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A vision and philosophy for educational leadership: a reflective essay

Abstract
The leadership position includes many roles and responsibilities that are essential to the growth and success of a positive learning environment. Encouraging participation and drawing from the expertise of individuals within the community will enhance the learning community. The involvement of others in the decision-making, the creating of goals, and obtaining a vision will strengthen the sense of pride in the school and in the community.

A leader needs to make clear the expectations and roles of individuals along with listening to what others are saying. Strong communications skills will play a vital role in all of the aspects discussed in this paper. A leader needs to be knowledgeable, flexible, have good understanding of human nature, and care about people.
A VISION AND PHILOSOPHY FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Education has been a very positive experience for me. I have enjoyed being in school from kindergarten through now as an educator. Even when I wasn't enjoying the academic side of school, I still gained a great deal out of the interaction between my peers and my teachers. For me being in school was a lesson for life. My educational experience gave me many learning moments. As part of the school setting I was not only exposed to the basic academics, but I was given the chance to discipline myself to be organized and to develop my social skills. Being in school gave me the opportunity to develop unique skills of my own and learn how to act and react within my environment. My educational experience gave me the tools to become a productive part of this society.

I feel the purpose of schools is multi-fold and it may be impossible to cover all of the positive aspects for the growth of America's youth. Our schools are the learning tools to develop productive lives for the people that will lead our country. Education will not just prepare students for careers, but it also produces a reflection of what our society is and will become. Schools have become more of a part of our society's lives. Long past are the days when the students and
parents were the only ones involved with the educational system. Now, all walks of life are interested and engaged with the developments of schools. Businesses want to see our students become more able to work with people of diversity and to be creative in the solving of problems in the working environment. For example, in the Cedar Rapids area the Cedar River Paper Company provides teaming workshops for teachers to help improve teaming skills and to put this concept of teaming into place with students. Non-parents have become more involved with the schools by volunteering and being involved with the decisions made in the educational process. For instance, community members serve on various committees within the school and give their views on items such as procedures, curriculum changes, and the types of activities that students will benefit. These and many other entities help to produce "learning communities" (Speck, 1999, p. 5) that invite all people of the community to be actively involved with different aspects to the educational process.

Our school systems have become so much more than a place of academics. Students are becoming life-long learners, which in turn gives them more opportunities
to be more productive in our society and become better leaders for our future. Schools have now extended the learning to problem solving, building leadership skills, independent learning behaviors, and improved social interactions. All of these entities are the preparation for students to interact within today and tomorrow's society. Problem solving within the school has become very popular with the community population. Many schools, classes and/or students are trying to come up with solutions to the problems facing our communities. For example, many schools are involved with the recycling of paper. The Linn-Mar schools in which I work recycle white and colored paper. This activity is usually structured and maintained by various student groups. Every building has bins in which the paper is stored until the paper can be delivered to the recycling center. Our schools and communities have come together to develop productive students and productive citizens.

Communication

There are many aspects to educational leadership. I plan to discuss my thoughts on those that I believe to be the most important to myself, the first of which is communication skills. "Communication is the most
important skill in life." (Covey, 1989, p. 237) Good communication is extremely important in all phases of the leadership role. The communications that are conveyed must be clear and concise, whether it is verbal or written communication. There are many groups of people that I will be in association with as a principal. "Communication creates meaning for people. Or should. It's the only way any group, small or large can become aligned behind the overarching goals of an organization" (Phillips, 1992, p.152-153). My beliefs and/or my positions on various issues need to be communicated to these groups so they know exactly what is being asked of themselves and what are the expected outcomes of their involvement. I believe that strong two-way communication is the best means of a good public relationship. When the staff is developing goals or involved with site based decision making, they need to know exactly what is the role that they are responsible for in order for them to feel that they are involved with the process. The community and the parents have to be updated with the happenings within the school and how this is affecting the students' learning. This can be done with weekly building updates, which can be very informational and can give
insight to what is happening in the classrooms. Honest, open communications will not only serve as a trust agent, but also may eliminate some misunderstandings in the future.

