

LEADING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES
MASA Spring Conference, March 20, 2009 8:15 am

Introduction:

Story: When I was growing up on a Southern Minnesota farm, I was generally a happy, spirited lad **CLICK** ho liked to whistle.

When I was in mid-adolescence, I apparently had a “blue period”.

I recall my mother entering the “lean to” that was attached to the back of our barn. I was working on some project, and she surprised me by saying,

“Don, you seem to have lost your whistle. We miss it! We need your whistle!”

Assignment: When the MASA leadership asked me to give the keynote this morning, the invitation included this request: *“Speak to us of hope. Help us persevere.”*

- In troubling times, like these in 2009, it is difficult to “keep our whistle?”
- It seems to me that most of life is about two things:

CLICK

Mope..... orCope and Hope

CLICK

My first point this morning is this:

POINT #1: Effective leaders combine (coping and hoping) – AND PERSEVERE IN BOTH.

1.1 School leaders consciously choose this high road. When absent, those around us say to one another, if not directly to us, *“We miss it! We need it!”*

1.2 Let me flesh out important connections:

CLICK

Mope.....or.....Cope and Hope

CLICK

Hang on.....or.....Manage and Lead

CLICK

Jim Collins in his recent book about leadership puts it this way; he doesn’t even dignify “status quo”:

CLICK

~~Status quo.....~~ **Good...to...Great**

1.3 The last time I addressed this MASA Assembly I knew all your faces and most of your names. Now I need a lengthy introduction. Thank you, Duane Bourgeson for your thorough and flattering introduction.

1.4 I still go to many Minnetonka High School sporting events. Like you, I love the excitement of students and fans and the competition, but few people recognize me, though we all live in the same community.

2.0 Thus, my second point this morning is this: **CLICK** **POINT #2: “TREASURE LEADERSHIP on stage center.”**

2.1 It does not last forever.

2.2 This center stage position we hold is four things:

- **A trust**....we are carefully vetted before being hired.
- **A privilege**.... This honor to lead a school system is extended to relatively few people.
- **An opportunity**... an opportunity to make a positive difference....This is a **most cherished wish** of human beings.
- **A responsibility**... not mope, but cope and hope, manage and lead.

Story: When I was ten years old, World War II had just ended, and I took note that many Dutch people in Hollandale, Minnesota, were taking a trip back to the Netherlands.

- When I heard no such plans from my Dutch Grandparents, I asked, “*Why are you not going to your homeland?*”
- My Grandfather looked me in the eye and said sternly, “*America is now my homeland.*”
- Then he softened his voice and said, “*Here is where you can go to good schools, work hard, get ahead, and make a positive difference in this world.*”

2.3 Everyone here has been given this most precious gift = an opportunity to serve, to make a difference in this world!

2.3.1 Each of us in this room has a long resume’ – an experience ladder with many steps already climbed.

2.3.2 We hold state licenses -- proof of knowledge and skills.

2.3.2 We have contracts -- a two way promise and commitment borne of head and heart.

2.3.3 We are on stage center – right smack in the middle of the action.

1.2.4 We are community leaders -- changers of destiny and creators of a legacy.

2.4 We are the chosen few, who give life to these famous words: “*I touch the future; I teach.*”

- You may recall these words were spoken at a press conference by the science teacher, Christine McAuliffe, who died shortly thereafter in the tragic Challenger accident on the way to the moon.
- All of us started out as teachers and we remain teachers in every aspect of our job as school leaders.

3.0 **CLICK** Point #3: School leadership is “TEACHING” in capital letters.

3.1 Every aspect of our being and doing as a school leader teaches.

- How we dress. How we walk.
- Where we park.
- How and what we speak
- To whom we speak.
- What we write.
- Where we go, or elect not to go, and,
- Let me add pointedly, **with whom we foster a relationship or who we decide to let drop out of the loop.**

3.2 Later this morning we will be urged to keep legislators within our loop. This is not always easy, pretty, or filled with immediate rewards.

