



Teaching as Leadership: ISM Research

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ISM conducted its [International Model Schools Project](#) from 1989 to 1995, and completed its "enhanced replication" of that project in May 2011 with the [ISM Student Experience Study](#). The former generated (among many other publications and ISM services) a book titled *Twenty Principles for Teaching Excellence*. The latter has, thus far, generated a number of *I&P* articles and three new instruments: [The Student Experience Profile II](#), the [Faculty Culture Profile II](#), and the [Characteristics of Professional Excellence II](#). In addition, ISM has published *Teaching Excellence II*, a workbook featuring the newer research while also incorporating the findings of the original project.

In a recent article on [faculty as leaders](#), ISM identified four actions that faculty leaders take—they assume control of their own growth and renewal, take control of their own curricula and assessment, use time to define and improve their work, and strive to be paid according to the merit of the work they do. This article takes another step further by examining the [qualities of leadership and the qualities of teaching](#) to see how the former might be enhanced.

Are good leadership and good teaching the same thing? As an administrator with faculty supervisory responsibilities, you may find it useful to consider one of the themes that developed from ISM's seminal study of student performance, satisfaction, and enthusiasm, i.e., that a consistently high level of those three student qualities was strongly associated with "leaderly" teacher behaviors.

Are good leadership and good teaching synonymous? The answer, then and now, is "not exactly." *But in those schools in which student and teacher performance/satisfaction levels remain consistently high, teaching approaches in general are strikingly consistent with recognized "good leadership" characteristics; conversely, in those schools in which student and teacher performance/satisfaction levels remain low or erratic, teaching approaches tend to depart dramatically from such characteristics.*

Leadership characteristics identified in that research include:

- knowledge and expertise that is readily perceived (by followers);
- a drive to stay current in relevant fields;
- repeatedly articulated (to followers) standards for performance and conduct;
- a "results" orientation;
- a "vision" of the process and the end product, and the ability and willingness to describe that vision to followers, often and well;
- a facility for infusing routine activities with meaning;
- a passion for preparation;
- flexibility, especially in design and evaluation;
- humaneness as perceived by the followers;
- a knack for confronting-without-demeaning;
- the ability to teach, not merely to assign, "responsibility"; and
- constant attention to reinforcement principles (i.e., feedback).

The late John W. Gardner, preeminent author in the field of leadership, noted that those in leadership too often think that their position on the organizational chart gives them a body of "followers." In fact, leaders' organizational positions only give them "subordinates." These subordinates

may or may not become followers, depending upon whether or not their designated leaders become actual leaders.¹

Gardner emphasized that leadership is not the same as status, power, or authority; it is a process of organizing, persuading, and exemplifying that ultimately results in creation or modification of followers' knowledge, behaviors, attitudes, and habits. Leaders bestow psychological rewards—positive and negative reinforcement—in such a way as to increase followers' collective sense of hope, confidence, and belief in the efficacy of their own efforts. Above all, leaders set conditions within their own organizations that foster a sense of continuous renewal.

How, then, do good teaching and good leadership differ? Strong teachers, it seems, do not tend to look *exactly* like strong leaders but practice "off-center leadership." At the heart of the issue is that teachers' primary focus is with young people who, generally speaking, are not yet as "formed" as are the adults whom other leaders lead. Therefore, much more attention must be paid by teachers to continuous positive or negative reinforcement than is the case with adult workers in other kinds of organizations. And that implies a level of **immersion** with the students that frequently sets teachers-as-leaders apart from leaders in other settings.

To accomplish this sort of immersion, strong teachers-as-leaders tend to be *supportively confrontational, continuously engaged, not self-conscious, and morally courageous on a moment-to-moment basis*. These characteristics are much less typical of leaders in nonschool contexts.

In ISM's Faculty Culture Profile II, an instrument generated by ISM's Student Experience Study 2010-11, many of the items (i.e., many of the findings from the study) echo strongly both the 12-item list shown near the start of this article, and, as well, the "off-center leadership" items just cited in the previous paragraph. The instrument's first two items are shown here by way of illustration.

1. I and my colleagues find ways to make it obvious to all students that we wish them success every day, both in school and outside of school.
2. I and my colleagues find ways to make it obvious to all students that we want them to become better, more virtuous people (in ways consistent with our school's stated purposes and projected outcomes for our graduates).

Note the **"immersion"** necessary to succeed with this "every day" with "all students."

For you, as an administrator with faculty supervisory responsibilities, major implications include these.

- Ensure that your teachers understand that, as "leaders of followers," they must develop the habit of making routinely clear to their students (and, in lower grades, to students' parents) that they are current regarding leading-edge research and theory.
- Ensure that your teachers understand the importance of envisioning and articulating for students and/or parents the "end product," the goals/standards toward which they are working, short- and long-term.
- Ensure that your teachers internalize the importance of being overprepared, both academically and in terms of daily readiness-to-teach, so that flexibility, adaptability, and individualization become feasible options in all classroom settings.
- Ensure that your teachers are willing to be "supportively confrontational," and that they know exactly how to enact this essential tactic—different in execution for each individual teacher—to challenge students in ways that will be seen by the students themselves as humane, considerate, and nonhostile.
- Develop a culture of delight within your faculty, i.e., a collective, mutually reinforcing demeanor that communicates genuine pleasure in, and honest enthusiasm for, the teaching endeavor, one that is coupled with the resiliency necessary to "find the meaning" after every disappointment.
- Use the Faculty Culture Profile II to take the "temperature" of your culture and provide insight into the extent to which teacher leadership qualities are evident.
- Use the Student Experience Profile II to assess the same thing through the eyes of the students; compare the results of the two instruments carefully.

Good teachers revel in the perceived successes of their students and devote themselves unstintingly to converting nonsuccess into success. Good teacher-supervisors such as you, yourself, do the same as leaders of teachers. You understand that your leadership task is to improve the teaching capacity of your faculty and thus the outcome in terms of student performance, enthusiasm, and satisfaction. Thus you revel in the success of your teachers, and continuously search for means of cross-pollination, teacher-to-teacher, as the most practical way to build a collective sense of career-long professional growth and development without which few individual teachers can sustain themselves as leaders of students.

¹ For more on Gardner's insights, see his book *On Leadership* (New York: Free Press, 1993).