One of the most valuable workshops that I have taken in my career was that of "Cognitive Coaching". This workshop and the aspects of this theory have opened my eyes to effective and respectful communication. It is important to understand what the speaker wants from the listener. Does the speaker want a solution, advice of different ways to tackle a subject or just someone to listen and care about what they have to say? The use of cognitive coaching and working toward a holonomous state will enhance communication and create a better awareness of the thoughts and feelings of fellow colleagues (Costa & Garmston, 1997, p. 62). Holonomous refers to an organization and individuals that act autonomously and work interdependently. I have found that one needs to have a sense of what people are truly communicating, not just by the words that are used but by how they are used, what tones are used, and what is their body language saying. I have learned to be patient with people while they are talking to me. Before I was
always anxious to reply with my answer because I was afraid that I might forget what I was going to say, but then I might misinterpret what the speaker really wanted. Now I give the speaker my full attention and I don't respond until they are finished and if they want me to respond. I have learned that I don't have to fix everyone's problems, but I can give them some understanding or guidance on how they can solve their own obstacles. The use of cognitive coaching has improved my questioning techniques and listening behaviors in a way that have enhanced communication and developed a system to empower others to become better problem-solvers.

Allowing honest, open communication will foster trust and an overall respect for fellow colleagues. Time and development will need to be put in place in order to gain success. If colleagues are not given the time to truly communicate with each other, then more than likely they will not find the time until this communication process has been put in place. I know that from my own experiences that I don't stick to new habits unless they have time to really become habits. Once a habit has been put in place and practiced, it is more likely that I will follow through with that
practice on my own and even create my own time for it to happen. Of course, one can not just tell others to start communicating with each other. Training and a process need to be put in place. Communication is such a broad term and there can be too many ideas of what might be expected. As an administrator, I will have to put in place some professional developmental practices in order for all staff to be on the same page to what is expected of them.

Goal Setting

I also believe that an educational leader needs to have the ability to draw people together to seek common goals. The goals need to be made for the welfare of the entire school setting and they must be attainable, yet stretch the limits of those involved. This will take time and allow for open discussions to find the common characteristics of the staff. Everyone has to have the opportunity to give their input and their beliefs. The principal has to keep the staff on task, be open-minded to new ideas, and make sure everyone is comfortable with the objectives that are developed. This needs to be a team effort in which all of the members come to a consensus of what is best for the students, community, and staff. It is the role of the
principal to keep everyone pointed in a positive direction and assure everyone that the goals being made are important, will be achieved, and evaluated at various times. The setting of goals will not only give direction for involvement it will also give those involved a common theme to work as a team.

A staff that makes goals for themselves has to be able to state their goals in clear and concise terms. Goals will go untouched if they are not made clear and understandable for those involved with the process. A commitment must be made to the goals and steps needed to be put in place in order to assure success will happen. "The power to make and keep commitments to ourselves is the essence of developing the basic habits of effectiveness" (Covey, 1989, p. 92). The staff and I need to act as a support system in order to keep everyone on track to achieving their goals. The power is in numbers and the more people there are that can help to keep others on the path of success the more likely that the goal will become a reality. Putting meaning, commitment, and support into the goal making process will enhance the chance to succeed.
Motivation

Motivation is another factor that is so valuable for a principal to understand and to apply. I believe that people are more motivated when they feel that they are important and that they do a good job. "Qualities in leading a group of teachers are similar to that of teachers leading a group of students" (Acheson & Gall, 1997, p. 239-240). A leader needs to be clear with expectations and communications. Motivation is contagious to a certain degree and as a leader I need to show my enthusiasm toward the growth and changes that are happening to the organization as well as the individuals. Variety of approaches to growth will keep others away from stagnant states. I plan to change the way that the staff tackles issues throughout the year(s). Hopefully, this will stimulate new ideas and strategies on how to accomplish goals. It will be my job as the leader to ensure that we as a staff stay on task and not fall from what it is that we are trying to reach. During this time, I must keep in mind the different personalities and idiosyncrasies that naturally are part of any organization. It is too easy to point out the inconsistencies that those individuals may have. As a principal I need to be able to identify
the strengths of each teacher and have the ability to use those strengths for the benefit of the students and staff. Motivation needs to come from within a person. "One way leaders can meet the higher motivational needs of subordinates is to shift power down from the top of the organizational hierarchy and share it with subordinates" (Daft, 1999, p. 251). Teachers must believe that what they do is important and that it is appreciated. It is my responsibility to recognize the great things that are being done within the building and then give the recognition that is needed. I must also realize that not all people want their achievements to be made public. I will always try to practice the phrase of "praise in public, criticize in private". Using this practice will only enhance that of successes and gain respect for those that are in need of growth. It is very important to know and understand the people that I work around. I need to make sure that each individual is being complimented on the positive aspects of their careers and to give assistance to strengthen their weaknesses. Motivated teachers motivate students, and motivated students have a better chance of reaching their goals.
Decision Making

