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Sara L. Oswald
University of Northern Iowa

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The roles of the secondary school administrator : a reflective essay

Abstract

A true leader must be able to do three things well: 1. Identify, What needs to be accomplished? 2. Be the world's best gopher. Support your staff by asking, How can I help you and support your program? and finally, 3. Say thank you to all who helped students achieve success along the way.

THE ROLES OF THE SECONDARY SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR :
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper
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The Department of Educational Leadership,
Counseling, and Postsecondary Education
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of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Sara L. Oswald
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Robert H. Decker

March 31, 1997
Date approved

Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Dale R. Jackson

March 31, 1997
Date received

Coordinator, Educational
Leadership Program

Michael D. Waggoner

4.1.97
Date approved

Head, Department of Educational
Leadership, Counseling, and
Postsecondary Education

My early experiences with administration set the stage for my perceptions of what the principal does in a school. Memorial Day, 1997, I will be celebrating my high school ten-year reunion. I am anxious to visit with some of my old teachers and my principal. I am from a small Kansas town and had only fifty students in my graduating class. Due to this small size, I had many opportunities to have both formal and informal contact with my building principal, Mr. Pat McAfee. I would see him in the halls visiting with teachers and students, and he always had time to say hello or congratulations for any achievements. I realize now what a difficult task it is for administrators to escape from their offices and be a visible and knowledgeable member of a school.

Of course the smaller size of my high school may lead some to believe that this principal had less work and worries than one in a larger district. However, the small town principal often has to fill multiple roles within his/her building. I also had the opportunity to visit with my high school principal in his office for various classroom discipline situations. I was not a "bad kid" by any means, but I was sometimes removed from a class period for too much talking. At these times, Mr. McAfee would discuss alternative behaviors with me. He always treated me with respect and was never condescending. I do not think that Mr. McAfee ever judged anyone harshly or labeled them as a lost cause. He seemed determined that every student had worth. As a student, his interest in my success empowered me to strive for excellence. I believe the teachers

also felt encouraged by Mr. McAfee's support. He was a great person to share a success with, and he was equally good at attacking problems.

My next experience with the principal position came with my current position in Harlan Community High School. Mr. Kent Klinkefus has been my head building principal for all of the six years I have been in Harlan. Mr. Klinkefus is another caring principal who shares Mr. McAfee's gift for greeting students and faculty in the hallways. He is also a strong instructional leader with whom I am comfortable sharing my successes and weaknesses. I often use him as a sounding board as I look for options to problems. He is a great coach. He knows when to give me advice and when to let me find my own way.

These two principals gave me the impression that being a good coach is an important part of being a good administrator. As I began this administrative program, I felt like I understood the human part of leadership, but I wanted to learn the background knowledge or the bureaucracy of running a school. I knew few details of educational philosophies and leadership models.

Understanding the Self

Adult Learner

In the past three years, I spent time learning about myself along with learning the details of administration. First of all, I learned about myself as an adult learner. I have always enjoyed school, but I have never faced the challenges that this program provided. I learned what it means to be a true life-long learner, juggling the roles of teacher, wife,

mother and student. It forced me to prioritize every aspect of my life. I could not always perform every task as well as I would have liked, so I was forced to accept my imperfections. This was difficult for someone who was accustomed to tackling every situation head on. One of the first adjustments I made was to resign my position as yearbook advisor. As I explained to my principal, I felt I could not give the position my full attention while keeping up with homework assignments and taking care of my new twins. The tug-of-war that I experienced after the birth of my children led me to the decision that I cannot commit to an administrative position at this time. I would only frustrate myself by not being able to fulfill all of the needs of both my family and my building. Fortunately, I have many years ahead of me to gain an administrative position. In the meantime, I am enjoying the increase in responsibilities that my principal has given me within our district. Many of these positions began as practicum experiences, but as I proved myself to my administration, I continued to receive more responsibilities beyond my practicum needs. In this manner, I gained invaluable experiences and was able to compromise the step between classroom teacher and building administrator. I feel I have gained recognition as one of the leaders in our school.

