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Personal perspective on education

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Abstract

In order to meet the challenges of educational administration, effective leaders must understand the culture of the school, model a passion for excellence, empower the stake holders, have a sense of commitment to a shared vision, and look to the future acting with integrity that heightens the value of character. Being an administrator or manager is not enough. Today's school leaders are shouldered with unending responsibilities that challenge their abilities every day. By utilizing multiple forms of leadership along with empowerment the tasks and goals set by our society can be accomplished.

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE ON EDUCATION

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A Paper

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by

David W. DenHartog
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One-third of all Iowa administrators will be retiring within three years, according to a recent survey conducted by the School Administrators of Iowa and the Iowa Department of Education(http://www.sai-iowa.org/shortsurvey.html). Some have labeled this a crisis situation. The Chinese word for crisis, xijg, means both danger and opportunity. Knowing that a possible danger looms, I am excited about the opportunities that will be available. In order to meet the challenges of educational administration, effective leaders must understand the culture of the school, model a passion for excellence, empower the stake holders, have a sense of commitment to a shared vision, and look to the future acting with integrity that heightens the value of character.

Helping others perform at their best summarizes the task of an effective leader (Parker, 1998.) Defining leadership is no easy task. As a matter of fact, General George Patton once said: "Leadership is the thing that wins battles. I have it, but I'll be damned if I can define it" (Jones, 1998, p. 279). Politician Julia Hughes Jones (1998) defines an effective leader as one who is responsible for their actions. "Each of us is capable of becoming

an effective leader by recognizing that leadership is not only responsibility, but character" (p. 279). In Jeanie Goertz's (1998) study of effective leadership she found that creativity is a vital component. Being an administrator or manager is not enough. Effective leadership is "orchestrating the totality of the enterprise through creative traits of passion for work, independence, goal setting, originality, flexibility, wide range of interests, intelligence, creativity, and motivation" (p. 166).

Kenneth Leithwood and Doris Jantzi (1999) see leadership within a school taking on at least six different forms: instructional, transformational, moral, participative, managerial, and contingent. Understanding the forms of leadership is an essential task but applying the lessons and using energy productively must be a common focus. Today's school leaders are shouldered with unending responsibilities that challenge their abilities every day. By utilizing multiple forms of leadership along with empowerment the tasks and goals set by our society can be accomplished.

This past summer I took a group of students to Alaska for two weeks. We hiked over a treacherous snow field where a

person could fall through several feet to a running stream underneath. As the leader, I set the course for the followers. I was responsible for making decisions and I was the first to take chances, willing but not hoping, to fall through to the icy waters. Leading a group of people through a difficult journey is tiresome yet rewarding. The higher the mountains that we attempt to climb the better the views may we enjoy. As I reflect on how to apply effective leadership strategies as a principal, I envision creatively climbing the mountains of education and reaping the benefits of the struggle. The initial part of my administrative ascent will be to understand the school's culture.

<div align="center">Understanding the Culture</div>

How to create the ideal learning environment has been a consistent topic throughout the educational leadership program of study. Working to develop a culture that reflects the advantages of a positive learning environment is a goal of most administrators. For it is culture, "the powerful socializer of thought and programmer of behavior" (Sergiovanni, 1995, p. 95) that is the impetus for movement. Understanding the

complexities and nuances of a school's culture is no easy task

but in order to hike in tandem culture must be understood.

Anthropologists, along with sociologists and psychologists,

actively analyze the complexity of culture and its influence on

our daily actions. In his book, Ishmael, Daniel Quinn (1993)

effectively argues that we humans are, in fact, more

imprisoned by our culture than a caged animal. So what is

school culture?

> Culture is the underground stream of norms, values,
> beliefs, traditions, and rituals that has built up over time
> as people work together, solve problems, and confront
> challenges. This set of informal expectations and values
> shapes how people think, feel, and act in schools.
> (Peterson & Deal, 1998, p. 28)

A key point in the previous quote is "time." A culture is

established over time and even though there are things that I

might disagree with or not understand in a school's culture it

will take time to shift the paradigms to which many in the

culture subscribe. James V. Hoffman (2000) states that schools

are very self-serving. Schools "enculturate the young toward

the values, beliefs, skills, and understandings that will preserve

existing structures" (p. 616). Hoffman goes on to explain that if

we do not challenge some of these beliefs and norms that our democracy will be in danger. I will be an educational leader who studies the culture and subtly challenges the foundation on which the culture is built.

