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## Leadership and Symbols: Words Alone Are Never Enough

In early 1990, a few weeks after Joseph A. Fernandez became the head of the New York City school system, a headline in the *New York Times* announced: "... Schools Chancellor Got Off to a Quick Start." How did the *Times* know that Fernandez had gotten off to a quick start? The chancellor had already fired three principals and two superintendents.

One principal had pleaded guilty to welfare fraud; another had failed to do anything about a teacher charged with molesting students; the third had been unable to control disorderly behavior. One superintendent was being investigated for dubious expenses; the other, Fernandez said, was simply "terrible."

In part, Fernandez was trying to fix a serious problem: incompetent and corrupt management. But he was also trying to convert the firings into a very visible symbol that could send his entire organization a message: "Things are going to change. This behavior is no longer acceptable."

Usually, as in the New York case, the change symbolized by banished employees is strictly negative: This behavior, though once acceptable, no longer is. It is much harder to use the firing to symbolize a positive message—to suggest the kind of behavior that now is desirable and necessary.

Nevertheless, that approach can work. Five days after Charles M. Atkins became the Massachusetts welfare commissioner, a front-page story in the *Boston Globe* described how a mother and daughter had lost their welfare benefits and were "homeless today as a direct result of the actions of the state Department of Public Welfare." The child was a special-needs student, but this "was not our problem," the depart-

ment's legal counsel told the *Globe*. "I don't want to sound callous, but housing is not our responsibility."

Atkins immediately fired the legal counsel for "policy views that are not in concert with this administration's commitment to the poor." And he called the *Globe* to say that the woman and daughter would "not be thrown out on the street," that their benefits would be continued. "If housing isn't our direct responsibility, helping her find housing is. If we can't do it, we should find the proper people who can." Atkins used the public firing to demonstrate what new behavior was required. He wanted everyone in his department to understand their new collective—and individual—responsibility.

Firing an errant employee is not, however, the only symbol that a manager can use to convey a message. One morning, Ira A. Jackson, then the commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Revenue, awoke to discover the newspapers reporting that one of his agency's tax-refund checks, for \$108, had bounced. A quick check suggested that the error had not been made by the department but by the bank. What to do? The department could get the papers to print a clarification—on page 47 below the obituaries. Instead, Jackson had his department issue a new refund check. Then, that same day, after alerting the press, he went over to the office of the woman whose check had bounced.

There, with cameras clicking, Jackson delivered the new check to the charmed taxpayer and an important message both to taxpayers and to his agency's employees: "The department isn't a large

bureaucracy without a face or a heart. People run it, and people are capable of solving problems caused by the system. I will see to it that anyone else with a similar problem gets equally prompt service." The newly issued check symbolized this message. And in the next day's newspapers, the picture of Jackson, the taxpayer and the check played even bigger than the original story.

A leader's task—to get hundreds or even thousands of people to collectively and intelligently pursue a common mission—is most challenging. To get an organization to accomplish anything, a leader has to deliver the same, clear message to everyone throughout the organization.

Still, words alone are never enough. Words are always open to misinterpretation.

And besides, who knows if the manager really means it. Thus, a leader, as Confucius said, "acts before he speaks, and afterwards speaks according to his actions."

The action itself becomes a symbol. It conveys a message. Unfortunately, what message is contained in the symbolic action is open to wide interpretation. Consequently, the leader needs to accompany the symbol with his or her own explication. Just as the words cannot convey the message alone, neither can the symbol. A leader needs both.

To lead their agencies, public managers need symbols. Sometimes they create those symbols. Sometimes they exploit symbols created by others. In either case, they need to manage the message of the symbol by providing their own explicit interpretation.

Leadership is the management of symbols. □



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