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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**

As I prepare to gather my thoughts and to reflect on what I see as major issues and problems in our schools today, and my vision of how to address them, I cannot help but reflect on the last 30 years. As a classroom teacher for those years, I have come into contact with a variety of different administrators and nearly as many different leadership styles and ideas on leadership. I have certainly been shaped by all of these experiences and I will try to use them to evaluate the concepts and techniques that we have discussed in our studies the last 3 years, in order to construct an administrative style that best compliments the qualities of leadership that I might possess.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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by

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As I prepare to gather my thoughts and to reflect on what I see as major issues and problems in our schools today and my vision of how to address them, I cannot help but reflect on the last 30 years. As a classroom teacher for those years, I have come into contact with a variety of different administrators and nearly as many different leadership styles and ideas on leadership. I have certainly been shaped by all of these experiences and I will try to use them to evaluate the concepts and techniques that we have discussed in our studies the last 3 years, in order to construct an administrative style that best compliments the qualities of leadership that I might possess.

When envisioning the most effective administrator, I see one who has a very definite commitment to what they believe is the leadership style that fits them best. Those administrators that I have witnessed being successful were those that were specific in their purpose and commitment. As Speck (1999) stated, "being grounded in personal beliefs provides a principal with a sound foundation for working with a variety of individuals to build a learning community that meets student needs" (p.84). I think this can be one of my strengths. I have been in education for a long time and have been able to experience working with a variety of both administrative and teaching styles. This experience should be valuable in the forming of my own administrative leadership style.

I have experienced administrators who have immediately effected positive change, while others took several years. However, each were able to become very effective leaders. The one ingredient in each different success story was the confidence of the administrator in their ability to lead and their sincerity in their goals of improving the schools. The one significant difference in their styles as compared to others who were not as effective, was the ability to make their staff develop ownership in the changes taking place in their schools.

Principals today need to be good managers, so they have time to get to the most important aspect of their job which is leading. It is necessary to have both qualities. (Kowalski and Reitzug 1993, p.6) offer the following description:

School administrators must be both managers and leaders. As managers they must ensure that fiscal and human resources are used effectively in accomplishing organizational goals. As leaders they must display the vision and skills necessary to create and maintain a suitable teaching and learning environment, to develop goals, and to inspire others to achieve these goals.

We have studied the idea of creating a shared vision which will lead to building bridges to the future. Speck (1999) says, "The vision thing is a key concept of successful principalship" ( p.118). The leaders primary mission should be to focus the majority of their efforts on the direction that the school should take to reach these futuristic goals. The complexity of this effort is somewhat overwhelming.

Glatthorn (1997) identified that, " there are 5 enabling behaviors that make a schoolwide difference; facilitating communication, creating a positive open climate, building a vision with the staff, developing staff through involvement, and being an effective and positive role model" (p.256).

In order for change to take place, the leader must create a school environment conducive to change. This involves one in which teachers feel empowered. One of the primary motivators for teachers to improve, is their feeling of fulfillment as a teacher. Pajak (1993) might point to the importance of ego counseling which he contends, " is based on the proposition that behavior of normal individuals is organized by the ego" (p. 64 ).

This includes their feelings about how they are appreciated and the culture of the environment in their work in. Teachers that are empowered, feel a sense of worth and some degree of control over their destiny. They react to change better and will actually help facilitate that change. To instill these feelings in the staff, the administrator must include the teachers in the decision making processes. The top down bureaucratic style does not instill this in people. Leaders in today's successful organizations have a management style that allows subordinates to have a say in how the organization is run and where it is headed.

Haycock (1999) says that, "teaching partnerships and collaborative programs occur more readily where the school itself reflects a collaborative work culture" (p.82). This participative decision making extends teachers the opportunity to have a role in their schools governance. As Kowalski and Reitzug (1993, p.208) suggest,

Principals, superintendents, and other school leaders face the challenge of motivating teachers and other subordinates when organizational needs may be incongruent with their individual needs. The challenge lies in structuring daily school life in a manner that allows schools and districts to accomplish the organizational need to educate students while still satisfying the personal needs of individuals.

The leader must hire the best possible teachers and create opportunities for them to improve in their methods. A collaborative working environment is essential. Teachers must be able to share ideas and evaluate others styles and to have someone evaluate theirs. Zedervyko and Ward (1999) state that, "It is not possible for teachers to be members of learning communities or learning organizations without time for regular reflection, research, collaboration and innovation" (p.36). This allows for the formulation of thoughts and actions which lead to a collegial atmosphere in which to set the vision of the school. In order to create this shared vision, the leader needs to draw others into an active pursuit of this futuristic vision. This needs to be done in a noncoercive way.