Being a visible leader is an important component of the school culture. Douglas Fiore (2000) believes that principals are the "key to change public opinion and improve the cultures of American learning institutions" (p. 11). One small but essential way principals can positively affect the school culture is to be visible. Fiore's research has consistently shown that positive school environments have visible leaders. To dismiss visibility's importance, "is to ignore one simple, powerful tool school leaders have at their disposal in the quest to improve student achievement and staff morale" (p. 12). School culture and environment are the underpinnings of a quality school. Administrators and school leaders do have an impact on the culture but must also recognize the evolution that has taken place to establish the current learning environment. "In crafting school culture, school leaders are models, potters, poets, actors, and healers. They are historians and

anthropologists. They are visionaries and dreamers" (Peterson & Deal, 1998, p. 29). The administrative artist, using a variety of paints and styles, recognizes that the mosaic is a work in progress and that beauty is relative.

Culture is embedded in our sense of community. To change or alter this sense causes mixed emotions. William Patterson (2000) addresses these concerns when discussing how real change can take place. Patterson sees at least four steps that support and sustain a changing culture. They include "developing a series of belief statements, determining their implications, putting the implications into practice, and revisiting the belief statements and implications regularly to ensure the culture is being preserved and renewed" (p. 4). For these things to occur, it will take patience on my part. I tend to be a person who wants to see action and results. It is difficult for me to understand those that move at a more deliberate, painstakingly slow pace. However, I do realize that shifting cultural beliefs is an ongoing process; and as Patterson states, ensuring both "preservation" and "renewal" are important.

Promoting and instilling a climate that fosters support for a shifting culture will be a prime task for me.

A key ingredient to culture is climate. Literally understanding the temperature of an environment and adjusting accordingly supersedes our level of comfortability. If we are well aware of the climate within a school we can be instruments of change to either lower or raise the temperature. As humans we are social creatures that depend on our feelings for direction and survival. Promoting a healthy, supportive climate is an essential tool for an effective leader. Robert J. Sternberg (1988), acclaimed Yale psychologist, formulated a model that highlighted essential components of a genial climate. Sternberg's triangular model notes that nurturing environments are created with components of intimacy, commitment and passion. Lisa Goldstein (1998), translates Sternberg's triangular model into the educational arena where relationships are strengthened and enhanced by loving teachers that incorporate Sternberg's three components. These components are equally as important with teachers and administrators as they are with teachers and students.

So how can a principal promote intimacy with a staff? "Intimacy embodies trust, the sharing of meaningful experiences, a degree of mutuality and reciprocity among participants, a commitment to open communication, and a depth of feeling, regardless of the number of people participating in the relationship" (Goldstein, 1998, p. 260). Obviously, developing this trust takes time but the results can be fruitful if embraced.

All administrators hope to be working in an environment with committed people. Frankly, most people would not be teachers if they were not committed to the importance of education. The question then becomes, how do we translate a commitment to education to a commitment to teaching and learning among all staff members? Sternberg's (1988) triangular model exemplifies the fact that, like a three legged stool, each component is dependent on the other. To have commitment we must have intimacy and passion and vice versa. Each of us reflect our own passions in our everyday actions. Like humans, these passions are as diverse as a colorful mosaic. Is there a best way to harness these passions,

couple them with intimacy or community and heighten commitment levels? As an administrator I would work hard to know my staff and understand their passions. Then through observation and discussion I could gauge whether these passions are being expressed and utilized within the classroom. I will also continue to lead by example, displaying my passions and relating how they translate into a commitment of teaching and learning.

<div style="text-align:center">Modeling a Passion for Excellence</div>

Happiness, an emotion humans desire, is directly related to passion. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1980) defines passion as an "intense emotion compelling action" (p. 831). If happiness is something we all desire, passion can be seen as the lever that moves us toward that goal. Goldstein (1998) relates that "in the context of teaching with love, passion could be defined as a teacher's compelling desire to teach, to work with children, and to facilitate interactions between children and content" (p. 261). Goldstein explains how passion associates with education so the next question becomes how, as

an effective educational leader, do I direct, propagate, and coordinate action?

Of course, there is not an easy answer to this question. I suspect that we all have things that we desire and enjoy. Personally, I love providing opportunities for students to experience something new. My passions rest with action, with movement, with involvement. Of course not all teachers share my enthusiasms, but I will be a big promoter of offering opportunities to students and teachers alike.

Providing such opportunities can be done both within and beyond the classroom. Knowing that teachers work with diverse groups of students, I will promote catering to these differences utilizing different teaching strategies that encompass multiple learning styles. I also want to give teachers the freedom to be creative and think outside of the box. I have seen and believe that creativeness by a teacher translates into interest and excitement among students. I would also promote both students and teachers being involved in extracurricular activities. Seen more as co-curricular, I believe there is a great deal to learn about life by being

involved in a wide array of activities. Whenever I can promote involvement by both students and teachers in activities that will stretch them in different directions, I will be not only supportive but an advocate.

