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Leading from within : a reflective essay

John C. Mutum
University of Northern Iowa

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Leading from within : a reflective essay

Abstract

The principal is a team member that brings a specialized skill set to the table, for the benefit of the whole team. The principal's role is that of a leader. The principal functions as the leader of vision, climate and culture, the leader of reflective practice, the leader of change, the leader of learning, and the leader of service. In all of these areas the principal leads from within the team as a member of the team.

Leading from Within

A Reflective Essay

A Research Paper

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John C. Mutum

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Victoria L. Robinson

Advisor / Director of Research Paper

4-4-06

Date Approved

Robert H. Decker

Second Reader of Research Paper

4-5-06

Date Approved

John K. Smith

Head, Department of Educational

Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary

Education

The traditional view of school leadership comes from a hierarchical model. It is authoritarian based and the principal is seen as more important than the teachers. The principal makes all the important decisions, or delivers them from downtown, and the teachers carry them out. That sort of top-down, authoritarian model will not be effective in the educational system of today. I don't think of principals as being more than teachers or better; they just have a different role. The principal is a team member that brings a specialized skill set to the table, for the benefit of the whole team. The principal's role is that of a leader. The principal functions as the leader of vision, climate and culture, the leader of reflective practice, the leader of change, the leader of learning, and the leader of service. In all of these areas the principal leads from within the team as a member of the team.

Leader of Vision

The principal leads the way in clarifying the vision of the school. As educators we often get caught up in the busyness of education and forget the entire purpose of educating. It is a case of not clearly seeing the forest because of all the pesky trees in the way. The principal is constantly bringing the focus back to why we are in education: to make a difference in the lives of children. This becomes the underlying theme in every meeting and communication.

Unless the school's vision is represented in how its resource are allocated they are not worth the paper that they are written on. Every decision must start with the question, "How will this align with our mission? How will this help us reach our identified goals?" If it does not, then though it may be a good thing, it should not be allowed to detract time energy or resources from our primary purpose.

As the leader of vision, the school administrator demonstrates what it means to believe in the potential of each student. This belief will also be apparent in the leader's commitment to developing the potential of each staff member. The principal motivates and encourages each staff member to do their personal best and to help students do the same. He or she highlights and celebrates areas of strength and challenges the staff to come together and grow in areas of weakness.

Leader of Climate and Culture

That vision is inextricably linked to the culture and climate of the school. The principal has a great responsibility for both the climate and the culture. The climate refers to the general feel or personality of the school. Is it relaxed and friendly or uptight and punitive? When visiting a school it is usually easy to get a sense of the climate within a short time. While it takes little time to notice the climate of a building, developing the underlying school culture takes a great deal of time and intentionality.

The school culture creates the building climate. The culture of the building refers to the way people and situations are approached. It includes the traditions and celebrations of the school. It influences how staff meetings are conducted and the approach to student discipline. The culture is reflected in how the building faces challenges and resolves conflict. The principal leads the way with the tone he or she sets in each interaction within the school community and leads the way in developing a culture which focuses on solutions rather than problems. Where the existing school culture has been negative, the principal is responsible for becoming a catalyst of change because, if the climate and culture are not positive, this can sabotage any improvement which is attempted. It is important to remember that it is not programs and curricula that change children's lives, it is people who care, dedicated to making a difference. Unless a principal is successful in impacting teachers at a heart level, little of lasting value will be accomplished.

In order to do this a school administrator must have a strong sense of identity and personal mission. Overcoming a negative climate in a building can take a personal toll. If a principal does not approach his or her job as a calling to make a difference in the school and the members of the school community, it would be easier to give up and settle for the status quo. Being an agent of change is never easy. Count on motives and methods being questioned. Just as in the

classroom, it is often the very ones who need you the most that are the greatest resistors to what you are trying to do for them.

One underlying assumption that needs to be worked into the school culture is a dedication to the education of all children. Unfortunately, this is not always the belief of all educators. Many educators begin with that belief, but experiences can chip away at it, if it is not promoted and protected. The principal, as the leader of vision, climate and culture, finds creative and persistent ways to communicate this philosophy and weave it into the culture of the school. School systems are put in place to assure that this belief is also the school's practice. When students are not achieving, there must be a system in place that will identify those students and come along side them with an intervention to help them succeed.

