

PUFF THE MAGIC LEADER

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Puff was a magic leader who lived by the school, close by the children who needed her, in a land of little hope. Some said Puff had magical powers that made people follow her, but only some. That is why, not long ago, the land of Lost Horizons hired her to be the leader of their urban school. Everything else they had tried had not worked. No matter what they tried, it didn't seem to help the children of Lost Horizons urban schools be successful, especially since they had begun to get so many "different" children.

At a big meeting held in Lost Horizons Community Center, the president of the school board asked the parents, teachers, administrators and community members present, "What's the problem? Why don't our children learn well?"

"It's the teachers", said the administrators, "they don't do it right. The community won't give us enough money to do it right. It takes more money to teach these children."

"It's the parents and the children," cried the teachers, "they just don't care, and they won't do what we say."

"It's the school board and the administrators," shouted the parents. "They don't know what they are doing. They do not give our children a chance."

"If they would only run it like a business," pleaded the business community." That's how they did it when we went to school, and it worked."

"Your test scores are terrible and your schools are confused," was the gleeful comment of the state department of education and some yuppie school districts from the suburbs. "We don't have these problems in suburban schools. We know how to do it."

What, oh what were they to do? They had tried time and again to hire new leaders, but each new leader wound up like all the previous leaders. Whether they were smart or they were not so smart, they seemed unable to make any difference. The children, even though they were smart, did not seem to do well. They became adults who were lost and unable to fulfill their dreams or become part of the country's dream.

"Send for Puff," someone said. "She's got the magic. She'll make a difference."

"Who is Puff?" asked the school board.

"She lives by the school," they shouted back. "She's the magic Puff, and she will change things."

Many were skeptical. They had never heard of Puff, and they didn't believe in magic. "What we need," they said, "are some good old fashioned educators like we used to have. They knew how to run a school. They just aren't preparing teachers and principals the way they used to. What's wrong at the university? It must be all those liberal professors."

The school board was desperate. "We've tried everything else," they said to one another. "Nothing has worked. Maybe we should try this magic, whatever it is." They summoned Puff before them to see if they wanted her for the leader of the school.

"What is good leadership?" they asked.

"What do you think it is?" responded Puff.

"That's not fair," they said, "we asked you first. We are only the board. You're a leader. We ask the questions, and you give the answers."

"Well then," Puff said, "good leadership is when everyone has the same picture of where you want to go, and you get on the path to get there."

"How do you do that?" the board wanted to know.

"You have to ask smart tough minded questions, get good information and then you just do it together with spirit," replied Puff.

"Is that the magic?" asked the board.

"Some say so," said Puff.

"Do you have the magic?" the board wanted to know.

"The magic is everywhere," Puff said. "It's where you find it."

"Do you have it?" they persisted.

"Sometimes. When I find it," said Puff.

Now the board was very confused by all this. Puff did not seem to give all the answers. Either she had the magic or she did not. All the other leaders had been very sure they knew what to do. Why didn't she? How could they be sure? Was she trying to hide something?

"Do you know that we have an urban school? It is full of different types of children who aren't learning well," inquired the Board.

"Yes, I know about your school. You have children with brains that work in most wondrous and different ways," smiled Puff.

"Could you work the magic in our school?" a board member asked.

"Probably," responded Puff. "You also have teachers with wondrous and different ways."

"Will you do it?" asked the board president.

"Do you want me to?", replied Puff.

"Yes" they said while four board members crossed their fingers when they voted.

"Okay," said Puff. "When do I begin?"

Puff would begin the new school year and see if the magic would work. The teachers in the school were not pleased. Other leaders before had thought they could lead and change things. But it always turned out the same. They never wanted to change the right things and they always blamed the teachers. New leaders were replaced by new leaders, and things were the

same as before, or even worse. No one seemed to understand or figure out what was wrong. Everyone in the school was doing what they were supposed to. The teachers of Lost Horizons did not believe in leaders, anymore. In fact, they did not believe in other teachers, or students, or parents, or experts, or community. What they did believe in was their own work, their own job and the "stuff" they taught to students.

So, when Puff showed up to begin they were all ready to play the school culture and teacher culture game. It had always worked for them. Teachers know how to teach administrators how to keep busy at "principal" work that will keep them from interfering with teacher work. The teachers were strong on doing teacher work: schedules the way they wanted, content they want to teach, order and control in the school and classrooms, student work to be done, parent help that is needed, and principals who support what teachers want. Especially they liked things that let them do their work, in their own ways, as long as blame was not assigned to them when students did not learn well.

