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What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay

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Abstract

Becoming an educational leader is something I have thought about since becoming a teacher. For a school to run successfully, those in charge must have an understanding of their own beliefs and how those beliefs will fit into the vision of the school. In this paper, I will discuss why I became an educator, what I believe about education, why I decided to enter this program to be a principal and what I believe about leadership.

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Becoming an educational leader is something I have thought about since becoming a teacher. For a school to run successfully, those in charge must have an understanding of their own beliefs and how those beliefs will fit into the vision of the school. In this paper I will discuss why I became an educator, what I believe about education, why I decided to enter this program to be a principal and what I believe about leadership.

In my senior year of college I was stressing over whether I was ready to take the CPA exam in Accounting. I was not so sure that a career in accounting was right for me. The problem was, I had already spent five years taking classes and was one semester away from graduation. Seeking some guidance, I went to talk to Ron Abraham, my auditing professor. He was a great teacher for me, very much unlike other instructors I had in college. He had a passion for what he taught, making a dull subject like auditing seem like the greatest thing on earth. When I told him of my dilemma, he asked me why I was questioning my career path. I told him that I felt very insignificant in accounting and that whatever I chose to do I wanted to make a difference. That is when I asked him why he became a teacher. He said that the life he was leading as an auditor was very time consuming and not very fulfilling, exactly what I was thinking. That day is when I decided to become a teacher. He got me in contact with the people in secondary education and the rest is history. Now I teach accounting, and am using the skills I learned not only in the Business Building at UNI, but also the instruction I

received in the Department of Education. After making my decision, I thought back to all of the teachers that had made a difference in my school life. From my kindergarten teacher who still remembered my name when I was a senior in high school, to my high school accounting teacher, who I model my own teaching style after. The common thread between these people and Professor Abraham is that they made learning exciting for me and helped me decide what career I really wanted to pursue.

As an educator I have formed many beliefs about education. These beliefs have changed a lot since I was a student. I believe that all students can learn, if they put some effort into it. Students will never fully learn just by being around things, but they must be immersed in a subject before real learning can take place. I am a person who learns by doing, and I think that many people are like me. Hearing about something or reading about it is fine, but you really come to grasp an idea when you can manipulate things and see the outcomes. I also believe that discipline and respect are crucial for student success in education. Many of the teachers that I had in my schooling were very demanding of my attention and my time. These are the ones that I had the most respect for. They expected more from me than what I thought was possible and showed me my capability. They were also the ones who ran a tight ship in their classrooms. Making sure students were engaged in the activities for the day and dealing with disruptions swiftly and respectfully. They may have seemed like taskmasters, but in reality they were

setting the tone for the class and creating a learning environment that was beneficial for all students. Finally, I believe that for students to be successful in education, they must strive to take ownership in their school and work to be a good citizen. Having pride in what you do and where you come from is very important to me. Simple things like attending school functions, learning the school song, cheering on sports teams can be all it takes. For those who want a greater immersion, being involved in activities, working with groups to improve the school and taking on leadership roles all help students toward learning how society expects you to behave.

While examining my beliefs in the previous paragraph it became clearer to me why I chose to enter this principalship program. It started as just a way to get a masters degree and move across the pay scale, but now I see that I have ideas that I think would be beneficial to a school. Being a leader is something that I enjoy doing. It is one thing that helps me in coaching football. Planning practice, deciding who plays and making quick decisions on the sidelines are all things I enjoy doing. Many of the things that I do as a coach correspond with duties of a principal.

What I believe about leadership is just an extension of why I entered the program. I feel that as a leader, you must surround yourself with the best people you can find, people you can trust to delegate responsibility. Being a dictatorial leader will only make people despise you, but when you involve others in the

process of running an organization those people will begin to take ownership in the organization. Thus, you are helping people to practice their own leadership skills and gain confidence in their abilities. Leaders must also make decisions based on sound research and also from input those working in the organization. That is not to say every decision must be made through a committee or from a survey, but decisions concerning the direction of the organization must be carefully weighed. Leaders must also model the behaviors that he or she expects from subordinates. It is important for others to see what is expected, and also to see that procedures apply to everyone, not just those on the bottom of the heap.