Carl Rinne (1998) relates passion with motivation. He asks what kinds of intrinsic appeals are revealed in each lesson that a teacher presents? "The secret lies within each lesson" (p. 621). Are lessons being constructed that foster active learning and critical thinking or regurgitation and recitation? Do the students enjoy their classes? Are the teachers having fun teaching their classes? I believe passions can be ignited if a salad bowl approach rather than a melting pot of instruction is incorporated. What I mean is that giving students chances to display and use their individual talents in different ways can help us tap the passions that are silently percolating. The same goes for teachers. An administrator should give teachers the latitude to tap into their personal passions thus their lessons and relationships will be enhanced. This is not to say that accountability will be lacking, rather that passions can and should be incorporated into standards and benchmarks.

Founded in 1997, the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking Project (RWCT) has been helping educators in Central Europe and Central Asia redefine excellence. Instead of focusing on mastery of facts, active learning and critical thinking become the focus. Charles Temple (2000) points out that teachers in the RWCT project believe that "opportunities for preparing students for citizenship in open societies are more likely to be found in the how of education than in the what" (p. 314). The RWCT is helping educators in other parts of the world understand how the school culture directly contributes to the economic and political structure of the country. I share the motivations of RWCT and hope to promote their philosophy at the schools in which I work.

Active learning and critical thinking are championed by educational guru Theodore Sizer. Struggling, or grappling with a position can also contribute to the quality of answers that are reached. Theodore and Nancy Faust Sizer (1999) believe that the struggle is an integral part of the process. Students who use their base of knowledge, examine alternatives and compare solutions not only increase their intellectual capacities but their

moral reasoning as well. Too often "children are seen as the school's clients, as its powerless people. They are told they are in school not because of what they know but because of what they don't know" (p. 184). To achieve maximum engagement schools must shift their paradigms. The student comes into the classroom not as a sponge but rather a faucet ready to be turned on if the right opportunities are provided. "When the questions become the student's own, so do the answers" (p. 188). Helping teachers to see and understand the power they possess when designing their lessons, working with students, and fueling passions will encompass my work as a principal.

The movie "Patch Adams" (1998) helps to clarify how important recognizing and promoting one's passions are to the human mind and heart. In many ways our passions encompass a spiritual calling that moves us in certain directions. To me, experiential learning exemplifies my passions. Michael Lewis McGowan (1997) gives his perspective on the role of adventure in spiritual and ethical development. Our education system, which at times is criticized for teaching "values," constantly

instills values both overtly and subconsciously. Experiential learning forces the individual to make choices. "Virtually all group problems encountered on expedition involve similar dichotomies that facilitate encounters with ethical principles and spiritual forces" (p. 15). By offering opportunities for students to experience new challenges problems arise and decisions must be made. Deliberating between numerous alternatives, evaluating choices and making quality decisions are skills in high demand. Recognizing alternatives and making the good choices help to strengthen ethical and moral standards, the bedrock of our society.

As an administrator I intend to do everything possible to promote adventure and experiential learning within the school community. I do that today advising and coaching students in ten different extra-curricular activities including; Model U.N., Future Problem Solving, Mock Trial, Project Citizen, Explore America, Intramurals / Outdoor Pursuits, Football, Cross Country, Basketball, and Tennis. Adventures and experiences do not have to come solely outside of class and I will promote this perspective as a leader also. Passion is a vital component

of an effective leader, according to Jeanie Goertz (2000). Goertz found that principals with passion "frequently refuse to put an idea aside until it is satisfactorily resolved" (p. 161). Promoting active learning, critical thinking, adventure, experience, and opportunities are passions that I will carry on as an administrator. How will I carry these? What type of leader do I see my self becoming?

Much research has been done and many books have been written on leadership. Styles, development, situations, and traits are a few of the angles that have been used to analyze leadership. How does empowering leadership affect a school and what types of intrinsic values and traits must an administrator display to be viewed as an effective leader? These are the two main areas in which I will focus.

Empowering Stake holders

Theodore and Nancy Sizer's (1999) underlying theme, concerning grappling, is that *who* asks the questions is just as important as the answer to the question. Paula Short (1998) furthers Sizer's idea by stating that "The challenge to principals is to understand how empowering environments can be

fostered through organizational leadership, structures, processes, and cultures that support efforts to make schools ·successful for all children" (p. 72). Empowerment emphasizes personal understanding along with opportunities to ask questions and share knowledge. An environment that encourages questions is important. Increased knowledge of the subject will enhance the questions. If both teachers and students are empowered by the quality of questions then their answers and actions will be enhanced.

