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A Preferred Vision For Administering Secondary Schools: A Reflective Essay

Anne E. Speer
University of Northern Iowa

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A Preferred Vision For Administering Secondary Schools: A Reflective Essay

Abstract

From the day I graduated with my bachelor's degree from Northern Iowa, I knew that I would soon return to begin work on my master's degree. Having grown up in a family of educators, there was no doubt that this degree would continue in the educational field. Because I appreciate initiative, change, and challenge, it seemed natural that I take the path of administration. In order to be an effective principal, one must possess many specific attributes. In each leadership position these qualities may be different and for each leader the definition may differ. Although positions and definitions may fluctuate, one area is consistent for all: a leader guides, influences, and offers advice and sound decision making. Abraham Lincoln believed that "your organization will take on the personality of its top leader" (Phillips, 1992, p. 64). Therefore; to effectively guide, leaders must direct, and offer; they must adhere to their values, possess certain traits, and have a developed set of core beliefs that are demonstrated at all times.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
and Postsecondary Education
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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts in Education

by Anne E. Speer

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Victoria L. Robinson

2/26/03
Date Approved

Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Robert H. Decker

2/25/03
Date Approved

Second Reader of Research Paper

Michael D. Waggoner

2/27/03
Date Received

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

Introduction

From the day I graduated with my bachelor's degree from Northern Iowa, I knew that I would soon return to begin work on my master's degree. Having grown up in a family of educators, there was no doubt that this degree would continue in the educational field. Because I appreciate initiative, change, and challenge, it seemed natural that I take the path of administration.

In order to be an effective principal, one must possess many specific attributes. In each leadership position these qualities may be different and for each leader the definition may differ. Although positions and definitions may fluctuate, one area is consistent for all: a leader guides, influences, and offers advice and sound decision making. Abraham Lincoln believed that "your organization will take on the personality of its top leader" (Phillips, 1992, p. 64). Therefore, to effectively guide, leaders must direct, and offer; they must adhere to their values, possess certain traits, and have a developed set of core beliefs that are demonstrated at all times.

Characteristics of a Leader

Heartfelt Leadership

Love, enthusiasm, and passion are very important values that must be held by an administrator. Quite often, what leaders show and demonstrate will be what their staff will also show and demonstrate to the students and community. A principal should demonstrate this love and enthusiasm and be seen as a learner, right along with the rest of the staff and students. "If we wish to encourage certain educational values in children, we should consider how those values are being played out, or not being played out, in the behavior of leaders in our schools" (Goldman, 1998, p. 20). That means, if we are pushing students to be their best, excel, and better themselves as citizens, leaders and teachers must also model the same attributes. Showing true passion means commitment, excitement, extra effort above and beyond, desire to improve one's self, and simply showing emotions. Educators often forget or overlook this passion. Staff in the school building get overwhelmed by the "business" aspects of the job and forget about the caring, compassion, leading by example, and most

of all, the children. "Strong leadership stems not only from such factors as the leader's command of issues, decision-making capability, and skill in focusing institutional purpose, but also the force of personal example" (Zingg, 2000, p. 52). Leading will be easier if people know that their leaders truly care and believe in what they do. Having this passion is only the beginning, but with other characteristics, the faculty and staff will unite and tackle issues as one team.

Leaders must also display compassion and build a positive environment. In all decisions that are made, an administrator needs to remember that people's lives are being affected. These thoughts may not change the decision made, but they need to influence the approach the administrator takes to deliver the message. How issues are approached will also affect the environment of the school. "When educators treat students with love and respect, encourage appropriate behavior, and correct wrongful actions, they show they care" (Krajewski, 1999, p. 35). A principal should not mandate or dictate. Like passion for learning, if compassion is shown at all times, staff and students will begin to display this value as well. An

environment focused on caring and respect will result. The children that we affect today will someday be leading and making decisions that will affect us all in the future. We can be assured that if we demonstrate a caring approach, today's students will also live and lead with this value.

Leadership and energy are also tightly connected. This includes creative energy, imaginative energy, and collaborative energy. "This power is at the root of successful people and organizations" (Arlington, 2000, p. 32). Administrators who perceive power in this way energize, rather than dominate staff, teachers, and students. Like compassion, energy is contagious. If the leader has it, others will acquire it. If principals approach new ideas enthusiastically and listen with energy, the entire school community will use this productive energy and will follow their lead. Creative energy is unlimited if the conditions are present for it to grow.

