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Critical components to successful leadership in education : a reflective essay

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Critical components to successful leadership in education : a reflective essay

Abstract

When faced with the question: "What do you believe about leadership and education?" most educators would quickly respond that there should be no separation between the two. A bond exists between leadership and education that is so strong one can not survive without the other. It is this tie between the world of education and the need for leadership that puts educators in classrooms and motivates administrators to take on the challenge of leading a building to success.

CRITICAL COMPONENTS TO SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP IN
EDUCATION:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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When faced with the question: "What do you believe about leadership and education?" most educators would quickly respond that there should be no separation between the two. A bond exists between leadership and education that is so strong one can not survive without the other. It is this tie between the world of education and the need for leadership that puts educators in classrooms and motivates administrators to take on the challenge of leading a building to success.

The leader role in a school building takes on numerous iterations from the educational leader, collaborative leader, public relations director, team leader, visionary leader, philosophical leader, political leader, and many more. The main role of the administrator is no longer to simply be a master teacher but to run a school building in much the same way a business would be run. The competitiveness brought on by critics outside the classroom and the urgency brought on by recent legislation make the leadership role more important each day. This important role must be filled by someone willing to take risks and be a leader as the risks often outweigh the rewards.

The need to be a leader comes from the idea that all that is wrong with a school could and should be remedied by the principal. Donaldson (1997) explains it as "open season on principals." This reasoning will surely keep potential principals away from the job.

As a teacher one can easily see and hear all of the negativity directed towards an administrator when things are not going as planned. This makes for a lack of interest in the occupation and speaks to the idea that one must be a true leader to tackle such a demanding job.

The success or lack of success in a building is often pinned on the principal that is supposed to be leading the building. “When the principal sneezes, the whole school gets a cold”(Whitaker, 2003,p.30). This ought to clear up any misconceptions about the role of a leader. Not only are you expected to succeed but when you fail your entire building will follow you in failure. What this means is that you must constantly strive for success and if you do indeed succeed your building will follow.

Going along in this direction brings out one of the most important roles of the educational leader, implementing change. The idea of change is often met with resistance. The idea of another policy or procedural change is many times seen as another quick fix or fad that teachers will have to employ for a year only to have it thrown out for the next big thing to come along. Whitaker (2003) speaks of concealing an idea because of the possibility that it would be “scoffed at.” Luckily he changed his mind and implemented a program of “caring is cool” that was successful. It is this ability of leaders to change even when there is a possibility of resistance.

It is important to realize that changing just for change's sake is never a good idea. This will undoubtedly be met with resistance and warranted resistance at that. The effective leader will make all decisions based on data that directly impacts their building. Data driven decisions should be the catalysts behind all changes in a building. One example of a failed change could be the popular idea of block scheduling. When prescribed to one building a social studies teacher responded that the positive effect was that they could now "show the whole movie"(Pierce and Stapleton, 2003). Clearly this was not the intent but that is lost in teachers asked to implement change without being informed of data behind the change.

Understanding the needs of the building and collecting the pertinent information is another role of the leader or principal. The interests and needs of the community should play as much of a role as the interests and needs of the students. This only makes sense, as our end product, the graduate, will be an important part of the community. Making sure that these two facets of the community, industry and scholarship are coordinated in a manner that will bring the highest level of success. This coordination is the responsibility of the administrator. This is a task that can be achieved with research and some community outreach on the part of the school and its staff.

Through the knowledge gained an administrator will inevitably gain information on the resources available to the school from the community. The collaboration is the key. Working with one another a community and a school can have a large amount of success. It is the building leader's role to ensure that the collaboration takes place.

This will ultimately put a public relations spin on the duties of the administrator. The promotion of school events, success stories from the building, putting students and staff in the news, are all part of the promotion of the building. After this takes place you are armed with what you need to approach the different businesses and organizations in your community and ask for any assistance as well as offer any help you can.

