Educational leadership -- a philosophy for an effective secondary principal: a reflective essay

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Educational leadership -- a philosophy for an effective secondary principal: a reflective essay

Abstract
Leadership is a very recognizable characteristic, trait, or process in our society today. We know it when we see it, yet it remains very difficult to define. Leadership can be an organizational function, an individual function, or a process that may take on different characteristics depending on the setting.

There are literally hundreds of philosophies/definitions of leadership, and nearly as many on educational leadership. The goal of this paper is not to give an all encompassing definition or model for effective educational leadership, but rather to simplify the characteristics of an effective secondary principal into four categories: (1) manager, (2) innovator, (3) communicator, and (4) caring, sensitive listener.
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP - A PHILOSOPHY FOR AN EFFECTIVE SECONDARY PRINCIPAL:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Leadership is a very recognizable characteristic, trait, or process in our society today. We know it when we see it, yet it remains very difficult to define. Leadership can be an organizational function, an individual function, or a process that may take on different characteristics depending on the setting. Marsh (1992) identifies the six theories of leadership as: (1) trait theory, (2) situational theory, (3) social influence theory, (4) functional theory, (5) contingency theory, and (6) strategic theory. McCoy (1995) defines leadership as a combination of qualities and skills which include foresight in establishing a vision, the ability to clearly articulate the vision, charisma in inspiring others to follow, competence in approaching the tasks at hand, integrity in setting a good example, commitment in relentlessly pursuing what it takes for progress to occur, and genius in weaving it all together to accomplish the desired change. These perspectives alone show the complexity of leadership.

Through extensive research of leadership, well-known scholars have determined that leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth (Johnson, 1993). One researcher, after reviewing more than 3,000 leadership books and articles written over the last forty years, concluded that not much more is known about the subject now than before all the research began (Lee, 1995). Despite the ambiguous nature of the definition of leadership, we do know a good leader when we see one. A good leader is the individual who "knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way" (Lee, 1995, p. 14).
This ability to lead is crucial in the field of education, especially as a secondary building principal. The problem, however, is that much like leadership in general, educational leadership and the process/characteristics which it consists of, is also hard to define.

Hemphill, Griffith, and Frederikson’s 1962 study (as cited in Johnson, 1993) showed an effective principal to be decisive, hardworking, and one who was closely connected with people as an information center.

Yet another study on effective school leadership in 1982 by Sweeney (as cited in Johnson, 1993) identified the following specific leadership behaviors: emphasize achievement, set instructional strategies, provide orderly atmosphere, evaluate pupil progress, and support teachers. The point here is, there are literally hundreds of philosophies/definitions of leadership, and nearly as many on educational leadership. The goal then of this paper is not to give an all-encompassing definition or model for effective educational leadership, but rather to simplify the characteristics of an effective secondary principal into four categories: (1) manager, (2) innovator, (3) communicator, and (4) caring, sensitive listener.

The Manager

Managerial ability is required to direct fiscal and human resources towards the fulfillment of an organization’s goals (McCoy, 1995). Management, however, is often distinguished as separate from leadership. The managerial duties of a principal are often focused on the
short-term, day-to-day, non-instructional, immediate operational arena. Leadership, on the other hand is often seen as the long-term, instructional, people orientated aspect of the job (see appendix A). This dual-role complexity often leads people to distinguish management as a separate entity. It would be my contention, however, that effective management is a distinct characteristic of effective leadership. Without effective day-to-day organization and management, long-term planning can not happen. Management is simply the short-term aspect of leadership. Bolman and Deal's 1991 study (as cited in McCoy, 1995, p. 3) concludes:

Leading and managing are distinct, but both are important. Organizations that are overmanaged but underled eventually lose any sense of spirit or purpose. Poorly managed organizations with strong charismatic leaders may soar temporarily only to crash shortly thereafter. The challenges of modern organizations require the objective perspective of the manager as well as the brilliant flashes of vision and commitment that wise leadership provides. . . management provides consistency, control, and efficiency but leadership is needed to foster purpose, passion and imagination.
The problem with management is that it is a great time consumer that sometimes inhibits the long-term/overall aspects of leadership. This often gives management a negative connotation that leads people to separate or distinguish it from leadership. The following quote is from a principal of an urban elementary school (as cited in O'Keefe, 1994, p. 8).

Management has a negative term to it. That means you manage certain things and control them. You can be a manager without being a leader. We need managers, I'm not knocking them. There are people who need to handle the details, who need to dot all the i's and cross all the t's and add up all the columns and collect all the files and fill in all the forms and on and on - nauseating as far as I'm concerned personally. I don't want to degrade that but, I could never do that., sit in the office and play with the computer. I could never do it but someone has to do that, otherwise we'd have chaos. The budget would fall apart and things wouldn't get ordered. That's management but it has very little to do with success as a principal in a public school.

