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INTERVIEW

Cultivating Leadership: An Interview with Ray Cortines

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Cultivating Leadership: An Interview with Ray Cortines

RAY CORTINES, Superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), began his career as a teacher in 1956. His career includes over twenty years in the superintendency, having served as Superintendent of San Jose, San Francisco, and Pasadena, California, and he has overseen two of the nation's largest school districts as Chancellor in New York City from 1993 to 1995, and as Superintendent in Los Angeles from 1999 to 2000. Mr. Cortines has also served as Special Advisor to the Secretary of Education in 1995, Acting Assistant Secretary for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement in 1997, and Deputy Mayor of Education, Youth and Families for the City of Los Angeles.

Mr. Cortines has been an Adjunct Professor of Education at Brown University, Stanford University, and Harvard University. He sits on numerous boards, including the J. Paul Getty Trust, Scholastic Inc., Board Governor of the San Francisco Symphony, and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. He is a consultant to the Eli Broad Foundation, the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation, and the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh. Mr. Cortines is also a Senior Advisor to the District Management Council (DMC).

In this edited interview with DMC's Dr. Joseph Scherer, Mr. Cortines reflects on his career, and shares his thoughts on mentoring, teamwork, and the importance of cultivating leadership.

You are a strong proponent of mentoring and have been very open about the importance of mentoring in your career. Can you share with us why mentoring is so important to you?

Whatever I have done and whatever contributions I have made were because somebody invested in me. Whether it was my first sixth grade class of forty-four kids, the principal of that school, or the teacher next door, they were all there for me. Over the course of my career, I have had many mentors and they have been very important to me. I would not be Superintendent of LAUSD today if it were not for the many individuals who helped shape my career.

When I was starting out as a young school administrator, people noticed that I worked hard and that I wanted to learn, and as a result, they provided me with many opportunities. One of the

reasons I make time to visit schools is that I am trying to look for talent and support that talent like I was supported. I constantly reflect on the people who invested in me, and I need to be doing the same thing for young people today.

When you visit schools as Superintendent, what kinds of things are you looking for? In your eyes, what makes someone stand out as a potential leader?

I am looking at how they interact with students, how they interact with their peers, and what they talk about when I ask how things are going. Do they talk about their 8:00–3:00 job or do they talk about all of the activities that they are engaged in other than their regular teaching assignment? I ask how they got into teaching or how they got into >

administration. What are their goals? What should we be doing as a district to further their professional development?

How did your mentors help you? What did they do for you, and how did they make a difference in your career?

I had mentors that encouraged me, but at the same time raised the bar with high expectations. They were extremely honest, direct, and candid with me. That kind of honesty, directness and candor are too often lacking today as we prepare individuals for senior leadership positions in schools. For me, the constructive criticism was more important than the pat on the back. What was special for me was that my mentors helped me understand that even though I was not on the same level as the superintendent or the principal or the assistant superintendent, I had the right to ask questions. I worked hard to ask questions in an intelligent way. I recognize today at my age and at this point in my career that my mentors' encouraging me to ask questions earmarked me as a learner. I have always been a learner. And, until they close the lid, I will be a learner.

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How do you teach people to be comfortable asking questions? You indicated that you felt comfortable asking questions, but that doesn't seem common today.

Mentors have to model the behavior they seek. Since I have been working as the Deputy Mayor, the Deputy Superintendent, and now the Superintendent, I have been approached by six young people asking me if I would be willing to be their mentor; to all six I have said yes. For them, it

meant that I would be willing to spend some time with them so they could ask me questions or ask my advice. I try to avoid the arrogance of position and create an atmosphere where they feel it is okay to talk with me. If they ever refer to me as their boss, I quickly respond that we are colleagues and that the learning goes both ways. I say, “I've just lived longer and have had a different kind of life experience. For me to understand you and do what I do every day, I need to understand your path of growth and development.” Then, I ask them questions.

Another skill you value highly is listening. Why is listening so important?

Listening to the voices of people at all levels provides insight. Some of the greatest insights that I have had about the Los Angeles Unified School District in the last year have come from students, even though I haven't always liked everything they said to me.

There have also been times where I think I talked too much instead of listening. Too many times we talk too much because we are trying to prove that we are knowledgeable. I think that points to our own insecurities. There's too much prattle and not enough insightful listening and not enough direct, succinct, and focused responses to issues.

In your opinion, is it personal characteristics or their position that qualifies someone to be a good mentor?

To me, it is the personal characteristics of the mentor that are most important—far more important than position. I think often of Felix Rohatyn in New York, who brought New York back from the brink of bankruptcy. For whatever reason, he and his wife Elizabeth adopted me when I was in New York and created a safe haven for me so that I could have a place to think. One of the things we don't encourage enough is nurturing because we are always busy encouraging people to do things, do things, do things. But, you don't do things well if you don't pause and think about what you are doing. The Rohatyns, both Liz and Felix, understood that, and on numerous occasions in New York, I needed to be alone or to be alone with them to think.



