All of us are deeply embedded within a number of strong, web-like structures of relationships, such as our families and workplaces. Sometimes these relationships benefit us; at others times they don’t. We spend much of our mental energy trying to strengthen our beneficial relationships and transform the harmful ones to our benefit. In practicing the art of relationships, we are also practicing the art of politics.

Sometimes I think there are really just two kinds of people in the world: those who employ power to benefit themselves and those who employ it to benefit others. Those who practice the art of relationships for the benefit of others are called leaders. Educational leaders, for example, strengthen relationships with their faculties, staffs, central offices, and parents in order to provide the best for their students. For example, using one’s personal and professional political capital to get the best available teachers for your students is an important aspect of educational leadership.

Mary Grant, the principal of Takoma Educational Center in Washington, D.C., is an accomplished practitioner of the art of beneficial relationships. Takoma is a Pre-K–8 school with about 450 students that has an enviable reputation for safety, rigorous academic and behavioral standards, and an environment supportive of achievement. As a result, it has a waiting list of parents anxious to send their children there.

Grant came to Takoma seven years ago with what you might call a new “theology” of education. “Everyone wants to get to heaven,” she says, “but not everyone wants to work to get there.” Working one’s way to an educational promised land—a place where learning occurs—was the hymn Grant sang upon her arrival. Today, she and her staff all sing from the same hymnal.

Forming Alliances

Although she is a consummate professional, Grant practices a personal and human form of politics that is centered on getting resources for her students. She does this by strengthening her relationship with parents, the media, her staff, the union, the district office, and the superintendent.

“You have to form alliances,” she says, “not just with your staff but with the parents and the community...You need to listen to what they have to say, and they need to listen to what you have to say.”

The alliances have created a family atmosphere at her school. “We’re a family,” says Grant. “We laugh, we go to dinner together, we sit around and talk. And I’ve not had one grievance filed against me in the seven years I’ve been at Takoma.”

Establishing Structure

According to Takoma’s assistant principal Andriana Kalapothakos, things have changed under Grant’s direction. “At the beginning, it took some getting used to. We were very independent in our separate classrooms,” she says. “But now we’ve got guidelines and structure. Adults, you know, need structure, too.”

Grant’s work ethic, however, is not based on an old-fashioned, whip-induced concept of leadership. She is a true believer in the power that comes from working with the strengths of others. (Not that she shies away from the need to identify and deal firmly with what she calls “the weakest link” when children’s future is at stake.) “We must pick each other up,” is how she describes her commitment to her staff. It is a commitment that is apparently shared because, except for a few retirements, no one has left and there is also a waiting list to teach at Takoma.

As a lifelong resident of the nation’s capital and its center of political power, Grant has become an accomplished practitioner of political arts. In the process, she has learned that there are good politics and bad politics, just like there are good families and dysfunctional ones. In families that don’t work, each member puts himself or herself first. In families where children form the center of the relationship web, the children thrive.

The same holds true of schools, where children learn to thrive under leaders like Grant, who skillfully practice the political arts of modern education in finding ways to keep children at the center of all their relationships.

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