The ability to make logical decisions can not be truly taught. Anyone can make decisions. However, not everyone can make processed and well thought out decisions. In order to make good decisions that the public and employees will respect, a principal must know the environment of the community. The decisions that are made by the principal need to reflect the surroundings for the school. A principal has to have a good reading on what the public feels is important. The setting of goals and meetings with the staff will give a wonderful insight to what they see as being priorities. As far as the community, a principal will need to do some leg work and meet with the public to get a feel of what the community sees as being important. The decisions that are made can not be rash, especially if the topic of concern is important to me. Nor, should I spend a lot of time evaluating decisions over petty items. "Effective management is putting first things first. While leadership decides what "first things" are, it is management that puts them first, day-by-day, moment-by-moment. Management is discipline, carrying it out" (Covey, 1989, p. 148). The experiences that I have encountered or will
encounter will help with my decision making process. Decision-making can also be a group effort. I have had some bad experiences when given the opportunity to make a decision along with my peers and then a principal totally makes a different decision. If teachers or community members are going to be involved with decision making, they need to know what their role is in that decision. If people are going to be involved with the decisions of the school, they must know if they are being asked for advice or if they are making the decision. Making decisions effects more than those directly involved in many instances. Fore thought and processing the alternatives will definitely help with the making of decisions.

Decision-making does not have to solely belong to the principal. I believe that there are many talented and intelligent people that are in the classrooms, in the community, and those that are used in the support areas. "The Shared Leadership Team: A group of people whose flexibility, commitment, mutual trust, and sense of ownership enable them to out-perform most traditional work groups with a single leader" (Zenger & Miller, 1992, p. 10). It would be a mistake on my part if I did not use the expertise of everyone that in part
of the learning community. Not to mention the respect and pride that is developed when shared decision-making is put in place within an organization.

Those closest to the children and "where the action is" will make the best decisions about the children's education. Second, teachers, parents, and school staff should have more say about policies and programs affecting their schools and children. Third, those responsible for carrying out decisions should have a voice in determining those decisions (Liontos, 1994 par. 3).

As a teacher, I feel strongly that the people in the organization can make the best decisions for the organization. The decisions must deal with items that can be changed without injuring the integrity of the organization and that fit into the philosophy of the school as a whole. An important item to remember is that it is vital that the participants know their role in the process and know of any boundaries that are prohibited. If a group is gathered to explore possibilities or to provide input to a decision, then those involved must know that ahead of time. If this does not happen then the leader will lose respect and the participants will be more hesitant to volunteer for these types of roles in the future.
Facilitating Change

Education seems to continuously go through some type of change. As an administrator, it will be my responsibility to facilitate the changes that are introduced to the district or building. Whether the change comes from within the system or is forced by some outside entity, it will be my duty to see that the change is implemented and to include the staff in the process. I will have to persuade the staff that the change is for the improvement of the students' learning. Most staffs have individuals that are reluctant to change just because someone says that the change will increase student learning. I do not want to dictate the change, but I will want to lead the change through and with the stakeholders that are affected by the change. (Speck, 1999, p. 15)

In order to make the transition of change I feel it best to approach it as that of "mutual accomplishment" (Glatthorn, 1997, p. 87-88). This will include resources, development, long term goals, observations, celebrating successes, and to analyze. I need to provide staff with some of the tools that will make the change process a smooth transition and allow them to come to their own conclusions that the change
is necessary and beneficial. The tools or aids that I can make available to staff are the data that speaks to the change, time and resources for them to research, time to discuss with others the pros and cons, and opportunities to visit or observe others that have put the change in place. "They encouraged teachers to use the new methods immediately and frequently, and to organize themselves into study teams for sharing, observation, and peer coaching" (Lashway, 1998 par. 8). I will offer my resources and encourage staff to be involved with the change process. This will not only give ownership to the staff, but it will also give them the opportunity to explore the best possible way that the change can be implemented for that unique situation. "Change is most likely to be effective and lasting when those who implement it feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for the process" (Liontos, 1994). I must point out the successes that have happened from the change to possibly motivate others to keep on trying. During the process as a staff, we will need to analyze and test to see if the change is in fact making a positive difference in the organization.

