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What is an effective leader?: A reflective essay

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What is an effective leader?: A reflective essay

Abstract

What is leadership? Wiles & Bondi (1986) describe leadership in the following way: Leadership is an approach, a way of working with people within an organization to accomplish a task. Persons in supervisory roles must understand the conditions of an organization, possess a vision of what can be done to improve that organization, and interlock the behaviors of others with that organization's structure. (p.26) In their studies, Hersey & Blanchard (1976) have found that: Over the last few decades, people in the field of management have been involved in a search for a "best" style of leadership. Yet, the evidence from research clearly indicates that there is no single all-purpose leadership style. Successful leaders are those who can adapt their behavior to meet the demands of their own unique situation. (p. 1)

What Is an Effective Leader?

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

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by

Diane M. Fiskén

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What is leadership? Wiles & Bondi (1986) describe leadership in the following way:

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If we were to ask the question, "what are the traits of an effective leader?", we would receive many

different answers. This paper will list several of these approaches to leadership.

Lane, Carwin and Monahan (1969) view leadership from four different perspectives. The first views leadership as a set of personality traits. According to this view, a leader is born, not made. A person's physical size is often related to their leadership capabilities.

This concept's validity might be questioned since normally, personality is not what makes an individual important; the job does. There are, however, some personality traits that may help make a better leader. These traits include social skills, ambition, and social direction (Fiorello, 1973).

The second view is that leadership is a set of functions. This philosophy sees leadership as formulating and implementing policy and maintaining the organization's functional autonomy (Lane et al., 1969).

The third view sees leadership as social relations. This includes demands made by one party on another. In this philosophy, the leader is expected to initiate ideas, maintain the group norms, and act as

the final arbitrator where decisions are concerned (Lane et al., 1969).

The fourth view sees leadership as a social process. This philosophy sees a leader as one who tries to induce his subordinates to act in such a way as to reach a particular objective (Lane et al., 1969).

Conrath (1987) believes that leaders must demonstrate knowledge and skills; integrity; good listening; consistency; flexibility; clear priorities; creativity; sense of purpose and compassion. The first three being the most important.

Teachers seem to work well for administrators who seem to know what they are talking about. Principals need to be at the forefront of all the most current knowledge that is available in the field. How can we lead, direct, or progress with teachers if we ourselves are not knowledgeable with better ways to organize and effectively manage schools (Weldy, 1986)? Teachers also seem to work well for administrators who remember how to teach, and are not afraid to go back into the classroom. I think that demonstrating high technical skills and good people skills will lead to a better teacher/administrator relationship.

Bennis (1984) reminds us that there are four competencies of leadership. They are management of meaning, of attention, of trust, and self-management. Management of meaning means that the leader clearly understands the purpose for schools and can manage the organization well enough to fulfill those purposes. Management of attention is the leader's ability to get teachers to focus on purposes and try to achieve them. Management of trust means that others believe in the leader. Management of self means, I know who I am; I know my strengths and weaknesses.

An effective leader also might possess the skills to be able to refrain from personalizing criticism. One public school principal in California once said that the major role of a principal is to "catch the arrows fired by disgruntled parents, students, and/or teachers" (Davis, 1988, p. 76). As principals, we need to be open and honest with students, staff members, and parents.

An effective leader needs to become familiar with their faculty, staff, and community; and try to develop a positive relationship with each. Try to familiarize yourself with as many teachers as possible. One way to

do this, according to Davis (1988), would be to spend time, perhaps over the summer, reviewing pictures and names in a recent yearbook. This will help in establishing a positive rapport with them. Most people like to be referred to by name.

Another way to learn about your teachers is what Peters and Waterman (1982) call "Management by Wandering Around" (MBWA). They suggest wandering the halls, visiting classrooms, offices, and classified staff without prior notice. It is amazing how much a person can observe by just watching.

I had the opportunity to view many different styles of leadership while substitute teaching in several high schools this past school year. At one of the high schools, the principal appeared to be a very effective leader. Upon entering the school building, I could feel and see that it was well organized. The physical appearance of the school was very attractive and very clean. There were many showcases and bulletin boards displaying various forms of the students' work. The principal in the building always seemed to be in the hallways in between classes, and was also available for the students and the faculty. The principal told

me that he makes a point of visiting each teacher at least once a day. The principal incorporates the management by wandering technique into his leadership style, and it appears to be working very well. Having seen this technique used, I fully agree that management by wandering is a very effective leadership quality. However, this style is not always accepted by all members of the staff.

At another high school, the principal always seemed to have a cup of coffee in her hand. This principal did not appear to be a very effective leader. Unlike the previous school mentioned, this school had no student work displayed. I felt that the students and the staff did not take a lot of pride in their building.

A third experience I had while substitute teaching was what I would refer to as the school with the "invisible" principal. On several occasions that I taught at this school, I never saw the principal. This style of leadership seems very ineffective to me. Had the principal been more visible within the school, school pride, both faculty and students, may have been better.

An effective leader becomes involved with the education process by talking with teachers. Spend more time with teachers in their classrooms, departmental meetings, and teacher lounges (Weldy, 1986). This allows us to let the teachers know that we care about who they are and what they are doing and that we are available if they need any assistance. It is once again allowing us to be visible in the school.