The subordinates will only spend quality time in the pursuit of a futuristic goal if they feel that they have been given a chance to have some input into the development of that goal. It therefore becomes critical that the administrator understand their own strengths and weaknesses in order to develop a leadership style conducive to developing a shared vision.

Each of us have certain qualities of leadership and a style that we should try to cultivate. Identifying those qualities and determining how to implement them into a plan of personal leadership improvement is critical to our ability to become an affective administrator.

We cannot afford to think of ourselves as one dimensional. Our roles change daily and often during the day, determined by whom we are in contact with. We are certain things to certain people. An administrator therefore must understand how people respond to certain things, and how they might treat information coming from the leader. It is important to present information in a way that it will be perceived in the way intended. Leaders need to have an understanding of psychology and how to create systems that take into account different personality styles which encourage the subordinates to work cooperatively with a shared vision of what they are trying to attain.

To be an effective leader, one must also be a good manager. If the management skills are lacking, the time that one will have to actually be a leader will suffer.

Portin, Shen, and Williams (1998, p.1) report,

Principals are approaching the limits of the amount of time they can dedicate to the job. Legislators, school boards, and district administrators who are proposing additional changes that will affect the school and the principal's role should realize that many principals are severely limited in their capacity to take on additional duties. In addition to the time constraints, the principal because of external priorities, are increasingly becoming managers rather than instructional leaders.

We can only be effective leaders if we first know ourselves. Comparing our profile with that of others, and knowing how to cooperatively work within that context, will create an environment of cooperation. Leadership demands that we design a plan for people to work cooperatively and that for the plan to be effective, the administrator must be able to influence others. Autry (1999) says that, "to influence, one must be trusted" (p.19).

I believe the best method for myself is to use my experience in teaching, especially my experience in what I believe to be the best environment for teaching; extracurricular activities. It is important that we try to create this same atmosphere in the classroom and in the school at large. One in which there is a common goal, a satisfaction from work well done, and a vision of what the collective goal of the organization is. We often see these in our activities, but have a hard time developing the same attitudes in the classroom.

Often a school with great athletics is lacking in academic prowess and the opposite is often true in a school with a high academic record.

I would like to create an environment in which all who chose, could attain the satisfaction that comes with achieving in all their endeavors, academic and extracurricular. When reviewing my experience as a teacher, coach and activities director, I feel I have a good fundamental knowledge of the strategies of communication, leadership, evaluation, etc. which I can cultivate into a useful and affective administrative philosophy. One which will allow for this type of flexibility in the school at large.

Goal setting would be a good example. I have always tried to emphasize the importance of setting goals that are a measure of what is to be the ultimate fruition of our labors. In order to reach these long-range goals, it is also necessary to establish a series of steps. These short-term goals also allow for successes along the way. Sometimes they convince us to reevaluate our situation and set new courses of action. I think this is probably realistic when talking about a visionary leader. There certainly must be time when it will be necessary to reevaluate and set new goals and a new course of action. It would be a mistake to think that all of our initial decisions will be correct.

The new goals need not be completely different than those originally set, but are interpretations of current feelings, climates, and information that would be gathered as the process evolves.

Carnall (1990), reminded us, "In a changing world, the only constant is change" (p.28 ). I will try to keep this in mind as I learn more about the expectations and problems inherent in administration. I will try to have a plan, and although realizing that the complexity of the job will not allow me to always follow it, I can still lead and not allow my staff simply to react to circumstances in a random fashion. An affective leader creates a collaborative atmosphere where everyone is informed and challenged to constantly improve for the welfare of their self and the organization. In order to do this, the administrator must have an understanding of the elements of the organizations culture. To develop an effective plan, it will be necessary to know which rites and rituals are so in bedded into the culture of the school that to try to immediately reshape them would mean sure failure for. The systematic and programmed day to day routines within the organization must be considered when creating any futuristic vision. Any plans and procedures created with long-term consequences must consider these cultural aspects. Danzberger, Kirst, and Usdan (1992) contend, "we no longer have a closed system of school politics whereby professional educators and their allies dominate the governance structure. School problems and issues now have great public saliency" (p.1)

