Graduate Research Papers   Student Work

2000

A leader's vision of building a learning community

Richard D. Wettengel

A leader's vision of building a learning community

Abstract

As I prepared my first memo to our high school staff about the weeks activities, an idea about my role as Activities Director came to light. It is the idea of service. Snyder, Dowd, and Houghton (1994) state that the notion of service is central to any administrative post. The root word in administration is minister, meaning, "to serve." That is exactly how I see my role at school. Service is the heart of my work. My ministry extends to students, parents, fellow staff members, administration, the Board of Education, and others in the school community. My personal mission statement is to be of service to all of these groups, no matter what my capacity is in education. This reflective paper examines this mission, investigating my values, beliefs, and philosophy of educational leadership. It explores the skills and knowledge necessary to be an effective leader. Most of all, this paper reflects my vision for sound administrative practice. Last, this paper reports on the challenges facing administrators today. As John Wooden says, "I will get ready and then, perhaps, my chance will come" (Wooden and Tobin, 1988, p. 157).

A LEADER'S VISION OF BUILDING A LEARNING COMMUNITY

———————

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

———————

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

———————

by

Richard D. Wettengel

March 2000

This Research Paper by: Richard D. Wettengel

Entitled: A LEADER'S VISION OF BUILDING A LEARNING COMMUNITY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master

of Arts in Education.

Robert H. Decker

3/28/00
Date Approved

Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Edwin H. Griffith

3/30/2000
Date Approved

Second Reader of Research Paper

Michael D. Waggoner

Date Received

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

As I prepared my first memo to our high school staff about the weeks activities, an idea about my role as Activities Director came to light. It is the idea of service. Snyder, Dowd, and Houghton (1994) state that the notion of service is central to any administrative post. The root word in administration is minister, meaning, "to serve." That is exactly how I see my role at school. Service is the heart of my work. My ministry extends to students, parents, fellow staff members, administration, the Board of Education, and others in the school community. My personal mission statement is to be of service to all of these groups, no matter what my capacity is in education. This reflective paper examines this mission, investigating my values, beliefs, and philosophy of educational leadership. It explores the skills and knowledge necessary to be an effective leader. Most of all, this paper reflects my vision for sound administrative practice. Last, this paper reports on the challenges facing administrators today. As John Wooden says, "I will get ready and then, perhaps, my chance will come" (Wooden and Tobin, 1988, p. 157).

<div align="center">Values, Beliefs, and Philosophy</div>

Tied into the practice of service is another overriding theme, which is extremely important to leadership: a moral authority. Do what is right. Leaders must be honest and have high standards. They must have impeccable integrity. William Morrow states that "what lies behind us and

what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us"
(Thorpe, 1995, p.30). What I am defining here is character. It is the
combination of service and character that is the foundation for great
administration. These two ideals separate greatness from mediocrity.
The hallmark of leadership is to listen to the voice inside which proclaims,
"this is the real me." In other words, a leader must start by knowing
himself. According to Bennis, (1989) true understanding of oneself comes
from reflecting on your experience.

This is the value I received when completing the Life Styles
Inventory. It strengthened my self-awareness and assisted in the process
of getting to know myself. Personally, I have a constructive style, which is
humanistic and encouraging. I tend to be affiliative, with a strong interest
in meaningful relationships. Perhaps this explains my strong desire to be
successful in education. I love a team approach and high levels of staff
involvement. The LSI also describes my stumbling blocks, one of them
being difficulty making decisions. As a future administrator, it will pay to
realize these effective and ineffective behavior patterns and to work
toward personal growth. This will help strengthen the organization. More
importantly, this self-direction will lead to greater learning and
understanding, as Bennis (1989) tells us that it is in our relationships with
those around us that we learn about ourselves. Leaders learn from

others, but they are not made by others. Knowing myself will guide me into another aspect of administration: the practice of building relationships.