Ethical Leadership

A second trait that must be modeled by an effective leader is honesty. Because "Today's world is confusing, especially to young people who are

trying to makes choices based on their values and priorities" (Krajewski, 1999, p. 33), administrators must demonstrate what is expected of all students. This is also true of a school's staff. Honesty will ultimately bring about confidence, respect, and support. Tom Peters reported in his research that the "best, most aggressive, and successful organizations were the ones that stressed integrity and trust" (Phillips, 1992, p. 52). A person viewed as moral is more likely to be trusted, confided in, and followed. A leader must never be deceptive or tell only half of the story. If this occurs, credibility will be less and staff, students, and the community will not trust what is being told to them. An honest person, even when the news is not good, will be respected. Sometimes, saying "what people want to hear" is easy to do. This may temporarily smooth over the problems, but in the long run it will create more difficulties. Leaders will find themselves gaining respect for being outright and honest. "It's [honesty] the keystone that holds an organization together" (1992, p. 52).

Collaborative Leadership

Effective leaders must also exhibit a third trait: the ability to see and build connections. Strong leadership needs "human qualities such as kindness and openness, generosity and civility, [passion and compassion], personal integrity and intellectual honesty" (Zingg, 2000, p. 52). These personal qualities are directly related to running a successful school and linking with the learning community. Leaders need to be open and passionate from the bottom of their hearts. Principals must live their values, openly share those values with others, and be true to them. If a leader demonstrates this and connects with people, starting from the bottom up, confidence, respect, trust, and support will be the foundation upon which the school stands. Using these personal connections along with dynamism and political skills, an administrator will be able to guide their learning community toward its vision and goals. Binding the members together will create an environment of connectivity. Leading in this manner will show everyone involved that being able to make

connections and connecting to others is a way to nurture and enlarge the educational pathways.

Arlington (2000) sums it up best by saying:

"Great leaders capture people's hearts and minds. They foster commitment when they demonstrate the full essence of what being human means and recognize the connection each has with others as we journey through life. People want human connections in their search for purpose and meaning."

A true leader recognizes that strong connections and relationships between people are essential for creativity, productivity, and commitment.

Political/Organizational Leadership

A fourth trait that must be displayed by a stellar leader pertains to political and organizational leadership. Administrators need to focus their concerns on the students, faculty, staff, other administrators, and the community. All stakeholders must be part of the decision making process. An administrator at times may act more as a facilitator. To show that the thoughts and advice from all people are important, a leader must ask them for their assistance. The empowerment of teachers and

students makes them feel an important part of the school and will motivate them to strive to make their school better. "If the principal supports the practice of collaboration with a leadership team and engages that team's discussions around professional issues, then you know the principal wants to include teacher leaders from the beginning in issues of importance" (Foster, 2000, p. 77). Involving all parties is profitable. If community members are associated with the school and have an investment in it, they will want that school to be the best it can be. In fact, principals do not have time in a day to be the only one to sustain and direct all committees, make all decisions, deal with all discipline, and evaluate and assist all staff. "In place of heroic leadership, principals should work to develop leadership capacity throughout the school community. [This is done by] 1. Encouraging and nurturing individual initiative; 2. Building a learning organization; and 3. Taking a balcony view" (Lashway, 2001, p. 4). School administrators should be present, be involved, watch over everything, but distance their ego and simply be part of the team. Principals can ensure total school success by

following the belief that more heads are better than one. Finding real solutions to problems, and having "buy-in" of all new ideas, can only come about by including all parties affected.

Instructional Leadership

The fifth characteristic an effective leader must articulate is the continuance of high standards. Most people will strive to meet the standards placed upon them. From the preschooler to the superintendent, if the expectations are set high, the quality of work will improve. Administrators need to work with members of the school community to establish challenging expectations and standards. The most obvious area associated with this topic is student achievement. Having high expectations for student achievement is also important and vital for a successful school. Standards and approaches need to be positive, healthy, and attainable. A principal and the school staff must stay current, constantly assess authentic curriculum and instruction, and performance-based assessment processes should be used to ensure that all children learn. Each person involved must be

treated as an individual and shown the growth they have achieved.

With the movement to mainstream special education students, the success of special needs students is important as well. According to Dorothy Lipsky (1998, p.80), traditional forms of assessment will not work for special needs students and instead staff "must develop and use adapted methods to assess student knowledge." It is important to realize that high achievement may not necessarily be reached in a consistent manner for all students. However, high expectations for all people involved, will result in a school striving to reach its full potential.

Visionary Leadership

None of these fore-mentioned attributes and traits would be as effective without vision, the sixth trait of effective leadership. Effective visions can be inspiring themselves. A principal and staff together need to develop a vision that is clear and challenging. The vision also needs to include the reach for excellence. Vision helps schools focus in one direction. If the vision is flexible, it can exist and tolerate change. An effective vision will

empower a staff and help them prepare for the future. A part that can't be totally forgotten is the past. These roots will affect the future everyday.

