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Essential characteristics of an effective educational leader : a reflective essay

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Essential characteristics of an effective educational leader : a reflective essay

Abstract

An educational leader envisions the future and encourages others to align with the shared vision. He/she is able guide practices toward the vision to make it a reality. By thriving on successes and learning from failures, the vision will become focused and attainable. A leader must know how to tie the community of learners together with a common thread. All must be gazing upon the vision as they act each and every day.

I believe that there are four critical elements essential for exemplary educational leadership. A quality principal emulates visionary leadership, is an effective communicator, is a lifelong learner and encourages others to be lifelong learners, and facilitates change. These personal beliefs will be expanded and elaborated upon throughout this reflective piece.

ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL LEADER

A Research Paper

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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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When I was in third grade, my teacher had me draw myself in two different careers in which I could envision myself in the future. I drew myself as a cheerleader and a teacher. As there was not a high demand for cheerleaders at the time of my career decision, I came to see I should choose my other option. For the remainder of my childhood days, teaching was my career goal. I never strayed from this goal. I was so embedded in my personal vision, I could not abandon it.

Even before third grade, I believe, my natural instinct was to become a teacher, as the spirit of education is in my blood. My grandmother, mother, aunt, uncle, mother and father all have significant ties to education. Growing up in a home with a mother who was a teacher and a father who was a school administrator, I was led to believe that life revolved around school.

As I grew, I learned from many teachers, and they all had significant influences on my life. I enjoyed having these people become a part of my life through learning. A teacher's role was important. They could positively influence their students' lives directly, as my former teachers had for me. Their importance in the lives of others affirmed my decision to enter the field of education.

My undergraduate days were spent at the University of Northern Iowa, which I chose because of its exceptional teacher education program. Course by course, I reflected on my former teachers and their teaching styles. I was able to analyze many different teaching strategies and their effects on different learning styles, including my own. It was then that I came to the realization that all children can learn; a teacher just needs to know how to reach each child.

An educator's role is extremely powerful in the life of a child. He/she has the ability to make a child's spirit soar. I knew I wanted to influence children in this manner, and I also realized that it would not be a simple task. I knew that my parents both spent much of their time outside of the school day working on school. There was always more work to be done, or a child to worry about through the night.

I was able to experience the tremendous workload myself during my first years of teaching. I learned that educators need the ability to give students individual attention so they may know what is important in their lives. If students cannot find personal meaning, a teacher must guide them on the search. Each student is different with different needs, a different home culture, and a different attitude toward learning and life. Because of these differences, an educator needs to be flexible and play whatever role a particular student may need in his/her life.

I encourage my students to be lifelong learners, as I enjoy being a lifelong learner myself. Everyday is a learning experience and new challenges are faced. I thrive on these experiences. They are all part of the lifelong learning process. Because I wished to grow professionally with new ideas and concepts, I chose the Educational Leadership master's program. I learn daily about teaching, but I wish to learn more about the foundation of my school. Why and how decisions are made is of great interest to me.

I have been able to experience education as a student and as a teacher. I now wish to take my knowledge a step further and partake in the administrative viewpoint. I hope to someday influence a greater number of children and families through educational leadership.

I chose my profession because I wish to impact the lives of others. Through teaching, I have the opportunity to impact a young life with knowledge, enthusiasm, and persistence to learn. Through educational leadership, I may have this impact on young lives, and the surrounding community. I have lived and learned in the direction of my personal vision. I am ready to lead others toward their own vision.

An educational leader is one who guides others by vision to learn and grow to their fullest potential. This leader not only leads students, but staff members, families, and community members who have an interest at stake in the school system. Lifelong learning is supported by the educational leader and his/her encouragement to reach the vision.

An educational leader envisions the future and encourages others to align with the shared vision. He/she is able guide practices toward the vision to make it a reality. By thriving on successes and learning from failures, the vision will become focused and attainable. A leader must know how to tie the community of learners together with a common thread. All must be gazing upon the vision as they act each and every day.

I believe that there are four critical elements essential for exemplary educational leadership. A quality principal emulates visionary leadership, is an effective communicator, is a lifelong learner and encourages others to be lifelong learners, and facilitates change. These personal beliefs will be expanded and elaborated upon throughout this reflective piece.

