

Leadership That Lasts:

By Terry O'Banion

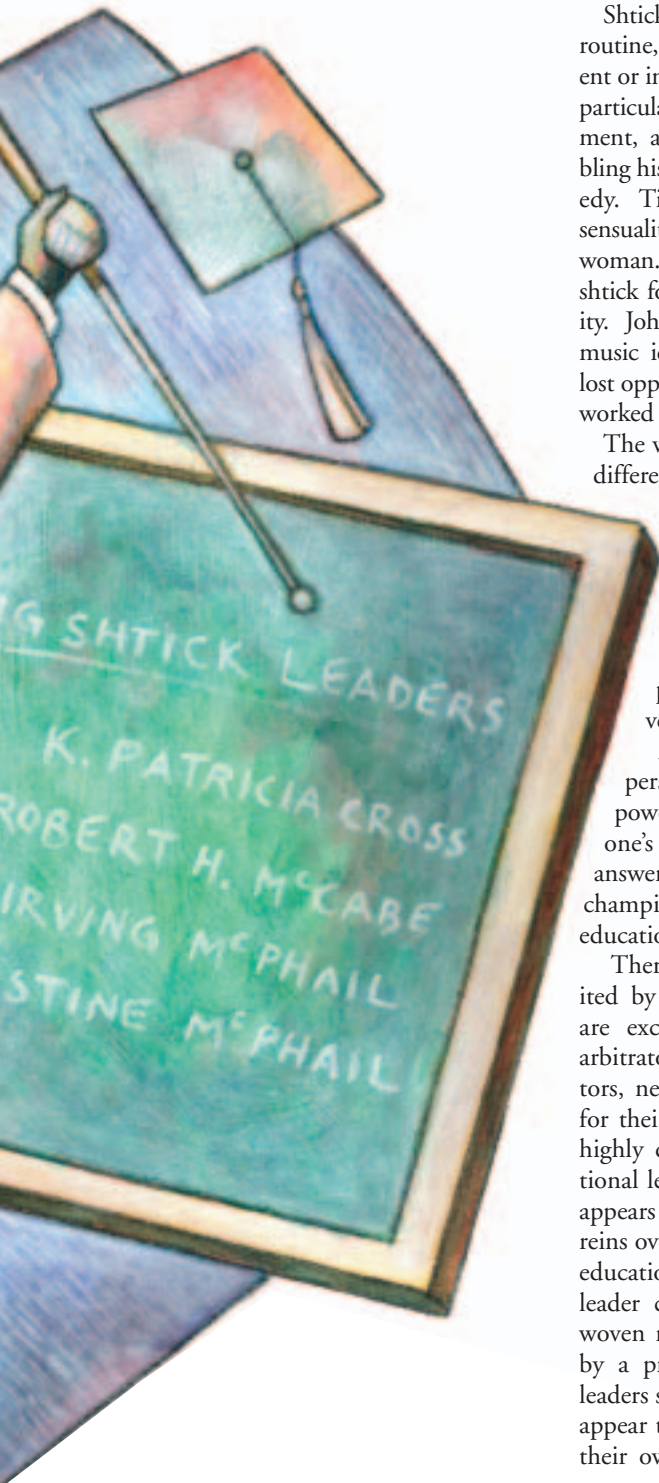
Every great educational leader wants to have lasting impact on the field or institution in which he or she works. Mediocre leaders hope to reach retirement with undistinguished records without rocking the boat. Incompetent leaders pray that retirement will come before they are discovered. In this article we are concerned only with those who desire to become great educational leaders who, through their vision—their “shtick”—make a significant and lasting contribution recognized and honored beyond the arena from which they receive their paycheck.

The word “shtick” is associated with show business and usually refers to a comedy routine made famous by a gifted personality. Rodney Dangerfield’s shtick is to play the schmuck who gets no respect. Jerry Seinfeld has created an elaborate shtick of making something out of nothing in which mundane, everyday situations are filled with tension and blown out of proportion for humorous effect. Gallagher smashes fruit all over his audience with a large mallet, ending with his signature shtick by smashing watermelons.



ILLUSTRATION BY SCOTT BAKAL

Walk Softly and Carry a



Shtick does not always refer to a comedy routine, however. It also means a special talent or interest that becomes identified with a particular person. In the world of entertainment, actor Hugh Grant's shtick is mumblying his way through a light, romantic comedy. Tina Turner's shtick displays the sensuality and energy of a mature and exotic woman. Britney Spears is known by her shtick for youthful and untouchable sexuality. Johnny Cash has become a country music icon for his mournful renditions of lost opportunity—a common shtick that has worked for many singers in country music.

