

The Seduction of the Leader: The Superintendent's Dilemma

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The term “seduction of the leader” was introduced to me more than 25 years ago by my colleague Rod Napier. The term describes an pernicious leadership dynamic that is played out in school districts across the country.

This “seduction” occurs when a superintendent and other senior leaders (e.g., principals, associate superintendents) don't receive honest and thoughtful feedback about the impact of their leadership style or ideas. In a previous article [Advice for Superintendents: A Consultant Perspective](#), I discussed this dynamic briefly, this article will attempt to unpack the complexity and power of this dynamic and provide some advice on how to avoid its negative impact.

Followers often have real difficulty speaking truth to power, for a wide variety of reasons. They may lack either the courage or the skill to approach a superintendent with a negative or contradictory message. They may have excessive respect for the unique role of the superintendent as the representative of the school district and all that entails. The superintendent might be a very friendly and kind person and people are reluctant to upset such a “nice guy/gal” The superintendent may not really be open to differing opinions or the ideas of others—and everyone knows it. In the past, there may have been negative consequences (*e.g., physical transfers to a difficult school, careers damaged, limited access to senior leadership*) when someone was honest and direct with a superintendent. This creates culture of avoidance and reluctance among those who should be providing honest feedback and ideas. This leaves the superintendent ill informed and isolated. The problem is, they don't know this.

Three examples will help unpack the seduction dynamic.

A year ago, I met with a new superintendent and her informal “kitchen cabinet,” although she also had an official senior cabinet, it was clear these informal advisors were the ones who helped the new superintendent develop ideas, shape policy, and make decisions.

In the initial stages of this superintendent's tenure, I was asked for my advice regarding strategic planning in her district. We met to discuss her ideas and aspirations for a district wide, collaborative planning process. I have deep experience with strategic planning and thought I could add real value to the conversation. The superintendent had strong views about how strategic planning should be conducted. This was a little surprising because she had no real experience with planning, but that did not stop her. Anytime I offered a different opinion, the kitchen cabinet members reacted as if I were daft and didn't know what I was talking about. They attacked my rationale, questioned my experience with “*this type of school district.*” Any ideas that were contrary to what the superintendent wanted were dismissed immediately by the members. This was a strange experience for me personally, but I realized that she was being “seduced” by sycophants. Instead of entertaining contrary and different ideas, the cabinet felt that they were there to support and protect the superintendent any way they could. Unfortunately, this left her with her strong opinions, albeit uninformed ones.



With another superintendent, the seduction took on a different form. This experienced and successful superintendent inherited a district that has been rolling slowly downhill for a decade. The faculty is aging rapidly, there are tough union issues to resolve, student achievement is mediocre, the district is unfocused and charter schools are blooming everywhere. The district needs vitality, clarity, and focus. Tough decisions need to be made. The incoming superintendent can contribute mightily in many ways. She has passion, energy, vision, and great ideas. She is known as an action orientated leader who gets results and is able to collaborate with others effectively. Unfortunately, district stakeholders had a long list of demands for the new superintendent.

They want her to cure the pervasive complacency that has been around for a decade, dramatically improve state test scores, bring focus, and hope to the district, rebuild the academic quality of the faculty as quickly as possible, and, oh by the way raise a million dollars for a special scholarship program for students. This superintendent has been captured by the unrealistic expectations of her followers and has convinced herself she can pull everything off. She puts in 15-hour days, six days a week, as she tries to push the district forward with her aspiration, perspiration, and intelligence. She can't do all these important things by herself. This dedicated and energetic individual will become exhausted over time, and her family life will suffer. Who will tell this well-respected, hard-working, engaging leader that he needs to slow down, create a sense of shared responsibility and ownership at the cabinet level, and strongly manage the expectations of district stakeholders - especially when hope is so bright, enthusiasm is growing, and people are beginning to donate to the scholarship fund?

My last example comes from a large urban district where a brilliant individual an "expert" on public education has become the superintendent. and is beginning to experience some challenges because of his leadership style. He just doesn't know it yet. Everyone acknowledges that this individual is very smart and talented. Unfortunately, he feels the need to constantly remind people just how brilliant he is. He sucks the air out of every room he is in, moving to the center of conversations seeking attention for himself. He acts as if he is the only person with any ideas, and he comes across as self-centered and arrogant. Most importantly, he never listens to others. Rarely asks questions, but has all the answers.

