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## A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

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## A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

### Abstract

Effective administrators must be committed to continually growing professionally. They must hone communication skills that will reflect honesty and clarity. Honesty and clarity in communicating will help facilitate strong relationships. Administrators must approach conflict in a healthy, caring way. They must have passion and vision so that they can lead and influence those around them into shared values and vision. Effective administrators must continually reflect on their own core and basic values, and evaluate how their actions and behavior line up with those values.

Finally, any educational leader must have a heart for kids. They must always remember why they do what they do. In fact, with more and more children coming from difficult home situations, educational leaders must have a special place in their heart to help those at-risk children be successful, whatever it takes.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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By

Ronald D. Morlan

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A PREFERRED VISSION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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To be or not to be an administrator, that is the question. One of the first things a person has to decide before pursuing a degree in school administration is to determine if he or she is ready to make the transition from being a teacher to being an administrator. One must decide if he/she has the gifts and abilities to make that transition. The transition from being a teacher and an administrator can come, and should come, while one is still teaching and training for administration. A teacher can start opening eyes to the bigger picture of the school system. Assigning one's self to more leadership responsibilities is a good way to start.

One of the most important things to do in deciding to make the transition between teaching and administration is to clarify and define personal core values. Along with that, a good practice is to reflect on how your actions correspond with your values. First of all, would becoming an administrator be consistent with your personal values? Is the extra time needed in preparation and growth to become an administrator interfere with a core value?

There is no one set of values that make an effective administrator, however, I believe there are some values that are shared by most effective administrators. Some of those are: education; leadership; communication; trust; relationships; caring; and commitments. These are just a few of

many basic values that I believe to be important to effective administrators. Now, these may or may not be core values. For example, one of my core values is faith.

The leader in any organization, especially in schools should wear their heart on their sleeve so to speak when it comes to values. "It is the sole responsibility of the leader to instill these values by constant preaching and persuasion" (Phillips, 1992, p. 53). Part of what effective leaders do is help the organization identify the shared values within that organization and move people towards goals that are consistent with those values. Values tend to motivate people. "Any successful organization, whether a business or a country, must possess strong shared values" (Phillips, 1992, p. 53). This process of principals bearing a clear vision for those around him/her is a primary way of earning respect of staff and moving towards goals and objectives (Vann, 1994).

### Communication

According to Speck (1999) one of the primary roles of the principal is to communicate the vision, goals, and values to the learning community. This key component of making the transition from teaching to administration, is one of the most important tools of an effective administrator: communication and relationship development. One must

decide if he or she has good communication skills and if those skills can be developed and honed to be an effective, communicating administrator. I have made a natural connection between communicating and relationship building, because I believe that in order to build relationships one must be able to communicate effectively. In fact, Covey (1990) believes that communication is the most important skill we have in life. Covey would remind us that communication is not just about the ability to express oneself, but the ability, patience, and desire to truly listen to those around us. "Seek first to understand, then to be understood" (Covey, 1990, p. 237). I agree with Covey that human beings have a need to be understood, affirmed, validated, and appreciated. Unfortunately, as Covey puts it so candidly, "Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply" (Covey, 1990, p.239). The effects of poor communication can be detrimental to a leader and the organization. Osterman (1993) compiled studies showing evidence that school leaders who focus only on communicating their own ideas become isolated and ultimately ineffective leaders. Gemmet (1977) suggests that the place to start in developing the art of listening is to first develop the attitude of wanting to listen. Do I truly want to do the hard work of

listening and understanding? Though that calling is a challenge, I believe the answer is: yes.

