



Great Leaders Need GAS

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Abstract

Efforts to identify critical characteristics of a great school leader have missed or not effectively captured the essence of one especially important characteristic that fuels the other characteristics into successful action. GAS is used as an acronym for a vernacular phrase that encapsulates the strength and effect of this critical characteristic. The role GAS plays in supporting great educational leadership is explained using fuel metaphors. This characteristic is so critical that all potential new educational leaders should be assessed for GAS to ensure they have what it takes to become a great leader. It is concluded that “GREAT LEADERS” are not possible without GAS.

Keywords: School, Leadership, Passion, Energy, Great leader

Criss Jami (2012) wrote, “I would rather be an artist than a leader. Ironically, a leader has to follow rules.” True, but how much artistic freedom would there be under rule-less leaders? Nevertheless, Jami is absolutely correct. The literature in educational leadership overflows with rules leaders must follow to be effective: Be this, don’t be that; do this, don’t do that. As suggested, rules for leaders are important, and a critical rule presented here is: Great educational leaders need **GAS!** But before discussing **GAS**, let’s review the concept of effective leadership rules.

Effective leadership rules are called by many names: characteristics, behaviors, principles, traits, attribute, habits, and so on. They describe acts or dispositions of leaders. To be consistent with the literature on effective educational leaders, rules will be referred to as “characteristics.” Sets of these characteristics are often embedded into effective leadership models that include synonymic if not duplicate characteristics. Many models do provide exceptional insight about effective leadership based on field research and/or direct experience. Undeniably and despite the lack of universality—and even contradictions (Persell, 1982)—these effective leadership models can help guide aspiring and currently practicing leaders alike.

Although all characteristics embedded in a specific model are often described as systemic and symbiotic, there is one identified characteristic that embraces and guides the others. Without this guiding characteristic, effective leadership would be without direction, and leader actions would occur randomly and discombobulated. Fullan (2001) referred to this guiding characteristic as “moral purpose.” Much had, has, and will continue to be written about this guiding characteristic. Suffice it to say, all human actions must be directed to achieve positive, productive results and goals. Moreover, without moral guidance or direction, leader actions can produce meaningless acts that achieve little to nothing and can even do evil and harm. The significance of moral purpose in leadership requires little debate. The specific moral purpose for educational leaders is also undeniable: making a positive difference in the lives of all students (Fullan; Krasnoff, 2015; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

Some effective leadership sets identify a characteristic that energizes the other characteristics into action. This characteristic has been called passion, energy, intensity, caring, dedication, commitment, etc. But what triggers this energizing force? Does moral purpose give rise to this energy? Can someone have a moral purpose without energy? Can someone with moral purpose choose to just sit on the sidelines rather than be active? Moral purpose alone does not always trigger action no matter how deeply one believes in that purpose. It is not inconsistent of human nature for someone to hold a deep belief in something and then act in contradiction to that belief. Human history abounds with such acts, and there is even a theory in psychology that explains such human behavior: cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). Something else other than a deep moral purpose must serve as the trigger to moral leadership action—a characteristic that fuels moral purpose and all the other characteristics into coherent, energized action.

One previously, specifically unidentified characteristic exists that fuels all other characteristics. It is the fuel, the spark, the connection between moral purpose and energized action. Without this fueling characteristic, leadership with moral purpose but without energy would produce limp actions, or no actions at all. Similarly, leadership with high energy but with no connection to moral purpose would result in meaningless, undirected spurts

of actions. Without this fueling characteristic, schools would be either lifeless or undirected—but either way—un-achieving globs of humanity.

This fueling characteristic is best termed as GAS. Yes, “GAS!” And no, “GAS” does not refer to intestinal “gas” or fossil “gas.” “GAS” is an acronym. Unfortunately, the world of education is already abundant with acronyms. One of the most famous acronyms in educational leadership is POSDCORB. As a former master university professor illustrated in his classroom, this acronym represents the many functions of an educational leader. He would explain what function each letter in the acronym stood for:

P **O** **S** **D** **C** **O** **R** **B**
 rganizing taffing irecting | ordinating eporting udgeting
 lanning

This professor would then introduce another acronym representing school district staff: COSOB. He would introduce the meaning of the acronym similarly as he did POSDCORB, explaining that the “C” stood for “Central,” and the “O” stood for “Office.”