When individuals are empowered they feel as if they will make a difference in the success of the organization. "Empowered individuals feel that what they do has meaning and significance; that they have discretion as well as obligations; that they live in a culture of respect where they are encouraged to act on their own" (Jones, 1998, p. 280). Charles A. Heimbold (1998), CEO of Bristol-Myers Squibb Company, believes that empowerment must be coupled with accountability. Having clear expectations coupled with empowerment elevates levels of success. A good administrator

effectively communicates expectations and realizes the potential empowerment strategies hold.

In some regards I perceive empower to mean "emptying" power, thus em...power. Emptying power is not giving up power but rather sharing some of the power to see it grow in strength. I recently read a story pertaining to empowerment comparing John the Baptist and Christ. John created a monopoly (baptizing) and was quite successful. But after he was beheaded the practice of baptizing ended for several hundred years. Christ on the other hand shared his power with others. His crucifixion did not end his evangelic message but because others were empowered the message thrived. As others have emphasized, it is not what you acquire during life it is what you leave behind.

Richard DuFour (1999), a longtime principal, has seen his own style of leadership evolve.

> I learned (sometimes painfully) that the best strategies for improving the school were to delegate authority, to enlist the faculty in critical decisions, to pose questions rather than to impose solutions, and to create an environment where teachers could continually grow and learn together. (p. 13)

Emptying and spreading the leadership opportunities allows
the administrator to lead from within instead of from above.
Gaining understanding and learning to share (or emptying) are
personal endeavors that facilitate quality leadership.

Creating an empowering school is often a shift in the
culture. The principal's role will change from "the 'boss' to the
facilitator of teachers and from subordination and isolation to
collaboration and consensus building" (Rinehart, Short, Short, &
Eckley, 1998, p. 631). It is essential that language, spewed by
both the principal and the teacher be empowering. Leslie Laud
(1998) highlights that three-quarters of an administrator's role
is spent communicating. To empower others our type and form
of communication must be analyzed. "Efforts to share
leadership can succeed only when teachers feel empowered"
(p. 23). Laud gives examples of how she conscientiously
changed the way she communicated with her staff in order to
be more empowering.

I am dedicated to promoting an environment where both
students and teachers are empowered. With shared ownership
the stakes for success are lifted and many can share in the

individual and organizational successes. Finally,

Paula Short (1998) points out that "you cannot empower

teachers and students; you only can create environments and

opportunities that lead to and support empowerment" (p. 72).

As the building leader I will focus on the environment and all

that is encompassed within a school's culture.

<div align="center">Developing a Shared Vision</div>

Each of us tackles life with certain expectations and

perceptions. In education, defining an optimal learning

environment might engage as much debate as defining

education itself. It is the task of any leader to not only share

their vision but to help others see the value in the vision and

the benefits of following as well.

I love to dream and challenge myself to make my dreams

a reality. As a former psychology teacher, students and myself

loved analyzing each others' dreams. Where are we headed

and how can we work together to reach our dreams? As a

teacher, I feel this is my constant call.

When a person refers to someone as a "dreamer" often a

picture formulates of an individual with his or her head in the

clouds. A person that is either naive, immature, or overly idealistic. Frankly, I view dreamers as leaders, those willing to share their visions and work to make them a reality. Norman Schwarzkopf (1999) comments on dreamers as well, "it's the dreamers of the past and the present who have given the greatest gifts to mankind and so it will always be in the future"(p. 521). So how does a leader get others to share their visions, their dreams, their goals?

Often times the characteristic of "risk taker" is associated with exemplary leaders. Opening one-self up for self-scrutiny and sharing a vision takes on some risks. A close look at some of our great leaders magnifies their willingness to take risks, sometimes fail, but in the end reap the benefits of persistence, commitment, and hard work. Abraham Lincoln, John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Mohathma Gandhi are but a few of the great ones that lost nearly as many as they won, yet persisted with their visions and were willing to lose all in the pursuit of their "dreams."

For others to jump on my wagon and believe in my vision I will have to operate with certain principles. I believe

working with integrity and character will bring those wavering on the fence to my side. Norman Schwarzkopf (1999) views integrity as the most important characteristic of leadership. He states, "leadership is a whole combination of different ingredients--but by far the single most important ingredient of leadership is character" (p. 520). Schwarzkopf continues, "leadership involves integrity. And that is why character is what counts in leadership. Integrity is a linchpin to all of this" (p. 521). I agree with Schwarzkopf and feel, as he does, that most leadership failures deal with character rather than competence. There is no doubt that competence is important but I will continue to make character and integrity my personal "linchpin" for leadership.

