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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

Caring is the first trait exhibited by almost every great leader. It may sound like a very soft touchy-feely thing, but it works. The second trait of great leaders, or those who get others to excel, is Integrity. In other words, they can be trusted to tell the truth. They tell the truth in good times and bad, and they tell the truth whether or not it makes them look good or bad.

Finally, great leaders who get others to excel have high expectations. They don't let people get by with mediocrity. No one can really feel good about themselves when they just "get by." Great leaders believe in people, and so they expect a lot from people

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING
ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Ever since the beginning of time, people have been looking for the secrets of leadership. They've been looking for those things that will bring out the very best in others. Well there aren't any secrets. You can read all the books on leadership, and you will find most authors say about the same thing. They just use different words.

Although there is no one correct way to administer schools. Some methods of administration work better for certain administrators than others. Each administrator is an individual who leads in his or her own way. As each administrator varies in personality, so do their leading styles. The administrator should differentiate leadership to meet the diverse needs of the staff in their respective schools. The staff needs to see that the administration can be not only informative, but also supportive and approachable. This is a concrete principle that does not change.

Teachers work best in a school when they feel joint ownership with the administrator. Whenever possible, it is important for staff to be involved in administrative decisions. Whether it be, which math series to purchase, or ideas for changes in the faculty or student handbook. It is imperative for staff to be involved. A positive school atmosphere benefits both the teacher and the student. This can be achieved through encouraging self-direction and self-monitoring while teaching. Teachers are able to decide when they are having difficulties with teaching and can take steps to remedy their difficulty.

Roles of Schools:

Not so long ago, attitudes toward public education were mostly positive, people didn't search out examples of "effective" schools. The assumption was that most schools were good. However, after a decade or so of attacks on schools, public confidence has deteriorated. Certain schools were singled out because of their antitraditional features. Effective schools

today are characterized by, "...an outstanding principal, high expectations for all children, an orderly atmosphere, a regular testing program, and an emphasis on academic learning" (Ravitch, 1985, p. 8). Some powerful remarks which are meritorious, however, do they give enough insight as to what roles schools are supposed to play?

Researchers and theorists and common sense tell us that, when parents, educators, and students share values, beliefs, and ideals about schooling, there is a better chance of creating schools everyone will support. Perhaps more important, other studies have shown that students are more likely to be successful when parents and educators agree on what schools should be (Schlechty, 1991). History has shown us that Americans have found it difficult to form and sustain such a shared vision of schooling.

Similar to the interrelationship between schools and society is the interrelationship between administrators and their schools. Administrators both shape their schools' philosophy and purpose and are shaped by it as well as by society. American education has reached an era of diversification and fragmentation. "The mid-twentieth-century school frequently resembled a shopping mall, both in appearance and in its attempt to provide something for everyone" (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993, p. 181). This statement seems relevant when analyzing the complexity of school programs. Society's special interest groups have had a major impact on the role of schools. Such influences include: desegregation, Individuals with Disabilities Act, and migrant education.

Schools continue to have an ever increasing demand for non-traditional educational functions such as, health care, counseling, day care, and sex education. Schools fill a bigger parenting role each year. However, society is quick to blame the schools when test scores drop, or violence occurs

(Aronson, 2000). Administrators spread themselves too thin trying to keep everyone happy. They lose sight of what their emphasis should be. Is it the management aspects of administration, such as budgets and salaries, or is it the leadership aspects such as purpose and value?

Sergiovanni has suggested that multiple goals can mean no goals. "The effect of too many goals is the fragmentation and diffusion of purpose" (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993, p. 190). Seldom have new goals replaced previous goals; rather, schools have been in a continual add on situation. So what is the answer for mismanaged schools and confused staff members?

Leadership

Years ago, Bing Crosby sang, "Accentuate the Positive, Eliminate the Negative, and Don't Mess With Mr. In Between." The trouble is, too many schools do just the opposite.