### Honesty

Honesty is one of the most key elements of effective communication and relationship building. Being truthful, candid, and caring with your communication, will make for effective relationship building. By being honest, even when it is difficult, an administrator will build trust. Trust is a key element in meaningful relationships. According to Daft (1999) honest feedback is a communication tool that guides organizations to learn from their mistakes and stimulates improvement. Another way to be honest and build trust is to follow through on things you say you will do. If a request is not something you foresee yourself completing, say so. This may create conflict, but people will soon know that they can trust what you say and count on it. "Through an individual's words, deeds, and actions, integrity can be judged to be genuine" (Phillips, 1992, p. 52). Simply put, "The architecture of leadership, all the theories and guidelines, falls apart without honesty and integrity. It's the keystone that holds and organization together" (Phillips, 1992, p. 52).



## Conflict Management

Conflict management is another major bridge in gapping the span of teaching and administration. What is healthy conflict? From experience, healthy conflict management is not conflict totally avoided. Yet, healthy conflict management is not always conflict sought out. Many people are afraid of conflict, or they live their whole lives in conflict. When is conflict healthy and useful for growth in a learning community? This is all part of relationship building. Managing conflict in a healthy way has a lot to do with communication, honesty, and trust. If one is going to be honest and truthful, conflict will follow. This is because everyone has different ideas of what is important as well as different views on what the reality is within that community. One of the most effective tools to an administrator is honed conflict management skills.

Conflict management will succeed if one can enter conflict with the desire to grow, learn, and create a mutual respect for opinions. It is my opinion that if someone feels respected, it is difficult to harbor anger, even if the conflict still exists. An effective administrator can communicate that varying opinions do count and are valuable, even if it is decided to go against those opinions.

A key element to conflict is caring. Do I truly care about the opinions and feeling of others? Am I prepared to change my view? Am I prepared to make my opinions heard and take the time to spell out the reasoning for those opinions? Do I have enough passion and vision to influence those around me to change? These are all questions that an effective administrator may ask to create a healthy conflict environment in their learning community. As an administrator, conflict is not solely confined within the walls of the school building, but conflict can happen outside the building with parents, businesses, and organizations.

Swap (1993) offers suggestions to help principals build a healthy climate and two-way communication. Principals can encourage school policy that supports involvement of parents and partners, initiate communication by sharing research findings, making time for those who are interested in learning more about the school, and most importantly model effective communication.

Conflict can be avoided simply by being aware of your own expressions, body language, and tone of voice. Amundson (1993) introduces a study that found 93 percent of communicating is non-verbal and only seven percent verbal. Covey (1990) supports these findings by citing experts that estimate ten percent of our communication is what we

say, 30 percent is just sounds, and 60 percent is body language. As a principal dealing with parents, staff, and partners, it may be worth having a soul-mate help you identify your non-verbal characteristics so you can tame them.

### Using Humor

I have committed a considerable amount of space to the topic of conflict management. This is largely because it is such a stumbling block for so many administrators, aspiring administrators, and teachers. In closing this section, it is imperative that the use of humor is discussed. A well-developed sense of humor can be a life-saving force in many organizations. My personal definition of humor would eliminate any so-called humor that would put-down others or include an unwanted sarcasm that can turn negative. My favorite humor is the ability to laugh at yourself and your mistakes. One must learn from them of course. Clever little statements used strategically during somewhat heated conversations can send the message: even though we aren't in agreement right now, I value time with you and love to laugh with you.

Humor can be used to break down the rigidity in the structures of school and helps humanize and personalize communications (Pierson & Bredeson, 1993).

## Professional Growth and Development

Another bridge in gapping the span between teaching and administration, is the commitment to professional growth and development. Am I willing to commit the time and energy to learning the trade of effective administration? Am I willing and able to financially commit to training and seeking a degree in administration? These are questions one must ask and answer before starting the formal pursuit of an administration degree. It is also important to know in what kind of program you are enrolled. Are you going to get a wide range of learning and experiences directly related and useful for your future practice? I believe that a program should give future administrators the tools to continue their growth and development. No program is a complete training. However, there are some elements that I think a program should have. These are areas that effective administrators should pursue themselves as well. These areas include but are not limited to: instructional leadership; organizational leadership; management skills; and some kind of field experience. It is important to stress that those enrolled in administrative programs need to pursue professional growth in these areas on their own as well as choose a program that contains these elements.