Using the tools of empowerment and focusing on integrity, I will lead by following my dreams and creating a shared vision. Through hard work, persistence, and a willingness to fail I will help others integrate my vision into their dreams. All of this can best be done by keeping an eye to the future.

Looking to the Future

To predict the future we must first understand the past is a call of historians. It is the duty of future administrators to know both broad educational history and the school's local history. If I have in-depth knowledge of the school's history I will have a clearer picture of where we can and are going. Education historian Diane Ravitch (2000) takes a serious, in-depth look at educational changes over the last century and concludes that our "reforms" may in fact limit, dismiss, and squelch educational "progress." Ravitch's comprehensive overview and critique of education has caused me to be leery of the movements to which many subscribe.

Ravitch (2000) eloquently maintains that reforming American schools has been a theme for the last century. By knowing this history and being aware of what is happening currently I will be a more effective leader. Many of the current reforms can be traced to the findings and presentations expressed in *A Nation at Risk* (1983). The recommendations called for by this historic document were predominately based on intuition and not empirical or evaluative data.

Donald Orlich (2000) defines reform as "anything you can get away with" (p. 469). He highlights several different movements going on today and questions their ability to improve student achievement. Noting cognitive development and behaviorist principles of instructional design Orlich declares, "the time has come to challenge the premise that massive funding, written standards, and a firm resolve to create reform will cause students to achieve at higher levels" (p. 469).

Stemming not only from documents such as *Nation at Risk* (1983) but from calls for "choice" by noted experts, the assault on public education continues. Bob Chase (1999), president of the National Education Association, believes that "by turning education over to the market, you'll be accomplishing many things, but the improvement of education is not one of them" (p. 435). Public education's market has in fact increased since 1983 contrary to many who mandate "choice."

How charter schools, vouchers, private schools, and home schooling, not to mention the internet, will affect public

education is not crystal clear. What is clear is that the public system will constantly be challenged. As an administrative leader in the public school I must be able to withstand that challenge, engage a wide array of people, and show, in a plethora of ways, the educational value that students are taking from school.

Historic work done by Joseph Murphy and Anne Lewis (2000) congruently envisions a third period of major change at the high school level. Successful high schools of the future will "reflect a clear vision of expectations where accountability is communicated to the community, learning opportunities are student-centered and contextual, a variety of means of assessing students are used, and it organizes students into small learning communities" (p. 723-724). Whether this is done predominately in a public school, private school, charter school, home school, or via the internet awaits to be seen.

My task as an administrator is to be cognizant of the trends in which we are living. It is not only important for me to be informed but my staff, parents, and students as well. Through an active web site, a monthly newsletter, and regular

meetings with parents I will work hard to keep the community up to date as to what is going on internationally, nationally and locally. I will support and encourage teachers to attend conferences that help us to be front runners that are proactive and innovative. As a teacher, I realize the large demands we are under and how difficult it is to read something "extra." If reading articles in your respective field was expected and sharing viewpoints with others was a part of the system and culture valuable feedback and new ideas would emerge.

Students should not be left out of the loop as their feedback and response to teaching methods will essentially determine the worth of such efforts. We often disregard student feedback as trivial and not useful. What good marketer would disregard their buyers? Students will "buy" into what we are doing if we give them some ownership and use their input to improve. With so many opportunities emerging and the landscape of education evolving rapidly it is an exciting time to be involved in the process.

Summary

Our country and the world is hungry for leadership. We are all looking for leaders that: know where they are going, want others to follow, and will not give up on their goals. We desire leaders that embrace change and work to enhance the quality of our lives. I am excited about fulfilling the expecations others have for me as an educational leader.

There are many that use the descriptor "crisis" to summarize our current educational state. Uncertainty is a more accurate term, from my perspective. With the wealth of information inundating our lives and technology changing at rates as fast as any modem, we are all wondering, "What will happen next?" and "Am I ready?"

We can never be fully prepared for what the next day brings but I am ready to lead a school in embracing the challenges and reaping the rewards of what learning can provide. The greater the mountain to climb the better the view at the top. With our ropes secured and working in tandem a good team can climb any mountain.

I will help create a culture that enhances the climate, fosters passions, and looks to the future. By strengthening and clarifying my commitments; by utilizing empowerment methods that uphold the integrity and character of individuals and organizations; and by maintaining a realistic, relentless optimism that accepts failure but expects success I will move up the mountain enjoying the scenery as I climb. With patience, perseverance, and commitment the mountain top can be reached!

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