To be a great educational leader there are many areas in which to excel. I have chosen four essential elements to examine and explain why they are important to me.

An Educational Leader Must be Organized

I believe the way in which a person prepares for the future demonstrates the leadership capabilities of that person. A person who is organized and prepared for the day is better equipped to get through the day successfully, even if unforeseen circumstances or events occur. Organizational skills help to make a leader much more effective. Being an organized person encompasses many activities for a principal, from simply keeping a neat and orderly office to having a current day planner, organization skills help to make a leader much more

effective. With a focus in mind and contingency plans in place, the organized leader can make even the most challenging day efficient and effective.

According to Shermerhorn, the four functions of management are: planning; organizing; leading; and controlling (1992, 21). For a principal to be an effective manager and to accomplish these four functions, he or she must be an organized person. There are many examples of organized leaders at West High after which I can model myself. Our Principal, Greg Meyer, is a master of day planners. He shared with me his system for making order of his day. His day planner consists of an hour by hour list of appointments, a list of phone calls made and a note about each one, tasks needing accomplished today and a section to reflect on the day's events. Greg has a fabulous system, it is very neat and orderly and easy to follow. His planner organization makes it easy for him to access events from any day, whether from last week or last year.

Recently, he upgraded his system to a Personal Digital Assistant, or PDA, that has a software interface with his personal computer. This technology enhancement has made his planning even easier and more productive. When he enters an appointment or meeting into the planner, it is registered on that day's time schedule and gives him the option of an email reminder of the appointment. The software linking the PC and the PDA also give him an opportunity to reflect on the days events using his computer keyboard instead of putting pen to paper.

Using a PDA or a day planner is admirable, but emphasis also must be given to prioritizing tasks during the day. Many minutes can be wasted in mundane activities that don't necessarily need immediate attention. According to Covey "The essence of time management is to set priorities and then to organize and execute around them" (1991, 138). So, in other words schedule your day and stick to it. Or, as Covey also says, "unless something more important—not something more urgent—comes along, we must discipline ourselves to do as we planned" (1991, 138). There are many ways to prioritize, from assigning A, B, or C to tasks to rank their importance to using a table to identify tasks as urgent, important or not urgent or not important.

Having an effective filing system is also an important part of organization. Jim Caparula, a Dean of Students at West High School, uses a very effective filing system. Jim sees many kids through his office every day. He uses paper files to keep copies of discipline referrals, suspension forms and adult contracts for students. This system provides proof of discipline that was meted out to students should anyone wish to question a situation. Jim also uses a spreadsheet filing system to keep track of each student he sees during the day. The date, student name, the referring teacher's name, offenses and consequences are entered for every student he sees. The spreadsheet allows him to track student behavior and discipline issues. Repeat offenders often come through the office, and the spreadsheet gives him the opportunity to see that consequences fit the situation.

Another interesting feature of his spreadsheet is the ability to sort the data by teachers who write discipline referrals. Not surprisingly a very small percentage of teachers write a large percentage of the referrals!

Having a great support staff is another tool for the organized principal. Principals must be able to rely on office staff to oversee many important functions. If he or she is away from the office, a secretary must be able to forward phone messages or notes from visitors. The support staff also must help the principal with things like filing, mailing, greeting visitors, and many other routine office tasks.

As a principal, I would use effective organizational skills to make my days run smoother. Using a planner or PDA will help me to be prepared for each day and allow me to prioritize tasks to make each day as productive as possible. Having a neat and tidy office will also benefit me because an office with a clean appearance gives others a positive impression and can help to cement confidence. I would also have an effective system to track student discipline and consequences. The use of a spreadsheet to log students as they come through the office is one effective tool I will utilize to document and archive discipline information. This same type of log will be used to document meetings with teachers, parents, or other stakeholders.