C **O** **S** **O** **B**
 entral ffice

He would then stop and say that we could figure out what the last three letters “SOB” stood for. Thus, COSOB stood for: Central Office “SOB.” This lesson, of course, drew laughter from the students in the class. As an acronym, GAS is not meant to elicit laughter, but to facilitate a better understanding of a critical and underlying characteristic of great leadership—even though it may produce a giggle or two. So, what does GAS stand for?

GAS represents a strong, compelling emotion that underlies, fuels, and sparks profuse passion, exciting energy, incredible intensity, consummate commitment, and determined dedication. But, more importantly, GAS connects fueled action to moral purpose that then leads to great leadership. So again, what does GAS stand for? It is a vernacular phrase that represents the fuel necessary for great leadership. GAS means:

G **A** **S**
 ive h**

Of course, readers can complete “it” to identify the full vernacular phrase that GAS represents. So, why does this phrase represent the most basic characteristic needed for great educational leadership?

In fact, this basic characteristic to excellence is not restricted to just leaders. Think about every great teacher who works days, nights, weekends and even holidays to ensure every child is afforded the best opportunity to achieve success. Of course, this teacher has passion, caring, commitment, dedication, etc. for his/her job. But this herculean effort cannot be explained merely by these limiting concepts. No doubt, this teacher has GAS—the teacher Gives A Sh** about his/her students!

Think about a parent who attends every parent meeting at school, visits his/her child’s teachers, helps the children with homework, and goes without for him/herself to provide for his/her children. Of course, this parent—like almost all parents—loves, cares, and is dedicated, passionate, and committed to his/her children. But, more importantly, this parent has GAS for his/her children’s education and future—this parent Gives A Sh** about his/her children!

Now, think about a time you were at a school before the school day began or after it ended. During this time, did you find some students in school studying or working hard to improve on something? It may be math, sports, music, or several learning interests, but there are students who try to do their best to learn and even spend extra time to do it. These students have GAS—they Gives A Sh** about their learning! These students go the extra mile, do their work, and behave appropriately—they use their GAS to ensure themselves a better future. The fact is most young students have lots of GAS, it may just be focused on things other than school learning.

This time think about that school leader who, as the teacher described above, works diligently and endlessly to make a positive difference in the life of every student. This is a school leader who goes without administrative luxuries to provide the learning resources needed by students and staff and who works tirelessly to help the community support student learning. This school leader is everywhere students are: in sport events, academic events, in the lunchroom, in the hallways, and afterschool interacting with students and staff alike. This school leader also identifies ways to improve the school in all areas to support a positive, safe, maximum learning and work environment, and then, gathers the necessary resources to actualize improvement. This school leader,

when confronted with a professional and moral dilemma, is willing to lose his/her job or position in the quest to ensure maximum learning for all students. This is the ultimate sacrifice and criterion for effective leaders as identified by Howard Gardner: “If you are not prepared to resign or be fired for what you believe in, then you are not a worker, let alone a professional. You are a slave.” (as quoted in Fyer, March 2007, p. 11) This leader is willing to fall on the sword for his/her moral purpose—welcoming martyrdom over failure and rejection. This great educational leader **Gives A Sh**** about making a positive difference in the lives of all students!

Finally, think about this same teacher, parent, student, and educational leader without GAS. They would work, learn, and live complacently embracing mediocrity or less because they have no fuel to act on their passion, dedication, commitment, purpose, etc. It is the fuel inherent in GAS that triggers all other characteristics into action guided by the moral purpose. When a school leader with all the other leader characteristics but without GAS faces that moral sword, s/he will not have the necessary fuel to act and cross the line of ultimate conviction. Instead, that school leader will retreat from and negotiate away his/her moral purpose—experiencing cognitive dissonance. Mediocrity in leadership and education rears its ugly head in the presence of GAS-less leaders and making a positive difference for all students is sacrificed.