The decision making process can seem like a lonely effort for any leader. In education there are so many lives affected by each decision that principals are often leery of finalizing decisions. Fran Vandiver, a high school principal, commented on this situation and explained that she was growing more and more frustrated after each faculty meeting (Donaldson, 1997, p.36). Much of the concern stemmed from a fear of leading that finally drove her to collaboration with staff (Donaldson, 1997). In this instance there was a positive result and Vandiver was able to get staff input on decisions before they were made. Often times the opposite happens and a fear of leading can result in no change when one is clearly necessary.

This will lead to leadership as it connects to relationships. In a recent interview with Waterloo East High School building Principal Mary Meier it was stated that much of her day is spent dealing with relationships (personal communication, September 25, 2003). Relationships of teachers with each other, student relationships, and relationships between the school and parents. This role of keeping people satisfied and working to meet their demands may be the most challenging of all. The ability to work with a wide range of people and their personalities, as well as the ability to focus a large group towards a single goal are things that only a leader would be able to accomplish.

As demonstrated throughout this paper there are no aspects of education that are void of leadership, and leaders are educators no matter their position in life. Either a building administrator or a classroom teacher the leaders have similar tasks at hand. The scale of the task may differ but no matter your view, leadership is possibly the most important aspect to education. Inside this single aspect are many different ways in which a leader can be successful and many different skills required to have success. Five of these tools are discussed in this essay. Cultural Leadership, the leader as the agent of change, Visionary Leadership, and Instructional Leadership are all addressed and explained for the reader.

The Agent of Change

As the principal teacher of one's building the head administrator should be seen as the change agent. It is repeatedly stated that the principal plays the most influential role in a building's success or failure. For the vision to be one of success and for everyone involved to go along with the work being done, the building leader must be seen as the person who implements the building's plan for success, the agent of change. A belief in the ability of your building to succeed coupled with the knowledge and tools necessary to achieve that success form the principal's role as a change agent.

Some may argue that with the new initiatives a principal's role is diminished. Including site councils, department heads, and deans of everything from discipline to students this may well be a valid argument but Rallis and Goldring (2000) argue that the principal's importance is only increased as the number of positions in administration grow. With the importance of the principal increased and the need for school improvement the role of change agent is also made more important.

The most important thing to remember is that the changes made must be purposeful and that purpose must be clear to everyone involved immediately. Generally speaking people oppose change, this opposition will be less forceful if a clear and obtainable goal is in sight. The first change will be the most important and could potentially be the most controversial.

Whitaker (2003) states that there are two ways to improve a school; hire better teachers and improve the existing teachers (p.8). The classroom is where the change will ultimately succeed or fail so the teachers should be the obvious starting points for change. Personnel decisions will be scrutinized and an existing staff will surely be resistant to widespread changes but that is not the issue. We are not talking about sweeping out teachers and installing an all-new staff, which would be an enormous mistake. Instead, the principal should look to build on existing positives and use any chance to hire new staff as an opportunity to find an open-minded asset to the building.

Improving the existing staff should not be too difficult. Whitaker (2003) suggests beginning with your best teachers, as they will present the least amount of opposition. Beginning with unofficial programs that encourage team-teaching or development across curriculums. Getting teachers into each other's classrooms may help open up the building to positive changes. This could even evolve into a mentor program for any "new" teachers and before long there will be a change in the making. The important thing here is the change should be seen as non-threatening and as a directive of the principal at the same time.

The "Change Agent" role of leadership is a difficult one to embrace. Being the new principal of a building is already a substantial change. Consider that nearly everyone in the building has more experience there than you (Lemley, 2003, p.157). There will be many opportunities for the existing staff to tell you

how things were run in the past but the change agent will have to take charge and explain that changes are necessary for success and will be implemented quickly and with purpose. This is the part of “taking charge of change” that Rallis and Goldring refer to in *Principals of Dynamic Schools*. Principals of effective schools are working to support changes that will make schools better place for teacher to teach and students to learn (Rallis and Goldring, 2000, p.131).

Having already discussed the two most important ways to improve a building as well as discussing the importance of taking charge of change it is imperative to look at which types of change may be successful. There will no doubt be mistakes made along the way but the effective change agent will see that these are minor set backs if there is a long term and realistic goal in mind. The set backs should not be held from the staff and all successes must be shared with everyone involved.