Being a well-organized leader aligns very well with Iowa Standard for School Leaders #3, "A school administrator is an educational leader who

promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment” (Wilmore, 2002, 52). In order for a principal to achieve this standard, he or she must be well organized to effectively lead the many people involved in educating young people and to make the important decisions presented to a principal every day. To stay abreast of all that is happening in a school means some tasks have priority for the principal, while others can be delegated. Also, each day brings fires that must be extinguished, but the organized principal has a handle on what can be accomplished each day thus allowing the principal to take care of those inevitable emergencies.

Effective Principals are Instructional Leaders

“...principals create, nurture, and sustain successful and healthy teaching and learning environments for teachers as well as students. The principal’s primary role is in modeling and supporting the learning of others, the essence of instructional leadership,” (Cunningham & Cordiero, 2003, 169).

To be an instructional leader, I believe a principal must have a core curriculum in place that students find challenging and worthwhile; he or she must set the climate for the school through student discipline and the modeling of positive behaviors by teachers and administration; and the principal must also hire great teachers and enable current staff to become more proficient in their craft.

The first and most important aspect of being an instructional leader is to be your building's curriculum leader. In many districts, the school board mandates the school's curriculum, so the principal becomes the steward for the board's vision. A principal also can have an impact on the adoption of new curriculum. This can be accomplished through student and parent surveys. By seeking the opinions of students and parents, the principal can learn what topics are important to these stakeholder groups. The principal would take this information to the board and seek to have new additional subject areas added to the core curriculum or offered as electives.

Principals have the responsibility of ensuring that teachers are using the prescribed curriculum. He or she can monitor the prescribed curriculum through scheduled observations. However, Brock and Grady explain, that "A 'staged' performance is not as accurate as what happens daily in side the classroom" (2004, 63). Brock and Grady also discuss how one principal made notes during drop in visits and later spoke to teachers about unacceptable practices or left messages about positive observations, (2004, 64). Since performance of the school is judged on how well the students measure up to state and federal standards, it is of utmost importance for the principal to be actively involved in ensuring the teachers base their lessons from the school's curriculum.

When a principal hires a new teacher he or she has an opportunity to improve the faculty by bringing in another great person. Whitaker tells us, "A

principal's single most precious commodity is an opening in the teaching staff. The quickest way to improve your school is to hire great teachers at every opportunity," (2003, 43). This is so important because the new person you hire has to become acclimated to the faculty. Hiring a great teacher gives the principal an opportunity to support this new person and introduce them to the other great teachers in the building so they can become a positive force in your instructional staff. This support and socialization will ensure your new addition won't likely fall into the trap of the disenchanted who thrive on teacher lounge gossip.

When most principals assume a new position, the staff is already in place. As a new principle, this doesn't mean he or she is powerless, though. Through mentoring of new teachers, staff development and evaluations, the principal can have a positive impact on improving the teaching skills of the faculty. By encouraging faculty members to observe one another and to share ideas that work in their own classrooms, they can help each other become more effective teachers. An example of this would be having your great teachers coach the others to improve their success. If these efforts to improve teachers don't work, the principal must also be able to terminate those faculty members who don't have what it takes, or are unwilling to improve their teaching skills.

Some people say they can tell a lot about a school by how it feels when they first enter. The building or the school's climate, relates directly back to the principal and instructional leadership. It is the principal who is charged with

modeling for teachers and students the proper way to behave in a school. "Staff members watch and measure the principal's level of enthusiasm, work ethic, and dedication as well as what the principal notices and rewards" (Brock and Grady, 2004, 54). By modeling expected behaviors, the principal demonstrates to teachers what is acceptable. When teachers assimilate these behaviors and see an improvement in student behavior, it is a win-win situation. Faculty morale improves, school climate improves and students and faculty create a greater connection with the school. Lambert adds that, "Student achievement can now be directly and unmistakably traced to the presence or lack of conditions that create high leadership capacity in schools, including teaching and instructional excellence," (2003, 55).

A principal sets the tone for students by laying out expectations for behavior and handing out fair consequences for unacceptable behavior. Students are seeking stability and a safe environment in which to learn. By demonstrating to students that unacceptable behavior won't be tolerated, the behaviors of offending students are modified showing other students that their safety and ability to learn are the principal's highest priorities.