With never-ending changes, with across the board cutbacks, with fewer teachers to do the work, with loyalty a thing of the past, negative comments can be a natural byproduct. Comments such as, "It won't work...We already tried that...and...I can't do it" become all too familiar. Administrators run into C.A.V.E. people (Citizens Against Virtually Everything). Unfortunately, teacher negative attitudes will defeat an administrator faster than any program failure. Negativity is extremely contagious and results in an environment where people don't try as hard, don't care as much, and don't succeed as often.

With recruitment and retention so important, an administrator must build a work environment that is alive, exciting, and positive. He or she must build an environment where satisfaction and fulfillment are the rule, not the exception. He or she must minimize or eliminate the negative (Zimmerman, 2001).

First, let's start with a working definition of what Leadership is.

Leadership is the energetic process of getting other people fully and willingly committed to a course of action, creating a vision for the future, inspiring and motivating followers, and creating change to improve school effectiveness.

Leadership is not just about style, or charisma, or forcefulness, although those things can help. Leadership is about understanding people, and especially about the process of getting people all pointing and acting in the same direction (DePree, 1989). It is about listening, and making a real "connection" with your potential followers. It depends on having a unique vision, making strategic choices, and designing and enabling a district to get the job done (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993).

By understanding the approaches or processes that all successful leaders use, administrators can enhance their own leadership skills. This is true regardless of the size or complexity of their district. Put another way, these leadership thoughts apply equally to Departments of Education, and to locally controlled districts.

Values

Administrators must first understand and communicate their own value systems, and must focus on balancing the interests and concerns of others, helped by understanding their value system. This is a pre-requisite to enable others to understand, buy-into and then follow any leader's program. Administrators need a sense of balance to deal with multiple interest groups, while also achieving their goals.

Bad values.

John W. Gardner (1993), in his study of leadership, also stresses the values aspect of leadership, related to the culture in which it operates, and states:

We say we want effective leadership; but Hitler was [unfortunately] effective. Criteria beyond effectiveness are needed. Ultimately, we judge our leaders in a framework of values [even though] the framework differs from one culture to the next and from one era to the next (p. 176).

Put another way, being an effective leader does not guarantee ethical conduct or moral outcomes. So, if we are to get the kind of leader that is needed today, a strong dose of sound ethics and values is a pre-requisite.

Understanding.

Of course, understanding your own value system, and that of your immediate society, is only part of the jigsaw puzzle. Studying cultures from around the world, Geert Hofstede (1996) demonstrated that there are both differences and similarities in the hierarchy of values. These build from a common cultural background (i.e. community of birth and education), through narrower peer group structures (i.e. corporations, clubs etc.), and leading upwards to individually specific (i.e. personal) value systems.

Hofstede (1996), who views culture as "collective mental programming" (p.76) considers values are the fundamental core of culture. Put another way, without understanding the values of a culture, and of all of its sub-cultures, we can hardly hope to effectively negotiate with it, much less lead it.

Everywhere.

This "value base" applies equally well to employees as it does to administrative leaders. Every employee is also dealing with several interest groups, to one degree or another. People find value in many places - in work, in religion, in sports, in relationships, in public service, in achievement and in travel. However, people can only find their own values in one place -

inside themselves. Values are with us all, every minute, and our values are apparent to others, every minute. So are our consistencies and inconsistencies. "If you cannot understand what you stand for, how can you understand others" (Yates, 2000, p. 1).

Leadership is different from management, in that leaders always make changes. Managers run organizations, and managers tend to institutionalize the "status quo". Both managers and leaders are needed, to improve their particular schools. However, throughout history, leaders of all types who have had many and varied objectives, went beyond these "status quo" boundaries. They found ways to create groups of followers, so they could together change things (Zimmerman, 2001). Throughout our administrative courses we have wrestled with just what leadership is and how to apply it to the principalship. A reoccurring theme through almost every course however, has been that great leaders: 1). Create (and need) followers, 2). Create (and need) change, and 3). Have a rock-solid value system which provides the glue.

