

Photo: Pam LeBlanc



BY DENNIS SPARKS

When Leaders Speak Their Truth

I wonder how many children's lives might be saved if we educators disclosed what we know to each other.

— Roland Barth

When educators complain to me about boring meetings, I tell them that the surest way to combat such boredom is to candidly and respectfully say what is on their minds and in their hearts. When leaders speak their truth, important learning almost always occurs, even if the process itself is sometimes uncomfortable.

Educators have a name for meetings in which the truth is told—"parking lot meetings." Such meetings also occur in bathrooms, hallways, and bars. But what's most important about them is that the truth telling is not occurring in the situations and with the people with whom it could make a difference.

While we teach children that honesty is the best policy and usually include honesty as a virtue in character education programs, more often than not honesty is difficult for educators when the issues under discussion affect teaching, learning, and the welfare of children.

The power of a leader's voice (for more on leader's voice, see [Volume 1, Number 5](#)) comes from its authenticity, from a listener's belief that the leader is telling his or her truth rather than reading from a script or spinning the truth. There is a difference, of course, between "my truth" and "The Truth." I express my truth when I share my values, intentions, assumptions, and requests in the spirit of dialogue and with a willingness to be influ-

enced by the perspectives of others. When leaders proclaim The Truth, they deny the validity of other points of view and suppress dialogue and learning.

A bumper sticker warning, "Speak your mind, even if your voice shakes," reminds us that telling our truth is often scary. Most human beings reach adulthood having learned through painful experience to shy away from the discomfort that truth telling often provokes. Because each situation is unique and brings its own anxieties and reasons for avoidance, there are no formulas or simple tips for acquiring the habit of speaking with directness, candor, kindness, and respect. However, with rehearsal and experience, we can learn to do it. ([Chapter 12](#) of *Leading for Results* expands on this point.)

When we have the luxury of knowing that a subject is likely to arise, we can clarify our thinking in advance by writing or talking through our point of view with a trusted colleague. Sometimes we can begin by telling less risky truths to test the waters and to lead up to more substantial issues. Almost always, we will have to summon our courage to do that which is frightening. When I am searching for that source of courage in myself, I remind myself of what is at stake—the quality of life that young people will experience in the years ahead and the vibrancy of the culture and democratic form of government we share. When leaders speak their truth in the spirit of learning from the views of others, they lead through learning.

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