Brock and Grady (2004) give a fantastic step by step manual of how to be an effective change agent; the following is an adaptation of this process from their book *Launching Your First Principalship*.

- Gather facts about the school and its issues. Look at strengths and weaknesses and what changes may improve the situation
- Look at the changes made in the past and why they were not effective
- Look out for political agendas in the building
- Decide whether change is truly necessary
- Plan the change and do your best to play the change out and look for success
- Initiate the change with teacher leaders and yourself at the forefront (p.54)

These steps are not a guarantee for success but they show that with a strong plan and the right sequence the change will be smooth and the change agent will have a much greater chance at success.

Ultimately the change agent must have the ability to lead a diverse group, meet resistance with authority and understanding, have a grasp on community and political issues, and be intimate with the organization's environment. The leader will indeed need to display all of the qualities expected from a principal but to be the change agent takes a little more initiative. Dynamic leaders serve as the ground zero for change in their buildings.

In order for the change to be effective the leader must first analyze and question all possibilities and then involve all stakeholders in the process of change (Rallis and Goldring, 2000, p.142). The goals must be clearly stated and realistic, and the staff must see that change is the only way to succeed.

The principal as the change agent is a difficult role to take on, especially when considering all of the other responsibilities put on a new principal. It is important to keep in mind that the position of principal is not raffled off. The leader is there in order to make improvements that were not apparent under the old system.

Change agent, principal, administrator, or principal teacher, the title makes no difference the bottom line is students and teachers must be allowed to succeed and the leadership of the building has to permit this through changes they study, initiate, support, and ultimately sustain.

Visionary Leadership

Visionary leadership is yet another component that must be evident if successful leadership is to occur. The visionary leader must wear many hats; they must not only own the vision but also explain it to the stakeholders and at times sell it to the community. When reviewing this aspect it is important to remember that the vision of a particular school district and the vision of an administrator are not always the same thing. Often times a building will be looking to accomplish something specific such as raising standardized test scores. A visionary leader will not be someone who simply takes the district's vision and achieve success with a quick fix. The visionary leader will be looking at all of the peripheral sources of assistance that will need to be brought together in order to succeed.

Visionary leadership is at times difficult to define. Today's school leaders are required to do so much that it is often just assumed that leaders will look at things differently and be able to implement change in a building or district while simultaneously having a vision for the future. This vision for the future and immediate implementation of change initiatives work hand in hand for the leader that is truly a visionary.

The idea of a school vision is in itself complex. MacKay and Ralston (1999) define different parts that go in the process: the vision as a “mind picture of the future”, a mission statement is “what a school stands for”, and a goal is a “product or behavior based on a school’s vision and mission statement”(P.15). There is a step by step process that has to be followed in order for the wants and needs of a building or district to actually mature into a vision. In order to illustrate this process we will take a look at the building level. The obvious first step would be the identification of deficiencies in a building. Next, Gupton (2003) recommended the building staff decide on and set realistic goals, and objectives (p.42). Here the vision is created but often looks like a simple wish list or is not taken to the next level; this is where the visionary leader steps in to complete the job.

One of the most important things to keep in mind is that creating the vision is a time consuming process that will need to involve all stake holders at some level or another. This is not an event that will take place at one faculty meeting (Gupton p.42). With the creation of the vision being such a key component it would be necessary to bring all stakeholders together to discuss the needs of a building. This may happen in the form of one large meeting involving everyone but would be more effective on a smaller scale. Here the visionary leader would delegate responsibility to teacher leaders and community leaders to gather information and ultimately meet as a small group to discuss the findings.

In today's world of instant results many will look to have sweeping changes in place quickly and have them be effective. This is where the visionary leader must use communication to keep everyone up to date on developments and inform all involved that the process is underway.

