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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

Successful leaders have three things in common. First and foremost is the ability to turn leadership upside down (Daft, 2001) and serve those whom are being led. Other styles may be effective at any given time, but the leaders that stick around are the ones that are able to serve. Second is the ability to make wise decisions based on experience and research, rather than wishy-washy decisions or passing the buck. Finally, a leader must have credibility. Credibility means that people know that the leader has principles and values that he/she really believes.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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As far back as I can remember, I have found myself in leadership roles. From being selected as a team captain for intramurals in elementary school to being elected Student Body President in high school to being Assistant Principal at Cedar Valley Christian School, I have had a lot of experience in leading others. Through these experiences and others, I have had many opportunities to discover my leadership style and to modify that style when necessary. I have also been able to observe the leadership of others and learn from their successes and failures. Through experiences in leading different groups of people, observing and studying other leaders, and reading and taking classes concerning leadership, I have noticed a few things that all good leaders have in common. As I prepare to lead a school, I need to focus on these attributes of a leader to help me to become the best school leader I can be.

In my experience, successful leaders have three things in common. First and foremost is the ability to turn leadership upside down (Daft, 2001) and serve those whom are being led. This is the primary factor that makes leaders effective for a long period of time. Other styles may be effective at any given time, but the leaders that stick around are the ones that are able to serve. Second is the ability to make decisions. Wise decisions based on experience and research rather than wishy-washy decisions or passing the buck, separate successful leaders from the rest. Finally, a leader must have credibility. Credibility means that people know that the leader has principles and values that he/she really believes, and that others

can place their trust in as well. A credible leader truly has the best interest of the group being led at heart, and is not swayed by selfish motives, the easy route, or the influence of others.

Servant Leadership

An effective leader is one who is willing to serve others. Many times society sees a leader as someone on top or out front, but a true leader is one who is behind and under the group that he/she is leading. In her book, Jesus: CEO, Laurie Beth Jones (1992) states, "The principle of service is what separates true leaders from glory seekers" (p. 28). I couldn't agree more. Support and encouragement are two essential characteristics of a leader. An administrator needs to be an example to others so that they will also lead by serving. An administrator who serves the staff will have a staff who serves students. "Servant leadership is leadership upside down. Servant leaders transcend self-interest to serve the needs of others, help others grow and develop, and provide opportunity for others to gain materially and emotionally. The fulfillment of others is the servant leader's principal aim" (Daft, 2002, p. 214). This type of sacrificial leadership describes the types of leaders needed in education, and ultimately describes the ideal administrator. School leaders are not in education to gain vast amounts of wealth or to take a company to a new level of success. They are not in it to make a profit or to become famous. Education is really not a competitive

market in the sense that a school has to show a profit or close down. School leaders are investing their lives for others. They choose to deny themselves for the success of the next generation.

An administrator has to be willing and able to serve others. The willingness comes from loving the job and having a desire to be the very best. It also means being willing to go the extra mile and to make sacrifices for others. People will feel like they are being supported and served by their administrator if he/she listens to what they have to say. Listening is a learned skill that has to be worked on continually. It is also a skill that takes time, and sometimes taking a little extra time with someone can make all of the difference in the world. People also need to be informed so that they know that they were being listened to and not simply heard. An administrator may be making progress on a suggestion from a parent or teacher, but efforts may go unnoticed and he/she may lose the support of that person if he/she doesn't let them know what is being done. The ability to serve others comes from being well organized, maintaining balance in one's life, and being able to prioritize and delegate. There are only so many hours in a day and an administrator needs to use time efficiently through organization and delegation, and avoid burnout through balance and priority.

An effective administrator will seek out opportunities to serve teachers. The teachers are the heart and soul of any school. Teachers have the most important contact with the students. They have the best idea of what the needs of

the students are, what works and what does not. In order to most effectively educate the students a school needs to have good teachers who are well supported by their administrator. This support is started and built through the development of a relationship with the teachers. The only way to build a relationship is to spend time. "Teachers and students need to have daily contact with the principal to hear concerns, receive information, share joys, and see learning taking place" (Speck, 1999, p. 58). It is the ability to be visible, talk, observe, assist, listen and learn that allows the principal to build relationships with teachers. An effective administrator should delegate meaningful tasks, be open to the way that others choose to do things, and help if possible without taking over. "Leaders do not do things alone, and thus the principal can do much more through the empowerment of teachers..." (Short & Greer, 1997, p. 68). Teachers who take ownership in the school are going to be proud of what they do and will transfer that feeling of pride to the students. Even if I believe that my way is the best way, it is better to allow a teacher to take on meaningful tasks and be involved in the process rather than to scrutinize them. The staff will be more effective because they understand why things are done and they take ownership and have pride in what they have accomplished.