This is one key to being effective in any leadership position: building a trust with the colleagues that you deal with on a daily basis. Once that trust is established, a leader can work to implement his vision. Dobyns and Crawford-Mason (1994) state that it is important to drive out fear and build trust with staff. A leader must have complete assurance and certitude regarding their character, ability, strength, and truth in the oversight of their staff and community. Especially when initiating change, whether it's modifying curriculum or motivating personnel, the idea of trust and genuinely showing others that you really do care is significant in the outcome that will be achieved. Block (1987) mentions two critical skills for an administrator: negotiating agreement and negotiating trust. Ask where the fence setters stand. Encourage the fence setters to contemplate the issue and inform us what it would take for them to give us support. This is one method to build trust through collaboration. Another method to gain trust is to be visible. Cohen (1990) believes that you can not lead from behind a desk. You must see and be seen. As Tom Peters phrases the technique in Cohen (1990), "MBWA", it means management by walking around. Perhaps no leader demonstrated this leadership style better than did Abraham Lincoln. Phillips (1992) states that Lincoln met with his

generals and cabinet members in their homes, offices, and in the field. It was important for him to get out of the office and circulate among the troops. Likewise, a principal can gain firsthand insights by using this style. These techniques shape the quality of interaction between the teacher and supervisor, something of great interest to Pajak (1993). In his description of clinical supervision models, Pajak (1993) states the basis of a collegial relationship includes trust and a willingness to share and understand each other. Literature also suggests that a number of outcomes may be associated with collegiality (Barth, 1990, p. 31). Decisions tend to be better. Implementation of decisions is better, as is higher levels of morale and trust among adults. Adult learning is energized and sustained. Trust makes communication easier.

Good leaders communicate clearly, in specific terms and in writing, to be sure their goals are completely understood. Lewis (1986) calls us to intensify and personalize communication, giving people a chance to express opinions and for us to hear their concerns. All employees have the right to know exactly what's expected of them. Have high expectations because research shows that the higher the goals you have, the higher the goals you will achieve (Cohen, 1990, p. 19). At the same time, a leader allows for mistakes to be made. Tolerate and nurture failure. Mistakes may be viewed as valuable learning experiences rather

than reasons to mistrust those people involved. Communicators keep their workers informed. They do not allow vague rumors and grapevine exaggerations to be their employees only sources of information. Within reason, they allow the staff to retain their individuality, to dress and arrange their work areas in a way that is comfortable for them. Good leaders get to know their employees as individuals, to learn their interests, hobbies, backgrounds, and families. Sometimes a five-minute chat with a staff member can pay off in increased loyalty and commitment. Snyder et al. (1994) relay that to get from communication to commitment, people must be involved in deciding how to achieve the vision, or the part relevant to them.

When a leader can emphasize shared values, it is more possible to tap into the strengths of the staff and community. Good leaders make goal setting a team effort. Block (1987) says empowerment is not a set of techniques, but a choice. Over time, a leader should seek more ways to shift responsibility and control to the people doing the core work of the organization. Lewis (1986) adds that reaching decisions by consensus is a powerful tool for building unity and strength. This is a positive approach to building connections with those you are involved with in the educational process. Give them a voice, a stake, and it will help create motivation. I will inspire and motivate by allowing staff to become stakeholders. A truly

outstanding environment exists when all members share in the vision. Examples of developing shared values include information sharing, group problem solving, and shared decision-making sessions. Collaboration provides the framework to build a learning community. Speck (1999) states that people must work together, break down the walls of isolation, and be invited on a regular basis to participate with a clear focus on improving student learning.

Good leaders also acknowledge a job well done with a pat on the back. They assume the best about their employees and treat them maturely. Cohen (1990) states that a leader must treat those you lead with respect, always. According to Cohen (1990), successful leaders build cohesion, teamwork, high morale, and esprit de corps. Praise in public and criticize in private. A lack of trust, something the staff experienced in one of my former schools, is discouraging to staff morale. Leaders must encourage workers to make their own decisions, making it clear that they trust and respect them. In return, they are trusted and respected.