All the teachers knew teachers work hard and do their jobs the best they know how. "It is others who are not doing theirs. And besides, everyone knows that some children learn better than others, and some children just don't belong in school. Education just isn't for everyone. Everyone knows that."

"Hello, Boss," they said on Puff's first day, "what do you want us to do today?"

"What do you think you should do?" inquired Puff.

"We want you to order these things. We need them, you see," was the teachers reply. "We have to get our rooms ready."

"Give them to the purchase person," said Puff.

"But, don't you want to talk about it, or argue about it, or mention the budget, or ask us to do with less? Don't you have to go through the catalogs and check on things?" they responded.

"Didn't you say you needed the stuff to teach the children?" asked Puff. "You should know, so we'd better get it. Give them to the purchase person."

"Well if we spend it all now, what will we do later in the year when we may need more stuff?" they wanted to know.

"Good question," said Puff.

"What if some of this stuff doesn't work?" they asked slyly.

"That's an even better question," smiled Puff.

"What are you going to do about that?" they asked triumphantly.

"Why nothing," Puff said in a very gentle voice, "it's not my stuff."

"But you're supposed to do those things," they said angrily. "You're supposed to stay in your office and order things and make these decisions," they insisted.

"Who said?" asked Puff. "I think I'll visit classes."

"That's not how it's done," the teachers said patiently. "We go to classes and you go to office."

"How's that been working?" inquired Puff.

"The best we know how," they said.

Puff smiled and went out the door to classes. A little later they heard laughter in some rooms, and sometimes students talking in excited voices. They soon learned those things happened when Puff visited rooms.

The teachers decided that maybe they had better think a little about the "stuff" they wanted. They formed a committee. They talked to other teachers. They talked to the purchase person. Puff had some ideas. They read catalogs. They talked some to students and parents, and they talked to sales persons. Finally, they said to Puff, "here's our new stuff list and when we need it."

"Is it the most important stuff to help the children learn?" asked Puff. They nodded. "Why don't you give it to the purchase person," smiled Puff. They did, and the stuff came, and it mostly seemed to work with the children's learning.

The students came and they said, "We want soda pop. We want parties after school. We want to dress like we want. We don't have time for homework."

"How will that help you learn?" inquired Puff.

"It will make us happy," they said. "Don't you want happy children?" they asked in a most clever way. They had begun to learn how to play the school game as well. "Happy children make a happy school and a happy school is a good school," and their smiles were beautiful.

"I had smart children more in mind," said Puff. "Don't you want to be smart? Most smart people are happy people because they've figured out what happy is."

"How will the school make us smart?" demanded the students. "It never has before."

"Good question," said Puff. "Let me know when you have some answers."

The students went off and they began to talk and ask questions. They asked other students, members of their family, even some of the teachers that the students thought would understand smart, and they also asked Puff. She usually smiled and said, "Good question, how will that help learning?" Finally, the students came and they had some ideas. They wanted student places in school to be nice. "They treat us like animals in the cafeteria," they complained. "Maybe if everyone treated everyone else with fairness and trust, we wouldn't be so angry. Could we have time to study together and with some of our teachers separately?" they wanted to know.

"Some of the stuff here is old. Can we get new?" they wondered.

They had other suggestions. "We need time to study some things longer than others, and different students have different needs in what to study and work on more. Do we have to stop every fifty minutes? Can't we work on that?" This last one surprised and scared many of the teachers.

"Some of these ideas are very good," said Puff. "They ought to help you become smart." She sent the students to work with the teachers' committees and together they implemented some of

the student ideas. They seemed to work too. Students said, "look what we did for our place and ourselves."

Of course not everything worked right away, and some students were still needed to be straightened out and disciplined. These were sent to Puff. Puff tried to find out what was going on and solve problems in a developmental way. The teachers came to talk.

"You aren't punishing these children." The teachers were angry. "We send them to you, and you don't do anything. How will they learn right from wrong or to obey authority if you don't punish? We can't teach them if they won't mind us." They were pretty hot and persistent about this.

"I talk to them," said Puff. "I try to find out from you and them why you have sent them and what is going on so I can make suggestions about how to work together differently."

"Well, they won't tell the truth," the teachers said, "they are children. Don't you trust us," they demanded. "You are supposed to stay in your office and punish children when we send them," the teachers said. "That's how it works. That's why we have policies. How else can we have order?" they inquired with very determined looks on their face.

"Good question," said Puff. "Let me know if you find an answer," she continued as she walked out the door.

