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## **No Man Is An Island**

*Administrators can learn valuable lessons by reading classic business books*

Robert Gibson

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. ... Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." -- *John Donne, Meditation XVII*

Many colleges of education have established doctoral programs in educational administration and leadership, where public school administrators study leadership theory, organizational change, and conflict resolution.

You might be surprised that the textbooks in these programs often have little to do with education. Instead, future superintendents and other school leaders study examples from business, military history, or political history, translating principles that work in other domains to the challenges every district faces.

The following scenario, though hypothetical, reflects a fairly common situation that principals face. It also illustrates how reading seminal books on business and military theory can give school leaders an advantage in dealing with day-to-day management issues.

### **The bell curve**

Southville High School lacked leadership, according to the school district's superintendent and board. So when Southville's principal retired, the board hired a leader with a "take charge" reputation: John Wilson, an assistant principal at a nearby district.

The superintendent and the board encouraged Wilson to "regain control of the school" and assured him that they would support him. By the end of his first week on the job, Wilson sensed that the board's assessment of the situation had been correct: Many of the teachers were less than enthusiastic about the school or their jobs. Several senior teachers, including the district's union representative, treated his suggestions and questions with outright disdain.

The new principal wanted to give his faculty the benefit of doubt. He waited one month, and then suggested that he and the teachers meet as a group after hours to brainstorm ways to improve the school. But when Wilson proposed the idea, a group of five teachers balked, saying that their contract required them to be in the building only until 2:45 p.m.

Wilson had noticed that members of the Gang of Five (his private nickname for them) often left the building as soon as the last bus pulled away from the curb at 2:35 p.m. each day. By 3 p.m., only about half the faculty remained in the building, and by 3:15 p.m., very few teachers remained.

He considered the effects of this exodus. Gang of Five members loved to cite their contract as a defense against their actions, but in this case, they were clearly violating it by leaving before 2:45 p.m. The senior teachers' behavior clearly was influencing the others. The following Monday, the entire faculty found this memo in their boxes:

"According to the faculty contract, members of the faculty and staff must remain in the building until 2:45 p.m. To remind the faculty of this requirement, I have asked the custodian to program the bell to ring at 2:45 each day. Please do not depart the building before the bell rings at 2:45 p.m."

By lunchtime that day, the superintendent and several board members had received complaints about the bell, but they had asked Wilson to clean up the school, and his new policy was an aggressive attempt to do just that.

On Tuesday afternoon at 2:35 p.m., Wilson noticed Gang of Five members standing in the lobby with their coats on. The minute the bell rang at 2:45, they marched out the door. By the end of the week, several more teachers were following suit, milling in the lobby until the bell rang. More important, Wilson noticed, the teachers who previously had worked past 3 p.m. had begun to leave promptly at 2:45, too, although they waited until the Gang of Five had left the parking lot. By 2:55, the building was largely deserted. Even the most junior teachers -- many of those who had previously stayed until 4 or 5 o'clock -- were gone.

### **Discrete success; collective failure**

On several levels, Wilson's 2:45 bell memo was a success:

On the literal level, it forced the teachers to obey the union contract.

On a tactical level, it proved that the principal, not the Gang of Five, made policy decisions at Southville High.

On an operational level, the action showed all other faculty that Wilson would confront the Gang of Five's negative behaviors head-on.

And on a strategic level, it confirmed in the school board members' minds their own hiring wisdom.

But in terms of consequences, the 2:45 bell edict hurt the school far more than it helped. Rather than compel the teachers to stay in the building to work on lesson plans or collaborate with their colleagues, the bell rule caused them to leave the building earlier, not later. In the long run, Southville's students suffered because of the 2:45 bell.

### **Bureaucracy, not discipline**

Wilson intended to make Southville a great school, just like the companies author Jim Collins describes in his book, *Good to Great*. To reach that goal, he tried to instantly create one of *Good to Great's* key concepts: installing a culture of discipline among the Southville faculty. But according to the Gang of Five and the colleagues they influenced, the 2:45 bell was the symbol of tyranny, not greatness, and Wilson was the importer of that tyranny.

Had Wilson studied *Good to Great*, he would have realized that the 2:45 bell created not discipline but a new layer of bureaucracy. Collins argues that bureaucracy is a poor response to the lack of discipline, and worse yet, it stifles innovation. That's why some teachers began to leave early: They were insulted by the bell, particularly since it interfered with the professional work they had been doing without supervision before Wilson made the change.

As Collins explains, bureaucracy “compensate[s] for incompetence and lack of discipline -- a problem that largely goes away if you have the right people in the first place.”

Rather than insult the professional ethic of the majority of his faculty, Wilson should have worked to counsel or remove the poor performers. Worse still, his attempt to marginalize the Gang of Five valorized the group in the minds of many faculty members, which fanned the flame of discontent in the building. It also encouraged an “us-versus-them” mentality, especially among teachers who had previously been neutral about Wilson.

Nearly every leadership or change management book trumpets the value of flexible employees, yet Wilson failed to train his faculty to embrace flexibility. As business consultant William Pasmore explains in his book, *Creating Strategic Change*, “If all people understand is how to do what they have always done before, their flexibility is limited.” In the Southville case, a few poor performers stubbornly intended to do what they had done before. Rather than train those few, Wilson bullied everyone. It didn’t work.

### **Principles Wilson might have considered**

Wilson might also have learned from the example of Abraham Lincoln during the American Civil War -- an example of change management in its most severe form. In his book, *Lincoln on Leadership*, Donald Phillips recommends giving key subordinates a three- to five-month grace period during which they can change their behavior and perform adequately.

If those subordinates do not improve, take action. In Lincoln’s case, he quickly replaced Generals McClelland and Hooker because they failed to take fight aggressively, a key part of Lincoln’s vision. In Wilson’s case, he granted the grace period, but he failed to target only the Gang of Five. Instead, he punished everyone.

Unfortunately for Wilson, not many of us would accept being punished for what our colleagues fail to do. Predictably, the faculty rebelled, in large part because Wilson failed to understand a guiding principle from The Arbinger Institute’s publication, *Leadership and Self-Deception: Getting Out of the Box*: “Leaders fail [when] they provoke others to resist them.”

Punishing the teachers unfairly was an effective way to provoke resistance, and giving them an auditory reminder to resist was the perfect way to sustain the revolution. In fact, it created a metaphor for the resistance.

As Jean Egmon explains in her 2005 article “Framing Reframing” (published by the Center for Learning and Organizational Change, Northwestern University), framing is a socio-cultural process of knowledge creation. Once you see or hear the symbol or metaphor the first time and understand what it’s supposed to mean to you, you react in a similar fashion every time you see or hear it. Wilson intended the 2:45 bell as a shot across the bow of the faculty, particularly the Gang of Five, thinking it would compel them to obey. Instead it became a daily call to arms for the resistance that it provoked.

Had Wilson “framed” the bell in honest terms by explaining to the faculty his true feelings about their leaving early, the faculty might have accepted the change, which would have signaled that they also accepted his overall vision for the school community and the strategy he had for achieving it.

Predictably, the bell tolled for our fictional principal. The school board eventually caved in to growing community pressure to remove him. Ironically, the Gang of Five was more effective at “framing” Wilson’s actions as wrong-headed than Wilson was at convincing the board, the superintendent, and the community that the Gang of Five were underachievers. He eventually resigned his position.

By effectively managing change and being absolutely honest about his intentions, an effective leader can turn a desert island into a paradise for learning. But by ignoring the effects of change, he risks finding himself like Wilson: rejected by the learning community he hoped to conquer.

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