A positive leader allows and encourages employees to grow in their jobs. They believe in investing time and money for employees to upgrade their skills. Providing this sort of training is a rock solid investment. "No organization," Deming said "can survive with just good people. They need people that are improving" (Dobyns and Crawford-Mason, 1994, p. 87).

It's important to take notice of any efforts to stretch and grow in their jobs. Thorpe (1995) speaks of Peter Senges' notion of the "learning organization," where inquiry, reflection, and growth are at the center of the enterprise. "The principal is the most important reason why teachers grow or are stifled on the job" (Barth, 1990, p. 64). A key to promote growth is staff development, which according to Barth (1990) is being able to supply assistance or encouragement in a hundred different ways. Change that emanates from teachers or the community lasts longer. Staff development, states Barth (1990), is least effective when it is planned, premeditated, and deliberate. Only modest professional growth occurs. The best staff development is a consequence of the teacher and principal imaginatively pursuing school issues together.

Barth (1990) suggests that the principal is the most potent factor in determining school climate. As I reflect on the leaders of my educational experience, they did influence the climate for the whole school community. Good leaders laugh, occasionally at themselves. They are pleasant to be around. They smile often and shake hands easily. They never lie or make excuses. They never betray a confidence, something notably important in a school setting. Building trust is a key.

The role of an administrator is to be a good listener. Thorpe (1995) advocates a new administrator spend their first year listening. Cohen

(1990) believes listening motivates. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is important to us because it helps to explain why high salary, good benefits, and job security may not be as important as other motivational factors. Cohen (1990) relates that, according to Herzberg, satisfying factors are more important motivators: they include feelings of achievement, increased responsibility, and growth and development. Being a minister to a variety of people, a good leader will lend an ear to and respond to many different concerns. Being empathetic is also a good quality I have. A good leader can place oneself in another's shoes and be compassionate.

A leader today must keep up-to-date and be innovative. Keep abreast of the latest technological advances and model those uses and skills to the faculty. As Willis (1993) and Giannelli (1985) have pointed out, putting pressure on teachers to use computer technology does not factor positively with use over time and with successful technology projects; teachers already afraid of computers may become even more reluctant to use the technology. On the other hand, to leave the decision to the teachers invites procrastination, or worse, no involvement at all with computers. A principal can resolve this dilemma by recognizing teacher's views on computers. I can help by assuring access to computer technology, allowing sufficient time for teacher use and planning, and providing training. Technology is a key tool in building a

learning community within a school according to Speck (1999). The use of technologies will have a profound effect on my school.

What is Vision?

"Vision is the distant light that gives direction to any effort. When this is clear and bright, it attracts attention and stimulates curiosity and interest" (O'Connor, 1997, p. 76). Vision has the power to transform any ordinary administrator into a leader. It empowers individuals and gives them confidence that is both convincing and inspiring. "The ability to envision, to imagine something new and better, to dream, can be acquired with practice. The necessary effort is worthwhile because vision is an essential ingredient for leadership" (O'Connor, 1997, p. 79). Barth (1990) states that vision is your own: each person is rich in resources, thoughts, and ideas. A leader should keep it polished through daily attention or lose it. Vision is a part of each of us; visions are us.

Leaders have a significant role in creating that vision, the state of mind that is a school. "Most important they can conceive and articulate goals that lift people out of their petty preoccupations, carry them above the conflicts that tear a society apart, and unite them in pursuit of objectives worthy of their best efforts" (Bennis, 1989, p. 13). Without a vision, it would be difficult for any administrator to elicit a motivated or

enthusiastic response from teachers or staff. This response allows for certain schools to perform in exceptional ways.

