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The essentials of leadership for successful principals

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The essentials of leadership for successful principals

Abstract

The high school principal wears many faces in the community in which she/he lives and works (Cavanaugh and Yoder, 1984). Most patrons of the school district know who the principal is and hold high expectations for him/her. At the same time, when the residents of a school district are asked to define the principal's job in their school district, it is often hard for them to come up with a clear-cut statement. This is due to a lack of understanding of the principal's responsibilities in the school system, and to the complexity of the principal's role in education (Hallinger and Murphy, 1983).

THE ESSENTIALS OF LEADERSHIP FOR SUCCESSFUL PRINCIPALS

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The high school principal wears many faces in the community in which she/he lives and works (Cavanaugh and Yoder, 1984). Most patrons of the school district know who the principal is and hold high expectations for him/her. At the same time, when the residents of a school district are asked to define the principal's job in their school district, it is often hard for them to come up with a clear-cut statement. This is due to a lack of understanding of the principal's responsibilities in the school system, and to the complexity of the principal's role in education (Hallinger and Murphy, 1983).

Gorton (1983) and Reynolds and Reynolds (1983) indicate there are differing viewpoints of the characteristics and role of the secondary principal. But one aspect of the principalship surfaces often, and that is that the principal is expected to be the leader within the school system.

According to Youngs (1983), principals must serve in a leadership role for school districts. Studies indicate that in schools where there are effective leaders as principals, a higher quality of education is provided, and more purposeful teaching and learning seems to take place (Giamatteo, 1981 and Fiedler, 1980). It appears there is a direct relationship between the capabilities of the principal as an educational leader and the quality of education provided (Farley, 1983).

Leadership has several aspects, each of which contributes uniquely to school competence and to school excellence. (Dutch, 1983).

However, it is difficult to isolate those traits and behaviors which characterize effective leadership among principals. That difficulty is traceable largely to the fact that leadership is not easy to isolate; it does not "hold still" for quiet study and analysis; it does not exist in a vacuum. In short, leadership is situational.

That situational dimension of leadership creates a dynamic for people who confront leadership expectations, one in which the critical variables change from one occasion to the next and the characters, personalities, and backgrounds of the players likewise vary from situation to situation. Sara (1981), in reviewing Junkins (1947) and Hemphill (1955), provides information about the situational elements of leadership. Simply put, leadership is a function of the particular situation, and different leadership characteristics are required for individual situations which vary with the circumstances. Therein lies a good deal of the complexity of understanding leadership. According to Hemphill (1955), variance in leader behavior is associated with situational variance. His study implies that it is possible for the same leader to function effectively in one situation and ineffectively in another situation.

The successful principal must be able to recognize the situation and adjust accordingly. Erickson (1979), contends there are three elements of leadership 1) you, the leader, 2) your organization, and 3) the situation.

Fiedler (1980), elaborates this concept when he observes, "effective leadership is really judged by the interaction between the leader's personality - what he or she brings to the situation - and the degree to which the situation gives the leader control and influence" (p. 12).

Added to the complexity created by the situational element of leadership is the diverse expectation held for the principal. Cohen (1982) speaks to some of the expectations when suggesting they include "knowledge and practices, goal setting activities, decision-making, resource allocation, staff and program evaluation, staff development and reward systems and other management behavior" (P. 12).

It is perhaps not surprising that those who attempt to develop useful understandings for studies of leadership approach the task in a variety of ways. The three most prominent approaches focus on the roles played by principals who exert leadership, the characteristics held in common by leaders, and the behaviors and activities displayed by leaders.

The Roles

Viewed in relation to the individual, some experts contend that leadership is not an attribute of personality at all, but the quality of the leader's role within a particular social system. In each such system, there are several forces related to the principal's role. The forces, viewed as a leadership hierarchy, place the cultural leader at the top, followed in order, by symbolic, education, human, and technical leadership forces. Sergiovanni (1984) contends that the principal's leadership role for each of the forces is as follows:

1. The cultural leader assumes the roles of "high priest," seeking to define, strengthen, and articulate those enduring values, beliefs, and cultural strands that give the school its unique identity,
2. The symbolic leader assumes the role of "chief" and by emphasizing selective attention, signals to others what is of importance and value,
3. The educational leader assumes the role of "clinical practitioner," bringing expert professional knowledge and bearing as they relate to teaching effectiveness, educational program development and clinical supervision,
4. The human leader assumes the role of "human engineer" by emphasizing such concepts as human relations, interpersonal competence and instrumental motivational

technologies...

5. The technical leader assumes the role of "management engineer" by emphasizing such concepts as planning and time management technologies...provides planning, organizing, coordination, and scheduling to the life of the school (pp. 6-7).

Common Characteristics

While research has underscored the importance of administrative leadership, it has been less definite in identifying the specific personal qualities a principal needs in order to exercise instructional leadership. Nevertheless, several studies suggest that certain personal qualities are essential (Gorton 1983). Abrell (1982), has compiled a list of leadership characteristics.

1. A desire to make a difference in the world and dissatisfaction with the way things are.
2. A passion for hard work and the physical stamina to get things done.
3. High character and unswerving integrity.
4. A need to compete and win.
5. A fair share of intelligence and an abundance of common sense.
6. Extraordinary persistence.