Instructional leadership is the focus of the Iowa Standards for School Leader (ISSL) standard two. It states, "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing and

sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth,” (Wilmore, 2002, 32).

In my teaching career, I have worked with three principals who have varying styles. Our current principal has done the best job of being an instructional leader. He is able to balance all of the points articulated in this paper so each group of stakeholders feels their needs are served, but his policies also aren't intrusive. My leadership style will create a positive learning environment where students are challenged academically and feel safe in classrooms and in the hallway. I also want to have a faculty who constantly strives to improve their craft by not being satisfied with what they have done, but by looking to what they can accomplish. A successful and productive school is the result of the behaviors modeled by the principal.

Great Principals are Great Communicators

There are many instances where a leader must effectively communicate with internal and external stakeholders. As a principal, one needs to get relevant information to those who need it. Each group of stakeholders may need to be told different information in different ways. It is up to the effective communicator to recognize these differences and confer the needed message to those who need to know.

In the many communication situations a principal encounters, there is one very important consideration discussed by Brock and Grady, “know your

audience,” (2004, 44). Brock and Grady go on to list four questions that must be answered before composing any communication, “Who are the members of your audience; what do they need; what is their emotional state; and what is the most appropriate form of communication,” (2004, 44).

The principal has many different groups with whom he or she must communicate. During a normal school day, the principal meets with other administrators, teachers, parents, community leaders and most importantly students. For a secondary principal, these groups are much closer in age, maturity and education level. Therefore, a high school principal probably does not have to change his or her communication style as much as an elementary principal would when communicating with different groups of stakeholders. However, it is up to the principal to determine what changes need to be made in communication based on what group he or she is speaking with.

When communicating with any stakeholder group, the principal should remember that an easy-going, humanistic manner would facilitate communication in even the most troubling situation. Demonstrate to people through your communication style that you genuinely care about them as people and that you empathize with their situation. This is an application of one of Stephen Covey’s “Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.” Habit number five states, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood,” (Covey, 1991, 272). Covey describes this as the “Principle of Empathetic Communication,” (1991, 272).

When deciding what to communicate to groups of stakeholders, the principal must decide what the group needs to know. Many variables are involved with this decision. He or she must be careful about whether information is privileged and whether it can be communicated to others without permission of parents or the student if the student is over 18. Recent concerns over federal legislation called FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) that says:

Records of individual students containing "personally identifiable information" must be kept confidential and cannot be released by the school without written consent of the parent or consent from the student if the student is eighteen or older, (Alexander, 2001, 16).

Parents have brought lawsuits against schools claiming that a principal's communication with teachers violated a student's rights under FERPA if "personally identifiable information" was included in the communication, (Alexander, 2001, 616). For a principal, this means when informing staff about disturbances or emergencies in the building, only general information can be used, nothing specific that could easily identify students who were involved in the incident can be stated.

When communicating with the media, parents and students, principals must be aware of what information is appropriate to disclose. It is important that student information contained in records is not communicated to other parents, students, staff who are not involved, or the media. The Principal must be careful

when communicating with community or media members, while surely wanting to put the best face on what is happening at school, he or she must be sensitive to the rights of all those stakeholders affected.

Recognizing the emotional state of your audience is critical when establishing communication. While any principal would welcome informal visits from parents, staff or students, frequently these visits involve problems the visitor has experienced and a demand for the principal to rectify the situation. In most of these situations, the principal has not been prepared for the visit and is not aware of the problem that exists. It is a decisive moment for the principal. If the principal has a calm demeanor this can defuse the situation. Offering something to drink and a private place to talk about the problem can give the visitor a chance to calm himself or herself, therefore allowing them to better communicate exactly what is wrong. The other option for the principal would be to become as defensive at the visitor, which would only make the situation worse. Most communication situations come to that decisive moment and the effective principal will surely choose the first scenario described. The culture of the person you are communicating with also has an impact on your communication style. Locker categorizes cultures as "High-Context", or "Low Context," (1995, 334). What Locker means is high-context cultures derive most meaning from the context of the message, while low-context cultures have meanings explicitly spelled out in the message. Most Anglo cultures are low-context, while Asian,

Arabic and Latin American cultures are high-context. When looking at communication this way, many of the minority people a principal speaks to (high-context) are looking at how the information is presented, the tone of voice of the speaker, and his or her facial expressions.