"An idea to look at in the change process is to hire teachers that are more open to changes and new
ideas" (Meier, 1995, p. 142). I, too, can look for these types of qualities in teachers that already exist in the organization that can be put into more leadership type roles. "The most effective change in school culture happens when principals, teachers, and students model the values and beliefs important to the institution. The actions of the principal are noticed and interpreted by others as "what is important." (Stolp 1994 par. 15) As an educational leader I must be enthusiastic and be a role model for the entire learning community to follow and observe. "One of the most effective ways to gain acceptance of a philosophy is to show it in your daily actions" (Phillips, 1992, p. 25).

Vision
What does it take for a school to stay on the cutting edge and to try new and innovative approaches that could enhance the learning of the students? One thing is to be a visionary thinker. To encourage and model thinking that is "outside the box". People that are willing to take chances and explore the many possibilities of what could be are the ones that usually come up with the ground breaking thoughts that can change how education is approached. Another term
for this is called "lateral thinking" (James, 1996, p. 186-187). Lateral thinking enables people to view a problem from all sides and understand all the alternatives before devising a solution. As an administrator, I want to encourage staff members to be risk-takers when it comes being creative and effective educators. Many times educators become stagnant and wait for ideas to come their way and by then it may be too late to incorporate them into their organization. This may be due to a lack of resources, time, or enthusiasm to change.

I believe that a staff needs to consolidate to create a vision that will be workable and understandable. The vision needs to fit the staff and the rest of the learning community. "A vision for creating a healthy school culture should be a collaborative activity among teachers, students, parents, staff, and the principal" (Stolp, 1994 par. 14). The vision must be measurable either by dialogue or data collection. A vision should not be something that is made in the first few weeks of school and then to be never touched again until the next school year. "The creation of a vision is not a static event,
because the vision must change as culture changes" (Stolp, 1994).

A learning community needs to know where it was, where it is, and where it wants to be. They need to decide what should change, what should be thrown away, and what should be added. "To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you're going so that you better understand where you are now and so that the steps you take are always in the right direction" (Covey, 1989, p. 98). The learning community needs to develop the steps that it will take to make the vision a reality and a way of how things are done.

Learning Community

I feel that it is most beneficial when all members of the school, parents, and community members are a vital part of the educational system. If the stakeholders of the school are informed and included in the decision making process of some of the educational procedures and standards. When people of the community are involved with these types of decisions, this will enhance the pride for the school, give a better awareness to what goes on in the educational realm and
increase student learning. "Children whose parents are involved in school do better than their peers" (Steinberg, 1996, p.125). When all of the stakeholders are invited to participate in the activities of a school this is said to be creating a learning community. Schools can no longer be a separate entity of today's society. There are too many influences that the school can change and that can change the school. For a long time, schools were reactive to what went on in society. Now, schools have to be proactive and foresee what the society needs from it. "The open systems view is based on the idea that an organization and its environment are in constant interaction" (Campbell, Cunningham, Nystand, & Usdan, 1990, p. 289). Schools are part of a revolving door type of communications system and it needs to have its lines of communication open to all of society.

I feel that the public school system is one of the most influential domains in the shaping of the outcomes of our children. Our schools impact not just the students, but also our society as a whole. My experiences in education have been very rewarding. I believe that to be the case with most individuals. Society does affect our schools, but our schools are
affecting society in a positive and constructive manner. There are many responsibilities and roles that a principal must practice for the benefit of the students, staff, and community. A principal needs to rely on quality leadership skills such as communication, motivation, decision making, and the setting of goals. The principal is not alone; there are many talented and intelligent people that are part of the learning community. With all of this wealth of brainpower any problem can be solved and many new and innovative ideas can be put in place. It would be a mistake not to include all of these people in the educational process; not just because of the talents that they possess, but because that as an administrator I care about the people that I come in contact with. A principal is not just a figurehead, but a caring loving person that wants the best for those around him or her. The roles of a principal that I discussed are only a small portion of the skills that an administrator requires in becoming successful. Obviously many are challenges, but most are rewarding.
Summary

The leadership position includes many roles and responsibilities that are essential to the growth and success of creating a positive learning environment. The encouragement of participation and drawing from the expertise of individuals within the community will enhance the creation of a learning community. The involvement of others to have ownership in the decision-making, the creating of goals, and obtaining a vision will strengthen the sense of pride in the school and in the community.

Communication is the most important key component in all types of relationships. The relationships that a principal has with students, staff, and community members are no exception to this success. A leader needs to make clear the expectations and roles of individuals along with the ability to listen to what others are saying. Strong communications skills will play in a vital part to all of the aspects that were discussed in this paper. A leader needs to be knowledgeable, flexible, have good understanding of human nature, and care about people.
References


