

# AT C-LEVEL

A Conversation With Robert E. Knowing Jr., CEO of the NYC Leadership Academy

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ublic education is not sexy. It doesn't pay well. Some regard it as an impenetrable fortress of vested interests and, therefore, impervious to change. Why would a high-tech CEO with a great track record and a bright future sign up to try to transform the New York public school system? Because, as Bob Knowing says, most of the students in that system "look like me." Because he has a firm commitment to learning and understands its organizational impact. Because he knows how to

ignite the spark of leadership. And because the mayor of New York and a dream team of investors are behind him.

Bob Knowing is CEO and teacher-in-chief of the NYC Leadership Academy, part of a daring attempt to turn school principals into agents of change using techniques from corporate America, the U.S. military, and the schools themselves.

 "Business vs. the Board of Education," page 33.

Barely 18 months old, the NYC Leadership Academy has graduated 77 principals who are already on the job at elementary, middle, and high schools in the New York metropolitan area. Not for the fainthearted, this tough-love approach of developing school principals into agents of change has drawn the fire of the media and the ire of unions and local politicians. Knowing has opened his books, his classrooms, and his leadership philosophy to a tough, skeptical, and often hostile press. But the money and the support keep on coming.

In this interview, Knowing describes life on the front lines of educational reform and shares his personal formula for leadership development.

**Q.** *By all accounts, the Bloomberg/Klein plan to change New York City public schools is a radical application of corporate tactics to the public sector. Why the focus on leadership development for principals through the Leadership Academy? What specific problems do you think leadership development will change or fix?*

**A.** The credit for the Academy concept goes to Chancellor [Joel] Klein and Mayor [Michael] Bloomberg. When I talked with them about their change initiative and its focus on leadership development, it was clear they understood what it took to transform an organization. To change a school system, you've got to have a transformation steered from the top.

**Q.** *So why leadership development?*

**A.** There is no other intervention that matters. Giving principals technical training or new pedagogical approaches has been tried before without notable change. The cornerstone of any great transformation has been strong leaders who have articulated a vision, who have been able to enlist people, and who can create an environment where people flourish and reach their potential.

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Part of a series  
of talks with  
top CEOs on the  
subject of learning  
and performance.

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**Q.** *Talk about your vision for the Academy.*

**A.** When I came in, the Academy was a blank piece of paper. Our mission and vision is to serve as a lever of change for this chancellor and to provide the system with principals with a strong grounding in instructional and transformational leadership who can make a difference for children.

**Q.** *Are there specific problems you want these leaders to address?*

**A.** The profile here is no different from a company in the PC space or a large private organization. A history of success or a history of bureaucracy makes a company resist change. There will always be resistance to technical change, or political change, or cultural change. Here you have it in spades.

This is a system that has been entrenched in an old paradigm for so long that acceptance of the status quo on school performance was OK. This happens in businesses too. When a new leader walks in, it is clear that things need to be done in a different way.

**Q.** *You're using an approach to leadership development that you pioneered through leadership academies at Ameritech and US West. Any similarities?*

**A.** At Ameritech, we did something unprecedented. It's easy to realize you need a revolution when you're on a burning platform. The hardest transformations are when companies are doing well. At Ameritech, we had come off of six straight years of record earnings. There were no clouds in the sky. But the chairman, who at 62 should have been thinking about retirement, was saying the company was ill-prepared to handle the competitive marketplace and its future.

So, we re-architected that business by focusing on middle-level managers as leaders. We changed our go-to-market strategy; we went from a 100-year history of a big, heavy, multi-layered organization to a very flat, nimble organization with a focus on the customer. It was the most incredible thing I'd been part of up to that time. But more important, we found out how to tap into human capacity. This notion of human capital: We literally exploited it.

When I went to US West, it was a burning platform—the lowest-performing Bell operating company

in the system. So I thought, Why not use the same methodology with a different twist?

But I learned something interesting. As a new person, you think you can get everyone to play at a higher level. That doesn't work. You've also got to infuse new blood to help combat those antibodies fighting against change.

**Q.** *The Leadership Academy is now starting its second year. The news media have reported some serious resistance, as might be expected. You were quoted in Business Week last year saying the effort "felt like a startup." How does it feel now?*

**A.** We've been pretty successful, so I don't worry whether we're going to meet payroll. More important, we have a tide of momentum moving toward a tipping point. We have 77 people going in as new principals; 242 principals whom I worked with all last year helping them grow as leaders; 63 new small-school principals who started in September 2004; 23 middle-school principals who are starting their journey with us. And we just enlisted 91 new aspiring principals who will be with us for 14 months.

Now when I go out into the school system, I see the results of what we've done. I see it turned into practice and application. The ultimate measure of our work, and it's *the* measure, is that more students pass and get to high school and go on to a vocational school or secondary education.

**Q.** *Have you had to change anything as a result of lessons learned along the way?*

**A.** Sure. That's how you continue to set the bar higher. Every one of our intervention tracks has undergone a 20 to 40 percent revision because experience has made us smarter. We're a repository of best practices.