3.3 **Story:**

- I remember one senator in the large meeting room in the basement of the Capitol. When I finished testifying before the education committee....
- He said, “*You, you, you superintendent from Edina, or wherever you are from...*”, and this was the high point of his response to my testimony.

Story: Once, I was invited to join a small delegation of superintendents to visit Governor Quie in the midst of a major state budget crisis.

- I liked Governor Quie, and still do.
- But, when we spoke of salary increases for teacher and other staff members in a time of very 20% inflation, he responded perhaps out of conviction but probably more out of frustration:

“That is like pouring money down a black hole.”

Story: Minnetonka had the first teacher strike in Minnesota for a suburban school district. The teachers and Board were at each others throats. Picket lines surrounded our administrative office building and every school building entrance.

- I was trying my best to find a bridge in negotiations.
- In the middle of it all, Governor Arnie Carlson invited our school board and me to the Governor's Mansion. This was big news!
- I had no idea what to expect, but was hopeful since he was a *moderate* Republican.
- Well, he advised the School Board, "*Do not budge an inch, "stick it" to the union.*" His actual language was a bit more salty.
- I left the Governor's Mansion distraught, but the Governor must be part of our loop as educational leaders, like it or not.

3.4 School leaders exhibit courage to hear hard things without giving up.

3.6 Managing and leading means figuring out how best deal with the perceptions on the other side of the table and understand the value of incremental change.

- **Not mope, but COPE and HOPE!**

3.3 We draw upon and use everything within our grasp: positional power, political savvy, and a positive personality.

3.2.1 And what is the most important part of our high profile? Our face! Our demeanor!

Story: Dr. Barbara Devlin, who retired last year from the superintendency in Richfield School District, worked for many years as the Personnel Director in Minnetonka.

- At one point in our history together, the state rescinded promised state aid, we lost an operating levy, and an arbiter sided with the teachers in a large salary package dispute.
- It was a perfect storm; and our district moved this close () to statutory operating debt.
- The School Board wrestled with the obligatory budget cuts from 7:00 pm to 1:00 pm in front of a large auditorium. Every seat was filled.
 - We ended up cutting 22% of the teaching staff, 50% of the custodians, closed one of our two middle schools, moved half of our K-8 students to different schools, moved all of our 9th graders into high school, and then, due to overcrowding put the high school on overlapping double shifts.
- The next morning, before the schools opened, every administrator in the district gathered for an emergency Administrative Council meeting.
- I don't remember what I said, but Barbara Devlin told me years later,

- “Your face reflected a calm, confident bearing, and
- *I knew then we would survive, strive, and start a new era in District 276 education.”*

Mope, on one hand, or **COPE** and **HOPE**, on the other hand.

To manage and lead out of HOPE, not fear, is our calling.

3.2 So where do we spend our precious energies?

4.0

CLICK

Point #4: Effective school leaders operate out of a THOUSAND GUISES.

- Sometimes managing and leading means just being there, a presence.
- Sometimes it entails listening, attentively, even when someone is “ragging” on our ear.
- Sometimes holding a hand or giving a hug, writing a note, or making a timely phone call.
- Often it means laying out a new, realistic vision, however big or small, and opening the door for participation in problem solving.
- Frequently, it means waiting...waiting...waiting, until the best time to make a move.
- As you well know, leaders make tough decisions, clearing the way for action, and express a clarion call for personal and community responsibility.
- Hard as it is, it can also require changing faces and modifying organizational structure.
- Last, and most importantly for me... Effective leaders include the celebration of successes, however little or big -- with liberal praise to all who make them happened.
 - **In so doing, we experience life in its fullest measure. Be thankful for it!**
 - **When I came home from work, Mary Anne soon learned NOT to ask me,**

“What happened in school today?”

Rather, her first question changed to: *“Tell me one good thing that happened to you today?”*

- I began to look for that one good thing each day...and sometimes had to look hard for my answer.
- To persevere, we must seek out the bright spots along the road, wherever they can be found.

And what is the payoff?