DMC Managing Director Joe Scherer (left) and Ray Cortines (right)

I have always looked for people from different professions and walks of life to be my mentors. One example is Harold Williams, the former Executive Director and President and CEO of The Getty Museum. I first met him when I was a young Assistant Superintendent, and our friendship continued when I became a Superintendent. He took an interest in what I was attempting to do in the arts and maintained contact over the years. He was constantly encouraging and expanding my understanding and commitment to artistic endeavors. The day that I left the Chancellorship in New York, Harold Williams called and said that if I were returning to California, he needed to talk with me. At that point in time there were no educators on the board of The Getty Museum, and he felt that I could make a contribution. Within six months after meeting with the appropriate people on the Board, I was on that board and have served twelve years. Now that's a different kind of mentoring.

You just described some unique people doing unique things, but can we institutionalize mentoring or is it simply dependent on individuals?

I believe you can institutionalize it. I ask the people I work with, whether it was in City Hall as the Deputy or now in this job, "How many people are you bringing along?" Sometimes I startle them by asking, "Are you training somebody to take your place?" They begin to understand that I am not trying to get rid of them, but that I am trying to remind them of their responsibility to provide others the opportunity. So, when you ask whether mentoring can be institutionalized, I believe that mentoring absolutely should be a part of leadership training. Whether I was at Stanford, Harvard, or Brown, I would always ask faculty and students, "How are you trying to influence others? How are you trying to provide others opportunities to develop?" I think it is very important for leaders to contribute to the development of new leaders. ▸

Mentoring requires a significant time commitment. You indicated that you do a great deal of mentoring even with your demanding schedule. Can we really expect busy people like yourself to set aside the time?

I make time to mentor others because a lot of people still mentor me. It's a quid pro quo. If I want to be mentored and if I believe in the importance of mentoring, then it is my responsibility to be engaged in the same activity.

The people that have been there for me were all very busy people, but they always seemed to find the time to support my development. Recently, I met a thirty-six year old young man who runs a community educational center in east LA. He had given a speech to introduce the Mayor of Los Angeles Antonio Villaraigosa, and I complimented him on his introduction. He didn't know who I was, and later, once he found out, he called me and asked, "Could I talk to you about my long range plans for my own education? I need some advice." I could have said, "Well, I'll point you to somebody, or I am very busy," but for me, it was an obligation to listen and to help. This professional obligation turned into a friendship with this young man and his wife, a teacher for the LAUSD, and their five children. One can be rich with possessions, but it is more important to be rich in terms of the people you surround yourself with.

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Preparing people to manage school districts regardless of size seems to have become increasingly difficult as witnessed by the decreasing number of applicants for these jobs. Why is that?

For me, it is simply the lack of practical experience in management. Somebody asked me where I got my

training to become a superintendent. I said my first sixth grade class of forty-four kids taught me a lot about management. I didn't know that a class of forty-four children was too large or that maximizing potential would be difficult given the different levels of learning among the forty-four. Well, isn't that what school management is all about? It is about being able to identify all of the needs. It is about being able to keep all of the balls in the air. It is about being able to recognize when you have failed with some, and when you could have done better with others. It's about being honest with yourself. Asking for help in our profession has become a sign of weakness. These jobs are very difficult. You can have all sorts of degrees and experience, but each day is a learning experience, and you have to look at it as a learning experience; you can't think that you automatically have all of the answers because of the title, the pedigree, or the experience you have had before.

If practical experience is missing from the traditional instruction at college or university, does the career ladder need to provide the necessary experience?

I think individuals need to be thrust into internships early on. I also think it is very important that we encourage people to learn from mistakes. Negative learning is as important as the positive learning, because you may find out, "Well, I wouldn't have handled it that way. Well, I wouldn't have done it that way." For me, handling negative situations is positive learning on how I might better handle a situation next time. I ask myself, "How could you handle it in a different way? Who would you have talked to?" Recently I sent a group of people out to investigate an incident on a school campus. The report came back two days later, and I saw that it was incomplete. I realized immediately that I did not have the right people on the investigation team. So, I sent a different group out to do the job. I recognized that I had made a mistake. And, so, there is an example of learning in a very positive way from that negative experience.

You have managed the two largest school systems in the United States. What management practice have you employed that has produced the best results for you in these districts? And was this practice situational to New York or LA or applicable anywhere?

The five districts in which I served as Superintendent were very diverse and not one of the five locales was the same. I never imposed the Pasadena model on San Jose. I never imposed what I did in San Jose on San Francisco. I looked at each district and studied every aspect of that district by talking to people, by studying the data that was made available, and by getting to know the policy makers such as the school board. Then, in each case I designed a plan that was needs-based for that locale. Certainly, there were some similarities and common strands, but each situation is different.

I have always approached each assignment I have had with a little nervousness. I think that has been good for me. People that think that they have all of the answers because they have done it before are doomed to make major mistakes. I think some anxiety is healthy. I've never worked so hard in all my life as in my present job and I have doubts as I've never had before in any job.