Critical Elements Essential for Exemplary Educational Leadership

The Administrator as a Visionary Leader

A quality educational leader facilitates a community of learners, where staff, students, parents and community are able to work and learn together effectively. Focus is needed to guide all stakeholders in one direction so that all may achieve their maximum potential. This focus comes in the form of a vision, what one sees. Learning communities must be able to have sight, or vision, of what they would like to become. The educational leader must be the source of light to allow people to have this vision.

When this vision is a part of the entire learning community, it is called a shared vision. When it is a true shared vision, stakeholders have had a role in creating the vision, implementing it, and then living it. These visions are important to learning communities because they “provide the focus and energy for learning” (Senge, 1990, p. 206).

One way to describe the formation of a shared vision is by picturing a gym-full of first graders. The teacher says to the children, “Run a mile!” There is mass chaos, the children run everywhere in all directions. Each child, individually, has a vision of what they are to do. Some run fast, some run slower. Some run in zig-zags, some run in straight lines. Students are running into each other, but they continue running. The teacher stops the students and asks them how they will know when they have run a mile. Students respond with a variety of answers, one being that all students run on the same path. The teacher then shows the students where a running track has been painted on the gym floor. The lines are a guide for the students. They may continue running in the fashion they were before, but now they have a shared direction, or vision. Students

continue running slow, fast, straight, or in zig-zags, but their direction is the same toward their goal of running a mile.

An educational leader must facilitate the formation of this same type of vision with staff and community members. In the development stage of the vision, stakeholders meet together to “talk, discuss, collaborate, and use data-driven decision making to determine” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 21) the current status of a school and where they would like to see it in the future. The educational leader is the facilitator of this group, guiding individual visions into one path. The process is as important as the final product in visioning. The facilitator must stress the importance of this process during vision formation (Glatthorn, 2000). This allows the realization of a shared vision to be an “energizing experience” (Lambert, 2003, p. 6) for the group.

Glatthorn’s (2000) process for developing a shared vision is an effective way for a leader to guide the visioning experience. To create a shared vision, all stakeholders must play a role. In a school, parents, teachers, administrators, students, and community members must have their voices heard throughout the process. The entire group is informed of the importance of this process and how the vision will be the guiding force behind all the school’s instructional and curricular efforts.

Once group members have an understanding of the importance of the shared vision, the group is given a knowledge base from which to start. Because not all members of the group are in the school each day, this knowledge base will give all members a place from which to begin.

The large group is then split into smaller groups. It is in the small group where the words of the vision are formed. The facilitator leads the group in brainstorming the

concepts the group members feel most strongly describe their vision for the school. The group decides on the most important words from the list and individually writes a statement using the valued words. From these pre-vision statements, the actual vision statement emerges. The entire group feels ownership and comes to consensus on how to convey their shared vision.

The shared vision is a force within people, it is not actually one specific statement (Senge, 1990), as many seem to believe. The vision statement is what is used to communicate the vision in one phrase. The full impact of the vision will not be understood by individuals outside of the shared vision (Short & Greer, 2002), but the general idea will be communicated. This communication is important because the community needs to have a general understanding of the direction in which the learning community is working. The actual shared vision, which is paraphrased in the simple vision statement, is what people hold inside themselves, which guides them in their daily work and practice.

Once the vision is shared with all stakeholders, it must be implemented. The vision is now a reality that stakeholders live each day. Goals, resources, programs, and activities are all aligned with the shared vision (Wilmore, 2002). Because the primary efforts behind building the vision are strong, stakeholders will put forth much effort in the beginning. After time passes, some will veer from the vision as new ideas formulate in education. A principal's job is to become the steward of the vision and continue to encourage others to keep the vision in sight. The leader keeps the pressure on by constantly keeping the vision in front of stakeholders and reports progress.

Effective facilitation of a shared visioning process will be vital to success in my journey to become a leader in education. The first Standard for Educational Leadership states: “A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 19). I need to be prepared to guide a staff and school through all steps in the visioning process.

