LEADERSHIP LENS

Dr. Douglas Hendrix Sr.
Superintendent/CEO of Schools

The Courage to Become — When Doing Right Costs Something

November 3, 2026

I have come to believe that courage is the foundation upon which every meaningful virtue of leadership must stand. Honesty is admirable until the truth threatens a relationship. Integrity is celebrated until doing the right thing costs you personally. Compassion is easy to profess until helping one person requires disappointing another. Vision sounds wonderful until it demands that we leave something familiar behind. Accountability is popular until it reaches someone we know, someone we like, or perhaps ourselves. In those moments, courage becomes the difference between the principles we profess and the principles we actually possess. Without courage, our values are decorations hanging on the walls of our character, admired when the weather is pleasant but unable to shelter anyone when the storm arrives.

Leadership brings pressures from every direction. Some come from families seeking answers, employees wanting better conditions, elected officials exercising oversight, and communities demanding improvement. These pressures deserve our attention. Others come from relationships seeking privileges, personalities seeking recognition, individuals protecting familiar arrangements, and people who have grown comfortable benefiting from conditions they publicly claim to oppose. A leader must possess the wisdom to distinguish between pressure that reveals a problem and pressure intended to prevent its solution. Both can be loud, but only one cares about making things better.

I sometimes imagine an aging house whose plumbing has been patched so many times that nobody remembers where the original pipes run. The water still flows, although unevenly. Some rooms receive more than they need, while others struggle to receive enough. Everyone knows which faucet to turn, which valve to avoid, and which leak to tolerate. Then someone decides the house deserves a better system. Suddenly, walls must be opened, old connections examined, and weak places exposed. The pressure of change does not necessarily create the weakness. Often, it reveals what years of accommodation have concealed. And the person trying to repair the plumbing may be blamed for the water appearing on the floor.

That is often what organizational becoming feels like. A district examines resource allocation, staffing, contracts, instruction, and long-standing practices. People accustomed to exceptions may experience consistency as punishment. Those who benefited from familiar arrangements may describe fairness as hostility. A necessary restructuring becomes a personal attack. A questioned contract becomes evidence of disloyalty. An employee asked to meet reasonable expectations may speak more about mistreatment than performance. Change becomes difficult because the people who learned to navigate the old plumbing may have little interest in seeing it replaced.

And this is where courage requires discernment. I am amazed by how frequently people communicate feelings to feelings until an entire conversation becomes detached from what actually happened. One person says a decision feels unfair. Another, without examining the facts, concludes that leadership must be targeting someone. A third repeats the allegation, a fourth adds an interpretation, and soon the story has traveled farther than the evidence ever could. Five people repeating one original account may sound like five witnesses when one story is producing four echoes. Feelings deserve consideration, but they do not automatically become findings. Suspicion is not evidence, repetition is not verification, and volume is not proof.

Consider a district establishing consistent lesson-planning expectations to strengthen instruction. The conversation can become an accusation that leadership does not trust teachers. A principal addresses chronic tardiness because children are waiting for instruction, and suddenly the discussion concerns whether the principal is compassionate. A district reviews unnecessary positions or limits discretionary spending to protect classroom resources, and someone declares that leadership does not value employees. Leaders must listen and correct themselves when warranted, but we cannot allow the emotional interpretation of a decision to become more authoritative than its purpose, evidence, and consequences. Wisdom requires us to care about how people feel without surrendering our obligation to determine what is true.

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What troubles me most is how frequently the language of children's needs is used to advance interests that have little to do with children. Someone invokes students while advocating for a preferred assignment, a protected arrangement, a particular adult, or an exception for a select few. Sometimes the concern is sincere, and we must be careful enough to know the difference. But whenever children are used to justify a request, we should ask which children will benefit, how they will benefit, what evidence supports the request, and what the decision will cost the children who are not represented in the conversation. Fairness must extend beyond the people who have access to our offices.

Self-interest can be especially difficult to recognize when it learns the language of service. It speaks warmly about unity while cultivating division. It warns us about people who supposedly hate us while nurturing its own resentment. It praises transparency until transparency reaches its preferred arrangement. It celebrates accountability until accountability approaches a friend. It may even form convenient alliances with people it privately distrusts because the relationship serves a temporary objective. None of us is immune to these temptations. That is why leaders must examine their own motives as carefully as they examine others'. The desire to be admired, protected, or vindicated can distort judgment as surely as the desire for money or authority.