The elementary principal cited here seems to distinguish management and leadership as two mutually exclusive duties/roles/jobs. I would argue that management has very much to do with the success as a principal in a public school, it is a part of educational leadership, although short-term. What is important is that a leader does not let
managerial duties blind him/her or hold him/her down. The short-term, day-to-day leadership duties can not overwhelm the leader into forgetting organizational planning, guiding instruction, goal setting, and implementing change, which are the real reason the leader is important (Brock, 1995). In other words, the leader still needs to see the forest through the trees (ie: big picture). The managerial aspect of leadership is best to be taken care of outside of regular working hours, as the other aspects of leadership require interaction with colleagues, staff, students, parents, community leaders, etc.

The Innovator

To innovate or create change and move a school forward is to restructure, reorganize, realign, reinvent, or reengineer (Lee, 1995). This is perhaps the greatest challenge to any leader, and is vitally important in education as we “prepare for a future in which the only constant is change” (Lee, 1995, p. 16). Will and Ariel Durant make this point in their book Lessons of History (as cited by Lee, 1995, p. 13).

There is no certainty that the future will repeat the past. Every year is an adventure. When an association of individuals or a civilization declines, it is through the failure... to meet the challenges of change... this depends upon the presence or absence of initiative and of creative individuals with clarity of mind and energy of will, capable of effective responses to new situations.
It is important that effective administrators are proactive and confront rather than avoid, anticipate instead of react to situations and circumstances (Mendez-Morse, 1992, p. 41). The only real way for a leader to do this by creating a vision, staying current with information/knowledge/trends, taking risks, and including others in the journey.

Creating a vision is an ongoing process with an objective to renew. Dr. Burt Nanus, Professor of Management and Director of Research at the Leadership Institute at UCLA (as cited in Powe, 1992, p. 2) states that:

nothing could be more common in organizations than a vision that has overstayed its welcome. . . the vision may, in fact, have been the right one at the time it was formulated, but rarely is right for all time. The world changes, and so must the vision.

In order to create and change a vision, it is vitally important that school administrators stay current in their field. Information is a very valuable resource. By staying current and maintaining a sensitivity to future trends an administrator can stay at the forefront of any field and give insight to create a vision for his/her people to follow (Bethel, 1990). This is not a new concept as is evident by the following statement by Annie Webb, the first woman to hold a statewide elective office in Texas, in 1936 (as cited in Lee, 1995, p. 16).
Be progressive. Keep up with the moving world while not discarding what in the old has value. Don’t cling to the old when its worth has passed. Don’t be a person so set in your views that nothing can change you... our public schools must put I can in Americanism.

In order to act on new trends, information, or visions, a leader must be a risk taker. Leaders must take risks to create an environment that supports and encourages innovation and creativity. Risk taking can increase awareness, knowledge, and excitement while being overcautious and indecisive can kill opportunity (Bethel, 1990).

Great change and innovation in the 20th century has affected society in almost every way. Computer technology, space flight, automobiles, and thousands of other innovations have advanced society. Each of these innovations started with an idea that was acted upon by a risk taker. Such innovation can not continue to exclude education. It is up to today’s principals to weigh such risks in order to advance the quality of education that is provided.

Risks are not taken haphazardly but tend to be considered as opportunities that will improve the organization. Crowson (as cited by Mendez-Morse, 1992, p. 44) describes the risks principals took when they disobeyed or bent the rules when making ethically laden decisions as “creative insubordination”. His study reveals that when certain decisions would not serve the needs of their students, staff, or the school, these principals chose to disobey or at least bend the districts rules. He
reports that principals risked “Being ‘insubordinate’ in the face of organizational-professional norms or rules” in to serve student, staff, and school needs. The choices principals had to make were such that the “principals feel they owe it to their children and to their school to be insubordinate if necessary in the children’s interest”.

When taking such risks for the sake of innovation it is important to be flexible and not to do it alone. Powe (1994) identifies the four conditions for change as (1) mutual trust and sufficient openness to allow people to recommend and try change without feeling threatened, (2) widespread participation in the change process, (3) a diversity of skills and viewpoints represented, and (4) lots of feedback (p. 2). In order for change to occur, the people who are affected by it need to be informed and given some ownership of it.