Perceptions of Power

In the beginning of our program, Dr. Dale Jackson asked us to complete a *Power Perception Profile* (Hersey and Natemeyer, 1979). My personal responses indicated that I felt I had high power in the areas

of Expert Power and Information Power. Expert power refers to a leader's possession of expertise, skill, and knowledge which in turn earns the respect of others enabling the leader to influence the behavior of others. Information power refers to the leader's possession of, or access to, information that others perceive as valuable. This power influences others who feel they need this information (Hersey, Blanchard and Natemeyer, 1979). When responding to the profile statements, I was considering my leadership role as a high-school foreign language instructor and yearbook adviser. As a foreign language teacher, I am often one of very few people who have tri-lingual capabilities. This leads to the perception of expert power. I also felt that my unique possession of this information put me in a position of having information power. What made this profile truly interesting was combining my own perceptions of my power with those of one of my third-year French students. My student and I had almost identical results except in the Connection Power and Information Power categories. I had scored myself low in the Connection power category with the idea that I do not use my connection with the administrators or a student's parents as a negative power basis. My student, however, said that he understood my Connection Power base to be related to my role as a possible scholarship and job reference. This gave the Connection Power category a positive connotation. In the information category, my student did not value his French education as much as I thought a student should. But, at the same time, he did recognize my role as an expert.

We spent a good deal of time discussing the various aspects of situational leadership. In addition to the areas of connection and expert power, I also had higher than average scores for referent power. This refers to a leader's personal likeability and personality (Hersey et al., p. 1). I believe this fits well with my philosophies. I was able to rejuvenate a dying French program at Harlan Community High School. I give credit to my reputation as a fair, energetic, and supportive teacher. These traits should serve me well in an administrative position as long as I also have the necessary knowledge base.

The Situational Leadership model is a guide to how to relate leadership styles to the maturity level of the followers. (Hersey et al., p. 2). I found it interesting that I rated higher in the areas that require more mature audiences. I wonder if that is a positive, negative, or immaterial bit of information. I imagine I would have adjustments to make if I needed to coach a less mature audience.

Learning Styles

Later on in the program, Dr. Robert Decker asked us to complete another inventory based on the 4MAT System (McCarthy, 1985). These learning style inventory results allowed me to label myself as a type-four learner. The accompanying literature seemed to describe myself to a tee. Some examples included: "Are enthusiastic about new things. Are adaptable, even relish change. They excel when flexibility is needed. Are risk takers. Are at ease with people. As leaders they lead by energizing people. They exercise authority by holding up visions of

what might be. They are sometimes seen as manipulative and pushy." The best part of this inventory is the study of how my type of learners are seen by other learner types. I can easily see how a type-two learner can be overwhelmed by the emphasis on change. Type-two learners are described as, "They seek continuity. They value sequential thinking. Need details. They are thorough and industrious. They enjoy traditional classrooms (McCarthy, 1985, p. 4). Applying this information to an administrative position will be crucial.

One of my weaknesses is my perception that everyone shares my vision of what might be. I am currently a member of a change force in my school. The process of bringing others on board to our philosophies and to wait for others to see the worth of our vision is sometimes a tedious process. I expect others to see our enthusiasm for what we know we can do, and everyone else will want to be involved. Interestingly, many of our staff members are hesitant to change, but I think this can serve as a *positive aspect of the change process. By forcing those of us on the change force to look at our vision through their eyes, we gain an even deeper understanding and appreciation of our own vision.* The comment on how type four learners are sometimes seen as manipulative and pushy stays in the back of my mind as a reminder to be patient and let others discover the worth of our vision in their own time.