7. Tact and other interpersonal skills.
8. Courage
9. Creativity
10. Humility (p. 44)

Other lists of leadership traits have been developed by Sara (1981), Erickson (1979), Cohen (1982), Farley (1983), Gibb (1947), Gronn (1984), and Croft (1982). Prominent among Sara's (1982) traits are the following: intelligence, self-confidence, initiative, responsibility, persistence, ambition, verbal skills, social-economic status, physical stature and social participation (p. 22). Cohen (1982) lists dependability, daring, self-confidence, physical drive, quick and decisive judgment, honesty, pleasant disposition, sociability and appearance (p. 14). Gibb (1947) identifies general intelligence, social-economic status, self-confidence, emotional maturity, aggressiveness, adjustability and enthusiasm (p. 281-282). The research of Erickson, Gronn, and Farley supports those characteristics as essential to those principals who are good leaders.

Behaviors

A principal demonstrates attributes of leadership through his actions. He takes responsibility for controlling a situation and influencing those around him. In the following paragraph, Murphy (1984), defines how the school principal must function within the school system.

The first responsibility lies in framing the school goals and objectives. Expectations of the school system must be developed and promoted in the staff and in the classrooms. Standards for reaching the goals and objectives of the school system must be developed. A way of assessing and monitoring a student's performance is needed so information can be passed on to teachers. The principal must establish policies and enforce practices that reduce tardiness, absenteeism and protect instructional time. He or she must promote curricular coordination to insure that materials used in the school are consistent and mutually reinforcing. (p. 29).

He then suggests that "Instructional leadership activity should begin with the formation of policies around leadership functions, develop practices based on these policies, and exercise behaviors consistent with these policies." (p. 28).

Others contend that the principal's activities must also include supporting instructional improvement, as well as supervising and evaluating staff instruction (Look and Manatt, 1984). Abrell (1982) approaches leadership behaviors in a more general fashion, identifying seven areas within which specific activities should be undertaken:

1. Credibility Leaders establish and maintain a high level of credibility by consistently speaking and behaving in ways that show they care about people, value quality, wish to meet needs, and desire to offer service.
2. Action Leaders encourage action on the part of their employees. Key phrases such as "go ahead," "do it," "try it," "let's get on with it" are common.

Committees are charged "to do" and "to act" as opposed to engage in in endless discussion or producing voluminous reports.
3. Simplicity Leaders keep division, departments, and all other units of the organization as small as possible and avoid, whenever possible, complicated instructions, procedures, and policies.
4. Concern for the Client Leaders stress the importance of the consumer of their products or services. Consumer satisfaction, after all, is what makes or breaks an institution.
5. Teamwork Leaders take pride in creating teams that are committed to excellence. Their employees know that cooperation and coordination of efforts are essential to success.

6. Autonomy and Accountability Leaders trust their employees to make decisions; employees know that freedom and responsibility go together.
7. Emphasis on goals Leaders emphasize attainable goals - such as high quality, cost reduction, increased productivity, service, and so on - that employees can strive toward (p. 44).

Each of these leadership forces clearly must interact with the others. This means that the principal must develop an environment which will permit the interaction of leadership forces. This also means the school must be structured to permit freedom within its boundaries. If given an opportunity to perform those leadership tasks with some freedom, the principal can help develop the human characteristics of motivation, enthusiasm, and loyalty to the school in others. But all that depends on the quality of behaviors in which the leader engages.

Leadership has often been thought of as a specific attribute of personality, a personality trait that some persons possess and others don't, or at least that some achieve in high degree and others scarcely at all. The search for leaders has often been directed toward finding those persons who have this personality trait well-developed.

While the thrust of this paper disputes the idea that understanding leadership consists largely of isolating "The one key trait," it is clear that, in fact, one trait does appear to be particularly prominent in the work of contemporary writers in the field. While that trait is not the sum of leadership, it is arguably one essential element. Gorton (1983), describes it as the ability to work well with people. He points out that effective leaders inevitably possess human relations skills and are generally likeable individuals, though their actions may not always be popular. People will usually respond to these types of leaders with trust and confidence. Although researchers and theorists are not of the same opinion about the particular attributes and skills which generate this type of reaction, they agree that effective leaders are sensitive to the needs of others. In addition, these leaders explain the reasons for their actions. They also involve others in important decisions and are open to criticism without being defensive. Admitting their mistakes and making changes are qualities which most leaders have. Last but not least, they are honest and fair in interacting with others.

Levine (1985), also speaks to the importance of interpersonal relations when she says: "Perhaps the most vital insight that can be transferred from well-run companies to schools is that the success of the organization depends upon creating

conditions that will increase the effectiveness of the people in the organization" (p. 58). She suggests that human relationships and environments that help people function more effectively are what distinguish well-run organizations from mediocre ones. She believes leadership, organizational structure, values, and goals need to be directed toward empowering people.

Murphy (1984), in commenting upon the need for effective relationships between administrators and faculty, stresses that good communication systems between school administrators and staff are essential in resolving conflicts between departments or staff members.

Conclusion

If there is one key understanding which offers unusual insight into why some principals have become effective leaders, it is their recognition that in order to be an effective leader there must be successful interaction between the staff and the principal. For it is, in the end, the staff which gives impetus and provides the opportunity for leadership. Therefore, the success of the principal depends first on his/her ability to work with the staff, but the key to further success is understanding the essentials of leadership. Although understanding leadership is complex, because it is not isolated from changing daily situations and personal relationships, it seems obvious that certain

elements bear heavily upon it: an effective principal plays several educational roles, possesses most of the commonly identified leadership traits, takes appropriate actions within the educational system, but above all, relates effectively with others in the many situations which all leaders routinely confront.

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