I have met very few people who do not wrestle with the affliction of what I want. We want appreciation, security, advancement, recognition, influence, and comfort. Those desires are human. They become dangerous when they rise above the responsibilities we have accepted. The question is whether we can recognize when what we want begins competing with what others need. In public education, that distinction carries extraordinary consequences because the resources involved do not belong to us. They belong to the public, and their highest purpose is to serve children.

The realities facing Clayton County make this responsibility impossible to treat casually. Economic hardship touches far too many households, and approximately one in four children lives below the poverty threshold. These children did not choose the circumstances surrounding their lives. Some arrive at school carrying the weight of housing instability, financial insecurity, family hardship, or opportunities limited long before they entered a classroom. They cannot afford for adults to spend years protecting arrangements that do not work. They cannot wait for us to settle every personal disagreement before improving instruction. Their childhoods are passing while we deliberate, and the consequences of our delay may follow them into adulthood.

I think about the child who reaches third grade without the reading skills needed to understand a science textbook. I think about the gifted student whose abilities remain hidden because nobody has looked beyond the circumstances of the child's home. I think about the young person who could become an engineer, electrician, physician, teacher, or entrepreneur if we would build a clear pathway between education and opportunity. These children deserve more than our sympathy. They deserve a system organized around their success, even when creating that system requires decisions some adults will not welcome. The children eat first because their futures cannot remain negotiable while adults settle questions of preference.

Perhaps that is why I have never understood falling in love with a position. I respect the office of Superintendent and the trust placed in me, but I do not love the title, privileges, or visibility. I love what the work can make possible. The position is temporary. The responsibility is real. I have no desire to remain in a seat beyond my ability to serve effectively. Leadership should never become a monument we build to ourselves and then ask the institution to maintain. A good leader should be willing to plant trees beneath whose shade someone else will sit. The harvest matters more than the name of the person holding the shovel.

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I know this approach invites criticism. My decisions will be questioned, my methods examined, and perhaps even my motives misunderstood. Public leadership should be subject to scrutiny, and no leader deserves immunity from legitimate criticism. I must remain willing to listen, reconsider, apologize, and correct what I get wrong. But criticism cannot become the compass by which we make every decision. If avoiding disapproval becomes our primary ambition, we eventually surrender our judgment to whoever is most willing to express it.

Authentic leadership can create tension where no conflict was intended. Sometimes a relationship changes because you cannot grant a request. Someone who once encouraged you becomes disappointed when the rules apply to them. Someone who appreciated your accessibility begins questioning your character when accessibility doesn't earn preference. Not every disagreement proves a leader is courageous; sometimes the leader is simply wrong. But sometimes a principled decision will cost a relationship, and courage requires accepting that cost without becoming bitter. I want my conduct to leave people with as little legitimate reason as possible to say I mistreated them, even when they disagree with my decisions. I cannot control every interpretation, but I can choose to be truthful, respectful, consistent, and fair. My hope is that the fruit of the work will eventually speak more clearly than the noise surrounding it.

When courage disappears from an organization, people doing their jobs can become targets for enforcing expectations that should never have been optional. A principal insisting on effective instruction is labeled unreasonable. A supervisor documenting poor performance is accused of creating conflict. An employee reporting a legitimate concern discovers that silence would have been more comfortable. Meanwhile, those who avoid responsibility may appear agreeable, those who manage appearances may seem more successful than those producing results, and convenient falsehoods may outweigh evidence. Eventually, the organization begins rewarding the very behaviors preventing its improvement.

Apathy then settles in gradually, like dust in a room nobody intends to clean. Good employees stop raising concerns. Capable leaders avoid necessary conversations. People learn that following the rules may create more difficulty than finding a way around them. Children may never see the meetings where these compromises occur, yet they experience the consequences in inconsistent instruction, uneven expectations, missed opportunities, and resources that never reach the places that need them most. Comfort can be expensive, especially when its cost is transferred to children. Many organizational crises are simply difficult decisions somebody postponed. Problems earn interest, and eventually somebody inherits both the principal and the interest.