The time commitment is also an important lesson for me to learn. Dr. Pat Krynski once told us that it takes seven years for a change to become institutionalized (Krynski and Reed, 1994, p. 67). This time

commitment allows all those involved with a change to adjust their own philosophies and methods accordingly. It is a study in how to keep what was right with the old way of doing things and incorporate what is best about the new beliefs.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The final peek at what makes me tick came through the completion of the Life Styles Inventory (Lafferty, 1989). This inventory held some surprises for me and further discussion with my classmates led to further confusion. My highest scores came in the areas of Achievement, Self-Actualizing, and Humanistic-Encouraging. After discovering that these are the three highest areas identified for the "ideal" school administrator I was ready to pat myself on the back.

But, I also had an exceptionally high score in the area of Competitive. This certainly did not surprise me. I have often used competition as a form of motivation. If the student next to me received high scores in a class I would challenge myself to receive equally high scores. Even when it is obvious that my skills are lacking in a specific area, I still know that I can improve on where I am today. I often compete against myself when it comes to classroom activities and getting the best performances out of my students. There is no other French teacher to compare my work to within my building, but I often consult former students to see how they feel their education stacks up with the person sitting next to them at the university level. I am also instituting the use of a national French standardized test so I can have some data appropriate

for comparing my students' abilities and therefore my teaching abilities with those of other schools around the nation.

Personally, I still do not see how this type of competition is harmful to anyone else. I never begrudge anyone of a better grade or project if I feel that the person worked as hard or harder than I did. When co-workers design fantastic class projects, I am excited for the opportunities this affords to our students. I use competition as a measuring stick for my own work. Am I just lying back and letting life happen, or am I doing my best to be a mover and a shaker in whatever I do. Unfortunately, the "ideal" administrator had a much lower score in Competitive than I did. My classmates, family members, and co-workers said they felt my definition of competitiveness was different than that of the Life Styles Inventory. If nothing else, I have learned to take note of my competitive nature and will try to use it for good.

The Roles of the Administrator

The Manager

In order to explore the topics that I see as most important to me, I addressed my ability in the six administrator roles identified by Gorton and Schneider (1991, p. 85). The manager role involves procuring, organizing, and coordinating both physical and human resources so that the goals of the organization can be attained effectively. The manager is responsible for keeping the organization running smoothly. I believe that I am a capable manager. I have experience managing daily functions through past job experiences and am considered to be an organized

person who can "get the job done." I feel the confidence of my superiors and my co-workers as they ask for my direction on various projects from chairing the Foreign Language Curriculum Committee the past three years, to my role on the district Phase III committee the past two years, and finally to my new role on the Assessment Committee. I was selected as one of four assessment committee members who was sent to California to investigate some new methods of reporting assessment criteria and successes. One area I am eager to learn more about is delegating appropriate assignments to support staff and other individuals. I tend to trust myself more than others when I feel I am responsible for completion of a task. One of the principals on my California visit, Mr. Randy Rowe, made the comment that he is a powerful instructional leader so he made sure that the assistant principal he hired was a strong manager. He says this gives him the confidence that the job is being taken care of without his constant involvement (personal communication, January 17, 1997).

The Instructional Leader

Each school has its own definition of what it means to be an instructional leader. Gorton and Schneider define instructional leadership as, "actions undertaken with the intention of developing a productive and satisfying working environment for teachers and desirable learning conditions and outcomes for children" (1991, p. 319). I am confident in my commitment to improving schools for students. I believe that schools are here to serve the students, and any type of

assistance I can give to improving both in-class and extra-curricular learning opportunities is a step in the right direction. A great deal of what I categorize as instructional leadership involves giving classroom teachers opportunities to stretch themselves through inservicing, observation of other classes, mentor relationships, and personal visitations to the classrooms for immediate feedback as often as possible, not just during formal evaluation periods.

Two judgments frame the contemporary concern for the professional development of teachers. The first reckons that teacher learning must be the heart of any effort to improve education in our society. While other reforms may be needed, better learning for more children ultimately relies on teachers.... The second judgment regards conventional professional development as sorely inadequate. The phrase 'one-shot workshop' has entered educational parlance as shorthand for superficial, faddish inservice education that supports a mini-industry of consultants without having much effect on what goes on in schools and classrooms (Sykes, 1996, p. 465).