Researchers suggest that teachers with more discretion regarding their work feel more responsible for how well their students learn. The flexibility allows them to respond to specific needs they see. Instead of

being guided by rules, they are guided by the norms and beliefs of the professional community. (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994, p. 23)

An administrator must also not micromanage. When teachers are given responsibilities they should be held accountable. The administrator should not give uninvited input or change the final product unless absolutely necessary. The whole point of delegation and empowerment is to share the load, and an administrator needs to be open-minded enough to treat teachers professionally and trust and respect their decisions. I have already concluded that I don't know everything and that someone else's way may turn out to be better than mine, even if it doesn't seem that way at the moment.

Another way that an administrator can serve teachers is by becoming a facilitator for them. "To facilitate simply means to make easier. Accordingly, administrators are expected to provide human and material assistance to teachers permitting them to perform their responsibilities more effectively" (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993, p. 34). For example, an administrator can help to make sure that there are parent volunteers, or teacher aides available or help in their recruitment. The principal may also help in keeping class sizes manageable. On the material side an administrator can make sure that teachers have the textbooks that they need. The principal may also encourage teachers to write grants for extra things that they want. Also, in this day and age, an administrator can help teachers stay up to date with the latest technology and help teachers get the training they need

to use that technology. Administrators can also serve teachers by taking the time to identify their strengths and help them to develop those strengths. "Great managers are aggressive in trying to identify each person's talents and help to cultivate those talents" (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999, p. 141). If a teacher is good at something but, for whatever reason, is not using that talent in the classroom, a good administrator can serve by being in tune enough with that teacher to suggest ways in which that talent could be implemented. An administrator must seek out opportunities to serve and act on them as often as possible.

An effective administrator will seek out opportunities to serve students as well. It is the job of the school to educate students. The primary focus of any administrator is the students, especially with the issues of open enrollment and school choice as prevalent as they are today. Not that an administrator should recruit students from other districts, but rather make the school a quality place where students want to be a part. Serving students begins with establishing relationships with those students. An administrator should know as many of the students' names as possible and should set goals regularly to learn the names of more students. Calling a student by name adds importance to the student and makes a connection with that student. A connection can then lead to a relationship. "Intangible rewards, such as genuine praise and attention, usually have a positive influence on students provided they are genuine, are not overused,

and are accessible to all students" (Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 1999, p. 151).

"Far better than prizes or rewards are individual notes, written by the principal and delivered to kids in their classrooms, telling them how you responded to pieces of art or performances you viewed" (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998, p. 172). The only way that praise can be genuine is if the administrator knows the student and has established a relationship with that student.

An administrator should be visible to the students. The principal should not be some figurehead that sits behind a desk and makes up rules. Further, the principal should let the students know that he/she is there to serve them and be open to their suggestions and listen and follow through on as many as possible. This can be done through an active Student Council, clubs, activity committees, etc. The more that the administrator can support student initiated ideas the more the students will support the school. If students respect the administrator they will respect the school as a whole. The administrator must not, however, cross that fine line between a well-liked, respected adult and "one of the guys". If an administrator crosses that line, he/she may be more liked by the students but will lose the element of respect that is so crucial when working with kids. The administrator has to maintain the role of an authority but also needs to build relationships with the students. An example of this is a relationship that I was able to build with a student that I will call Jon. Jon was a bright kid but was not motivated. Instead of using his abilities in a productive way he would use them to