5.0 **CLICK** Point #5: **Managing and leading (through hope) gives leaders ENORMOUS POWER for good.**

5.1 Wise leaders recognize the underlying psychological benefits coping and hoping.

- People are more likely to come together for common ends.
- Bridges are more easily built among the generations.
- Coping and hoping changes attitudes, extends patience, and releases energy.

5.3 Read, again, a typical superintendent's job description.

Almost every line can be translated, cope and hope, manage and lead.

Indeed, the core of mission of education itself is to cope and hope.

Story: Years ago, superintendents on the west side of the metro area got together periodically on Friday afternoon to shoot the bull and buck one another up.

I remember Art Bruning, Superintendent of Hopkins Schools, who was-- and yet is -- greatly admired, making this confession to our group:

"I have spent years listening to other people and trying to do their bidding. I am weary."

"I can scarcely remember what I believe for myself and what values I hold most dear."

5.4 Who among us has not said the same thing, perhaps over and over again?

5.5 Thus we move to Point #6.

6.0 **CLICK** Point #6: **Effective leaders RECHARGE their (HOPE and COPE) batteries.**

- A dead battery for a school leader and effective leadership is an oxymoron.
- Each of us must discover these reservoirs for himself or herself.
- Let me share what has worked, and continues to work, for me:

6.1 **CLICK** Reaffirm Spiritual Roots:

6.1.1 For most of my 24 years as a superintendent, this written question was taped to the head of our bed: “*God, what are you and I going to accomplish this day?*” It was the first thing I read when I got up.

- I needed to remind myself, daily, that I was never, ever, all alone,
 - no matter how steep the mountain climb happened to be
 - or how few people seemed to be on board with the agenda of the day.
- At the end of the day, back in bed, I would review the day, thank God for it, asked forgiveness for my human failings, which were many, and sleep soundly, well...*most of the time.*

6.2 **CLICK** Maintain Circle of Friends and Acquaintances:

6.2.1 I mentioned earlier that at one point Minnetonka laid off 22% of its teachers and 50% of its custodians.

The next fall we had the largest class sizes in the Twin Cities according to the ECSU studies, the dirtiest buildings, and the highest tax rates, too, as listed in the Star and Tribune.

6.2.2 We invited a psychologist to speak at the opening school workshop in front of a still grieving staff, diminished in size nearly 25 % over all.

6.2.3 I remember well one of his points.

6.2.4 He said, “**All of life is ‘hello’ and ‘good-bye’.**”

6.2.4.1 “*If you don’t say “hello” to someone new or learn something new about old friends every day, you will soon be all alone, for nothing in this world is permanent.*

- *A child leaves home; a neighbor moves away; a grandparent dies; a colleague takes a new job.”*

6.2.4.2 “Therefore, he advocated, “*Every day, look up, look out, look deep to expand your friendship circle.*”

6.6.4.3 Life is change. Change is life. Embrace all of it as it comes. This is living!

6.3 **CLICK** Relish Collegial Support:

6.3.1 I mentioned earlier, that Minnetonka had the first teacher strike in suburban metro area.

- Ralph Lieber, Edina Superintendent at the time called with this message. “Don, remember no one can do this tough job better than you.” Boy, did I need that encouragement!

6.3.2 This MASA Spring Conference provides THREE valuable services, as do various workshops throughout the year.

- They bring us all together to learn new things to be sure...
- They connect us to our business partners such as **Knutson Flynn lawyers** who are underwriting this morning session.
- And extremely important, these associations encourage collegial support – a reminder that we are not alone in fighting the demons.

6.4

CLICK

Remain Curious:

6.4.1 *Hope grows from curiosity--and the excitement of trying something new and different.*

6.4.2 Mandates come down from above and often crush our creative spirit.

6.4.3 However, new ideas, *adopted locally by free will*, can often push the doldrums aside and do a tremendous service of uniting and rallying the hearts of colleagues, staff, parents, and students.