The impact of this leadership style is beginning to show itself. His principals, teachers and staff are growing disinterested in what he has to say. People mumble and whisper about him in meetings. Others roll their eyes at each other to communicate "*here he goes again.*" Attendance at community meetings is dwindling and district town hall meetings are sparsely populated by staff and teachers.

He recently requested a forum with the city Chamber of Commerce, and it was respectfully declined due to scheduling difficulties. Union negotiations are coming and the tone and tenor of these beginning conversations feel contentious. Teachers and staff feel disrespected by his lack of awareness, inclusion and inability to authentically listen to their ideas. The board feels trapped, because they unanimously selected him, and don't want to look bad by getting rid of him, besides, he has three years left on his contract. How does one tell this arrogant and brilliant individual that he needs to dramatically change his leadership style if he is going to be successful at leading the district. Who delivers this message?

How to Avoid "Seduction of the Leader"

The following advice has been gleaned from working intensively with more than twenty superintendents over the past 25 years. Many of them might be difficult - even challenging to implement and courageous to do - but they are worth the effort.

If you're not getting honest feedback, you're in trouble

The first sign you may be seduced is that you do not receive any contrary opinions about your ideas and proposals. Nobody is ever that brilliant. The superintendent must be proactive in encouraging a climate of honesty, openness, and candor, especially

at the cabinet level , where important decisions need to be made. If your principals and cabinet members aren't pushing back on your ideas, sharing different perspectives, and asking the tough questions, you are ill-served and under-informed.

The cabinet, at the very least, should be the place for robust discussion and debate about district issues that matter. This goes beyond the collegial *"Does anyone have any questions?"* About an idea or a proposal. This kind of soft question often produces silence or some lame response. The superintendent needs to be assertive and ask, *"This is my best current thinking about this subject. Help me think out loud about why it might not work."* or *"What about this proposal makes sense to you and what doesn't."* or *"What don't you like or appreciate about the ideas I am presenting."* It is important to wait patiently for some real answers.

Build a culture of assessment and honest evaluation

Periodically a superintendent should anonymously evaluate the effectiveness of their cabinet meetings. Everyone on the senior cabinet has opinions about their meetings. It is essential to create a vehicle to bring those ideas into full view. An anonymous questionnaire that asks five simple questions can give you all the information you need to continue to improve the value of your cabinet meetings. These questions might be:

1. How effective are our meetings? (on a scale of 1 to 10)
2. How involved do you feel in our meetings? (on a scale of 1-10)
3. What is currently working well in our meetings?
4. What needs to change in order for our meetings to be even more effective?
5. What advice or feedback do you have for me that would enhance my effectiveness in the meetings?

Capture the feedback and communicate it to the senior team as soon as possible. Then, actually use the information to improve your meetings in the future. This kind of transparency is rare in most school districts, and it conveys a learning attitude on the part of the senior leadership. It will also improve the quality of your district meetings, which can often seem endless and sometimes a waste of time.

Use a 360-degree feedback process for yourself and your senior team

The 360-degree feedback procedure involves each leader soliciting anonymous feedback from multiple stakeholders about the leader's strengths and areas of needed feedback. This takes real courage, but it can be one of the most compelling leadership experiences you will ever have. There are dozens of excellent books and articles about the 360-degree feedback process and how to conduct it in the most constructive manner possible. It will communicate to institutional stakeholders that the superintendent and other senior leaders are open to the feedback of others and are on a learning journey as leaders. This is a powerful message to convey. The information generated can help build a senior team in positive ways as individuals learn how others see them, seek the support and advice of other senior team members, and learn together how to lead the district.

A word of caution: Never conduct a 360-degree feedback process on just yourself. Doing so might convey unintended messages to some stakeholders, leading them to assume you are in trouble. The procedure is best done as part of an ongoing learning process for a cabinet or senior team.

Obtain Feedback By Conducting a “Leadership Review”

One of the most powerful and effective ways senior leaders can avoid seduction is by soliciting anonymous feedback from relevant stakeholders and subordinates about their leadership effectiveness. The human resources department can help organize and coordinate this effort to ensure anonymity. A short survey could go out to 20 to 30 selected individuals that would ask the following questions:

1. What have I done in the last year to improve the overall morale in the district ?(or division/department?)
2. What is one piece of advice you can give me that would further enhance my leadership effectiveness?
3. What are three things I do well as the leader of this district (division /department)
4. What is one thing I really need to improve upon as a leader?
5. What is one thing I can do to ensure the district (division/department) continues to improve?