The most important piece of the vision, and probably the most difficult, is the stewardship of the vision. Maintaining alignment over time will be a challenge, but one I am prepared to undertake. I also understand that school cultures change. If a shared vision is conflicting with current school climate and culture, the principal must allow the vision to be recreated.

A true shared vision is vital to the success of any school. Like the children running in the gym, moving in the same direction allows goals to be accomplished. The speed or individuality of the participants may differ, but the goal is the same. A quality educational leader is one who facilitates the development of ideas with individuals, communicates the ideas of the group, aligns goals and programs with the vision, and keeps the vision alive. Students will be able to achieve if they have a strong leader behind the vision.

The Administrator as a Communicator

A quality educational leader is a one who infuses a multitude of elements into his/her leadership style. A major part of these critical elements consists of exceptional communication skills. An educational leader is one who guides teachers, students,

parents, and a community on a shared learning journey. For all involved to feel their role is valued, they must know that their voices are heard, and they must hear the voices of others.

For an educational leader to be an exemplary communicator, he/she must be able to communicate on “three levels: one-to-one, small group, and large group—to articulate the vision of the school to the school district, parents, and the larger community” (Smith & Andrews, 1989, p. 15). To develop a shared vision and carry the vision from each individual in a school building to the entire district as a whole requires a person who can listen and understand each person’s motivation for being a part of the school community. Expressing ideas and decisions, listening attentively and empathically, and understanding are all communication skills that an educational leader must have.

Educational leaders with fine communication skills are able to skillfully evaluate and effectively work with others. They are able to problem-solve, cooperate, and work through conflict. They know what information is appropriate to share with others, and in which way it is most appropriate to share (Smith & Andrews, 1989). By willfully seeing and understanding the viewpoints of others, great communication can take place. Stephen Covey’s (1998) theory encourages that effective communications begins with seeking to understand, before being understood.

Covey (1998) notes that one must “[listen and respond] with both the heart and the mind to understand [a] speaker’s words, intent, and feelings” (p. 128). When a parent, student, or staff member is sharing a concern or question with an educational leader, that leader must be listening whole-heartedly to the concern. Whether the concern be minor or major, it must be addressed in a serious, thoughtful manner. Before advice

can be given, a leader must take the time and effort needed to completely understand the issue before an answer can be suggested. A concerned person must know that he/she is truly being listened to, not just heard. True empathic listening is critical in one-to-one communication.

An effective educational leader must be able to express thoughts, ideas, plans, and concerns with a community of learners. He/she also must “give voice to all stakeholders, identify common values, and resolve conflict while building the [community], its unity, and its vision” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 67). All who have interest in the school must feel a level of comfort when sharing their thoughts with others. Educational leaders must create an environment in which all people feel at ease to communicate with each other.

As I look to my future leadership in education, communication will be vital to my school’s success. All members within the community of learners, staff, parents, and students, will feel comfortable to share feedback and other points of interest with me and with the entire community. I must feel equally comfortable in sharing my own feedback and thoughts with them. To be at this level communicatively, one must be trustworthy and trusting of others.

I hope to build trust among all learning community members so that they may communicate with one another easily. Once the level of trust is built, not only should community members feel free to share, they should be willing to listen. Early on in my career as an educational leader, the staff I lead will be informed of views on communication. They will be reminded of this throughout each year, taking a proactive approach to stifle any communication problems that may loom in the environment between staff members and myself.

Parents and the community will be aware of the importance of communication in our learning community through frequent newsletters and invitations to visit our school. Adults in the community must be aware of the content and methodology teachers use with their children. If the parents are not continuously updated, they will not be supportive and effective communication will cease. With consistent communication efforts, parents will be informed and invited to participate in the ongoing school improvement process.

Effective communication is vital to the fourth Standard for Leadership: “A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 66). An educational leader must be able to exercise quality communication skills with staff, community, and families in order for a school environment to function properly. By making all learning community members’ voices listened to and allowing all to feel that their thoughts are valued in the school community, an educational leader will have successfully established a quality communicative environment.