get into trouble. He was very vocal in his dissatisfaction with the school, the teachers, and the administration. He was just a negative kid and that negativity sometimes affected other students. Jon was smart though and never did anything that would get himself in a lot of trouble. I had several talks with Jon, about how his behavior was inappropriate, or how he shouldn't be so negative. I also spent a good deal of time with teachers that were frustrated with Jon. One day he crossed the line and called a teacher a disrespectful name. Jon got sent to the office and it was my job to deal with him. He knew what he had done was not acceptable but he tried to blame the teacher and make excuses for his behavior. I gave Jon an in-school suspension. He did not take this well, claiming that it was unfair and that he was being picked on. Jon served his suspension the next day. Jon forgot his lunch that day, so I had someone that was going out for lunch pick up a sandwich for him. When I took the sandwich to him, his whole attitude about school changed. He finally understood that someone at the school cared about him, not because he hadn't been told, but now he had been shown through a simple act of unwarranted kindness. Jon turned a corner that day. He still wasn't a model student, but I didn't spend my time dealing with his behavior problems anymore, and he was a positive influence instead of a negative one. This was an opportunity that I had to serve a student that made a difference.

An effective administrator will seek out opportunities to serve support staff. This group includes the custodians, kitchen help, secretaries, librarians, or

any other adult who is responsible for an area of the school. The custodians need to feel like they are being served and supported. If a building is clean and properly maintained it will stay that way. The administrator should regularly ask the custodians if there is anything that can be done to help them out.

A school is just like a neighborhood in that when one window gets broken, if it is not fixed people will think that this particular neighborhood accepts broken windows and others will get broken. Or if someone's yard has junk in it, people will think that it is acceptable and others will follow by leaving junk in their yards. Disorder seems to spread like a cancer once it gets started. If there is one broken light, more will get broken. If the floor looks dirty it will get dirtier.

When the respect for the building goes down the respect for the school goes with it. This needs to be stopped before it ever has a chance to start and the custodians are the key element. A positive relationship with the custodians will take them from doing the minimum that their job requires to going above and beyond because they feel like a part of the school.

The kitchen staff needs to feel served and supported. They provide a valuable service to the students and staff. They should be asked regularly if there is anything that could be done to improve their job, like more lunch shifts, cafeteria rule changes, or anything else that would be easy for an administrator but difficult for the kitchen staff to initiate.

Secretaries need to feel served and supported. A secretary's job is to do things for the administrator. A simple thing done for a secretary will go a long way. If secretaries feel like they are occasionally on the receiving end and not always on the giving end, they will be more apt to go above and beyond in their duties. Any administrator knows the importance of a good secretary. The organization that a secretary gives a school is the key ingredient in the efficient running of the school. A secretary can also free some of the administrator's time by taking care of some of the management activities allowing the administrator to spend more time leading the school. A secretary is normally the first person that someone coming into the school sees, so it is very important that the secretary is positive about the school.

Librarians need to feel served and supported. All too often students will not use the resources that are available to them because the library is not attractive or because they do not feel welcome there. An administrator should encourage librarians to come up with ideas that will help students take advantage of the resources available. The library should be an area of the school that students feel comfortable in and it should stimulate them to want to learn even more than they are learning in the classroom.

An effective administrator will seek out opportunities to serve parents. It is important to approach parents with the attitude that the school is here to serve the student, parent, and the community. Parents should regularly be asked for

input and for suggestions as to how the school can help students be the best that they can be, rather than to communicate with the parents only when there is a problem, a need to be met, or a job to do. Communication is the key. An administrator needs to be available to talk to parents and to make them a priority. Parents need to feel like they are important. Parents want to be involved in their children's lives and they need to know that they have a part in their children's school. A practical way to serve parents is to make opportunities for them to help available and to let them know that they are welcome in the school. The school should help parents to become better parents and in turn the parents will help the school become a better school. An administrator should never belittle parents and tell them what is the best for their children. The principal has to remember that it is ultimately the parents' responsibility to educate their children. The school is merely the tool used for that education. A school should never take over the job of parenting or relieve the parents of their responsibility to their child. Parental involvement is essential in the success of a child. It is not easy, but the more that parents are involved, the better, not only with the day to day education of their child, but in every aspect of the school. A parent that feels that they are listened to and are receiving something for their effort will be more inclined to give of their time and resources for the betterment of the school.