Is that because you've had more experience and more opportunity to think about what's possible and what isn't?

Maybe. I'm not sure. I certainly think that the complicated issues that I face now in Los Angeles demand a team approach. We have many fine team members, but I think that I need to be looking simultaneously at developing capacity within and providing supplemental external support to get a clearer view of what is happening. The outsiders' view forces us to think about why we have always done something in a certain way, or why we have done it this way for the last five years. I am always asking questions. What if? Why not? How come? That makes people uncomfortable. I'm not telling them that they are not good at their jobs or that they don't have the skills, but I just want to know if there is another way. Isn't that what science does?

Isn't that what we do in medicine? Medical science keeps working to find a better way and that's what we need to be doing in education. We tend to get some things right and then rest on our laurels. When our young people who are in Advanced Placement or honors courses get good scores, we celebrate those scores; but, at the same time, we need to raise the bar a little higher for those young people and their teachers. We need to engage in the long, complex work of improving education. One of the things that we have not used well as educators is research. Part of that is our fault, and part of it is the researchers' fault. The researchers have not been able to put their research into language that a sixth grade teacher, elementary Principal, Assistant Superintendent or Superintendent can understand. They also fail to synthesize their findings, which sometimes educators can't do because they either lack the ability or simply lack the time.

“Management is an ongoing process, and to do it successfully in whatever size school district takes a team.”

Often school district operations are silos. How do you create an effective team? How do you break down these silos?

I think you have to work at building teams. Recently, when I was out of the district for a day, I called in two or three times and was told that there was a major issue that they wanted me to resolve. Instead of making the decision myself, I told one of my key staff members that I trusted his judgment and that he should test his decision with one other individual; if both of them agreed, they should move forward. That forces a relationship that generally isn't there.

It is also critical to model that you value teamwork. Too often, people come to meetings unprepared; I expect staff to come prepared the same way I prepare for meetings. I want to share and debate ideas. I do not want people to try to second guess what the ▷

Superintendent thinks or wants. Exploring options and supporting ideas with concrete data and information allows the team to come together to fashion the best solution. And if we find out that it isn't the best solution, then we have to have the courage to say it isn't working and change it. I think we need to do some things, make some mistakes, make some improvements, modify it, and move on. For me, it's a continuous loop. Management is an ongoing process, and to do it successfully in whatever size school district takes a team.

What does working as a team mean to you?

Working as a team does not mean that everybody has to agree. Working as a team means having an environment where you can be honest, open, and constructively critical of each other. Many of the people in district administrative organizations have not risen to where they are by being team players. They have gotten to where they are as a result of how many people they have slaughtered along the way. They may be very bright, and they may have the right pedigrees, but, whether it's a large system or a small system, you are not going to maximize progress if you don't work as a team. Working with the Board of Education can sometimes be a challenge, but the Board needs to be a part of your team. You can't ignore the teachers' union, if you have one. You can't ignore the carpenters. You can't ignore the custodians who take care of the environment where teaching and learning take place. How do you value and recognize the people that make a system work? You have to let them know that their ideas and their contributions are important. I receive over a hundred e-mails a day now that I am cutting the budget. The reason I receive so many, people say, is because I respond to them. Now, "no" is a response. People don't think it is, but it is. But, I think that if you encourage people to be engaged, you need to recognize that engagement. It's time consuming, but it's worth it in the long run if school systems across America whether rural, urban, or suburban are going to be able to deal effectively with the kinds of economic issues they face today.

I was in Pasadena eleven years as Superintendent and in the system for fifteen years. After leaving

Pasadena, I understood more about the importance of a team. In Pasadena, I did too much myself. It wasn't about my ego, but I was just trying to handle a horrendous issue of desegregation, and make it work, and keep the community calm. I was the one who was constantly out in front, and I don't think that I developed the capacity in others as I should have. In going to San Jose to settle the bankruptcy, I didn't settle the bankruptcy—we settled the bankruptcy. It was a team effort. In moving the academic achievement in San Francisco, it was we that did it. It was the teachers' union, the administrators' association, the parents in that community, and the students themselves. The whole standards movement that I brought to New York City wasn't about my standards, but it was about providing the opportunity for teachers, higher education, the business community, and parents to talk about what the standards should be for children; the ultimate goal of graduation at the twelfth grade is a team effort of elementary, middle and high schools. I have been the most productive in team situations, whether it was at the university, as the Deputy Mayor in LA, or as Chancellor or Superintendent. I am not always sure that I have been the best team member, but I know I profited from the team experience.

What advice would you give to young people aspiring to be the next Superintendent in Los Angeles, San Francisco, or Pasadena?

My advice to aspiring leaders is to take advantage of every leadership opportunity that becomes available. Seize the opportunity, solve problems, make things work, and don't worry whether it is going to lead to your next promotion. Good judgement, integrity, and knowing who you are personally and professionally are the things that are important. □



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