Followers

"Leaders create followers," this does not mean manipulation or control. Rather, it means that the job of a leader is to encourage other people to get things done. This starts with a thorough understanding of the follower's needs, aspirations and concerns, which means administrators need excellent listening skills. There is symmetry and rapport between leaders and followers. Both need each other.

Leadership comes from within the administrator in the sense that deeply held values and principles provide the roadmap for the way in which administrators lead, and the way other people respond. "Whether the leader

is a person of impeccable moral fiber, or quite disreputable, it is always their personal value system that sustains them in their quest” (Zimmerman, 2001, p. 64).

Situational

In this sense, leadership is situational, as a good leader in one circumstance may not be successful in another. A classic example of leadership varying by situation is Winston Churchill, who succeeded in wartime and then failed in peacetime by losing a general election. He was unable to reflect people’s post-war needs. By contrast, Charles De Gaulle was a strong wartime Leader, who then managed to reflect the needs of the populace in peacetime whilst still holding his own views (and values) on the future of France – so succeeding in both situations (Zimmerman, 2001).

Charisma

There is little "psychologically" special about being a leader. Charisma is not the beginning and the end of the story. Leaders have the same personal characteristics that we all prize in everyday life (courage, vision, intelligence, managing complexity, managing data, creativity, energy etc.) they just seem to make more use of these characteristics.

Mick Yates (2000), sites that there are “4 E’s” of leadership (envision, enable, empower, and energize). Leadership starts with having a vision, then developing a plan to achieve it. It is based on both data assessment and intuition, hope and fear. It is a noble challenge. A vision could be a grand view of a state’s future, or a local district – or it could be a picture of what one wants to achieve in the family, or with a group of friends, or in a small social club. In all cases a vision of the future is the key to getting started as a leader.

Leadership means creating enabling mechanisms to encourage the right kind of action. This entails choosing the right people to get the job done,

and rewarding them for it. It may mean defining a new organization structure or it could be the deliberate elimination of some structure - but there is always a structure in place to get the job done. David Hanna (2001), who works with the Covey Leadership Center, once wrote; "Every organization is perfectly designed to get the results that it gets. Leadership is the key" (p. 45).

Leadership means empowering people to achieve the vision. The leader sets out a contract with his or her followers. The followers have a contract with their leader, for success and failure, reward and sanction. Both are given mutual freedom, yet held mutually accountable. Both are thus empowered (Yates, 2000).

Leadership means energizing people to act. It usually involves expressing the vision in a "story", which builds understanding and the desire for action in the followers. A great example of a "story" is John Kennedy's "put a man on the moon and return him home safely by the end of the decade". This energized an entire nation, its military and its industries. He stuck to the script, and even after his death, the mission was accomplished. The leader's "story" takes careful note of the audience's perceptions, so he or she will be an excellent listener and judge of others. The story is expressed simply but powerfully, and it is repeated often. The leader energizes the vision, the enablers, and the empowerment (Yates, 2000).

Common sense, therefore tells us that the leader is also a follower, in the sense of reflecting the wishes of others, even if they cannot properly communicate these wishes. Leaders and followers are interdependent, as they need each other, if either are to exist.

Administrative Beliefs

I have always held the belief that you can pay people to perform, but you can't pay them to excel. There are certain traits that great leaders exhibit.

To an extent administrators can master and exhibit the same traits, becoming more effective in getting others to excel. Caring is the first trait exhibited by almost every great leader. It may sound like a very soft touchy-feely thing, but it works. As Max Lucado says in his book, And The Angels Were Silent (2001), "The people who make a difference are not the ones with the credentials but the ones with the concern" (p. 32). Perhaps no one is more recognized for leadership than Abraham Lincoln. Examining some of the books written about him, you will find a lot more emphasis given to his caring than his strategic planning, brilliant programs, and media savvy (Zimmerman, 2001).