After determining the appropriate answer for the first three questions, the principal is now faced with what mode of communication will be most effective to handle the situation. Many types of media are at the disposal of the principal for communication. Most messages that deal with general-purpose information can be sent using mass mailings, or when appropriate, email. When sending specific information, personal letters, phone calls or a meeting would be more appropriate. Style is also important when deciding on appropriate communication. The tone and word usage of communication should fit with the reader to make the message as clear as possible.

Effective communication is an important element in all of the six of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders. Communication is an integral part of interacting with all of the stakeholder groups needed to articulate those standards. In order to accomplish goals associated with each of the standards, the effective principal must be able to work closely with stakeholders. Communication with these groups, whether in person or through other media, must be appropriate to affect change.

In my own principalship, I will model my communication style after several of my mentors. Each in his or her own way has an effective style. By combining portions of their styles; I feel I can become the best of all of them. Our current principal is great at determining what information groups of people need to know and does not divulge any more than necessary. Our athletic director has the gift of face-to-face communication that gets people behind him with his motivational style of speech. I do feel strongly that a personable demeanor and easy-going manner will help in any communication situation, whether it be a friendly meeting with a student in the lunchroom, or meeting with an irate parent. To me, communication is the foundation for the interactions a principal must have in order to be an effective leader.

Every Great Leader has a Vision

While I have only begun my journey to becoming a great educational leader, my background in athletics has brought me into contact with many great visionary leaders. Many of my coaches had outstanding vision, and I think the same principals apply in athletics or in any area where one person leads many. My own coaching has brought this idea of vision to the forefront of my leadership thinking. Without a vision, direction and a clear sense of purpose, a leader is merely responding to the next crisis or mandate and never really knowing if goals are being met.

The first step in becoming a visionary leader is to develop the vision of how you want your school, team or organization to look. The development of this vision starts at the top with the leader, but also must incorporate members of stakeholder groups. Charlotte Danielson (2002, 26) explains:

School leadership requires the capability to develop, communicate, and put into place a vision for school improvement that marshals the energies of disparate members of a staff around common goals. Visionary leadership enables staff members to regard the most mundane aspects of their roles in light of their relation to promoting student learning.

By including stakeholders in the development of the vision, the principal discovers what is important to those stakeholders. The stakeholders also develop a personal attachment to the vision, making sure their energies work toward the achievement of building goals. You see teachers do this when they involve the whole class in the development of rules or classroom procedures. When former South Carolina Football Coach Lou Holtz addresses business people at speaking engagements he speaks in football terms, but his message is true in football, business, or education, "All winning teams are goal-oriented. Teams like these win consistently because everyone connected with them concentrates on specific objectives" (1999, 44-45). By including stakeholders in the development of the vision, they develop a sense of purpose, a direction and a feeling of pride that comes from focusing everything they do on achieving that vision.

The next step is to articulate the vision. This brings in the communication element discussed earlier in the thesis. Stakeholders must know the direction the principal plans to take. Wilmore explains, "If we plan a trip but do not tell others when and where we are going they cannot help us get there; they can't find us or come to our aid in case of an emergency" (2002, 21).