According to Snyder, et al. (1994), vision is not a dream, but a reality that has yet to come into existence. The ability to see the reality gives the leader an inner strength that is required to devote long hours to make that vision real for others. Vision acts as an inner force compelling a leader to action. One must continuously sharpen and develop their vision to make it coherent for the learning community.

Barth (1990) says the principal is a central figure in determining the quality of a school. The principal who is a committed learner is likely to have a school full of students and adults who are committed learners. Cohen (1990) adds that the essence of leadership is very simple. It is to motivate people to perform to their maximum potential to achieve goals or objectives that you set. In reflection, this is why the idea of vision and of communicating that vision, is so extremely important to be an effective leader. Barth (1990) reports that with strong leadership by the principal, a school is more likely to be effective; without capable leadership, it is not.

Demands of Administration

Kowalski and Reitzug (1993) express that one of the biggest challenges facing principals today is managing time in a way that allows them to complete tasks which they feel are the most important. An

effective leader must be able to sift through a wealth of information and make sense of it all. Prioritize both time and resources. This gets into the area of management and organization. "It is obvious that a person can be a leader without being a manager, and a person can be a manager without leading" (Yukl, 1989, p.4). But I also believe that if you are a poor manager, at some time it will interfere with your ability to lead. An effective leader must strike a balance between the two. Barth (1990) reports that it is possible for school leaders to be effective educational leaders as well as building managers. A leader accepts responsibility. Cohen (1990) suggests this means the welfare of those you lead must always come before the leader's own well being. Therefore, an administrator's first duty is the accomplishment of the organization's mission, welfare of subordinates second, and your own welfare last. Do not be afraid to take risks.

Barth (1990) cited reasons for leaving the principalship, among them excessive time demands, stress and emotional health concerns, fatigue from a heavy work load, and lack of support from superiors. What a principal needs most is support and assistance. I feel that the administrative team is one place to provide that support and cohesion. In our administrative meetings, we found comfort just in conversation with each other.

Leaders must be aware of conditions that can influence their schools. Kowalski and Reitzug (1993) include a myriad of factors:

- Collective bargaining and its effect on the relationship of administrators and teachers.

- Legal dimensions to schools including federal and state influences, judicial decisions, and local control.

- Reform movements in educational systems, including school-site management, which try to shape school governance.

- Changes in curriculum, especially as technology improves. My former school recently received a substantial gift to be used for the business department. Improvements in curriculum include four new classes to address skills needed to be competitive in the job market.

- Multi-cultural educational needs will have to be addressed. The fastest growing segment of school populations is minorities.

- Trends in the educational process. Benchmarking, Outcome Based Education (OBE), cooperative learning, and authentic assessment are a few examples of the latest movements in education.

There are many more factors that can influence education. It is an exciting time for schools because so many needs and challenges are present in this profession.

One of the greatest challenges for an administrator is the role of curriculum leader. The principal can set the tone for a quality curriculum by playing a key role in providing ongoing leadership with curriculum. Glatthorn (1997) identifies five behaviors that can make a quality difference in providing leadership in this area: (a) facilitate communication, (b) create a positive, open climate, (c) build a vision with the staff, (d) develop staff through involvement, and (e) be an effective and positive role model. The principal must be informed of federal regulations and state policies and mandates, as well as provide input to district functions when providing curricular leadership. The principal must keep up to date with best practices, must be able to align and integrate curriculum, must demonstrate leadership with implementation and monitoring of the curriculum, and must be able to evaluate the curriculum's effectiveness.

An administrator has to meet great demands for accountability, both for himself and for his staff, especially in the area of evaluations. One expectation is that leaders are to devote an enormous amount of time to planning and evaluation. Principals, like their staff, have the capacity and need for personal and professional growth. As a principal, I can be a

learner and, just as important, model learning. Barth (1990) says that to foster a culture of reflection, learning, cooperation, and professionalism among educators contributes to a similar culture among others within the school system. When a principal can lead the staff to reflect thoughtfully about work, to analyze their work, to clarify and reveal their thinking through spoken and written articulation and engage in conversation with others about their work, then we can better understand schools and the tasks confronting us. This leads to improvement.