At the heart of a collaborative school culture, where all parties work together for the greater good, is collaborative decision making. The principal must facilitate bringing a diverse community group together and reaching consensus on decisions that will benefit all. To accomplish this the principal gains input and works to make decisions in which there is no winner or loser. A school leader must also be adept at conflict resolution skills, allowing participants to see challenges from vantage points other than their own.

The principal needs to reach beyond the confines of the school to the greater community and involve community leaders in the process of educating our

community's children. He or she must communicate the importance of education to the wider community and bring it to the forefront when community and government decisions impacting education are considered.

People are lifelong learners. This must be firmly embedded into the culture of the school. Teachers and staff need to be growing and developing in their skill level and be learning new strategies effective in reaching students coming from a changing society. This professional learning community needs to be in the habit of evaluating their current practices with an eye toward keeping only those practices which are effective in reaching the learning goals of the grade level as determined by collectively and individually examining objective measures of student learning. As the instructional leader, the principal must be skilled at leading group evaluation of data and leading the group into action steps indicated by the data. This again ties to the school culture which values and believes in the success of all children.

Ultimately the principal is called to lead, or influence a group of people: staff, students, parents and community members. As the leader of vision, climate and culture, the principal is the team member that helps to unite and motivate this group to a common purpose: educating all children effectively.

Leader of Reflective Practice

In order to do this a principal must be committed to growing in his or her own skills by being the leader of reflective practice. A reflective practitioner, simply put, is a person who consistently and systematically sets aside time to reflect on his or her professional practice. Reflecting on our skills and practice is a critically important element in becoming an effective administrator. Thinking deeply about what we do, helps the school principal become the principle learner and the leader of a learning community which grows and adapts its practice to give children what they need to become all that they can be.

As the leader of an organization whose purpose is education, it just makes sense for the principal to be a lifelong learner. We hold learning and personal growth as a core value. If it is a core value, then for us not to practice it would be hypocritical. Reflecting on what we believe, allows us to know and to articulate what we believe about education, the school community and ourselves. Some have gone so far as to say that, "Anyone who serves as principal and cannot articulate and act upon a set of internally consistent beliefs and principles does not deserve to have the title" (Terry, 1999). I know professors who would heartily agree. Without those beliefs firmly in place, we simply fly by the seat of our pants, reacting to each situation as it comes. Reactions can be based on emotions or our own insecurities. Taking time to think reflectively helps us to distance ourselves psychologically from our emotional or ego related attachment. It helps

us to be more objective and think thorough alternative solutions we may not have yet considered (Silver, 1988). When we are aware of our core beliefs and consistently examine our actions in light of what we believe, we are able to gauge whether we are truly acting on what we believe. As we note inconsistencies between what we believe and what we do, we are able to plan how to react to similar situations in ways that are integral with what we believe. This is the same learning that we ask students to do when we are having discussions about their behaviors.

Thinking deeply about our craft goes beyond just thinking about administrative technique, or the *how* of what we do. It delves into foundations of the *why* of what we do, questioning our motives and considering the implications or our actions on the wider school community (Polite 4). For instance, if I begin to use angry confrontation with students as my primary means of discipline, how will that affect the climate of the school and how other staff members deal with students and one another? What messages am I sending to students, staff and parents about the level of respect we show each other as human beings? If, as John Maxwell (1993) says, "Everything rises and falls on leadership," not only will *what* I do impact the school climate and culture, but so will *how* I do it. With so much at stake, it is imperative that I take time to ponder my actions and what message they send to the people to whom I am responsible (Polite 4).

The chief reason that may prevent principals from reflecting about their practices on a consistent basis, is the shortage of time and all the other competing priorities an administrator faces. Principals are tempted to see it as selfish to close themselves in their office and read a journal or review the day critically (Terry, 1999). Instead of this being a selfish act, since it will make us more effective, it benefits the people around us (Evans and Mohr, 1999). Only when we see reflection as vital to our success, will we be able to make sure that it is scheduled into our daily routine alongside other valuable practices. It is reflection, in fact, that helps us to be more effective with our time. Only by thinking deeply about what we value and holding that next to how we actually spend our time, can we begin to change our practice to match our priorities.

