



BY DENNIS SPARKS

## Leaders Use Every Opportunity to Promote Learning-Oriented Conversations

**If you advocate with the intention to persuade, control, or manipulate others, the group will instantly fall out of dialogue. Advocacy spoken with the attitude that “I am right” squashes listening and triggers defensiveness, aggression, and/or withdrawal. In such advocacy, there is no invitation to hear and learn from differing perspectives.**

—Linda Ellinor & Glenna Gerard

Leaders who are most effective in continuously improving teaching, learning, and relationships in schools minimize compliance-oriented directives and maximize interactions with others that promote individual and group learning. They see themselves as teachers who use learning rather than mandates as the primary means of organizational advancement.

Such leaders purposefully use every meeting and one-to-one conversation to promote learning. The content of such interactions is what Noel Tichy calls “teachable points of view” in *The Cycle of Leadership*—“a coherent set of ideas and concepts that a person is able to articulate clearly to others”—and the process for learning is dialogue in which leaders offer their views to others in the spirit of mutual respect and influence. Rather than telling or persuading, leading through learning occurs when leaders express their views concisely and precisely and listen to others in a spirit of

openness about the topic at hand. Leaders speak “their truth,” not “the truth,” and they listen to learn, not to gather evidence to prove that the speaker is wrong.

Creating a teachable point of view is a demanding process, one Tichy says “requires first doing the intellectual work of figuring out what our point of view is, and then the creative work of putting it into a form that makes it accessible and interesting to others.” Writing is an important means of achieving this clarity (Read more about this in [Vol. 1, No. 2.](#)), as is a desire to learn from the perspectives of others and a willingness to revise one’s own ideas because of them.

A practical and compelling way for leaders to present their teachable points of view is through stories. (Read more about this in [Vol. 2, No. 8.](#)) Tichy recommends three types of stories: *Who I am as a leader* (explains the real-life experiences that have shaped the leader and his or her views), *Who we are* (describes the common experiences, beliefs, and values of the organization), and *Where we are going and how we will get there* (describes in clear, everyday language both the organization’s goals and the approaches it will use for achieving them). Such stories are most effective, Tichy points out, when they are “not only intellectually clear, but emotionally engaging. . . .”

When leaders cultivate their clarity regarding important ideas and values and offer them to others for the purpose of mutual influence, they lead through learning.

*Dennis Sparks*

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