When reflecting about what constitutes a successful team, business, or school district, it has been my experience that there are several factors involved. None of which are that much more important than the others, yet a lack of any of them could mean failure. These factors include talent, leadership, role-play, support groups, teamwork, communication. A school district can only be as successful as it's administration and the teachers in the classrooms. It must be the responsibility of the administrator to hire the most qualified professionals possible. To facilitate this, it is necessary to have a system which attracts the best. This involves salary and working conditions, a serious concern, especially in small rural districts. An administrator who can create good working conditions and a feeling of respect among the staff in the development of an atmosphere of trust and loyalty, will have an excellent chance to keep good teachers and also to attract new ones to the system. Most teachers would not list salary as their top reason for choosing to work at a school or why they stay in that schools employment. Of course different people have different needs, desires, and goals. The effective leader realizes this and first satisfies the physical needs of those in their employment. Equipment and advancing technology must be a focus of the schools.

The following criteria can be used for evaluating the principals performance as a resource provider according to Smith and Andrew, (1998, p.42):

1. Teaching assignments match the expertise of the staff.
2. The master schedule gives team teachers common planning period.
3. School- and district-level staff members work together to assess student needs or to develop curriculums.
4. A sufficient supply of materials is maintained and stored in organized and accessible areas.
5. Records of meetings show how staff members have been involved in budget decisions
6. Staff meetings are organized as instructional episodes, with the principal serving as a teacher or facilitator encouraging participation through use of small- and large-group processes.
7. Practitioners' workshops, retreats, and sharing of new ideas, show the principals leadership in seeking additional resources and opportunities.

Leadership must be enthusiastic in these areas. The Administrator must convey an image of one who enjoys their position and the opportunity to work with the staff and students. Individuals working for the District must have pride in the system and its maintenance. They must be willing to take on a new assignment or responsibility if it will help the system. Kowalski and Reitzug (1993, p.33) contend that:

Increasingly, educational organizations are placing a higher premium on an administrator's ability to lead. They are the persons who initiate action, identify alternatives, select appropriate courses of action, and direct individuals and groups to desired levels of functioning so that the organization can reach its goals and objectives.

The effective administrator can represent the School and lead others. A major part of their effectiveness can be evaluated by their ability to solicit support that is needed both internally and externally.

The school needs support from the community and from the staff. In order to insure support of the staff, the administrator needs to explain why decisions are being made and allow the staff to believe that their opinion counts. This is in the context of the artistic component of administration.

A danger does exist anytime information is shared, it can be misinterpreted. There is not a total safeguard against this. However, planning can avoid many problems associated with this. The support of the community is vital to the District. With good information, the relationship of the school and community is strengthened. The community can become a great asset, as it should be. Community members can be used for a great number of volunteer projects which alleviate staff from mundane duties. This creates better staff support and builds a commitment to the school in the community member.

Teamwork was another ingredient that came to mind. How many times have we seen a system full of qualified individuals who have not been able to deliver a great product? Why has one business flourished while another has not? What is the main reason for the success of top companies? I suggest it is a feeling of belonging, of being a part of something special. It is an ownership brought about by hard work and accomplishment. These feelings have to be affirmed.

With constant affirmation, individuals become committed to the success of the venture. They are willing to sacrifice a personal concern for concern for the whole. It becomes evident that through hard work and a commitment to the program, not only do they receive self satisfaction, but they become part of a successful formula, thus having a opportunity to experience more successes.

Often administrators send negative messages. We should try to sow "good seeds", if I might quote a part of a speech I have heard. By sowing "good seeds" we do not plant them, we spread them. They are not forced into the ground where they grow. Under those conditions the plant might grow quickly, however it may not have a good root system and may not withstand a strong storm. On the other hand, when we sow seed, it usually takes longer for them to grow, but when they do, they tend to root deeply and hold strong in times of adversity.

All too often we spend our time looking at what is wrong with everything within our schools, instead of focusing on the good aspects, building on them and allowing them to influence and change the negative things going on around us. Our schools would run much smoother if administrators would look for the positive things and reaffirm the hard work and sacrifice of loyal staff. We as administrators, teachers, students and staff need to sow some good seeds both in the school building and in our communities. Our unified goal should be improved student learning.



Clarke (1999) stresses that, “ system change becomes possible when individuals with different roles - students, teachers, school administrators, and policy makers - interest around a shared concern for student learning” (p.1).