Another benefit to taking time for personal growth is the ability to keep up with current innovations in administration as well as teaching. To be a leader often carries the expectation of being in front. Though I take a more collaborative view of leadership, this picture is helpful in illustrating how inappropriate it would be for a principal to be lagging behind in his or her professional knowledge. We do need to be at the forefront not just of what is current, but what is effective. The principal becomes the schools principle learner. Only then can he or she lead a true learning community.

The concept of a professional learning community looks at the staff as a team, learning together how to reach students most effectively. As a community

we reflect upon our practice collectively. The principal by using reflection in his or her own practice serves as a model for the staff. Some principals demonstrate this by asking the staff for feedback about their own decisions, methods of communicating, or other job performance taking suggestions for improvement (Arredondo, Brody, Zimmerman & Moffett, 1995). This really sets the scene when it comes time to ask the staff to reflect on their own practice. The principal has created an environment where it is safe to not be perfect, to question what you do and seek improvement. We have to move beyond the “value” in evaluation. Having room for improvement does not make anyone less value-able, instead as we recognize the value of those we serve, we see our duty to provide them the best, most effective instruction possible. Evans and Mohr (1999) tell us, “As the leaders of the group, we must model the willingness to be uncomfortable, wrong, and maybe foolish.” By being willing to do that we set the tone. In order to grow, we have to be willing to be wrong, admit it, and even be willing to laugh at ourselves. “ In the midst of this very serious work it is, in part, a sense of humor that gives principals the elasticity and the willingness to face tough choices and difficult times” (Evans and Mohr, 1999). Our example can pass that on to those we work with and care for.

As principals we lead the way to the whole staff embracing the value of reflective practice. Terry (1999) tells us that, “successful leadership is measured by the improvement in the performance of others.” So thinking deeply about

what we do as educators needs to become part of the practice of the entire school community. Those core values we hold in common, “must become shared goals so that the entire community shares a vision. The relationship of the principal's values to the accomplishment of goals in the school and to important variables such as school climate and staff morale have been strongly documented” (Terry, 1999). Teachers want to teach and they will see the value in a principal who works along side them to help them become more effective (Terry, 1999). This is in part how we can build a team of reflective practitioners. Only as equal partners in the inquiry, can this work, because “only teachers themselves can provide the interpretive knowledge needed to understand teaching acts” (Arredondo et. al. 1995).

Ultimately, the end result of collectively thinking deeply about how we teach, is a higher standard of learning for students. As New Zealand principal, Linda Tame, explains about her own school’s journey, “We have discovered the power of teacher learning. At the moment our school is on a learning journey and the staff are very aware of that. I think that the students are also beginning to realise that learning at Lincoln High School is changing” (Ministry of Education, 2003).

Leader of Change

The principal, as the leader of change, must understand the nature of change. Change is not a dragon to be slain or a task that must be accomplished. It is the core process of education. Education is change. We sometimes mistakenly believe that Education is static. If we find a method or plan that works, then we are set. We have arrived. But education is not a destination; it is a journey. It is those who think that teaching is a destination, that find themselves complaining about the students of today and how they just don't have what the students of yesteryear had. That is because they have stopped in the middle of the journey and have found themselves left behind.

As principals we must lead the way for the whole staff to embrace the journey. We teach them to find joy as we travel together. Community is what helps encourage people to stay on the road to change. It is a sense of togetherness, that we are not alone and isolated. The principal is charged with helping to create that sense of community and togetherness. He or she does that by building relationships within the teaching community. I do not mean to say building relationships in a utilitarian sort of way in order to control people. That is not relationship. It is manipulation. Michael Fullan (2004) echoes saying that what separates effective and ineffective leaders is that effective leaders really care about the people they lead.

Building relationships is the true core of leadership and change (Calabrese 2002). We ask teachers to really care about the students that they lead. We set the example in how we relate with the people that work with us. This community of caring is built each day by treating our coworkers with respect and dignity, even when they disagree with us. Without that relationship of respect, it will be very difficult to produce change (Whitaker 2003).