One of my mentors gives his staff the opportunity to work in triads as observational teams. The teachers are given release time to meet for ninety minutes after taking personal time to observe each other on at least three opportunities. The ninety minutes are divided into two sections. First, the teachers outline for each other what they observed

the students doing during their classroom visits. The last thirty minutes is spent discussing controversial articles that the principal presents to the groups for discussion. In this way, the principal can generate professional and personal growth in a less formal setting than a traditional in-service lecture format.

This concept works well with the five factors Hoerr mentions that should be considered when creating a sense of collegiality in a school.

- 1) Time is our most precious resource. Principals must be prepared to provide sufficient time for teachers to meet. Today's fifteen minute faculty meetings are not conducive to serious discussions. Even if the principal provides teachers with two release days a year, he/she is sending the message that collegiality is important.
- 2) An invitation is better than a command. Voluntary programs are preferable. As the risk-takers share their successes with others, the rest of the staff will want to get involved.
- 3) Power shared is power multiplied. Principals must allow the teachers to be heard and to make a difference on substantive issues. Before the process begins, there must be thought on which issues are appropriate for collegial decisions and which ones should be resolved by the principal.
- 4) We practice what we value. The principal must set an example to the staff by attending and participating in the collegial meetings.
- 5) Focus on an important issue. One way to find meaningful issues is through a reading group similar to that mentioned above. Another way is to ask teachers what questions they would like to pursue,

what frustrations they are experiencing, and how they would like to see their school change (Hoerr, 1996).

The instructional leader would also need to familiarize himself/herself with the work of the various curriculums present in the district. I think this will be a challenge to me. I need to prioritize, staying current with trends in all of the curriculum areas and not just let the teachers come to me with their answers. As a teacher, I appreciate it when my principal provides copies of journal articles he has read that pertain to my classroom techniques, from foreign language trends to technology use in the classroom. Roger Scott outlines four attitudinal approaches necessary for curriculum alignment to occur:

1. Teachers and administrators need to know what they are responsible for teaching.
2. Teachers need to make decisions about time, materials, and teaching strategies appropriate for helping students learn the skills specified in the objectives.
3. Teachers should monitor the progress they are making on implementing the plan.
4. Teachers and administrators must assess the results of the school year, identify strengths and weaknesses, and incorporate the assessment into planning for the next year (Gorton and Schneider, 1991, p. 367).

These attitudes help define the administrator's role in curriculum evaluation. The teacher remains the content expert while the administrator can work to align the school's curriculum.

The Disciplinarian

This role has been touted by teachers, students, parents and community patrons as a critical issue in today's schools. The key for me is to treat discipline as not just a time to give out punishments but to focus on the individual student and provide growth opportunities for that student. I give a great deal of credit to my high school principal who could tell the difference between when I was in trouble, because I was bored in the class, or when I might have been out of control. The best thing he ever did for me, and what I hope to emulate, was his commitment to taking time out of his schedule to have honest, open discussions with me. We would brainstorm appropriate alternative behaviors. I have studied the work of Jim Fay, the author of the Love and Logic series dealing with discipline issues. He believes that teachers should replace the abuse of power and babying the students. It is easy to see how barking orders at students only produces negative results. The less obvious issue is how "hovering" over students also sends the message that they are not capable of doing anything on their own. Some of my own behavior seemed outwardly warm and caring while unintentionally I was sending a negative message. By giving students choices and power, they develop responsible attitudes (Fay, 1994). One of my special talents as a teacher has been the ability to deal with the kids other teachers want out of their rooms. They often simply need to be treated with respect and taught what is or is not appropriate for my classroom, and we all get along fine.