The Administrator as a Lifelong Learner

Football coaches are similar to educational leaders. They have goals: in football, to coach players so that they may win, and in educational leadership, to lead teachers in their mission for high student achievement. They both practice their profession with passion. They both have high expectations set by their supporters, their supervisors, and themselves.

Football is not the same as it was fifty years ago. Uniforms have new regulations and the rules of the game have been altered. Training approaches are incredibly different. Plays may resemble some of the past, but most change from game to game. Football coaches must be willing to adapt to change by learning more about the game. They must have the desire to continue increasing their knowledge of the game for achieving success.

Like football, education has changed quite drastically from what it once was. Educational leaders are no longer the individuals solely responsible for the discipline of the students. The job description encompasses much more than a schoolmaster of long ago could have ever dreamed. Educational leaders must be lifelong learners in order to remain passionate and knowledgeable in their field. Constant learning increases leadership skill and capacity.

“Andragogy (Knowles, 1981), the science of the lifelong education and learning of adults, deals with the independent adult learner who has his or her own goals and is interested in learning for a specific task or problem” (cited in *Lifelong Learning*, n.d., ¶ 5). Educational leaders are certainly andragogous beings. New skills, tasks, ideas, and concepts are continual demands on school leaders. These individuals must be willing and open to the learning process in order to reach personal and professional goals.

As a future educational leader, I will continue my journey as a lifelong learner. Because I believe that no one person can be a true expert on any one subject, there is always more to learn. I started my teaching career as a learner. Not only was I learning through practice, but also through multiple staff development course offerings. My desire to learn is insatiable, as I continue to take courses to further myself as an educator.

My role as a leader will also be that of a learner. Leaders must keep current with events, ideas, strategies, technology, and programming that will assist teachers in helping students achieve. I will continue coursework, attend collaborative meetings and conventions, and continue reading articles and journals which will assist me in becoming a better educational leader.

Self-reflection is an important component in a leader's professional growth. Continuous use of reflective practice leads to new ideas and revision of previous ones. This type of reflection encourages one to think about one's "own practice and [enables] others to think about theirs" (Lambert, 2003, p. 7). By thinking about one's "methods, techniques, strategies, and procedures" (p. 7), effective changes can be made all on one's own.

The third Standard for Educational Leadership states that "A school administrator is an educational leaders 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, p. 32). In a school leadership position, I must also encourage lifelong learning for the staff in the school that I lead. For teachers to feel support, they must know that I am a supporter of their lifelong learning process. "As a principal, [I am] on a constant quest to develop every person to his or her highest potential to promote achievement" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 39.) My job as an educational leader is to provide learning opportunities for students, teachers, and myself. We all must be making growth to be a true learning community.

Francisco de Goya, a renowned Spanish painter, created a chalk drawing of an elderly man using two sticks to help him walk (cited in *Lifelong Learning*, n.d.). He

titled his piece *Aun aprendo*, which means “I am still learning.” At the time of the drawing, Goya was eighty years old. If Goya, a brilliant artist who grew throughout his long career in art, was still able to learn at eighty years old, all people of all ages are able to learn.

All people, from football coaches to artists, can continue the learning process. Educational leaders who are in the business of educating others, especially, should be furthering themselves through continued education. A successful individual could be defined as one who wishes to reach his or her highest potential and is willing to put forth effort to achieve. My journey has begun. I am eager to discover where my potential lies and how I will be able to lead others to their fullest capabilities.

The Administrator as a Change Agent

A quality educational leader facilitates a learning community, where staff, students, parents, and community are able to work and learn together effectively. To accomplish this, the leadership cannot be static; an educational leader must be a change facilitator. Changes must be implemented over time in educational settings to improve the learning process for students. School improvement reforms are common in today’s schools, yet at times they are ineffective.

One common problem with change is that it becomes a hierarchal chain of command. “Traditionally, decisions about curriculum, pedagogy and school organization have been made by theorists, researchers and policy-makers, based in universities or ministry offices” (Wells, 1994, p. 1). From there, head administrators in a district pick up the idea of reform and pass it on to their administrators who are then responsible for the implementation. The administrators meet with teachers to explain what is expected of

them throughout the change process. At this point, the idealistic model of reform is usually shattered.