Conclusion

Schools today are experiencing expanding expectations. Schools are expected to attend to more social, psychological, and other personal problems. In a real sense, schools today have assumed many familial responsibilities. Being a leader in today's schools is a complex and problematic undertaking. Yet research demonstrates that "in schools where achievement was high and where there was a clear sense of community, we found invariably, that the principal made the difference" (Barth, 1990, p. 64).

The mission of schools today reflect that we are to provide spiritual, moral, physical, and intellectual growth by delivering quality educational opportunities for all children. I believe that schools must welcome everyone and provide a nurturing environment. Schools must

show that students have the ability to contribute positively to family and society. Schools exist for the students and community. It takes a cooperative effort of the school, home, and community to make the process work. Each person in a school has importance and dignity worthy of being recognized and respected. All students are capable of learning and schools must see that they do learn. To achieve success, it takes responsibility. Excellence demands a commitment. Last, schools must show to its students that learning is a lifelong process.

Zen Buddhism, according to Barth (1990), advises "to train a bull it is sometimes necessary to enlarge the fences." To improve a school, Barth (1990) believes it is sometimes necessary to enlarge the four walls that surround the future. The expansion of our vision can result in schools that we value for children and for ourselves. It takes a person with vision to be a change agent within a school. My personal vision suggests that this is possible. This reflective essay demonstrates that good schools are important to me. I believe that my personal vision of effective leadership provides a framework or a road map to be of service to others. The result will be a community of learners that are led by vision.

According to Owens (1998), the most persuasive research suggests that student academic performance be strongly influenced by school culture. I know of no one in a school who possesses more

influence than the principal. This effective school research indicates the

increased involvement of teachers and staff in decision making,

collaborative planning, and flexible change strategies reflect the

personality of each school. Strong leadership can make the difference in

establishing effective schools.

REFERENCES

Bennis, W. (1989). <u>On Becoming a Leader</u>. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc.

Barth, Roland S. (1990). <u>Improving Schools from Within</u>. San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers.

Block, Peter. (1987). <u>The Empowered Manager</u>. San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers.

Cohen, William A. (1990). <u>The Art of the Leader</u>. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Dobyns, Lloyd & Crawford-Mason, Clare. (1994). <u>Thinking About Quality</u>. New York: Random House, Inc.

Giannelli, G. (1985). Promoting computer use in the classroom: The teacher is always the last to know. <u>Educational Technology</u> 25(4): 30-31.

Glatthorn, Allan A. (1997). <u>The Principal as Curriculum Leader</u>. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

Kowalski, Theodore & Reitzug, Ulrich C. (1993). <u>Contemporary School Administration</u>. White Plains, NY: Longman.

Lewis, James Jr. (1986). <u>Achieving Excellence in Our Schools</u>. Westbury, NY: J. L. Wilkerson Publishing Company.

O'Connor, Carol A. (1997). Successful Leadership. Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Series, Inc.

Owens, Robert G. (1998). Organizational Behavior in Education. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Pajak, Edward. (1993). Approaches to Clinical Supervision: Alternatives for Improving Instruction. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc.

Phillips, Donald T. (1992). Lincoln on Leadership. New York: Warner Books, Inc.

Snyder, Neil H., Dowd, James J. Jr., & Morse Houghton, Dianne. (1994). Vision, Values, and Courage. New York: The Free Press.

Speck, Marsha. (1999). The Principalship: Building a Learning Community. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Thorpe, Ronald. (1995). The First Year as Principal. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Willis, J. (1993). What conditions encourage technology use? It depends on the context. Computers in Schools 9(4): 13-34.

Wooden, John with Tobin, Jack. (1988). They Call Me Coach. Chicago: Contemporary Books.

Yukl, G. A. (1989). Leadership in Organizations (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.