



NAVIGATING A PANDEMIC WITH MORAL AND INTELLECTUAL LEADERSHIP

Dr. Steve McCammon—January 20, 2022



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Red Steagall is one of America's great cowboy poets and songwriters. He's a man who emphasizes the importance of knowing where you're going and how you plan to get there. In "The Wagon Tongue," he describes how late at night on long cattle drives the cook would point the tongue of the chuck wagon toward the North Star. Tomorrow, the cook would explain, might be cloudy. Without landmarks—trees or mountains—on the trail, cowboys could easily point the herd in the wrong direction. As one chorus rings out,

*Cause life is like a grassy sea, the trail ain't always plain
One may lead to pleasure and another lead to pain
But you'll never lose direction, and you'll know just where you are
If you'll always point your wagon tongue toward that old North Star*

In the pain-filled past two school years that we have all experienced, it is clear that in the face of a terrible pandemic, the best leaders understood their North Star to be commitment to the moral and intellectual foundations of the school enterprise. As president and CEO of the Schlechty Center as well as in my new role as executive director of the National Superintendents Roundtable, this overarching lesson affirms what we have collectively learned in working with districts and in networking with leaders across the nation: At its heart, education is a moral enterprise. Superintendents and boards who understand that have a marker pointing them in the right direction, even amidst the darkest nights of the soul.

I read with great interest the series of articles published on the *Education Week* website by the National Superintendents Roundtable this past year: "[Leadership Lessons From the Kitchen Table.](#)" What strikes me is not just the actions of these leaders during the pandemic, but rather the realization that these leaders' actions were not part of a well-orchestrated strategic plan. Culture, it is said, trumps strategic plans. These leaders are clear about what they believe and clear about the direction of the organizations they lead. Even amid chaos in a context that lacked, and still lacks, consensus, they leaned into their districts' culture and direction, using them as the North Star for making difficult

decisions. To paraphrase what one thoughtful leader shared recently on social media, “The pandemic did not develop character. It demonstrated it.”

The National Superintendents Roundtable, under the leadership of former executive director Dr. James Harvey, also published [“The Quitting Report”](#) this past year. In it, superintendents responded to this question: whether they had considered quitting the field during the great challenges of the ongoing pandemic. The challenges were well detailed in the report; however, the true learning is in the reasons offered by so many leaders who chose to strive forward because of the important work at hand in service of children and of their local communities. They were committed.

My colleagues and I have also heard amazing stories of how teachers and principals responded during the pandemic by reaching out to their communities and families. But it is the superintendent, with the support of the board, who is responsible for the district’s direction—what we at the Schlechty Center think of as “directional systems.” Our founder, Dr. Phillip Schlechty, defined directional systems as “systems through which goals are set, priorities are determined, and, when things go awry, corrective actions are initiated.”

Phil Schlechty never drove cattle, but because he understood the importance of being clear about district direction, he understood the metaphor of the wagon tongue and shared about it often. I am not sure he would have anticipated school leaders being pulled in so many directions, on so many difficult issues fraught with political passion, such as our nation witnessed these past few years. However, he would have had no difficulty understanding the need for leadership firmly anchored in the moral and intellectual dimensions of schooling amidst a national crisis. To him, that was what school leadership was all about.

At the Schlechty Center, we believe that bureaucratic school leaders ask the wrong questions. Relying on power and control, compliance, and lines of authority, they worry about who is in charge instead of where they are going. They are concerned with questions such as, Who’s in charge of what? Who decides? How are things decided? What are the standards of performance? Who judges the performance? And what metrics are used in reaching these judgments?

Alternately, leaders committed to the moral and intellectual foundations of their organizations ask a different set of questions:

- What are the core values and beliefs we want our organizations to embrace and uphold?
- What accomplishments will make us most proud?
- What will it take to satisfy those we intend to serve?
- What kind of organization are we, and what do we want to become?
- How do we identify, import, and develop the knowledge we need to engage in the kinds of continuous innovation required to survive and thrive in a constantly changing environment?
- How will we know when we succeed, and how will we measure success?

Leaders of organizations accustomed to exploring issues of values and belief—instead of debating who’s in charge—will know instinctively where to turn when a nearly unimaginable crisis strikes.

I have learned much from the leaders with whom I'm affiliated, through both the Schlechty Center [Superintendents Leadership Network](#) and the [National Superintendents Roundtable](#). These superintendents are adept at dealing with uncertainty. They are skilled at reframing problems into opportunities. In observing what they do, we see a set of patterns that we at the Center refer to as *Pillars of the Superintendent as a Moral and Intellectual Leader*. These pillars, as captured by George Thompson, Director of Strategic Initiatives at the Schlechty Center, define a leader who acts in the following manner:

- **Models and Develops Trust:** Gives priority to building personal trust and trust in the organization.
- **Clarifies the Vision:** Consistently and continuously communicates and clarifies a clear and compelling vision of the future.
- **Knows What He or She Believes:** Understands the need to be clear about what he or she believes and understands that shared beliefs are the foundation of the direction of the organization.
- **Enhances Capacity:** Attends to developing the capacity of the organization and the capacity of the people who are part of the organization to support continuous innovation.
- **Educates Community:** Educates the community, especially community leaders, and informs policymakers about the condition of education.
- **Thinks and Acts Strategically:** Employs systems thinking to understand how systems are linked to one another and how they interact.
- **Personalizes Relationships with Principals:** Develops personal relationships with all principals in the district.
- **Unifies Central Office Staff:** Educates central office staff so they understand and are committed to the direction in which they are being led.
- **Shares Authority:** Shares authority rather than delegates it. Views authority as affective and highly personalized.
- **Personalizes Relationship with the Board:** Strives to work as part of a team with the board in order to focus on the needs of children and the future of the community.

These pillars are frequently described as aspirational, but in these past two years, they became real. While it may be the case that superintendents who responded most effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic are unaware of these pillars, we have no doubt that their leadership during this once-in-a-century crisis reflected the principles embedded in the pillars. That's why throughout the *Education Week* series "Leadership Lessons From the Kitchen Table," we see superintendents standing on the moral foundation of the profession by insisting on a duty of care to others, continuously clarifying their vision of the future, calling for collaboration with peers, insisting that trust in their organization and in their people is the key to success, and standing up to harsh personal criticism for doing the right thing because they knew it was the right thing to do. Lying awake at night worrying about their community and their students, these superintendents knew exactly where the district's wagon tongue was pointed. They were clear about their North Star.