I am not suggesting that every tradition is wrong or every change represents progress. Stability can be a gift to people who have endured too much uncertainty. Sometimes courage means slowing down, protecting something valuable, or admitting that a proposed change is not working. But we must distinguish stability from stagnation. Stability gives people firm ground from which to grow. Stagnation asks them to remain where they are because movement would inconvenience someone. Our children need stability that supports their becoming, not comfort that confines their possibilities.

To those who aspire to leadership, I offer something more useful than the promise that leadership will be rewarding. It will be demanding. Some days, the right decision is clear and the consequences frightening. The person requesting an exception may be someone you admire. The employee requiring correction may be someone you care about. The truth may threaten an arrangement that has made your own work easier. You will discover whether your principles are commitments or preferences. Courage is rarely announced by a dramatic moment. More often, it appears in a quiet office, an uncomfortable conversation, a signature withheld, a concern reported, or a decision made correctly when doing otherwise would have been easier.

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And those who are led must become more thoughtful about what we demand from leaders. We cannot insist upon accountability and condemn everyone who holds someone accountable. We cannot demand fairness while expecting exceptions for ourselves. We cannot call for transparency and punish people for telling truths we would rather not hear. We cannot ask for improvement while refusing to examine familiar practices. Leadership exists within a shared moral environment. The courage of the person in charge matters, but so does the courage of the people surrounding that person.

I often return to the image of a bridge. Its strength is not known on a quiet day when nothing crosses it. Its strength is revealed when the weight arrives, the wind rises, and the structure must carry people safely from one side to the other. Leadership is much the same. Honesty, empathy, integrity, wisdom, and vision are the materials that build the bridge. Courage is what allows those materials to hold together under pressure. Without it, the structure may look impressive from a distance, but the people depending upon it remain in danger.

The children of Clayton County depend on us to build something strong enough to carry them. They need excellent instruction, safe schools, responsible stewardship, consistent expectations, and opportunities beyond graduation. They need adults who can disagree without becoming enemies, make difficult decisions without becoming cruel, and place institutional responsibility above personal preference. Decency does not require weakness. Accountability does not require humiliation. Authority does not require enemies. We can be adamant about standards and decent toward people at the same time. We must be.

When I say the children eat first, I understand that the declaration will sometimes require adults to accept less than they want. A preferred arrangement may not continue. A requested exception may not be granted. A resource may need to go somewhere other than where an influential person wants it. A relationship may become impossible to maintain without compromising our responsibility. These are difficult choices, but something is harder: looking into the eyes of a child whose opportunity was diminished because the adults entrusted with protecting it lacked the courage to do what was necessary.

I did not come to this work to become comfortable, admired, or indispensable. I came to help. I want children to learn to read, discover their gifts, and move beyond the limitations that poverty and circumstance may have placed around them. I want employees to work in an institution where expectations are clear, excellence is recognized, and fairness does not depend upon relationships. I want a community served by a school district that solves problems rather than preserves them. And when my time in this position ends, I want the work to continue because we built something stronger than any one personality.

Perhaps that is the final test of courage: whether we are willing to become less important so the mission can succeed. Whether we can endure misunderstanding without surrendering integrity, accept criticism without abandoning compassion, and make difficult decisions without losing our humanity. Whether we understand that the office is temporary, the responsibility is sacred, and the people we serve must never become instruments of our ambition.

The pipes of becoming will be tested. The pressure will rise. Some familiar connections will not survive the work of building something better. But I would rather repair what is broken than spend my years decorating the walls around it. I would rather be accountable for the discomfort of necessary change than for the quiet suffering caused by our refusal to change. And I would rather leave behind children whose opportunities have expanded than a collection of people who remember only that I made them comfortable.

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Courage is what keeps honesty honest, integrity intact, compassion responsible, and vision alive when the cost of practicing them becomes real. It asks us to place our hands on the work, our principles beneath the pressure, and our children's futures above our own desire for approval.

The children eat first. That is the promise. Courage is what keeps us from breaking it when keeping it becomes difficult.

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