Can a school reach effectiveness with a GAS-less leader? Sure, GAS in those being led can make a difference. There are probably many schools with GAS-less educational leaders that achieve because of the many GAS-ful teachers, staff, parents, and even students in the school learning community. But, to go from effective to excellent, the school leader also must have GAS in his/her own tank! It is the great responsibility of the GAS-ful school leader to align and focus the moral purpose of the learning community that may include different shades of that moral purpose—making a positive difference in student athletics, band, choir, cheerleading, dance team, or other student-related areas. They are all important! But, oneness in the moral purpose of the school is necessary to guide the many GAS-fueled actions required to achieve excellence. When a learning community embraces a unified moral purpose, then the total GAS in its communal tank reflects its maximum potential for success. A GAS-filled learning community guided by a unified moral purpose and competent in the skills necessary to improve knows no bounds!

It is important to note that just as cars may run out of gas, or get it siphoned out, so too can a leader run out of GAS and even get it siphoned out by the demands and threats of the job. Therefore, just as cars, leaders too must fill up their tanks and refuel with GAS from time to time. This may involve going into the hallways and working more directly with students and feeding off their energy, or in other ways. Different leaders may go to different GAS stations to refuel!

Gas fuels most cars. So, before a trip, we check to make sure the car has enough gas to get us where we want to go. GAS also fuels leaders to get them where they want to go—making a positive difference in the lives of all students. So, in preparing for a trip with school improvement as the destination and when hiring, developing or evaluating leaders for that trip, check all their leadership characteristics—but most importantly, check for GAS in their tanks to make sure they have fuel in there. No one wants their school stranded in the middle of nowhere with no GAS. Additionally, as gas fuels cars to victory, GAS fuels leaders to greatness! So, without GAS, leaders do not run, let alone reach greatness.

The American school process may be conceptualized as a network of superhighways. The superhighways take different routes, but all lead to a great metropolis that includes the ultimate goals of maximum student success. There are places for future doctors, lawyers, engineers, technicians, educators, and many more student success destinations. Within this network of superhighways, different fueling sources must be available for the many cars to refuel with GAS. On these superhighways, 24-hour roadside assistance is available to help cars that may run out of gas or experience mechanical problems. This service is especially necessary for cars with young student drivers. A school is a network of superhighways with cars moving toward the same destination but using different routes to get there. Many cars run smoothly and get to their destinations with little to no problems. Other cars may need support to help them reach their ultimate destination.

It takes many things to make a school great, but one thing for sure: “It takes GAS!” It takes GAS in parents, teachers, students, and in school leaders too. So, let us stop asking educational leaders: “do you care,” “do you have passion,” “are you energized,” “are you intense,” or “do you love your profession?” Instead, to identify potential great leaders, we need to ask: “Do you have GAS?” or “Do you Give A Sh** about making a positive difference in the education and lives of all students?” In making hiring decisions for educational leaders, begin by first checking the prospect’s fuel tank: “No GAS, No Go!” If the prospect does Give A Sh** then continue the vetting process.

Finally, if you are a practicing educational leader and you need to rev up your school for greater success, then put the pedal to the metal and give it some GAS! Excellence in education demands leaders with GAS—otherwise known as GREAT LEADERS. It is simple to see, without GAS, the best you can hope to be is a “RET LEADER” and nothing more. GREAT LEADERS need GAS. More clearly stated, GREAT LEADERS Give A Sh**! And now, you too can complete the rest of “it” yourself.

Works Citation

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Biographical Sketch

Dr. George Padilla earned a Ph.D. in Educational Administration from the University of Texas at Austin in 1997. He worked in the Texas Public Schools as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, central office administrator, and superintendent. During this time, he also served as an adjunct professor for the University of Texas—Pan American teaching educational administration courses including statistics, principalship, curriculum, community relations, and personnel services. He is currently an Assistant Professor in Organization and School Leadership at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. His research interests focus on the development, practice, and effects of successful school leadership. Dr. Padilla hopes his research and teaching at UTRGV help produce greater school leaders who will develop learning communities where every child can learn and develop to his/her maximum personal potential.