"But you have to stay here and handle these students," they demanded.

"Don't have time," said Puff. "I've got to visit classes."

"But what shall we do?" they demanded.

"What do you want to do?" replied Puff.

"We want these children to mind us and do what we say so they will learn," was the instant reply.

"Why isn't that working?" asked Puff.

"They don't care and their parents don't care," said the teachers.

"Can't do much about 'don't care'," said Puff. "How will punishment help that?" inquired Puff.

For one of the few times that year the teachers did not have an answer. They looked at one another in a bewildered way. No one had posed that question exactly that way before. The teacher craft did not have a set answer for that--yet. "This is what we have always done. It's how we teach order and respect."

"If it were something besides 'don't care,' what might it be?" queried Puff.

The teachers knew some answers. They knew things about students. Maybe some children had not been successful at school. Maybe those in their families and friends had not been successful at school. Maybe they had different ways of learning than the ways the teachers had of teaching. Maybe they were being abused and frightened. Maybe no one had ever helped them believe what they wanted to believe about themselves; that they were important and had value. Maybe they didn't know they had brains that work and could get smart. Maybe some children suffered because they were "different" in some way.

"Sometimes we aren't always very nice around here to children from different backgrounds," one teacher said. Some others nodded sadly. Some were embarrassed. Some were tight lipped and had angry looks.

"Can we do something about those things?" inquired Puff.

"Probably," said the teachers. "We know about things like that."

"Will punishing help those things?" wondered Puff.

"Not much," they said. "But how can we do something about those things? They won't let us. Wouldn't we have to really change this place if we worked on those things?"

"A really good question," said Puff. She went out the door to visit classes.

The teachers were quiet for awhile. Finally one said, "You know, if we really thought about it, we could....." Others had different ideas. Before long there were three different study groups working to gather information. They gathered information from many sources, including the students, their families, professional organizations and journals, school leaders, including Puff, and even the university, although they were very very careful about who they talked to at the university.

After some time they came to Puff and said, "We would like to talk with the whole staff. Later we want to talk with students and others. We have some new ideas. Maybe we have to change how we are together. Maybe if we have different ways of understanding and talking about how things are, we could change."

"New ideas are almost always good," said Puff. And she set up a meeting and helped facilitate and plan things.

This new way of working, thinking and talking began to grow in the school. Over the next two or three years teachers began talking to one another in funny ways. They began to tell different stories to explain things. They would say things like, "Why do you suppose that is?" or "Maybe if we tried this, I read somewhere that.....," or "That's a good question," or "I know we can figure it out." "But will it help learning?" became a common question heard a lot in the school.

They included Puff in many of their talks, and in time they quit asking Puff for decisions and began to share information about decisions they thought needed to be made in order to promote learning in the school. Puff helped with the processes and the planning. Puff found resources to help people learn and do new things. Everyone began to like the new ways and the new stories.

"That sounds smart," Puff began saying quite a lot to all the people in the school, "how can I help you do it?"

It wasn't too long until they had to change the name of the school. It became the New Horizons school and district. Puff thought it was time to go. They didn't seem to need her anymore. That year no one had asked her to punish or judge anyone, or spend lots of time organizing and managing, because the things were organized and managed by the ones who did them. All Puff could do was visit classes and assist with development, learning and hard work. Puff really liked doing that. Teachers and students were involved in that a lot now. Especially since there were no more bells and teachers and students planned together daily or sometimes weekly around what was to be learned and how for different students. It was fun visiting classes and seeing all the

hard work.

Many in the school began to say, "I'm not where I want to be, but I'm getting closer and smarter every day." Students and teachers began to say to Puff, "Thank you very much for your kind visit. We are glad of your interest and concern, but we are busy right now. Could you come back another day?" Puff smiled through her tears on those days. She thought to herself, "They don't need me anymore. They've found the core."

Puff decided to go. There were no more principal things to do like punishing, ordering, telling, organizing, judging and "being decisive."

The students, teachers, school board and community were very upset when Puff said she guessed she'd go. "You can't leave us," they cried. "You've got the magic. Look what has happened in our school."

Puff just smiled.

"Where will we find the magic if you leave?", they wanted to know. "If we lose your magic, won't the schools become like they were before?"

"Magic is where you find it," Puff offered.

"Will we keep it if you leave?" they insisted.

"Good question," smiled Puff.

This story represents an application of certain theories and understandings about transformational leadership. Can you identify them? Can you think of other stories that might help create new meaning?