The second trait of great leaders, or those who get others to excel, is Integrity. In other words, they can be trusted to tell the truth. They tell the truth in good times and bad, and they tell the truth whether or not it makes them look good or bad. In a sense, truth telling is a way of showing honor. It says people deserve to know what is happening, why it's happening, and what the next steps will be. Telling the truth, right up front, is a way of expressing deep respect. Great leaders know that their silence, double talk, or delayed truth telling would create unnecessary anxiety in people, and they respect people too much to put them through that kind of stress. It's no wonder that Integrity works. People feel honored and respected when their leader continually tells them the truth. So they'll keep on supporting their leader, even if they don't always like what he or she has to say.

President Dwight Eisenhower put it this way:

The supreme quality for a leader is unquestionable integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, a football field, in an army, or in an office. If a man's associates find him guilty of phoniness, if they find he lacks forthright integrity, he will fail ("Brainymedia," 2001).

Finally, great leaders who get others to excel have high expectations. They don't let people get by with mediocrity. No one can really feel good about themselves when they just "get by." Great leaders believe in people, and so they expect a lot from people (Zimmerman, 2001).

People can accomplish amazing kinds of things, if they're led and motivated by the right person using the right approach. That right approach starts with caring. "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" (Yates, 2000, p. 1). Even if administrators know everything about their curriculum, their budget, or their comprehensive school improvement plan, that wouldn't be enough to motivate anyone. People want to know how much administrators care about them. When administrators effectively communicate they care, they become a leader who brings out the best in others.

Walk the Talk

Such thoughts are expressed by Elliott Jaques (1985). He, like many authors, stresses that the CEO must "walk the talk", and his or her values must be evident in everything that he or she does (or does not) do. Without a clear understanding of one's own value system, one's actions will be erratic or opportunistic - not likely to get others to follow. Discussing the CEO's leadership of one critical constituency, his or her own employees, Jaques (1985) says:

If the CEO can establish over-arching corporate values and philosophies, which are nested within basic societal values, and which meet people's own generic values, he or she can get the whole organization working effectively in the same broad direction It is our values that move us, bind us together, push us apart, and generally make the world go round (p. 122).

After Administrators have understood their own system of values and beliefs, then they must figure out the values of the people around them. One

of the first jobs of an administrator is to figure out what succeeding (including the role of the followers) means. He or she then needs agreement amongst the potential followers to be able to act, and thus to succeed.

On the negative side, without a clear sense of his or her own personal values, the leader could get hopelessly lost, suffering inconsistency and insincerity as he or she struggles to handle the staff.

Establish a shared vision

As a community, administrators must establish a shared vision to build bridges for the future. It is important to focus the majority of their effort on the future not the present. A vision of what administrators want their schools to become. By creating a shared vision a district begins to get people involved or take an interest in the culture of the school. Changing the school culture is not an easy task. This is a complex system and it is important to understand how it works. People want to be involved with school culture decisions.

Decisions need to be data driven

The first question staff members ask of new principals in dealing with change is, "What's in it for me?" Because of this it is important for the principal to have sound data driven examples which prove that these are "Best Practices" which will lead to an increase in student achievement. It is important to articulate that these are not one time cure alls. The focus of the leadership must be on change and continuous improvement. This will give the district personal and systemic direction to continue on to excellence.

Assure accountability within the system

Not only must an administrator "talk the talk" of continuous school improvement they must also "walk the walk." People must be held accountable for reaching their goals/ standards/ benchmarks. Because staff members have taken part in creating these goals they have a vested interest

in attaining them. Accountability is more easily managed if the administrator has created a relationship with the staff members. Fielder's Contingency Model states, "...when subordinates trust, respect, and have confidence in the leader, leader member relations are considered good" (Daft, 1999, p. 96). Human relations skills are important in achieving high group performance. A leader with good interpersonal skills can create a positive group atmosphere that will improve relationships, clarify task structure, and establish position power.

Reading for professional improvement

The capacity to apply knowledge of best teaching practices gives the administrators leadership ability credibility. Keeping up on the latest educational journals is crucial to be able to facilitate change. If a staff member comes to an administrator with a new teaching technique the administrator should have some notion of what they are talking about and be able to refer them to some data which supports their decision. If an administrator has the vision of continuous improvement for their district, they must first be willing to improve themselves through reading.