**Q.** *You're applying business principles to public education. When this is up and running, will there be lessons to take back to the corporate world?*

**A.** We're not using just business principles. We're taking principles from the military, from Focus Hope [a civil rights organization in Detroit that gives high technology capabilities to inner city minorities], from the school system, from GE, and from Ameritech.

You want to talk about borrowing; I've never had an original idea in my life. If you've got the best, I'll use it. We are a repository of best practices. We are about benchmarking, benchmarking, benchmarking. If you really want to talk about how to become the best at what you do, learn how to be a learner. Open yourself up to learning. You can be the smartest bear in the woods, but the collective wisdom of other bears might help.

**Q.** *Do you think there might be lessons from this experiment in public education that could be applied to culture change and leadership development in business organizations?*

**A.** Absolutely. I think that this is transportable anywhere. I think we can put this in other school systems, in the military, in the private sector.

**Q.** *Part of your strategy is to recruit principals aggressively for the Academy. How do you evaluate someone's potential to benefit from the program?*

**A.** We do two kinds of recruiting. One is for our aspiring principal program. I look at whether they can be a great principal at the end of the process. I'm looking for edge, energy, and vision. Do they have the conviction and passion to enlist others? If I feel that the leadership bucket has a lot more volume than the instructional bucket, that's very good. It's harder to make a leader out of someone who's just an instructional expert but who shows none of these other traits.

When I'm trying to recruit principals to take over troubled schools, I'm looking for a very different kind of person—a seasoned veteran who has done it. Someone with more of a track record in an urban school system, in tough circumstances, in tough communities, and who, in spite of all the barriers, can get it done. They don't whine about the hand they've been dealt. They figure out a way to get it done, and, more important, they get people to buy into a point of view.

**Q.** *Are you recruiting from outside New York? Do you have the ability to offer incentives? The pay isn't great in public education.*

**A.** Yes, that's why we're outside the school system as a separate 501 C3 [not-for-profit organization]. We

have one person in particular who's funding incentive packages. It doesn't take much to get someone here. Think of the future attractiveness of a candidate who can come into this system and get things done. There is upward mobility here because the school system is as big as a *Fortune* 500 company. But more important, you can launch out of here and run another school system. And those other school systems do pay more.

**Q.** *You mentioned metrics and the fact that you have no shareholders. What are your measures of success? How will you know that this is working?*

**A.** First of all, I set a number of expectations of things we said we were going to do. It was a pretty ambitious plan in terms of multiple-track interventions, recruiting, number of people through the system, touching everyone, multiple iterations, and so forth. We had a checklist of things we promised our funders we would do. That's the first measure.

The second measure is that we must be able to act within the fiscal constraints we imposed upon ourselves. We must be fiscally responsible.

The third piece, which is longer term, is that we must be able to demonstrate that these principals can turn schools around and that students can achieve at a higher rate than what has been the status quo.

**Q.** *Say more about what you mean by "achieve at a higher rate." Test scores, graduation rates, things like that?*

**A.** Absolutely. Test scores are the underpinning in terms of children matriculating through the system and eventually graduating with a [New York] Regents diploma and going on to college or vocational training. Fifty percent of the kids in this system don't graduate. Seventy percent are not at grade level in reading and math capability. The data is there in front of us, but we can't be shortsighted. We can't be seduced by the Hawthorn Effect [the tendency of things to improve by virtue of being observed]. We're going to get some rise at first, but this is a three- to five-year intervention.

All the models tell you that when you put the right kind of leader in a school, in three to five years, if the talent is there, a leader can turn a school around. You'll see, not the incremental improvement, but the quantum leaps you would expect. There are examples all over this country of people who have done it. What

nobody has ever been able to do is bottle it and transfer it at scale.

**Q.** *Do you think you'll be able to do that?*

**A.** Of all the business challenges I've undertaken, I think this is the riskiest thing I've ever done because I'm a bottom-line results guy. At the end of the day, I'm an accountable guy who says, "If I can't improve student achievement, then I've failed."

There are much safer things [Mayor Michael] Bloomberg could have done in his administration. [Rudy] Giuliani fixed crime; he's an icon now. Mike could have picked a number of things to put his hat on. He picked what is probably the most difficult thing and said, "Judge me by it." I admire that so much.

**Q.** *The program has attracted significant support—from Richard Parsons, the CEO of Time Warner, and David Coulter, vice chairman of JPMorgan Chase. You have the participation of Jack Welch and other business*

*leaders, as well as leadership gurus like Noel Tichy. What is it about the program that won their support?*

**A.** They understand the power of investing in people. This was a no-brainer for them.

**Q.** *You undoubtedly gave up more lucrative opportunities to take this job. Why?*

**A.** Unfortunately, this is a seductive proposition, especially when you know my background and know where I come from. I grew up poor in a family with 13 children. It's hard for me to look the other way.

Every time the New York media takes a pot shot at us, I remember that most of the kids that fail in this system look like me. I get my reality check knowing this is the most important work I've ever tried to do in my life.

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