The advantage of sowing “good seed” is the long lasting affect it will have. I have seen administrator after administrator come into a system and try to totally change it. Why would they not first study the situation and see what “ good seeds” and what “bad seeds” have been planted ? Too often, they just bring in a whole new concept. This immediately tells anyone that has been working in the system for a number of years, that what they have been doing was worthless. How does this encourage people? Robert Owens (1998, p.78) says that,

The shift in organizational theory from traditional modernism, with its emphasis on perfecting and refining bureaucratic management strategies and techniques, to a post modern approach, which emphasizes the potential for improving organizational performance from within, from the bottom up, by fostering the growth and development of the people who inhabit the organization.

I would suggest two approaches. One would be to study the situation and then to implement an improvement plan that would allow the system to retain the basic concepts that are working and facilitates positive change in those areas where improvement is needed.

As Phillips (1992) suggests, "too many of today's leaders resign themselves to the limits imposed on them by flawed systems rather than rethinking those systems" (p.141).

We often find administrators managing and not leading. I have become increasingly aware of the difficulties of administrators in our modern schools to find the time and energy to actually be visionary. Their day is taken up with meetings dealing with "Behavior Disordered" or "Learning Disordered" children, filling forms to substantiate what the school has done to facilitate learning for these students or writing Individual Education Plans.

These are societal problems that are escalating in our modern system of education which require an increasing amount of time from the administrators day. As Kowalski & Reitzug (1993) said, "actions of the American public, especially actions of those who promulgate and administer educational policy in an official capacity, are influenced by problems of the day" (p.111). Examples of factors creating needs and wants in public education that they list are cultural diversity, drug abuse, changing American family, poverty, technological advancements, world economy, nature of work, concern for at-risk students and civil rights. Robert Owens (1998), states that "the school system or school, as a sociotechnical system, is in constant dynamic interaction with the larger external environment in which it exists (p.69)."

There should be identifiable points of concern that we target when constructing a school improvement plan. Some of these may need immediate attention and others could be handled at a later date. The key would be that the staff would be affirmed for having done some excellent work and therefore would be more motivated to improving their style and curriculum to help the school address certain concerns.

The second approach is more philosophical in nature and may not be as easily evaluated. One of the inherent problems with our society today is the demand for change. With our advanced technologies and fast paced lives, we tend to demand that changes take place immediately. I contend that the school is a place where more happens than teaching a student about Math or Science. While these skills are certainly necessary, they are not a direct indicator of the school's success in teaching their students. It appears that the most successful and productive citizens are not necessarily those who have the best skills in math, science or any other subject exclusively, but rather those that have a solid moral and ethical base.

Education then helps them to expand their ability to be good productive citizens. These qualities take time to cultivate. We are also restricting our positive influence on society when we do not make discipline and a demand for good moral judgment a priority of our educational system. Education should deal with the whole person. We tend to strive to make gains in only subject content.

While this satisfies an immediate need, it does not improve the essential fabric which holds our communities together. As with any change in the organization, this starts with the leader. Phillips (1992) contends, "all the theories and guidelines, fall apart without honesty and integrity. It's the keystone that holds an organization together (p.52)".

I realize this is very philosophical, and in a practical sense may not be attainable, however as I reflect on becoming more involved in the total process of developing a philosophy of what is the ideal environment for learning, I keep finding myself more concerned with these issues than with those concerning the average test score on an ACT test. The moral fiber of our students and the influence of society on our students has a great impact on our ability to educate. All of our expertise in curriculum development, etc. is useless if our students are not prepared socially.

Our new emphasis on school reform deals with subject content and our ability to evaluate the learning process. At times teachers become very frustrated with this, because they feel powerless to change the students perception of their role in this process. I realize that most of the frustration stems from a minority of our student body, however I believe any teacher would attest to the fact that the situation is getting worse rather than better. It goes beyond standards and bench marks to the moral fiber of our society. This presents an external influence on our ability to be successful educators and it is important for the administrators to be aware of this and work to make the educational environment as

productive as possible. As Kaplan (1998) explains, “ultimately, the only meaningful measure of leadership development is its impact on student achievement” (p.90).

This presents us with the problem of defining achievement. I suggest that to build strong educational institutions, we need to develop mission statements that not only address the acquisition of subject knowledge, but also addresses the development of the students awareness of their roles as productive citizens. I look forward to this challenge. I cannot think of a more important and rewarding career to be involved in. Our schools and their future lie at the core of our Nations ability to function.

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