A principal that comes in and tries to make wholesale changes without understanding the culture of the building that he or she is inheriting will be in serious trouble (Brock B. & Grady, M. 2004)(Terry 1999). A principal must work to identify the existing values and underlying assumptions of the staff. These values and assumptions can either be a foundation for the change process or a very large barrier. Either way, to not know what beliefs underlie the collective practices of the school community could be very much like walking blindly into a minefield. Since lasting change needs to be consistent with the beliefs and values of those implementing the change (Calabrese 2002), the change must either be consistent with those values or the values themselves will need to be impacted before sustained change can occur (Hunzicker 2004).

For this reason it is more effective to work to change the beliefs of people than their behavior. Simply trying to impact their behavior is very Skinnerian. If we put enough cheese at the end of the tunnel or apply electric shock for wrong responses, we can get the rat to traverse the maze. To simply try to force behavior

change upon people without leading them to see and accept the value of the change is fundamentally disrespecting their humanity.

That is not to say that once those rationale and values have been established and the staff as a whole has committed to them, people cannot be held to that standard. In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins (2003) states that the first step in creating a great organization is not deciding where the bus is going, but rather getting the right people on the bus. I believe that there are times for the good of the organization and the students that some teachers may need to move on. If after attempts have been made to reconcile and value divergent opinions, a staff member is so set against the direction that the rest of the staff is determined to go, they may need to go a different direction on a different bus. Even in antiquity the statement "Can two walk together unless they are agreed?" (2000 B.B. (before busses)) was a descriptor of shared vision in community.

When a school community, in looking at what their students need, decides to begin looking for something more effective, developing a mission statement is a good starting point. This serves to set the direction for the journey. Laying the groundwork for identifying and refining the values of the staff is the first step in the process in developing a school mission statement. Often people are unaware of their own underlying assumptions and values. Through the discussions and reflection that occurs in asking what it is that we intend to do in our school, some of those assumptions can be brought to the surface and challenged if need be.

Identifying those assumptions and values also allows us to question practices that have become routine, but may not be moving the school in the direction that we want to go. If something is not central to our mission we can question whether it is something that we need to continue. This, of course will need to be done through the group process. People often have strong attachment to past programs and practices and it may take time for them to recognize that those programs and practices are no longer necessary. In order for people to be able to let go of the old they need to see through evidence in the practice of others and eventually in their own practice, that there is something better, or more essential, to move us toward our common path.

In the process of creating a new mission statement, it is essential that all members of the school community have input (Wilmore 2002). It is the entire community that will be asked to implement the mission. People will tend to work for a vision that they have helped create and in which they believe, because then they have a vested stake. Huffman (2003) tells us, "The task of the leader is to share and combine the personal visions of faculty members into a collective vision molded and embraced by all. The creation of a school vision, as an integral component of the change process, emerges over time and is based on common values and beliefs."

It is only through examining our values that we can arrive at a set of shared values and beliefs. It is through those shared values and beliefs that a

sense of shared purpose, or mission, can be established. That shared purpose is foundational for establishing a community that learns together how to move toward fulfilling their mission. This is also a critical step in recognizing that we are on a journey. While a community such as this has a common focus, centered on student achievement, there is a sense of the continuousness of the process. We recognize that where we are, is not sufficient as we examine the data. And we begin to inquire into how we can improve our practice to move us forward in the journey. It is this constant focus on the evidence of student achievement that keeps us moving in the right direction.

Leader of Learning

As the staff develops a community with shared values and beliefs tied to student achievement, and as it becomes clear that in order to affect positive change in that achievement, changes need to be made in teacher practice, the community recognizes the need to learn more effective practices. This is the core of a professional learning community. The principal then, as the leader of learning, involves the learning community with the creating and carrying out of their own learning. The principal assumes the role of a facilitator and a catalyst to help keep the adult learning process moving forward and in the right direction.

The principal constantly keeps the vision / mission of the school in the forefront of every conversation. The staff or a leadership team then generates the

strategic plan that will bring that vision to a reality. All staff development then, is tied to that strategic plan (Zepeda 2004). The principal's mission is to help create the environment and structures that allow the staff to move forward toward creating and implementing that plan. Creating a professional learning community becomes not the goal of staff development, but rather the vehicle to implement staff development practices that will impact students (Morrissey 2000). The PLC simply becomes "the way we do things around here."