As with so many other aspects of effective leadership the communication component of visionary leadership is truly where the vision is either realized or not. Everyone involved must understand what is expected and how to recognize accomplishment in the vision (MacKay and Ralston p.22). All involved must know what constitutes excellent teaching and learning and what roles they play in achieving the vision (Gupton, 2003, p.42). With expectations clearly laid out and responsibilities clearly delegated the process can begin to move forward. The building staff and community leaders involved will benefit from clear and straightforward information regarding all aspects of the building's vision. Making sure that light is shed on each concern and that each voice is heard is critical. Gupton (2003) relays that the role of the visionary leader is to facilitate and never to dictate, this is where the communication lines are most often crossed (p.46). This is the area where the visionary leader must sell the vision. The facilitation of change and delegation of responsibilities associated with the change is where the adult stakeholders will take ownership of the vision (Gupton, 2003). Sigford (1998) discusses adult participation and the questions that this group may pose. Adults want to know not only what is in it for them but also how the vision

will benefit the community. What they will have to do, whom information will be shared with, how responsibilities will be shared, and who exactly is involved will just be some of the questions the teacher leader will face. It is imperative that the visionary leader has the answers or at the very least, access to the answers when the questions are posed.

It is not just that communication must occur, how the pertinent information is shared is also important. It is no longer enough to communicate but one has to take into account their audience. Sigford (1998) explains that adults have a foundation of life experiences that must be acknowledged and explained in order for the stakeholders to take total control of a vision (p.63). A visionary leader will seek out those qualified in their respective areas and have them take control of different aspects of a building's vision. Perhaps there are staff members or community members who are particularly adept at manipulating data; one could break these individuals into data collection teams. If the vision involves something like social climate of a building or attendance issues, or any other perennial concern past committee members dealing with the subjects should be consulted. The important thing is that the visionary leaders look at all of the assets available and utilize them to the greatest extent possible.

Visionary leadership is critical to any administrative team's success. Becoming a visionary leader is in no way an easy task to tackle but with the proper preparation, open communication, and ideas flowing freely up and down

the hierarchy and administrator should be able to not only form a vision for their building but be able to begin implementation. This would be a process best begun far before the school year began with a clear explanation the vision will be a time consuming adventure that will not simply go away. Having all of the stakeholders play some role, no matter how seemingly insignificant, is also a critical element to the visionary leader's agenda. In the end a visionary leader will delegate authority and responsibility to the proper staff and community members and, when handled correctly, those involved will feel like they are the vision and not just part of the process.

Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership is another important trait that a successful leader must possess. If a staff is going to let ethics and morals guide their instruction and actions then their leader will have to do the same. In school buildings throughout the country children's future is on the line. An outsider may be shocked at not only the number of decisions made on a daily basis in a school building but more importantly the number of moral dilemmas that face all staff members. Questions arise as to grades, graduation requirements, attendance policies, transcripts, official records, and a myriad of other situations where moral misjudgment could take place. This could be something as inconsequential as excusing an absence

for a favored student or something as significant as changing official records to favor a student. Ramsey (2003) thought ethics important enough to dedicate an entire chapter of his *School Leadership from A to Z* to the subject. Here he points out that “you can not have too many reminders that ethics is never obsolete, especially in schools”(p.25).

As the leader of an organization it is important that ethics are employed in all aspects of the job. It is ridiculous to think that anyone can carry out a job flawlessly or that anyone could be successful in their position without considering ethics. Loader (1997) explains that all professionals make mistakes whether they work in the public or the private sector, the key is that they have to account for them (p.25). The correlation between the ethical leader in education and the ethical leader in the private sector are echoed in Pristash’s work (2002) where she points out that many parents and students view a school’s principal as the business leader (p.21). This comparison is easily made but many would argue that the products are so different that the educational leader has even more pressure to be the ethical leader. While corporations are focused on profitability, public education is more focused on accountability. Dealing with the complexity

of today's educational centers, the increased number of stake holders and increased demands on the educational leaders may lead some to make poor ethical decisions in order to keep their schools on the "right track". In other cases these situations may lead to what Loader (1997) calls the "Paranoid Principal" (p.25).

Too much stress for perfection can lead principals to make decisions that they know are morally questionable but they believe to be in the best interest of their building, community, or their career. This could involve state mandates for something like graduation requirements, it could involve athletic eligibility, or it may involve an incident that could tarnish the community or building's image.