The Facilitator of Human Relations

This role consists of administrators being concerned about the personal needs of their employees and building cooperative teams in order to meet the goals of the organization. The administrator must develop high staff morale and a humane school environment. I believe strongly in the team concept of reaching goals. As an administrator, it is my responsibility to give support to the staff in any way possible. I will assist teachers to the best of my abilities to improve instruction.

On a more personal level, this is one of the roles where I need to focus. I hate to think of myself as an uncaring person, but I often become frustrated with melodramatic co-workers who use every sick day they have allotted, and have nothing better to do than cry on everyone's shoulder about how rough their lives are. I am compassionate when an emergency arises and will do anything within my power to support the staff member. But it is the old story of the boy who cried wolf; eventually, I stop listening to the same people with the same old problems.

On the other hand, I am a highly energetic, positive person who tends to want those around her to feel comfortable, supported, and positive. The key to staff morale is often just listening to the staff and showing you care about their concerns. You need to be open to hearing about their successes and their failures. I am confident that I can go to either one of my principals with both my good news and bad.

The Evaluator

The evaluator is responsible for the evaluation of staff, programs, and student performances (Gorton and Schneider, 1991, p. 89).

Studying the evaluation and supervision of teachers brought up several approaches to staff evaluation. I enjoyed the study of various programs that implemented peer evaluations by staff members on a volunteer basis. "Recent research in staff development points to the power of peer coaching in changing the instructional practices of teachers. Teachers value feedback from their peers more highly than from any other source" (Cunard, 1990, p. 33). Cognitive coaching was a growing buzzword around our area and I would like to learn more about its formal implementation. I have enjoyed many peer evaluation partnerships within my district and was pleased to see that experience pay off in the formal class setting of Evaluation and Supervision of Instruction. I received positive feedback on my narrative and dialog with the classmates I reviewed in class.

One area of evaluation that has yet to be used to its fullest potential is the use of student evaluators. Who better than the students knows the strengths and weaknesses of the teachers. One student developed a sample evaluation form for use by student evaluators. The form addresses several questions including,

- 1) Does the teacher's approach to discipline help or hinder the learning atmosphere?
- 2) Does the teacher use time effectively?
- 3) Does the teacher treat students

as adults? What maturity level is expected of the students? 4) Do students feel comfortable asking questions and receiving help? 5) Is the teacher sensitive to students' interests and needs? 6) Does what the teacher says get through to the students? 7) Are students actively interested or doing other work? 8) When the teacher gives students time in class to work on an assignment, does talking center on the topic at hand? (Belton, 1996, p. 67).

One important distinction to be made is the difference between observational reports and evaluation. I believe a faculty member's formal evaluation should come only after several classroom observations and discussion. It is in these less formal situations that an administrator can use their best coaching techniques.

Conflict Mediator

This is Gorton and Schneider's final identified role. The conflict resolver attempts to give each side of a conflict a look at where the other side is coming from so neither side is completely right or wrong. This role is an interesting one and I have been involved in several mediations as one side of an issue or as the mediator for students and co-workers. While I am comfortable in this role for the most part, it can be difficult to deal with individuals who are not interested in mediation and see life as black or white. I think of some of my more stubborn colleagues and shudder at the thought of having to bring them to a harmonious end of a

dispute. I know that there will be times when I will say as the administrator, "This is the way it's going to be." I hope I can receive more practice with mediation and will turn to my administrators for more advice on their mediation techniques.

A Vision for Tomorrow's School

Setting Goals

I believe that school success depends upon how effectively we select, define, and measure progress and how well we adjust our effort toward goals. School goals tell teachers what should be emphasized instructionally, and define for schools and teachers "how they should gauge their performance success" (Rosenholtz, 1991, p. 5). Schools often lack clear, common direction and communication that promotes people working toward mutually intelligible goals. Sergiovanni cited Warren Bennis' leadership keys as, "putting people at the center of things, building a shared sense of what needs to be done and creating adaptive learning organizations (Sergiovanni, 1996, p. 3). As a building administrator it will be my first responsibility to work with my staff to set a direction or focus for where we want to be as an institution. "People accomplish more together than in isolation" (Schmoker, 1996, p. 48). It is also important to limit the number of goals we focus on. It is easy to be carried away with good intent. It is better to make great improvements in a few areas than to make small improvements in many areas.