This method of change usually fails, as the teachers, those who actually work with the students, have no role in the change decision. When it is the highest level of educational hierarchy, those who are most removed from the classroom, making the decisions and expecting others to conform, the possibility of failure increases.

Administrators must play the role of the change facilitator, working between the upper administration and the teachers to effectively implement the change. They also must be monitoring school functions, procedures, instruction, and curriculum to identify when change is due. Teachers need to feel valued through this change process, as they work directly with the students. If their thoughts are not considered, there is no unity in the system, which means the reform will not be successful.

Unity must be formed among teachers and administrators throughout the change process. Teachers and the principal work together to identify needs and then begin the change process. School cultures can be resistant to change because “holes” are created in the transitioning. Unless the group as a whole is willing to make changes, only pieces of the reform can be implemented “to fit in and around existing elements” (Barth, 2001, p. 8). If the reform is pieced in around what is already in place, teachers will be overwhelmed and the changes will not improve, but deteriorate the current situation. This is a time for “sacred cows,” (p. 54) programs or procedures schools have that have been in existence for a long time even though they are no longer functional, to be eliminated (Wilmore, 2002). If the entire staff has set the direction of change, ownership is taken and there is a strong force committed to improvement.

Once a staff has agreed to a change within the school, strong supports must be put in place for them throughout the change process. Teachers and support staff cannot be expected to successfully implement reform without guidance from their leader. “Change-bearing innovations [live] or [die] by the amount and quality of assistance that their users [receive] once the change process [is] under way” (Joyce, 1990, p. 5). The staff is made up of individual people and their beliefs, and they must feel supported by their colleagues and administrators (Krovetz, 1999).

Because a principal’s role in the change process is that of the change facilitator, he/she must find the resources needed to assist the teachers in bettering the education for students (Barth, 2001). Human resources are some of the most valuable. The change facilitator must be one of these resources, embodying several behaviors. He/she may be described as a person who “encourage[s], persuade[s], or push[es] people to change, to adopt an innovation and use it in their daily schooling work” (Hall, Hord, Huling-Austin & Rutherford, 1987, p. 3). Facilitators must also support, help, assist and nurture those working on the human challenge of change.

As I look to my future leadership in education, being a facilitator of change will be vital to success. Change and reform are necessary events in the existence of a quality school. Society changes families, which change children. If schools are not keeping up with the world, they will not function effectively. A change facilitator must be aware of the community outside of the school to know what reform needs to take place within the school. I am willing to take this challenge.

I must also remember that today’s reform may need to be completely changed in a few years. Even though many resources are used and much time is taken to implement

the change, I have to remind myself that changes are processes. They take place over time and are never “finished.” Nothing should be implemented with a sense of permanency, just a sense of improvement on what exists currently. Of course, during the implementation of a reform, I will keep the staff positively focused on how the change will improve the school.

The process of change requires a leader who is willing to see the big picture. This leader must be able to “transform the organization through people and teams” (Fullan, 2002, p. 17). One of the characteristics of a change agent is that he/she understands the process of change. Fullan notes that while implementing change, it is important that “leaders help others assess and find collective meaning and commitment to new ways” (p. 17). Although the implementation may be rocky at first, a quality educational leader will encourage questions and those who disagree to work together to find common ground.

The change process cannot be planned and implemented step-by-step (Fullan, 2002). This process is a transformation of people, learning to think differently. The change agent’s role at this point is to foster questioning and push for progress. An effective change facilitating principal will allow for resistance due to change. Those who share dissenting views often have important points that must be addressed. Throughout the change process, listening is vital. The process of educational change is not instant, but conditions must be met for the change to grow and evolve over time allotted for the change to take place.

The administrator as a change facilitator is a part of the second Standard for Educational Leadership: “A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes

instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 32). By facilitating changes in alignment with the school’s vision, students will be exposed to an improved educational process. Like learning, which is never-ending, school improvement is never a finished product. School changes are included in the lifelong learning process for education. An educational leader must take responsibility for school improvement reform and guide staff members to educate students qualitatively.

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