The answers to these five questions will provide the superintendent and other senior leaders with critical and practical information leaders rarely receive. It is important that you communicate back to the people who completed the anonymous survey that you appreciate the time and attention they invested. In broad strokes let people know the essential messages/ lessons you received from the survey information. This should be done in a face-to-face meeting. For example:

1. I learned that I need to be more visible to people throughout the district and attend more events, especially the smaller ones.
2. People would like to have quarterly town hall meetings to get everyone on the same page, ask questions and continue to build a sense of community.
3. The weekly blog I started to use this year seems to be working well. I need some advice on how to make it more streamlined.
4. Many people see me as hardworking, fair, trustworthy and decisive. I appreciate this a great deal.
5. I also received feedback that I need to be a better listener. I have been working on this one for a while, but want to continue to be a better listener.
6. The principals feel that they have enough good information to do their jobs well and that this is a big change from the past. I am glad they feel this way. I will continue to share relevant information often.

When we have worked with a superintendent/senior leader willing to undertake this process like this, several things were accomplished. District stakeholders, both internal and external ones respected the courage it takes to conduct a leadership audit. It communicated to followers that the leader is open to the ideas and feedback of others. It let followers know that their opinions and advice are valued by the leader. Obviously the key to the leadership audit is to do something meaningful and visible with the information. You cannot respond to everyone’s advice but you can respond to the handful of key themes that emerge in a process like this. If people believe their feedback truly informs your thinking and actions, they will continue to provide it and you will be a well-informed leader.

Meet with staff and faculty periodically

Superintendents need to meaningfully interact with their staff and teachers at least monthly. Host an informal breakfast or lunch meeting with five to seven members to discuss district issues, teacher concerns, school culture, and the “word on the street.” The key is to keep the groups meetings small, because it encourages conversation. Be transparent when selecting the invited staff and teachers and make sure different departments and schools are represented. Make sure that the informal leaders who have huge peer influence are also invited.

Frame the discussion around several themes: (1) What is currently working well in the district (e.g., particular school, program, division), (2) What needs improvement and my attention as the superintendent? (3) What should I be aware of, that will enable me to lead the district effectively?

The conversation during the meeting needs to be balanced, or it can quickly devolve into a complaint session. These discussions will give you ongoing feedback about district life. Be sure to include a curmudgeon or two in these conversations; they often are quite gifted at speaking truth to power and usually are not hard to find .

An added benefit to these conversations is that participants will tell others about these meetings. The rumor mill that exists in most districts will be robust with positive messages about your open leadership. This is good.

Seek out different thinkers - especially those with a negative edge

Individuals who are known to be critics are often ignored because of their predictable negativity and sometimes prickly personalities. They often have the gift of only looking at what’s not working. It isn’t that the glass is half empty or half full. There isn’t even a glass. The psychological bind leaders experience with these people is that they are often right and might be the only people willing to speak truth to power. Their information can be helpful, even strategic, but it often comes with a bite as they deliver it. Seek them out anyway. It usually is worth the pain and aggravation.

One note of caution in this regard. Try to avoid those with a destructive bent. Being a critic is one thing but seeking to inflict damage or destroy the organization is another. In seeking out the views of the curmudgeons, ensure that the individuals you solicit actually care about the institution.

Remember that visibility and availability are essential

The superintendent and other senior leaders must be disciplined in their efforts to listen to multiple perspectives from multiple layers throughout the district.. They can only do this if they are visible to others and available to them. Staying trapped in your office doesn’t help you find the voices that need to be heard. Venture out across the district and make sure people see you. This creates the opportunity for connection and conversation.

I had one superintendent who spent at least one day a week visiting her schools. She made sure that she blocked out the time in her calendar and was diligent in adhering to this commitment. She could meaningfully do 3 visits in a day and not make it feel like a political event or a fast paced “tour.” She would talk with students , staff and teachers, and most importantly, she listened and took notes. She always followed through on any commitments she made during her conversations. People really appreciated her visits and over time they became rich sources of conversation and information. People found her approachable

and honest and told her things she would never had access to, if she wasn't present and available on a regular basis

Concluding Thoughts

Seduction of the leader exists in most districts and has little to do with people's honesty and integrity. We believe most people want to be able to have open discussions and debate, push back on their leader's ideas, provide contrary and supporting information and help influence decision making. There are underlying forces that support this seduction dynamic. Senior leaders must be diligent in recognizing this dilemma and conscientious about implementing practices and protocols to neutralize its insidious power.