The high expectations placed on school leaders are described by Loader (1997) as a "dreadful burden" that leaders often take from school and place on themselves (p.27). One can easily see how the burden to perform could drive some administrators to massage statistics or manipulate numbers in order to make their building look as if it is meeting the community's needs when perhaps it is not.

While the administrator works to improve their students' achievement and keep their students in school long enough to graduate, they also work to keep their community happy and that is often a difficult task. General perceptions of the

administrative occupation are often negative to begin with giving principals even more cause for concern. Pristash (2002) explains that when a group of parents were asked what it was they thought principals did the majority gave answers with negative tones. Some of the uncomplimentary responses included:

- They're always busy—you can't get in to see them
 - They take longer breaks than anyone else
 - They sit back reclining and reading magazines
 - They take care of administrative fluff
 - They are hardly ever seen, especially when needed
- (p.29)

With parents holding these types of generalizations about principals one can see that putting ethics high on the priority list is a must for educational leaders.

Due to the fact that education is so regularly under fire the leaders of education are expected to not just meet the ethical standards of the masses but to be morally and ethically superior to those standards. Ramsey (2003) discussed the idea that schools are expected to be “virtuous enterprises” and therefore are held to a higher standard (p.26).

Ramsey (2003) explains that despite today's headlines and exaggerations the best leaders in all occupations continue to be "principle centered" (p.25). The idea of walking the walk is a major component. If you have high expectations for your staff you must have higher expectations for yourself.

If you are to be a believable leader you must not only model good behavior you must make all decisions based on good moral values and ethics. Ramsey goes on to explain that there are many reasons for school officials to be ethical leaders and list six:

- Educational leadership is a sacred trust
- It has to start somewhere
- Ethics is contagious
- People enjoy working in an ethical environment
- A reputation for high ethical standards is the best possible advertisement (p.26-27)

The importance of ethical leadership should be at the forefront of any leadership-training program and should be considered priority for any leader coming into the profession with an eye on success.

Ramsey (2003) discussed an example of a superintendent who would lie, ration, or withhold information based on personal interests. Even though there is not a moral code or ethical code by which one can compare decisions made,

making the ethically right decision is never difficult. There are different tests that leaders can internalize: Could I tell my grandmother about this? Can I live with this decision? Is this going to cause people to question my ethics? If any of these questions can not easily be dispatched don't do it. It is as true for schools as it is for business: "the ultimate secret to success is simply doing what's right every time, all of the time." (p.28).

Cultural Leader

Believing a leader is capable is just as important as the leader's belief in their support structure. Creating this understanding and the sense that all things can be accomplished is the idea in education referred to as creating a positive culture. First creating and then promoting a relentless campaign of positive attitudes, policies, and ultimately, positive results is one of the most important elements to leadership, especially educational leadership. A school's culture should be easily recognizable by the public and should display the attitudes held by the leaders, staff, and students that work and learn in the building. This culture of learning and achievement should constantly be displayed to all parties in the community, not just parents and those directly impacted but all should see the culture of the building.

The importance of this element to leadership may seem obvious. The problem with the obvious is that it is often neglected, in today's ever changing educational world the urban educators and leaders of urban schools must pick this role up and work to make their building stand out as a positive asset to the community as opposed to a liability. A building's culture must be presented to everyone at all times. Administrators have to take their roles as leaders and lead the charge in promoting positive culture throughout their buildings. Too often urban schools are labeled as poor achieving magnets for violence and chaos. Negative press is the only press remembered and negative culture is tough to change.

Where one begins often determines where one ends up. Beginning with the attitude of the staff and transforming this into something positive is crucial. Without the staff, leaders would be helpless. When culture is being formed it is important to use positive language. Lemley (2003) explains that certain terms or phrases should be culled out of culturally rich schools. Some phrases like working "in the trenches" or "it's a jungle in there", or teaching on the "front lines" have no place in education. All of these phrases conjure up thoughts of negativity and inherent trouble. Too often teachers in urban schools and leaders of those schools wear their building dysfunction as a badge of honor.