The world of education is not that much different from the world of show business except for the pay differential and the fact that, in education, there are very few laughs and very little glamour. In education we have our shtick, too, and the leaders who make a real impact, who provide leadership that lasts, carry a very big shtick.

A leader's shtick is the vision, the personal mission, the driving force, the powerful idea that manifests itself in one's life work. Upon retirement, the answer to the question "What have you championed as your major contribution to education?" reveals a leader's shtick.

There are various levels of shtick exhibited by educational leaders. Some leaders are exceptional collaborators, managers, arbitrators, facilitators, healers, orchestrators, networkers. These leaders are known for their *process shtick*, and while these are highly desirable skills in any good educational leader, the impact of these skills disappears quickly when the leader turns the reins over to another leader. We all know of educational institutions in which the new leader completely unraveled the carefully woven network of communication created by a predecessor. Such behavior by new leaders seems to be the norm as new leaders appear to be genetically motivated to plant their own shtick in institutional pastures.

For those leaders who want to see their impact last beyond retirement, process shtick is highly vulnerable to change—especially by the next president.

Some leaders could care less about process shtick and leave that to others in the institution to monitor and maintain. A second group of leaders—wanting to make a lasting impact—value *resource shtick*. The vision and mission of these leaders is to gather and herd resources for the institution or program they lead. In the great growth period of the 1960s many community college leaders, by necessity, were known for their building prowess. They secured support to create buildings to house the resources that were to make community colleges a permanent addition to the higher education scene. More recently, the resource shtick has motivated leaders to create foundations and partnerships with business and industry to channel resources into the institution. Some leaders have honed their political skills to create favorable alliances with local and state legislators to the benefit of their institutions. Resource shtick is also a highly desirable attribute of leaders, along with process shtick. But while it may have more lasting impact than process shtick, (The gymnasium usually outlasts the model of shared governance.) it tends to be local by nature. Except for the buildings constructed during a leader's tenure, and then only the one embellished with the leader's name, the other resources are quickly co-opted by the new leader. Leaders who want to make a lasting impact can do so by husbanding resources, but that impact will almost always be limited to a local arena, and it too, is vulnerable to change by those who follow.

For the kind of leadership that lasts beyond institutional walls, beyond retirement, even beyond death—great leaders who make an impact do so with *idea shtick*. Ideas can be local, of course, but if they are profound ideas, substantive ideas that transcend the local, they can have enormous

Big Shtick!

impact in the educational world. Leaders who carry a big shtick, especially a big idea shtick, will have the most impact. Theirs is the leadership that will last. Some useful shtick principles can be derived from observing how some of the great leaders have practiced this concept.

Big Shtick Leaders

K. Patricia Cross, professor emerita, University of California, Berkeley, has championed a number of key ideas in her extraordinary career. She has been a great predictor acutely attuned to movements stirring in higher education and giving voice to those movements in her research and writing. Her book, *Beyond the Open Door* (1971), predicted the arrival of the “new student,” which became part of the vocabulary of the 1970s. In *Adults as Learners* (1981) she wrote lucidly about adult learners, which became the focus of a great deal of higher education policy, programs, and practice throughout the 1980s. For these two key ideas, and others, she is internationally known and will continue to be known as one of the most gifted educators of her time.

Not one to rest on her laurels, at the end of the 1980s Pat Cross created the concept of Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs) for which she is widely known today. This basic, but profound, idea makes it possible, with no additional resources from the budget, for classroom teachers to determine immediately whether or not students are learning what teachers believe they are teaching. Because this idea is substantive, clear, and simple to apply, it may be the most ubiquitous innovation currently practiced in the field of education. Hundreds of colleges and thousands of educators implement CATs on a daily basis. It has been reported that over 400 professors at Harvard utilize CATs in their classrooms.

The idea of CATs is original with Cross. It probably emerged from her earlier research and her careful analysis and interpretation of the research of colleagues, as well as her own classroom practice. No great idea springs full-blown from the head of Zeus or from the head of educational leaders. She formed the original notion, nurtured it through several forms, tried it out in practice, and gave it life through her publications and presentations. When the shtick is original the idea may be more powerful than implementations of adapted ideas. Certainly the leader who creates the



original idea can take pleasure in the satisfaction that comes with its impact.