An effective administrator will seek out opportunities to serve the community. "Education is a community venture with schools, churches, health,

welfare, and law enforcement agencies working together to provide for the needs of children" (Erickson, 2001, p. 11). Schools need to show the community that they are on the same team and should work together with other members of the community whenever possible. A community that feels like it is receiving some benefit from the school will be more inclined to pass bond issues and support the school when they are asked. Community service should be a regular part of every school. Anything from picking up trash, to working at a community event, the school should be visible as a servant of the community rather than a sinkhole for tax dollars. The administrator should know and be in contact with the neighbors of the school. They are the ones who are going to be the most vocal in the community. If there is a good relationship with the neighbors, that will spread throughout the community. As taxpayers, the community members are stakeholders in the school. "As stakeholders see the principal regularly and in a variety of ways - helping teachers, working with students, learning together, talking to parents and community members, and solving problems - they develop a sense of commitment to the work of the learning community" (Speck, 1999, p. 58). The community needs to regularly see the school making a positive influence on the community. The community wants to know that the school is equipping students to become productive members of society. The more examples that they have that this is happening, the more supportive they will be of the school.

Wise Decision Making

A leader must be able to make wise decisions. Hopefully every decision that an administrator makes is based on what is best for the people of the school and what is right. It would be nice if every decision had a right or wrong answer. This is not the case when working with people.

An administrator needs to think through every decision to determine whether it is the type of decision that is appropriate or necessary to make on his/her own or if it is a decision that requires the input of others. If it requires the input of others, the administrator must decide the extent to which others should be involved. The Vroom - Jago contingency model (Daft, 2002, p. 95) is a good guide for determining the input of others. The model separates the involvement of others into five categories, each of which involves others more in the decision making process. The categories are decide, consult individually, consult group, facilitate, and delegate.

Decide (Daft, 2002, p. 95) means to make a decision without the input of others. This is to be done when there is a time factor and a decision must be made, or when the input of others is not necessary. It may also be a case where the administrator is the expert in a certain area or, because of the situation, the administrator is expected to make the decision independently.

Consult individually (Daft, 2002, p. 95) means to ask a few select people for their input. These may be people with expertise in a certain area or they may

be respected people from the group. An administrator must be careful with this method so that he/she is not seen as playing favorites, and this type of decision making must not be secretive. The final decision is still made by the administrator.

Consult group (Daft, 2002, p. 95) means to present the decision to a group for the purpose of suggestions and discussion. This should be a way for opinions to be heard and solutions discussed but the decision is still made by the administrator.

Facilitate (Daft, 2002, p. 95) means to present the problem to a group for the purpose of collectively coming up with a solution. The administrator's opinion carries no more or less weight than anyone else's. The administrator sets up boundaries but leaves the decision up to the group.

Delegate (Daft, 2002, p. 95) means that the group is given the authority to make a decision within the boundaries set up by the administrator, but the administrator plays no direct role in the discussions. The five categories of decision making seem easy enough to follow, but the key is knowing which method to use.

The Vroom - Jago model (Daft, 2002, p. 95) uses a flow chart to determine which method to use depending on the situation. Through experience and an understanding of the people that an administrator is dealing with, he/she will have to determine which method will work in any given situation. It is not

an exact science and an administrator must base his/her method of decision making on what is best for the school, and not what is the easiest or quickest.

The Vroom - Jago model (Daft, 2002, p. 95) fits my natural thought process. Whenever there is a decision to be made I will first decide how much and what type of input I should have from others. This model takes my natural tendencies and refines them into a more structured approach. This will be very useful as I make decisions and gain experience as an administrator.

Some decisions are tough and some decisions are going to upset some people. An administrator needs to have the ability to make tough decisions. Sometimes these decisions are best made after discussing them with others or by appointing a committee, but sometimes the decision just needs to be made. All too often, leaders pass the buck or avoid making tough decisions to avoid offending someone. Whenever decisions are made, however, information has to be collected and a rationale for the decision must be presented so that it is clear why the leader made the decision. People may still disagree, but they will know why and how the decision was made. Leaders who are able to make tough decisions and stand behind those decisions, in the long run, have more support and respect than those who are worried about their popularity. An email that I received one time sums it up nicely. It was a quote by Clementine Paddleford. "Never grow a wishbone, daughter, where your backbone ought to be." People will respect and support a leader who is willing to stand up for what is right and is

able to make tough decisions. This is not to exclude wise counsel or the opinions or suggestions of others, but there comes a time when all of the information has been gathered and a decision must be made.

