Years ago, while serving as a wilderness survival instructor, I had the honor of working with many dedicated professionals, including some who were members of the Special Forces. Mountain evacuations and search and rescues were ongoing realities. During those intense moments, I learned volumes about human behavior and peoples’ gut reactions to intense stress and vulnerability. They served as windows into a person’s capacity for selflessness and courage. At others, as harsh indictments tainted by panic, unbridled self-preservation, even selfishness. As we emerge from our pandemic purgatory, these vivid memories are coming back. Judgements of leadership during this crisis are being made, explicitly and implicitly.

Someone much smarter than me once said that all of us face tough choices, and will continue to do so. Sometimes we may avoid them, and at others, take them on directly. But they are all tough in the same way. They pit one powerful right against another. Open schools fully, or not. Get vaccinated, or not. Send our children to school, or not. Wear a mask, or not. I have never been fond of distinguishing between management and leadership. Both are needed. But during these challenging times, stark realities have been presented to school and community leaders that do not have easy answers; compelling problems that are complex, rife with paradoxes, and seemingly no-win dilemmas - all while relying on changing data sets and competing interests. Indeed, given this turmoil, a few have simply preferred to inject doubt, suspicion, and cynicism. But that's another issue.

Leadership during this time of COVID demands a new kind of courage that requires confronting problems that have never yet been successfully addressed. It selects for leaders who live in close proximity to their core values; who may agonize over choices deep into the night, but fully understand and willingly accept their fishbowl existence.

As I learn of the anticipated departure of a number of area School Superintendents and the harsh, vitriolic language directed at our County Health Officer, I must take a respectful pause to recognize these individuals who, despite unrelenting criticism and second guessing, are willing to make controversial decisions and take unpopular positions. From my personal conversations with them throughout the pandemic crisis, sometimes late into the night, I sensed the depth of their sound values as individuals. But sound values raise tough choices; and tough choices are never easy. I extend my respect to them precisely because they stand for something. Whether we agree with them or not, they stand their post and offer the best they can during an unforgiving, even hostile, time in our local history. And that is the cauldron of true leadership.

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