administration. It gets a little more formal because in 1964, Wayne Hall, who was the Director of the Institute of Education one year before we became a faculty, invited me initially to be assistant to him and then by '65 I was an Assistant Dean of the Faculty, and I continued in that capacity until Barbara and I went to Alberta. So I filled the Assistant Dean role for those four years.

Alberta ... I went as Chair of Elementary Education. After a few years, I was invited to consider the position of the Dean, and I was Dean again for an all-too-short period. Nobody forced me to show interest in other administrative positions, it just sort of happened. And so after three years in each, three years as Chair of the Department, three years as Dean, I became Vice President Academic and filled that position for four years, and again the same procedure, I was invited to consider the Presidency.

Can you think of some of the similarities across those many positions?

The leadership position, the leader is effective if that person is helpful to other people who are more directly involved. I mean, the principal of the school ... if the principal is really effective then she or he helps the colleagues, inspires them, encourages them to be more effective with each other and with children. To relate to people in a sensitive, caring manner about important issues, it's not just about anything. We who are involved in education are involved in very important particular matters, so there has to be a balance. On the one hand, the structure: we have to be concerned as to what we want to achieve in schools for children, in universities for older students. In any setting at all, what do we want to achieve? But never to forget that it's people who bring about change, and consequently it's the leader's responsibility to help people to be comfortable so that they can be more effective.

In addition to the relational aspect, what are the most important characteristics, do you think, of a leader, a good leader?

I don't think there's a formula. I don't think there is one model. A leader has to be true to himself or herself. A leader has to be aware of the different sectors that play a part. And a leader has to be aware of that, a kind of political aspect to an administrator's job. There's the internal aspect but there's the external as well.

In all your years as a leader, what was your most rewarding moment and why was it so?

I'm rather pleased that there still is reference to Project MEET (McGill Elementary Education Teaching internship program). It goes back to 1967. While our model had some unique features, we borrowed. We not only borrowed from teacher education programs in other places, we borrowed from professional preparation programs with regard to other fields. Oh, there were problems, but it came together and we had one group of students who started in '67 and a second group of students in '68 and then it continued after I left. And for me the really big ... I don't underplay for a moment

the value that my former students tell me the program had for them, but I think they would understand that for me the major thrill is that there are still people who feel that there are connections between some of the developments that followed in the seventies, and perhaps to this day, and what we explored in the late sixties. So that was a real thrill.

Can you just elaborate a little bit on the structure and the focus of the MEET Program?

Project MEET — there was a very important school component. Each ... I'm not sure the label we used was the best one. That's one of the things. We called it internship. The students were in the schools Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of every week. They came out to Macdonald College on Monday and Friday. With you know, our attempt to build bridges between the university and the schools, there were university people who went into the schools, there were school people who came to the university. I came out of that feeling very, very good as to what we achieved in relation to the future teachers. I did not feel that positive about what we had achieved for the other half of the model, because we talked about a double model right from the start, and that is professional development, in-service education for people in the field. I think, you know, people who have followed have done a better job than we have done. I mean, I'm not about to request that the kudos which are offered from time to time should be eliminated. I accept them, but I also feel it's my responsibility to point out that we started off with a definite intention of having a continuing education professional development component for people in the field and while, without exception, they were awfully generous and kept saying that they were learning so much by being involved, I'm not sure we provided the kind of leadership we might have to the people in the field.

What would you consider the most important qualities of a school leader?

One cannot be an expert in everything, but for the school leader to be on top of the goals of education for children and their families. Not that he or she has to pretend to be the expert. There are a lot of other people to call upon. Very, very important to work with the teachers, to help the teachers to become even more effective, to recognize that it's very artificial to chop the needs of children and their families into discrete segments labeled education, recreation, health, and so I would argue that it's the responsibility of the principal to bring together other professionals in relation to the growth of the children and the welfare of their families. I would say the same thing, of course, about the leaders, the administrators in health units and recreation centres, and so on, but our focus is education.