Robert H. McCabe, president emeritus of Miami-Dade Community College, also carries a big idea shtick. In fact, he has carried a number in his career and continues to carry two for which he is particularly well known. During his 16 years as president at Miami-Dade, McCabe was very adept at process shtick and resource shtick, skills that contributed to Miami-Dade’s international reputation as a flagship community college. But he is known today and will continue to be known in the literature for many years to come for his two great idea shticks: the endowed teaching chair and programs in developmental education. Miami-Dade provided the laboratory for the testing out of these two ideas, but the value of the ideas transcended local territory, and they have been widely copied by community colleges across the country.

McCabe was one of the nation’s first educators to articulate the idea of the endowed teaching chair, an idea that emerged as part of a major educational reform effort at Miami-Dade. Not only did he champion this idea in articles and speeches, he created an action agenda to establish 100 endowed teaching chairs at Miami-Dade and used his resource shtick to garner funds to support

the programs and his process shtick to embed the idea in the culture at Miami-Dade. Leaders transcend the norm for impact when they embrace creative ideas, provide resources for their implementation, and pay attention to how the ideas are placed into practice—when they combine the process, resource, and idea shtick.

McCabe, of course, did not invent developmental education, but he has been one of its foremost and most creative practitioners. Miami-Dade was a perfect laboratory for developmental education, with the majority of its students speaking English as a second language. McCabe rallied the troops at Miami-Dade around the goal of increasing access with quality. Together they created numerous programs of assessment, admissions, advising, placement, and support that made Miami-Dade’s under prepared students among the most successful in the country. Through his articles and monographs, presentations at national conferences, and service on national commissions McCabe championed his idea shtick regarding developmental education and made a lasting impact on higher education.

Irving McPhail, chancellor of the Community College of Baltimore County, and Christine McPhail, director of the Community College Leadership Program at Morgan State University, are a husband and wife team who share a big idea shtick. In each of their positions of leadership they have strongly embraced the idea that education is going through a revolution in which learning should be placed first in every policy, program, and practice. Irving McPhail has used the idea as leverage for creating a one-college confederation from three existing community colleges in Baltimore—a challenge that could not be met by previous leaders. Named chancellor in 1998, McPhail launched an ambitious agenda with a five-year strategic plan aptly named LearningFirst. Today the college is struggling to implement the Learning Revolution by selecting and training faculty who are learning centered, by using technology to increase and improve student learning, and by creating and assessing learning outcomes for programs and courses. A key component of the LearningFirst plan is to make all budget decisions based on whether or not the action improves and expands student learning. As a result of these early efforts, the college was selected by a committee of international leaders to be one of 12 Vanguard Learning Colleges in a project coordi-

nated by the League for Innovation in the Community College.

Christine McPhail had already begun to implement her big idea shtick on the Learning Revolution as president of Cypress College in California when she moved to Baltimore to head a new doctoral program to prepare community college leaders at Morgan State. She designed much of the new program on the core principles from a book, *A Learning College for the 21st Century*, which outlines what a college would be like if it placed learning first in every policy, program, and practice. She is preparing future leaders to be competent presidents, but presidents with a built-in big shtick to ensure that they will have significant impact on their institutions.

Both of these leaders are implementing a major, new idea in the arenas for which they have responsibility, but they are also very aware that they are involved in an idea that transcends the challenges of their immediate workplace. Through their research, their articles, and their presentations they are having a very broad impact on the literature and culture of higher education. They have joined hands to wield a very large idea shtick, and they are wielding it to great advantage.

Big Shtick Principles

From these four examples of leaders who have created or embraced big shtick ideas it is possible to derive a beginning list of principles or guidelines that might be used by other leaders who want to ensure significant impact on education beyond the arena from which they receive their paycheck.

Principle 1—The best way for a leader to profoundly influence education is by creating or embracing a significant idea that provides a vision and an agenda for action. You have to get a shtick that works.

Principle 2—A leader usually champions more than one shtick in a lifetime but is usually remembered for only one.

Principle 3—A few leaders create original shticks, but most are known for the creative adaptations they make of existing shticks.

Principle 4—Big shticks have a lifetime that extends beyond the lifetime of their creators.

Principle 5—Big shticks are often tempered in the cauldron of local fires, but for maximum and lasting impact they must spread across the countryside.

Conclusion

The community college has been an ideal crucible for the creation and adaptation of big shtick ideas. In its one-hundred year history there have been numerous great leaders who have made a lasting impact on education because they have made the community college rich territory for the testing out of big shtick ideas. In today's environment it often seems easier to settle for impact through process and resource shtick, but this is exactly the time we are in need of

the big shtick ideas to keep the community college relevant and essential for the 21st century. If we do not experiment with more big shtick ideas, the community college we know today may cease to exist, and the community college we dream of for the future may never come to be.

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