Leaders of change recognize that the people in the organization are its greatest resource (Mendez-Morse, 1992). Principals need to be aware that educational change is going to affect both students and staff. A 1982 study by Bossert and colleagues at the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development (as cited in Effective Principal Behaviors, 1987, p. 2) stated that for principals to contribute to effective schools they must “emphasize achievement by setting goals, developing performance standards for students, and express optimism that students will be able to meet the goals”.
A 1989 study by Bamburg and Andrews (as cited in Johnson, 1993, p. 11) applies staff awareness by saying that "in initiating change the principal must be able to promote activities that encourage effective communication between principal and staff". This communication can lead to a trust that allows for successful innovation to take place.

The Communicator

Good leaders are separated from bad leaders by "the artistry of getting others to commit themselves to their highest possible levels of achievement" (Lee, 1995, p. 14). The key ingredient in getting others to do this is communication. Communication is one of the most agreed upon skills of importance listed by acting administrators (Lester, 1993) (see appendix B).

The communicating and listening skills of superintendents, principals, and teachers are an important characteristic of leaders who facilitate school change. It is the basis for their ability to articulate a vision, develop a shared vision, express their belief that schools are for the students' learning, and demonstrate that they value the human resources of their peers and subordinates.

Being an effective communicator and listener is also a key ingredient of the following characteristics, being proactive and taking risks, of leaders of school change (Mendez-Morse, 1992, p. 39).
Perhaps communication rates so high on the list of necessary skills because people are the primary resource involved in education. A study by Mazzarella and Grundy, in 1989 (as cited in Mendez-Morse, 1992, p. 34) reveals that “one finding to emerge repeatedly in studies of leaders, including studies of educational leaders, is that leaders are people orientated” and that effective principals’ strongest asset is “an ability to work with different kinds of people having various needs, interests, and expectations”.

The study by Mazzarella and Grundy is interesting considering that Roberts (1993) found in a study of beginning administrators that their biggest concern was working with teachers. The following quotes were taken form the Roberts study: (1) “The teachers will ‘lead’ the school. I plant the seed and coordinate the fertilizer.”, and (2) “I am very anxious to involve all teachers as much as possible” (p. 7).

A principal’s communication with staff is vital for the success and growth of a school. Principals need to guide teachers in participative roles and help them to develop ownership of the decisions they make and have a stake in their success (Burger, 1995).

People want their actions to make a difference and teamwork/collaboration is one way of accomplishing this. This collaboration can only happen when the leader moves the faculty from a competitive environment to one of cooperation through the use of effective communication. Empowering others is a very important component of leadership and can be very rewarding (Blase, 1995). By
doing this, a principal will move towards a partnership relationship with faculty, find time for teachers to work together, provide training, encourage and allow open communication to ensure security and trust, and support work done and ideas generated by the team (Burger, 1995).

The purpose of communication is to establish a common bond, or commonness, among persons. The establishment of commonness is based upon trust, mutual respect, frequent exchanges of ideas, and opportunities to engage in discussion of important matters, as one successful administrator noted. 'I try to establish an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect with my faculty. We have regularly scheduled times when teachers can comfortably express their concerns and ideas, and have input into school decisions' (Wendel et al., 1996, p. 138).

By allowing this ownership and collaboration people see a difference between where they currently are and where they want to be. A "creative tension" develops that results in a "natural energy for changing reality" (Burger, 1995, p. 26).

Walker (1995) identifies four types of communication as interpersonal, group, organizational, and public. The first three types having been covered in this section through the importance of communication with staff. The fourth type, however, is also important. It is vitally important that an educational leader maintain a feel for the pulse of the community. This can be done by accessing resources, understanding
the legal and political context of the school in the community, having an appreciation for diversity in the community, and encouraging/managing community participation (Walker, 1995, p. 20). A 1982 Bossert study (as cited in Effective Principal Behaviors, 1987, p. 2) reveals that principals of effective schools “understand community power structures and maintain appropriate relationships with parents”.

The Caring, Sensitive Listener

A 1990 report by Mahoney (as cited in Mendez-Morse, 1992, p. 38) revealed that a superintendent he studied recommended “be a good listener...often, people aren’t looking for instant comments or solutions; all they want is for someone to hear them out.”. Having an open-door policy as a principal and showing the willingness to set your work aside at any time to listen to someone’s concerns will help to create sensitivity in the school. A sensitive leader has a heightened awareness of the issues, values, and people in our changing society and tends to use power wisely, which inspires loyalty and trust. This sensitivity to followers’ needs is crucial to the effectiveness of the leader to get responsive, productive people (Bethel, 1990, p. 107-108). Sensitivity can attract others to the cause of the leader, whatever it may be (i.e., a new educational program). The more sensitive the leader becomes, the better able they are to motivate and influence others to help them make a difference (Bethel, 1990).
By listening and showing sensitivity a leader can develop a caring relationship with others (see appendix C). Caring is a willingness to share or sacrifice time, money, energy, or other resources for the benefit of others (Frase & Hetzel, 1990, p. 1). By caring, being sensitive, and being consistent people can develop a sense of trust with a leader and are more willing to try new things, share information, and to extend themselves.