A principal needs to reaffirm, reassert, and remind everyone of this vision as often as possible. However, the principal's approach needs to be non-threatening. Effective visions cannot be forced upon people. A leader may at times have to persuade a staff member that this vision is the best road for the school to take. Remembering the traits of compassion and respect will help an administrator clear this hurdle. "If everyone accepts, the vision will be implemented whole-heartedly. When this is achieved, it is always done with enthusiasm, commitment, and pride. Moreover, truly accepted visions tend to foster innovation, risk-taking, empowerment, and delegation" (Phillips, 1992, p. 164.) A clear and innovative vision can lead to great accomplishments within a school.

The Greatest Challenge of Leadership

Implementation of discipline is probably one of the most important, yet most difficult and essential

school leadership aspect to maintain. By setting clear guidelines and implementing a sound program, one will find problems to be minute. Of course, this all balances on the fact that the fore-mentioned topics have also been established and implemented. A school must also be united in its approach toward discipline. "It takes an entire school, with everyone working together, to teach a child and to develop positive climate and discipline" (Arbor, 2000, p. 21).

Although all may work together, discipline issues will occur. When they do, these issues need to be dealt with quickly, fairly, consistently, and be learning experiences for the student involved. Administrators will find that discipline will be a huge part of their daily job. Without clear beliefs and standards, dealing with discipline matters could become very time consuming and emotionally draining.

Discipline issues need attention and resolution offered in a timely fashion. This is the case with any problem in the school. We expect our teachers to report on time and our students to be in the classroom before the bell rings. Many elements of society function based on a time frame; discipline matters should be no different. Not only should the student

be dealt with, but also any staff member affected should be updated in a timely manner. The day an incident takes place is the best time to handle it. This way, the events are fresh in everyone's mind and any consequences placed upon the student will be obviously connected to the choices they recently made, in other words, taking advantage of a teachable moment. Time is an important element of discipline.

Students and staff will be the first to let an administrator know if they feel something has not been dealt with consistently and fairly. Procedures need to be established school wide, and everyone must follow them. When a leader bends the rules, students will be more likely to break the rules. However, consistent does not mean equal. This means similar infractions should be dealt with in a similar manner regardless of the circumstance. Fair means they are treated similarly no matter what their grades are and no matter what activities they are involved in at school. Also, "educators who operate from an 'interest' basis opposed to a 'position' basis are more likely to be perceived as fair" (Arbor, 2000, p. 22). Decisions need to be made on the basis of what is in the best interest of the learning community, not

on the basis of defending a position. All students, teachers, and staff would admit that consistent and fair expectations and consequences are important for a positive environment. Administrators need to remember that they can mean business without being mean.

Lastly, discipline should be treated as a way to educate the students on what they did wrong and what a better choice might have been. Students need to be held accountable for their actions. Conferencing with students is important; having them state the problem, share their decision, and discuss what would have been a better choice is an obvious pattern to follow. This forces the student to be an active participant. This of course may not be the best course of action if offenses such as drugs or weapons arise. The actions to follow in these cases are most often clearly defined. For effective discipline to occur, the "teachable moments" must be utilized.

Conclusion

The administration of a school is a complex and demanding position that is constantly in the public eye. This position is an awesome responsibility that

can be best handled by a person who can show and practice all of the traits and values mentioned in this paper. This person must be of unquestionable personal integrity. All school personnel want the feeling that their administrator will do the right thing and make proper choices. All of these attributes will help an administrator build and create a successful learning environment. On a daily basis, leaders must remember that they are there for the sake of children and recall this poem by Ginott (1976):

"Outlook"

"I have come to the frightening conclusion
I am the decisive element in the classroom
[school].
It is my personal approach that creates the
climate.
It is my daily mood that makes the weather.
As a teacher [leader] I possess tremendous power
to make a child's life miserable or joyous.
I can be a tool of torture or instrument of
inspiration.
I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal.
In all situations it is my response that decides
whether a crisis will be escalated or
de-escalated, and a child humanized or
dehumanized."

A leader has the power to not only make or break the success of students, but also the livelihood of the school. Therefore, principals need to be leaders,

listeners, models, teachers, cheerleaders, and partners with school personnel, students, and the community. Through the implementation of these roles, and the use of their values, traits, and beliefs, effective administrators will truly set the tone for their buildings, and their decisions will be based upon what they believe and know to be right.

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