The primary focus of the learning community is inquiry and reflective practice. Critical inquiry takes place as teachers look at the needs of students and begin to question their own practices. This requires leaving the safe harbor of holding on to past practices and the belief that we already know how to teach effectively. We need to move to a stance of uncertainty where we are free to question how effective our current practices are, in light of the needs of our students (Sno-Gerono 2005). Only when we admit that we do not know, will we sincerely begin to investigate and search for a better way.

This can be a difficult task because there is safety and security in the assumption that we already know how to take care of the business of education. In order to help educators make this shift, we must help them exchange one kind of safety for another. Instead of the safety of isolation, where no one else can see whether the individual teacher is effective or not, the principal is charged with helping to create a culture where being uncertain is safe, an understanding that it

is acceptable not to know. In the classroom we, as educators, regularly practice this approach. We ask students to help identify what information they know, what skills they have mastered, and what knowledge and skills they need to acquire. Brain-compatible classrooms encourage an atmosphere in which it is safe not to know something, because learning new things is the entire purpose of education. We need to take that same kind of attitude with staff development. If we are lifelong learners, then we do not know everything yet, and can never know everything. This understanding can create a strong desire to know more. As learners we must identify needed knowledge in order to go about learning it.

The staff as a community then, looks at current practices to identify areas which need to change in order to reach the building objectives. The team identifies where their practices are, on the continuum of best practices, and decides what steps are needed to move forward on that continuum (Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell & Valentine 1999). We apply the same understanding of assessment being nonevaluative that we use in the classroom. It is a nonjudgmental look at where the knowledge and skills of the learners are currently and what needs to happen in order to move them to an increased level of proficiency.

This idea of safety extends to the conversations about how to improve practices. It is imperative that there exist a safe atmosphere in which to share ideas and opinions and then openly discuss those ideas and opinions. There must

be an understanding that divergent opinions are not only tolerated, but valued (Scribner et. al. 1999). From there, the staff can engage in generative problem solving, dialogue and reflection (Zepeda 2004). That dialogue is what engages the critical thinking of the educators to challenge current assumptions and move toward a shared understanding of more effective practice.

Simply having dialogue about best practice though, is not enough to make it materialize in the classroom. The conclusions that the learning community reaches must be implemented at the classroom level. In a professional learning community, that takes place through collaborative practices. The principal and leadership team create an environment where there is an appreciation of collaboration (Sno-Gerono). Teachers learn to deprivatize their practice (Scribner et. al. 1999) in favor of sharing practices and looking for input on methods of instruction.

One effective model for sharing that practice is peer coaching. Peer coaching allows colleagues to guide one another toward improved teaching practices that will impact students' achievement. This form of collaboration is much more effective in producing changed classroom practices than the old checklist principal-teacher evaluation structure (Zepeda 2004). It creates a collegial, cooperative learning where the vast pool of knowledge that exists among staff members can be shared and disbursed in a way that could never happen in a culture of isolated practice. It creates the sense that we are in this

together, that we all have a piece of the puzzle and an understanding that we can learn powerfully from one another.

As teachers design and implement their own staff development, they are free to implement that development using what they know and what they learn about effective teaching. Students do not respond well to sitting and listening to uninterrupted lectures. Adults respond even more negatively. Teachers along with the principal, as facilitator, can ensure that staff development is engaging and stimulating. The staff development activities can be reinforced using strategies such as: brainstorming, graphic organizers, humor, artwork, metaphors and movement. These strategies, to name a few, stimulate different parts of the brain and make learning more powerful (Tate 2004). The introduction of fun into the learning serves to help cement the learning community as well.

Finally the type of interactions a principal has with teachers one on one can have a tremendous impact on that individual teachers' professional development. It is not the principal who produces the most important changes in a school, but the teachers. Transformational principals produce second order change (Hallinger 2004). They increase the capacity of others to impact students. The role of the principal is to recognize latent potential in teachers, to see the greatness they carry within and help them realize that potential (Calabrese 2002).

Leader of Service

Teaching is an act of service to the community and to children. It is important to help educators remember during times that they may not feel appreciated that they are there to serve the community and their clients, the children. The principal, as the leader of service, helps to instill a sense of service not only in the lives and attitudes of the educators, but also into the lives and attitudes of the students. This is accomplished by providing opportunities for students to engage in meaningful service learning projects which serve the greater community.