Making decisions is a tough job. Those under a leader can make suggestions. Making suggestions is an easy job. Everybody has a suggestion. Not everybody has a decision. Perhaps that's why there are so few leaders - at least, good leaders. (Wooden & Jamison, 1997, p.114)

Although authoritarian decision making is necessary in some cases, it is not the wisest method of making decisions in most cases. People want the buck to stop somewhere and it is important for an administrator to be able to discern when it is appropriate and necessary to make a decision and when it is appropriate to involve others in the decision making process. As much as people want a strong leader who is willing to make decisions, they want a leader who will listen and value their input as well. "Research reviews have consistently indicated that satisfaction and morale are likely to be higher in democratically led groups" (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993, p. 226). Morale is very important in a school. Satisfied teachers result in satisfied students, which results in satisfied parents. The opposite is also true. For this reason, teachers should be involved in the decision making as much as possible. Teachers are trained professionals and their input should be valued. Helping make decisions about the school also allows teachers to take ownership in a school. In the long run, this builds into loyalty,

stability, and lower teacher turn over. "Initial increase in productivity experienced under authoritarian leadership diminishes sharply over time and ultimately results in lower productivity levels than in democratically led groups" (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993, p. 226). There is a fine line between being bold enough to make tough decisions and being humble enough to seek out the input of others. This fine line is wisdom. Wisdom comes from experience and knowledge, and an administrator should take advantage of every opportunity to grow in both areas.

Credible Leadership

A leader must have credibility with followers. Leaders who live out their principles and respect their followers inspire trust. "Trust is a key element of a learning community's soul. Without this important level of trust, individuals will not fully participate or commit to the work of the learning community" (Speck, 1999, p. 59). Imperfections of a leader are more accepted and forgiven if the followers know that the leader is a person of integrity and is headed in the right direction.

Credibility boils down to two things, competence and integrity. Competence comes from consistently doing a job well. Gaining people's trust in the leader's competence takes time. Consistently making good decisions without selfish motives or a hidden agenda and having success in leading positive change

grows a leader's competence in the eyes of the followers. Competent leaders also know when to seek assistance. "Good leaders are seen as competent not just because they know what they are doing, but because they know very well when they don't know what they are doing -- and they turn to others for help" (Myers, 2001).

Integrity comes from always doing what is right. There should be consistency between what is being said and what is being done. "Integrity means that one is whole, so one's actions are in keeping with one's words" (Daft, 2002, p. 47). A leader must practice what he/she preaches. A leader must be above reproach, so that there is not even the possibility that the leader's character can be questioned.

Leadership is not something that can be compartmentalized. A leader is a leader 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Especially in the area of education where people trust the schools with their most prized possessions. "The school learning community will soon realize through your actions what you hold important about schooling and learning" (Speck, 1999, p. 83).

People want a leader who they know has their child's best interest at heart. Integrity comes from one's actions, which means that sometimes an administrator may have to go the extra mile in order to have his/her actions match his/her words. For example, if the principal preaches conflict resolution through face-to-face discussion, confession and forgiveness, when a situation occurs in his/her

own life, he/she must be willing to follow the same guidelines. It is easy to tell students that it is wrong to talk behind someone's back and to seek revenge, and that the right thing to do is to confront the person who has done wrong and mend the relationship before the conflict grows. It is difficult however to put those words into practice in our own lives when a colleague has wronged us.

Sometimes a leader has to do what is difficult in order to maintain relationships and to be a role model to others. "When leaders model their convictions through their daily actions, they command admiration, respect, and loyalty. These virtues are the foundation of trust between leaders and followers" (Daft, 2002, p. 47).

Summary

The administrator's job is to run an effective school. For a school to be effective it needs to have people working together; continually working to improve the school. An administrator must lead those people by serving as many groups as possible, helping them to improve the different areas of the school rather than trying to come up with the best ways to do things, and telling other people what to do. The administrator must be able to make tough decisions in the best interest of the group, even when that decision may upset some. A successful administrator must have the trust and confidence of those being led. This trust does not come with the position, but must be earned. No one wants to follow a

tyrant, but people are willing to go above and beyond for someone who will help them out, who will make decisions, and who they can trust.

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