6.4.4 For example, I learned about one of these uplifting ideas last month at a Rotary meeting.

CLICK

UP ON GREEN. (SLIDE)

CLICK

CLICK

6.4.5 Founder, Michelle Hedlund is in our audience today. Right there....

6.4.5.1 In hard times, good stewardship captures hearts of people, and ***Up On Green...***

- will bring schools and children into the ecology movement with almost no expense,
- will unite our many constituencies, and
- will result in great public relations.

6.4.5.2 I thought to myself, “*If I were still a superintendent, I’d grab onto this idea.*”

6.4.5.3 One minute later, I heard Michele say that Superintendent Dennis Peterson and the Minnetonka Schools had already joined and is fully engaged in the *upongreen* movement.

6.4.5.4 In fact, the UPONGREEN WEB site has an excellent video link showing each school site. Dennis, I saw your picture in the video, also.

6.4.5.5 Effective school leaders are more than a knight, rook, or bishop being moved around by others. We are have power and responsibility to make creative moves of our own.

6.5 **CLICK** **CLICK** **Enjoy Family Clan:**

6.5.1 Sometimes, genetic roots only come together in the cemetery.

6.5.2 Now that is a grave mistake.

6.5.3 Family members go with us for the whole of life's journey, not for one job stint.

6.5.3.1 Reunions, weddings, funerals all serve to support the core of our being.

6.5.3.1.1 At age 73, cousins still call me "*Donnie Boy*". Kind of humbling but touching, too.

6.5.3.1.2 And who does not feel warm all over when hearing these words of endearment? *Dad, Mom, Brother, Sister, Grandpa, Grandma, Uncle, or Aunt, Cousin?*"

6.5.3.1.3 Marvel at how the DNA works its magic, one generation to the next.

6.5.4 Soak up the unbridled enthusiasm of youth in the family clan.

6.5.5 Living life more abundantly includes walks down memory lane and creating new memories for ourselves and those we love.

6.9 **CLICK** **Romance spouse.**

5.9.5.1 No relationship is more precious to me.

5.9.5.2 Invest in keeping it fresh.

- For years, Mary Anne and I learned a new card game every year.
- Many times the two of us had two day vacations tacked unto a conference or workshop someplace in the USA.
- We do at least one puzzle a year and paste them up in the out-house at our lake cabin.

5.9.5.3 Kind of a funny place for a family history book, but it works wonders in more ways than one.

6.6

CLICK

Establish Rituals:

6.6.1 Research by the Search Institute on healthy children underscores the value of family rituals to encourage developmental assets.

6.6.1.1 We, who are adults, are still children at heart in many respects. .

6.6.2 At one point, I wrote a pledge of allegiance for administrators and a second one for new teachers. I asked them to stand and say their pledges to each other during new teacher orientation each fall.

6.6.2.1 Hokey, maybe...but it was a kind of bonding ceremony...

6.6.2.2 Everyone promising to help the other to be successful in their joint mission.

6.6.3 Another ritual in the spring of the year was a day of staff recognition and a small gift memento for long years of service. If the staff member was retiring, the principal presented him or her with a rose to be worn all day long.

6.6.4 Such awards and recognitions grew over the years as a way of celebrating the contributions of people.

6.6.4.1 Dr. Dennis Peterson, Minnesota's 2009 Superintendent of the Year, has taken this to a whole new level. Ask him about it.

6.6.4.2 Dr. Michael Lovett, White Bear Lake superintendent, is another good contact. He was a wonderful colleague for many years with a great eye for recognitions.

6.6.5 Hope needs to be recharged in visible ways, especially when so much battery current is going just one way: out!

6.7

CLICK

Take a break!

6.7.1 Effective leaders are not wind-up clocks. Keep the spring tight and they run forever.

- For good reason, the Scriptural exhortation of one day of rest out of seven was included in the first Chapter of Genesis in the Bible and later in the Ten Commandments,

Story: In 1979, I had picked up much scar tissue from many referendum campaigns and a teacher strike three years earlier that had not yet healed.