Conclusion

There are many impediments to effective educational leadership (see appendix D). Such things as insufficient time, parent/student/teacher apathy, failure of parents to back the authority of teachers, little sense of school community, societal problems, and bureaucratic constraints can make the job of effective leadership an increasingly difficult one.

The four categories for an effective principalship can be instrumental in overcoming the impediments to effective educational leadership. The great commonality to the four categories presented, with the management category being the exception, is that none of the categories can be effectively used by sitting behind a desk, and none of the categories can be effectively applied without trust. In order to use the principles presented to overcome impediments to effective leadership, a principal must be active in the hallways, classrooms, and community and must develop a trust or consistency with the people in those environments.
Most importantly, regardless of what style of leadership or what characteristics a leader feels are most important, the leader must always be aware of the different/changing situations that occur and the different leadership styles that those situations call for. According to Bill Weisz, the vice chairman of Motorola, (as cited in Bethel, 1990, p. 123) "Different situations require different kinds of leaders. Leadership in essence is almost like playing golf. You use the right club at the right point. You don't use the driver on the putting green or the putter off the tee."

As I enter the principalship, I will face the complexity of integrating these four components of my personal philosophy into my own leadership style. Each component will act as a special piece to the puzzle, with each needing special attention when facing the multitude of situations presented to me as a leader. My organizational skills will serve as a vitally important attribute in "managing" an efficient building. By being an organized and efficient manager, I hope to lend the underlying structure and stability to the building which is necessary in allowing me to be a proactive and innovative leader. I feel that organization and efficiency, two skills often seen as more crucial to the business field than that of education, can allow me to avoid the "crisis" situations that inhibit the smooth functioning of a school.

With the managerial tasks of the position in place, I feel I will have more time to focus on the most important part of the job -- people. It's important to be honest as a leader. The building principal can include staff in the decision making process, but tough decisions often fall to the
principal alone. Tough decisions aren't always popular with everyone involved, however, an honest approach can lead to the trust that is required between a staff and a principal. Teachers need to know that the principal will listen, provide support, and offer honest feedback.

It will be important for me to try and transfer the energy and enthusiasm that I have always tried to bring to the classroom as a teacher, to an entire building as principal. Developing a trust and rapport with my staff can help to create an acceptance to this type of atmosphere and allow for the innovative trends that schools need to continually explore.
Appendix A

Management vs. Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Management Skill</th>
<th>Leadership Skill</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directing</td>
<td>Supporting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Thinking</td>
<td>inspiring Creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>Delegating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening Skills</td>
<td>Ensuring Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructive Criticism</td>
<td>Enhancing Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td>Resolving Conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementing Technology</td>
<td>Humanizing Technology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Bethel, 1990, p. 115)
Appendix B

Common Skills Identified By Administrators As Necessary

Superintendent: Communication
               Finance
               Interpersonal Skills
               Negotiations

High School Principal: Communication
                       New Trends in Education
                       Leadership
                       Interpersonal Skills
                       Problem Solving

Middle/Junior High School Principal: Interpersonal Skills
                                   Communication
                                   Vision
                                   Computers (Scheduling)
                                   Legal

Assistant Principal: Interpersonal Skills
                     Communication
                     Scheduling
                     Budget/Management

Randomly Selected Administrators: Interpersonal Skills
                                  Communication
                                  Finance
                                  Computers (Scheduling)
                                  Leadership
                                  Motivation
                                  Delegation
                                  Research
                                  Stress Management
                                  Counseling

(Lester, 1993, p. 4-11)
Appendix C

5 Steps To Establish a Caring Relationship With Employees

1) Attending: Get out of the office and into the hallways, classrooms, playgrounds, etc.

2) Listening: Genuinely and non-judgmentally show interest

3) Responding: Clarifying and probing and then sharing reaction openly and honestly

4) Personalizing: Focus on individual problems as opposed to generalizing

5) Initiating: Provide follow-up and share in solutions and future contacts

(Frase & Hetzel, 1990, p. 1)
Appendix D

Impediments To Effective Leadership

Insufficient time for:  -planning
                      -collaboration

Teacher willingness to engage in shared decision making due to time

Student and parent apathy toward education

Failure of parents to back the authority of teachers

Little or no sense of school community

Societal problems:  -demand for health/nurturing needs
                    -learning problems
                    -lack of values/behavior problems
                    -violence, drugs, threats of litigation

Bureaucratic constraints due to political environment

(McCoy, 1995, p. 15)
References