Set expectations high

Students tend to learn as little-or as much-as there teachers expect. Low expectations can quickly become a self-fulfilling prophecy. A good teacher can understand a child's limitations, but can still demand that they perform up to their full ability, whatever that may be. When standards are raised and students are rewarded for meeting them, the general standard rises too. Effective Administrators hold teachers accountable for teaching and children accountable for learning. Test scores aren't the only thing that matter, however, effective administrators know that test and reports are necessary to find out what is being learned and let all who are concerned know about it.

Success breeds success

It's important as an administrator to start small and allow for success. As staff members experience success, and continue to succeed, they gain momentum and confidence to tackle larger projects. Administrators need a vision and dedication of teachers and parents. This dedication is crucial to a program's success. Administrators and staff must as Og Mandino (1983) says, "Go another mile" (p. 99). The only certain means of success is to render more and better service than is expected.

Volunteerism is crucial

Educators can use the help of volunteers, most administrators only talk a good game when it comes to using volunteers in their schools. Volunteers are welcome to help raise money, or run copies however, their talents are not fully utilized. Effective administrators truly welcome volunteer involvement and utilize people's resources.

There is no substitute for hard work

Good programs work because the people running them have a clear goal and are truly dedicated to attaining that goal. Good programs make better schools, and better schools make teachers' lives more interesting and administrators' lives less difficult. That's a powerful incentive to cooperate. Hard work is often the solution to not only a schools problems, but life's as well.

Originality is a myth

Good programs are seldom truly original. Ideas are where you find them. Most successful administrators borrow or outright steal others ideas. This is a time honored tradition in administrative practices. It is not necessary to reinvent the wheel. However, even the best idea must be adapted to fit each individual school. Effective administrators also know how to blow their

own horns when it comes to school improvement. They understand how to use publicity and public relations to tell the community what's going on in their schools.

Leadership is an art

"The signs of outstanding leadership appear primarily among the followers" (DePree, 1989, p. 22). Is the staff reaching its potential? Do they achieve the required results? Can they manage conflict? Effective administrators must deliver to their organizations the appropriate services, products, and equipment that people in the school need in order to be accountable. To be a leader means to make a meaningful difference in the lives of those who permit leaders to lead.

Formal leadership in schools is a complex task

Effective administrators often have different beliefs and act differently from their peers. Effective school leaders are strong educators who base their work on important issues of learning and teaching school improvement. Effective leaders can take a staff who in one way or another, have lost their dreams, their ambitions, and settled for mediocrity. "They have become, confined to cemeteries of choice. But they need not remain there. They can perform the greatest miracle in the world. They can each come back from the dead" (Mandino, 1983, p. 14).

No one has a magic bullet for making schools better, and no school will ever be a perfect place. People need to see schools as always being in the process of improving. "Americans-parents and educators- need to see themselves as always being in the process of learning how to do that"(Dodd & Konzal, 1999, p. 215).

More democratic and effective schools offer the best hope for creating stronger communities and a better world for tomorrow, perhaps everyone will

come to see that we all must cooperate to make schools work for every child. More positively, the creation and leadership of a value system for the district which is in total synchronization with the values of its constituents will be very powerful indeed.

Conclusion

None of these principles comes as a major surprise; they are mostly common sense approaches. Administrators, teachers, and parents can keep on making their changes and improving their own schools, as some have been doing all along. They may well anticipate major reform such as those set forth by House File 2272 and Chapter 12. The idea is to pick a modest program and make it work; once the school is actively involved, it will be time to try something more ambitious. The process goes on from there, one program after another.

The major challenge facing leaders today is the changing world that wants a new brand of leadership. This new reality involves the shift from stability to change, from control to empowerment, from competition to collaboration. Today's leaders were probably not born with natural leadership skills, but can learn leadership qualities and build personal competence through practical experience. With practice, a conscious awareness of the correct thing to do will gradually transform into leadership competence. Administrators can learn to visualize the future, influence others to engage in that future, and have the courage to take on real change.

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