Informing stakeholders about the new vision is very important, but also how the principal goes about presenting our vision is of equal importance. Some people respond differently to certain modes of communication. For example, my coaching duties include 9th grade football in the fall and girls track in the spring. My coaching style with 9th grade football players is significantly different than how I coach with girls who run on our track team. The goal is the same, to encourage athletes to do more than they thought possible, but these two distinct groups need different approaches to be motivated. The principal may need to use several types of communication to let the stakeholders know, "who we are, what we are there for, where we are going, what our plans are," (Wilmore, 2002, 21). This might include: letters to parents, community members and civic groups; question and answer forums for stakeholders to learn more about our vision; and even media coverage to get the word out about the positive direction the school is going. Mike Shanahan, Coach of the Denver Broncos, sums it up nicely when he says:

Communicating might be the single most important skill we possess, and it has many forms: reading, writing, listening, speaking. Think about how often you do each of the four things in a given day, how important they are to your daily and lifelong performance (1999, 119).

Our goal when articulating the new vision is to get all of the stakeholders behind the new direction, even people who are resistant to a change in vision.

Hall and Hord articulate this by saying, "For change to succeed, a major shift in thinking by all the participants is needed" (2001, 11). The principal must do a great job in selling the vision to the stakeholders so they too can buy into the change in thinking.

Implementing the vision is the last step, but certainly the most important. Implementation requires rallying your team behind you to work toward achieving the vision. The best example of this I know is how the football staff at West High prepares for each opponent in Saturday morning meetings. There is much discussion and debate on how best to prepare and scheme for next Friday's match-up. But, Coach Schrader insists that once a decision has been made, a course has been charted and a vision established, we are one as a staff in implementing our plan. There are no longer opportunities for debate or discussion, our decision has been made and now we are focused on achieving our vision. He doesn't allow naysayers; players, coaches, or parents, to distract us from our goals, achieving our vision and fiercely competing in our contest.

The final piece in the vision puzzle is stewardship, or sustaining the progress of the vision. The first three parts of the vision are definite and planned out, so many leaders find this much easier to accomplish. In stewardship no one really knows the problems or conflicts that might arise from our vision. But, in order for the school to achieve its goals and succeed, the momentum of the vision must be perpetuated.

I believe this step is where the principal must be at his or her best in maintaining an open line of communication with stakeholders. There will be many people who have agendas that may or may not align with the school's vision. Our vision will not stop people from advancing their own agenda. With many groups involved in the vision, many different streams of resources and certainly even more opinions, the principal must be able to advance the vision of the school while also appeasing stakeholder groups. Some stakeholders might also try to alter the vision with the promise of monetary support or other resources, but this type of politicking will only compromise the integrity of the principal. President Abraham Lincoln once spoke of this in a speech to accept the nomination for Senator of the state of Illinois, "A house divided against itself cannot stand...Or cause must be entrusted to, and conducted by its own undoubted friends—whose hands are free, whose hearts are in the work—who do care for the result," (Phillips, 27)

Stewardship also is very important to the credibility of our school and school leaders. There are many examples in education where schools jump from one popular idea to the next without regard for the work that went into the last new innovation, or the opinions of stakeholder groups. By maintaining the energy of the shared vision for a school, teachers, parents and students can take pride in their affiliation with such a highly organized and well run school.

Conclusion

The process of writing this paper has helped me to examine how I got to be where I am today, my beliefs about education and four areas I believe are essential elements to be an outstanding educational leader. While examining my beliefs, I have had the opportunity to read many wonderful books on education and leadership by a wide range of authors. My path to becoming an exemplary educational leader will gain inspiration from famous football coaches like Mike Shanahan and Lou Holtz, leadership experts like Stephen Covey, educational theorists like Charlotte Danielson and Todd Whitaker and even former President Abraham Lincoln.

These four elements of educational leadership I've chosen to study are ones that are most important to me. Being an instructional leader is of primary importance when leading a school. Having a firm grasp of curriculum, assessment and best practices for education provide the backbone for a principal. Having a vision for what your school will look like allows stakeholders to buy

into your plan and work in partnership to achieve a great and lasting educational environment.

These first two elements would not be possible without the other two, communication and being organized. All great leaders are those who can communicate their plan and rally support with their optimism and attitude. Finally, one must be an organized person to entrust the confidence of those you plan to lead.

While this is not a complete list of all the attributes of an exemplary educational leader, they do provide a great foundation for the success of a principal or school administrator.

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