## Instructional Leadership

Instructional Leadership is an area that is often forgotten in light of the pressing urgency of many management issues. I believe that instructional leadership is one passion that teachers should carry with them as they bridge the gap between teaching and administration. An effective administrator has a handle on curriculum issues, instruction, assessment, and staff development. These are skills that develop a healthy learning environment within the community. Part of being an effective instructional leader is being able to put together contingency plans, in other words, plan for the future. Below is a list of eight skills that are required to effectively plan for the future in the realm of education.

1. Perspective
2. Pattern recognition
3. Cultural knowledge
4. Flexibility
5. Vision
6. Energy
7. Intelligence
8. Global values (James, 1996, p. 24)

The above list speaks to the great effort and skill required to be an effective instructional leader for the future. Another part of thinking about and setting goals for the future is to look at data from the past. So often educators just want to rush into the next new thing coming down

the pike in education. Instead of rushing ahead it is imperative that educational leaders, "...think through what they know about the problem; think about the data that can assist with a better understanding of the problem; understand all that the data reveals; and, clarify goals and desired outcomes before identifying solutions" (Bernhardt, 1998, p. 143).

With the primary focus moving towards instructional leadership, one must not ignore the pressures of management within a school system. Effective administrators have developed skills in understanding finances, law regarding schools, public relations, personnel issues, collective bargaining, and school facilities.

### Management Skills

One of the ways that an administrator can try to balance the huge responsibilities of both instructional leadership and management is to hone and develop the skills necessary to be effective in each. If one becomes proficient in one of those two areas, it will become second nature requiring less time. This allows time to pursue the other area. For example, one may be quite proficient in dealing with instructional issues like curriculum, instruction, and staff development. Although one always needs to maintain and grow in an area of the profession, being an expert in instruction will eventually free up time to develop management skills.

The key is not to get lost in one proficiency area or the other. An administrator must continually reflect on how they are doing in the different areas of instructional leadership and management.

### Shared Decision Making

Gone are the days when the principal is the person directing traffic and giving orders. No longer is the principal the sole decision maker. Educational leadership has entered an era of principals surrounding themselves with professionals, teachers, parents, and community members who can assist in making decisions. Often this process is called site-based management. Site-based management is, "...basically an attempt to transform schools into communities where the appropriate people participate constructively in major decisions that affect them" (David, 1996, p. 4).

The assumption regarding this school-based decision making is that administrators, teachers, and parents collectively have the best understanding of the contexts and cultures of the school (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). As an educational leader, one must truly believe that the more people you can get involved in the process of problem solving the better your pool of ideas to approaching various educational dilemmas.

## Conclusion

In summary, effective administrators must be committed to continually growing professionally. They must hone communication skills that will reflect honesty and clarity. Honesty and clarity in communicating will help facilitate strong relationships. Administrators must approach conflict in a healthy, caring way. They must have passion and vision so that they can lead and influence those around them into shared values and vision. Effective administrators must continually reflect on their own core and basic values, and evaluate how their actions and behavior line up with those values.

Finally, I believe any educational leader must have a heart for kids. They must always remember why they do what they do. In fact, with more and more children coming from difficult home situations, educational leaders must have a special place in their heart to help those at-risk children be successful, whatever it takes. Og Mandino in his book, The Greatest Miracle in the World, said it best,

I seek more valuable materials than old newspapers and aluminum beer cans. I search out waste materials of the human kind, people who have been discarded by others, or even themselves, people who still have great potential but have lost their self-esteem and their desire for a better life. When I find them I try to change their lives for the better, give them a new sense of hope and direction, and help them



return from their living death...which to me is the greatest miracle in the world (Mandino, 1975, p. 16).

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