Service learning helps to round out the education of the whole student. It impacts students' academic achievement, civic participation, personal and social development, as well as their career skills. It is an important part of a complete education and the principal has a key role if service learning is to be an effective component of the curriculum.

Service learning is more than just volunteering. It is another avenue to teach the curriculum. Because it is hands on, it can result in much stronger learning than just listening to a lecture or only reading about a subject. Because it is real-world application, it is much stronger learning than learning that is only theoretical (Hinck and Brandell 1999). Students take what they have learned in the classroom, they transfer and apply that knowledge which moves them to a higher level of learning.

It is the curriculum links that distinguish service learning from community service (Weissbourd 2003). The stronger and more closely the learning ties to the curriculum, the greater will be the impact on student achievement (Billig 2000). The learning needs to have clear academic goals, which are made explicit to the students. Students need to be given adequate time to think, talk and write about their experiences to maximize their own learning as does any reflective practitioner. As with any important area of the curriculum it is necessary to assess the learning which takes place (Moon 1999). This serves to signal to the students that it is actual learning and holds them accountable for that learning.

Studies have shown that service learning when tied to the curriculum can have many positive results. Students are motivated to stay in school (Weissbourd 2003). They may acquire a greater complexity in their thinking as well as achieving a positive affect on their grades and attendance (Hinck and Brandell 1999).

Service learning can help develop democratic values and civic mindedness in students. Rick Weissbourd (2003) says, "With strong schoolwide and community support, service learning can connect students' academic and civic lives..." and, "service learning can help teach important skills for civic participation." He goes on to point out that the service needs to be linked with a deeper analysis of the underlying social issues that have led to the problem they

are addressing. This way, students have a clear understanding of the impact of what they are doing and whether or not it is addressing the root issue or simply putting a band-aid on a symptom. This analysis helps move students beyond nice acts to a more deeply relevant addressing of social justice issues. It ties closely to what the effective, professional learning community does in addressing the underlying issues of school improvement.

It is important that students create collaborative relationships in the community in which they are not just coming and doing something “for” a segment of the community, but rather doing something “with” them. Shelley Billig (2000) reports, “...the greater the degree of direct contact with the community and the more mutuality of the relationship, the greater the respect and caring that is developed.” Otherwise it does not create deeper understanding but may reinforce negative stereotypes (Billig 2000).

Service learning also impact students’ personal and social development. Students involved in serving others developed a greater understanding of themselves and of their place in the world. They become more connected to their communities and experience fewer discipline problems (Hinck & Brandell 1999). Students engaged in service learning tended to be more accepting of cultural diversity (Billig 2000). Shelly Hinck and Mary Brandell note that, “...students who engage in service may develop greater complexity in their thinking; ethical commitments regarding themselves, their lifestyles, and what they know and

believe; movement toward higher levels of moral reasoning; and development and clarity about their faith and spirituality.” This addresses some of the public’s deep concern about the importance of character education in the public schools.

Working in a cooperation-oriented project helps prepare students for the workplace of today. Billig (2000) tells us, “... that students who participated in service learning reported gaining more career skills, communication skills and knowledge of more careers than nonparticipants.”

Including service learning in the school curricula has so many benefits for students that it is important for the principal to work it into the fabric of the school community through the collaborative process of the learning community. It needs to have broad support from parents, staff and the community at large. The principal is responsible for initiating and sustaining that support. Service learning needs to be a part of the vision and mission of the school and closely tied to its learning objectives.

As a principal I must lead by the example of service in my life. This will be evident in my commitment to the school community, as well as the community at large. I will strive to work as a servant leader within the school community. Someone who is less concerned with image than compassion, someone who is willing to roll his sleeves up and take part in the work of community.

Conclusion

The principal functions as the leader of vision, climate and culture, the leader of reflective practice, the leader of change, the leader of learning, and the leader of service. But ultimately the principal leads from within as one who works along side. It is a passion for fulfilling a calling and seeing others fulfill theirs, that motivates the most effective principals. It is what will be central in my own practice.

Nelson Mandela in his 1994 inaugural address quotes Marianne Williamson:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others (Williamson 1992).

I think that this is what we are meant to do as principals, to let our light shine and liberate teachers to do the same so that they can help children to become everything they were meant to be.

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