In an ideal world, what kind or kinds of professional development should educators have to become school leaders?

The individual should have opportunities before he or she has full responsibility for a school in benefiting from mentors. That doesn't happen to too great an extent and I think that's very important. You know, to encourage people to be sensitive, to be caring, to really focus on the extent to which other people can be helped to be effective. I think that's the way an administrator is effective: by helping other people to be effective.

How do you think school leaders should be chosen?

I think the school board should look for people who exhibit leadership qualities in whatever they're doing, you know. In a Teachers' Association, for example, in accepting responsibility for a particular program in the school, and the school district should value not only indications of leadership behaviour in education, but should also value leadership behaviour in other sectors of society. And, of course, we should develop programs at universities, different kinds of programs, which would be useful for future principals and for existing principals.

How do you think school leaders can address issues around equity and social justice in their schools?

Very important matter. I don't have over simple solutions to very complex problems, but here, too, I'll just reflect for a minute or two on a matter that we ... that I felt we had to attend to at the University of Alberta. It became abundantly clear to a number of us, myself included, that a number of faculty were not being treated as fairly as other faculty, that almost without exception, the individuals in the group who in our view weren't treated properly, well as I say, almost without exception, they were women, was something we couldn't ignore. Needless to say, we involved some of the people in the process. It wasn't a top-down kind of thing. So that was an attempt to achieve a better level of fairness. Again, it wasn't just at the University of Alberta. I mean ... Institutions right across the country and beyond we began to take more seriously issues of sexual harassment. We began to take more seriously concerns of students. I mean you were involved in Deans of Students. So I think we have to be willing to look critically at our own behaviour and never to fool ourselves into thinking because we have dealt to the best of our ability with Problem A that there are no problems.

When you think about leadership in the twenty-first century, what advice would you give to leaders generally or school leaders specifically?

We're into the twenty-first century, but I've got to say that the things that are important to me and the matters which I think cry out for attention are little different from what they were when I started as a school teacher fifty-five years ago and prior to that as well. I mean, I don't want to be perceived as somebody who feels that nothing has changed. All kinds of things have changed. I mean in my view, others may disagree, the challenges are for us to be caring, to be sensitive, to be aware of what the goals are. The goals may change, but to be aware that there are goals and for a leader to accept responsibility of helping people to implement in relation to those goals. It's important, but it was ten years ago and fifty years ago as well. So that's what I mean when I say that I'm not sure that the twenty-first century cries out for a fundamentally different approach. The same caring approach in relation to twenty-first century life.

In retrospect, what are the most important lessons you have learned as a leader?

To look critically at what's going on, which, of course, includes my own behaviour. But not to be so overwhelmed with concerns and with guilt that I become immobile and ineffective. So, you know, a kind of balance, I think.



Myer Horowitz has enjoyed a distinguished 55-year career as a teacher-educator and administrator. He did his undergraduate work at the School of Teachers at Macdonald College at McGill University (Elementary Teaching Certificate, in 1952) and at Sir George Williams College (now Concordia University), where he obtained a B.A. in 1956. He received a Master's in Educational Administration from the University of Alberta in 1959 and a Doctorate in Elementary Education from Stanford University in 1965. In 1960, Horowitz became a professor in the Faculty of Education at McGill University—where he later established and directed Project MEET (1967), an alternative internship-type program for preparing elementary school teachers. In 1969, Horowitz moved on to the University of Alberta where he became Chair of the Department of Elementary Education. He later served as Dean of the Faculty of Education (1972–1975), Vice-President (Academic) (1975–1979) and President of the University (1979–1989). He was named Professor Emeritus of Education in 1989. Dr Horowitz is an active supporter of many community and charity organizations. He has received honorary doctorate degrees from eight Canadian universities. In 1990, he was appointed an Officer of the Order of Canada.