- I was exhausted in body, mind, and spirit.
- All the school board members who hired me were gone, and most of my recommendations at the Board table were being approved by split votes.
- I was burned out and fled to a school conference on the East Coast, literally adjacent to the Atlantic Ocean.
- But I did not attend any sessions the first day.
- Instead I walked the beach for hours and then wrote a one page record, a kind of diary entry and a prayer. Handout:

WALKING A BEACH, RESTORING THE SOUL!

11-13-79

HANDOUT

Story Continued: I came home from that break, a changed man. My mind was more clear and new thoughts came to me that I used for the next 16 years as school superintendent.

7.0 **CLICK** **School leaders unite people in COMMON CAUSE. .**

STORY: Your predecessors honored me as Minnesota Superintendent of the Year in 1990 and National Honors shortly thereafter. An early highlight was an invitation to OVAL OFFICE to meet with the first President Bush.

- Before I left, one of our District 276 citizens heard about this trip and came to my office with his son's picture which showed the, then, Vice President Bush handing T.J. his diploma at the Air Force Academy.
- The father's request was that I obtain the signature of President Bush on the photo.
 - Later I flew to DC, rode with AASA Executive Director Richard Miller in his car to the White House, went through gate security, parked the car on the grass next to the White House entrance.
 - We were greeted at the door by a Marine with a stiff salute and finally entered the Oval Office. I carried the photo in my left hand.
 - President Bush greeted me, shook my right hand, and asked what that was in my left hand. I explained, and he said, "*Sure, I'll be glad to sign it,*" and he placed the photo on his desk.
- We stood around for about 20 minutes talking about education, while pictures were being taken from every corner of the room.

- At some point, I sensed it was time to leave and edged toward the door, but the President said, *“Wait a minute. I want to sign the picture.”*
 - He sat down, and I stood before him and watched.
 - He reached for a cup on his desk that was filled with a sundry pens and pencils.
 - He picked one and said, *“Oh, this one never works.”*
 - He picked the second one and said, *“I don’t think this will work on glossy paper.”*
 - Finally, he picked the third one and wrote his name on the photo.

7.1 Meanwhile, I’m standing in front of his desk, thinking to myself...

7.1.1 Here is the most powerful man on earth.

7.1.2 No one walked in with a pen on a pillow.

7.1.3 Like most of us back home, he has a coffee cup filled with assorted pens and pencils.

7.3.4 I thought then, and still believe, that in America, **the great are ordinary, and the ordinary are great. *Greatness is both national and local! Greatness is found in a “can do” spirit in the midst of good times and tough times. .***

7.2 Every school leader in this room is a local role model, closely watched.

7.3 Everyone here uses and creates symbols that change the way people in our school systems act, think, and hope for the future.

7.4 Each leader here is charged to cope and hope, manage and lead.

7.5 I am convinced that ultimate greatness in America is found:

- not in places like DC or the monuments of the Black Hills,
- not in skyscrapers and an abundance of things,
- and not in deep pockets and concentration of wealth;
- not in genetic ties,
- nor racial colors,
- nor a national religious creed.

7.6 Greatness in American is found...

- In our freedoms to speak, be, and do.
- Within our laws made by our own hands in republic setting;

- In the creativity that marshals itself in up and down economic cycles.
- Within principles of equity, hard work, and fair play.
- In the living of life every day with people around us who are ordinary and great, all at the same time.

Would you please stand?

CLICK

I will read the paragraph directly under Point #7 on the handout.

Then I ask you to join me in the unison reading of what you see in the **BOX** at the bottom of the sheet.

What makes and keeps our country strong are the resilience, resolve, and restless creativity of ordinary people where we live and work. Courageously, American citizens go through the dry valleys of life and climb its rugged mountains. I believe that is our history and this shall also be our posterity, if linked by leaders in common cause.

Now, **ALL TOGETHER**, in unison....if you will...

CLICK

My commitment as a Minnesota school leader is *not* to mope, but to cope and hope!

My pledge is to manage and lead!

My personal and professional goal for the American dream is to turn abilities of youth into adult capabilities.

I embrace this dream.

I accept the challenges of this day.

I will do my part to turn hope into reality!

May God bless all of us in our special call to public service!