Our overall commitment should be to educating our student population. Every child's education should be held as a non-negotiable

item of business in our school. Dr. Floyd Buchanan, former Superintendent, Clovis School District, Clovis, California stated,

Accountability starts with a child's right to an education, and a child's right to an education is not negotiable. It's not negotiable by the teacher, the principal, the superintendent, the school board, the parents, or even the child himself. And to ensure that a child gets an education there has to be an accountability process that's connected to the entire educational program (personal communication, January 17, 1997).

Teachers and administrators will be held accountable for a student's ultimate success or failure.

Accountability

If we are going to work together towards a goal there has to be some method of analyzing progress towards that goal and holding administrators, schools, teachers, and students accountable. School leaders have to identify absolute minimum standards. They have to address the questions of, What is absolutely necessary for a student to know? How will we measure this standard?

One of the keys to accountability is to insure that it focuses on improving results. The information we collect and analyze should help us understand and improve instructional processes that help get better results (Schmoker, 1996, p. 70). Data collection can provide quantitative proof of a school's success. I recently visited the Clovis Unified School District in Clovis, California. Clovis is known for its achievements in

assessing and reporting quality. The cover of a promotional flyer shows the district's focus on accountability: "Quality is a Standard; Quality is a Measurable Goal, Not a Vague Sense of Goodness; Quality is a Result" (Schmoker, 1996, p. 47). Dr. Richard Sparks, Director of Assessment for Clovis Unified, stated, "When progress is monitored - it improves. When progress is monitored and reported - it accelerates" (personal communication, January 16, 1997). This is the philosophy behind Clovis' practice of publishing annual reports on multiple aspects of school functions including everything from ACT scores to campus cleanliness evaluations. Clovis is an example of how to use a combination of traditional standardized test scores and in-house assessments to report progress to its community. While many people dispute the validity of standardized tests as a measure of a teacher's performance, they remain the most objective measures of student knowledge. The key is to find out how the data they provide can best serve your school. Community accountability is an approach for improving schools by using data about student performance in an 'open system.' It relies on the open flow of information between public schools and the public. "The data that support the information system are indicators of student performance and other variables that can aid the interpretation of performance results. This information can then be used to support enlightened action rather than expanded control. It is important to establish the basic ingredients of this kind of accountability and school improvement system" (Henry, 1996, p. 87).

Reducing Threat

One of the consequences of using data to monitor progress is the threat it poses to staff. Schmoker outlines several guidelines for reducing this threat:

- Do not use data primarily to identify or eliminate poor teachers.
- Do not introduce high stakes prematurely.
- Try to collect and analyze data collaboratively and anonymously by team, department, grade level, or school.
- Allow teachers, by school or team, as much autonomy as possible in selecting the kind of data they think will be most helpful.
- Inundate practitioners with success stories that include data (1996, p. 35).

Supporting Your Staff

As a leader I will include regular praise and celebration of progress toward our goals as an essential part of my vision of success. I often like to use the coach metaphor to describe a leader's role in a school. A coach takes a group of individuals with different backgrounds and abilities and turns them into a team. A coach works with the team towards a goal. A coach trains its team in the skills necessary for goal attainment. A coach gives constant feedback on performance. A coach rewards those who show commitment and talent. A coach stays on the sideline as the team discovers how to work together. Sergiovanni

explained the role of an administrator as a server. "The role places serving ideas, serving convictions, serving teachers, serving others who work to make ideas and ideals real, and serving students and parents at the heart of the work of school administration" (1992, p. 5).

A true leader must be able to do three things well: 1. Identify, What needs to be accomplished? 2. Be the world's best gopher. Support your staff by asking, How can I help you and support your program? and finally, 3. Say thank you to all who helped students achieve success along the way.

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