It is as if teaching in a low achieving building is more difficult and therefore more respectable. Respect should grow from the ability to improve a building not from the ability to maintain its current status.

Once the staff is on board and the negative language has slowed to a stop it will be time to involve the community and create a culture of ownership.

Manna (1999) says that the success of a school has very little to do with “special programs, expansive playing fields, huge endowments, snappy uniforms, celebrity alumni, or whether the school is wired to the Internet.” The idea here is simple, the success of a building is dependent on the culture of the building, the feeling that their building is special. A sense of ownership by the parents, students, and staff is imperative when discussing positive culture in a school building (McEwen, 2003, p. 101).

With the staff, parents, and students all on board to create a positive culture for their building it is time for the leader of that building to step up and implement the necessary procedures for success. “Dismantling a toxic culture and building a new one is complicated, messy, and even confrontational at times” (McEwen, 2003, p.94). For this reason the changing of a culture must be done rapidly and without restraint. Personnel who are not immediately on board must either be dealt with to change their negative ways or must be removed. Parents have to somehow be empowered to make decisions at the building level. All administrators must be available to talk to students and staff in order to identify

all barriers to success. Students must be monitored and guided as well as promoted and praised. Any negativity must be confronted immediately and conversely any positive displays must be rewarded immediately.

All change is met with resistance. Change in building culture is no different. Though the past was negative and at times unproductive it was comfortable and familiar. Here perseverance must be employed to make sure the positive culture takes hold. Often times building leaders look to implement change and either abandon the policies or lose momentum when met with challenges. Cultural changes are often severe and require a lot of forethought and staff training. If everyone involved is clear on the desired outcome as well as the plan of implementation a building's positive culture will be a little less difficult to employ.

Clarity is key. Sharing expectations with staff, parents, students and the community will take care of any misunderstandings. Maintaining a high level of discipline and being consistent will aid success. Communicating student progress to not just the students but parents on a regular basis will prove the program is working. Evaluating staff in a non-threatening manner will ensure quality instruction as well as a positive learning environment. Modeling the behavior desired is also an important ingredient to the success of a positive culture change. Accomplishing all of the aforementioned items will never guarantee success but it will definitely make failure more difficult.

An educational leader helps the community see the necessity of a positive culture. They also allow the building to improve by engineering change and bringing everyone affected by the school into the equation. This element of leadership aligns with the Iowa Standards for School Leaders in that it shows a clear intent to acknowledge strengths and improve performance of a building. It is clearly a critical element of any educational leader.

The next area of leadership discussed is the area of leaders as agents of change. No matter how you look at leadership one thing will be constant and that will be change. Whether it is an initiative created and implemented by the leader personally or something handed down it will inevitably be the leader who will have to ensure the success of changes in their organization.

Conclusion

In conclusion it is important to point out that though visionary leadership, ethical leadership, being the change agent, and being the cultural leader are absolutely essential tools for a successful administrator to possess they are by no means the only tools necessary. It is often stated that today's educational leaders must be all things to all people. The community wants an unwavering leader who will lead the students to success no matter the costs. At the same time the community is not always ready or able to pay the costs necessary. A building staff wants someone who will back them up when they have to make a decision. Simultaneously the staff may not always agree with the administration's

decisions. The students need an instructional leader as well as someone they can trust and open up to. The students will generally make the administration earn that trust and may not appreciate all that is done for them. The parents are often looking for an ally to help them with their students' problems. Parents will at the same time defend their students and attempt to protect them from administrative decisions. The difficult part is to keep your focus where it is needed most because that focal point will change sometimes on a daily or hourly basis. Surrounding yourself with the best staff possible and having a willingness to admit you need help are also critical to success.

Having the ability to lead is much easier than having the desire. When Pristash (2002) interviewed students, teachers, and parents to get their thoughts on the position of principal not one said that they would want to do it. This is a challenging and sometimes lonely position but not unlike most challenges the rewards of turning a building around and reaching students will out-weigh the sacrifices made.

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