A school leader needs to be able to communicate effectively to many different audiences. However, if an administrator is going to be a successful communicator, s/he also must be receptive to information from others. By utilizing two-way communication a leader would benefit from the knowledge, expertise, and perspectives of teachers and other staff members. Administrators who use two-way communication would also have the opportunity to understand what parents and others in the community expect from the school (Parish & Prager, 1992).

According to Gardner (1988), there is more to face-to-face communication than the verbal component. The leader's style, timing and symbolic acts all carry messages. These also demonstrate that messages are

being received. Words and sentences, facial expressions, tone of voice, timing, body language, unfinished sentences and silence are all contributors to multi-level dialogue.

Gorton and Schneider (1991) stated that poor communication about the evaluation process can result in uncertainty and anxiety on the part of the staff members. They stated that the most desirable approach would be for administrators to meet with all staff members, during the first few weeks of school, to discuss the evaluation process. During my practicum experience I had the opportunity to sit in on one of these meetings.

Each year the faculty members are to set goals that they would like to attain during the school year. These goals may be related to personal or professional interests. At the initial meeting, the principal and the teacher discuss the goals and ways that might help attain them. During the goal setting conference that I took part in, the principal and the teacher discussed how the new school year was going for the teacher and what goal(s) he would like to accomplish this year. This meeting was very relaxed, but productive. I felt

that the teacher knew what was expected of him during this school year and that the principal conveyed a sense of respect for this individual.

In order to be an effective leader, I think it is necessary to meet with the staff, either as a group or individually, to discuss the evaluation process. I would have to agree that poor communication may result in staff anxiety and uncertainty about what needs to be achieved. I also like the idea of having the teachers set goals for themselves. By allowing them to set their goals, they will have a sense of ownership with these goals. An effective leader needs to offer assistance to the teacher so that they may achieve their goals. Since the teachers have chosen their own goals, I would imagine that the success rate for achievement is very high.

Teachers, as well as students, like to be recognized for their performances. When students and faculty feel good about themselves, they become more productive and the organization adapts a healthier outlook toward change (Davis, 1988). Sending a personal note to let an employee know of something positive about them that you have seen or heard, will

also boost their self-confidence (Parish & Prager, 1992). Even the smallest of recognitions, such as, "I liked your class on..." can have a big impact on morale and productivity of students and staff. After all, who does not like a compliment now and then?

As a new administrator in the school, we should inquire with other administrators and staff about office procedures and possibly the practices that our predecessor followed. We should try to find out which tasks are handled by whom.

Administrators need to establish some organizational goals and to develop a plan of action. However, to do this, we need to know the strengths and weaknesses of the organization (Davis, 1988). Before making changes, ask individuals that might be affected by decisions some questions. Get to know their thoughts on the changes you have introduced.

The keys to effective leadership rest with our ability to articulate and pursue our philosophies, goals, and objectives. While doing this, we must also be dealing with conflicting interests that may affect the organization. We might want to consider these steps before making decisions:

1. Seek multiple sources of information.
2. Research the issue/problem carefully.
3. Find the decision that best suits our goals while minimizing the amount of personal disruption between staff, students, and parents.
4. Be forthright and honest with everyone throughout the decision making process.

(Davis, 1988, p. 81)

Making changes was a major issue that was discussed with Mr. Randy Achenbach (personal communication, October 19, 1992), Superintendent of Schools, Janesville Consolidated Schools, during my clinical experience. He stated that as a new superintendent he is mainly observing the school and how it operates, instead of making drastic changes in the beginning.

As administrators, we should also utilize the vast array of talents that we have among our faculty and staff (Weldy, 1986). This not only allows us to delegate authority to others, but it also recognizes the persons used, and helps to improve morale. Once responsibility has been delegated to staff members,

principals need to support their decisions with enthusiasm and interest (O'Connor, 1978).

One very important trait of an effective leader is their ability to manage time. Administrators deal with so many people and with so much paperwork, that they need to develop a system. This system needs to have people time and paper time. Parish and Prager (1992) stated that the first half hour of each day should be devoted almost exclusively to communicating with the students. By doing this, a student has the opportunity to share with the principal any comments or concerns they may have. O'Connor (1978) suggests that building principals get away from their desks when students are on campus. By supervising before and after school, and during lunch, principals will get to know the students. By knowing the students, principals are able to work on problem solving before the problem arises. An effective leader must be organized in all aspects.

A national study of secondary school principals indicated that 83% view working with teachers on instructional courses as their primary responsibility. However, the survey revealed that only a small percentage of a principal's week is spent on instructional

leadership. Instructional leadership is defined as supervision, teacher evaluation, class visitation, staff development, and material selection (Weldy, 1986).

Another survey of high school principals nationally, revealed that their median work week was 56.5 hours. The three activities that received the majority of the time were school management, personnel management, and student activities, even though the principals desired to spend a major portion of their time on other tasks (Guthrie & Reed, 1991).

Organization is an important key to effective time management. Using a long range calendar will allow us to be aware of any activities needing our attention at least a week in advance. Such activities might include meetings, conferences, preparing reports, student activities, staff evaluations and supervision, and in-service training (Guthrie & Reed, 1991) .

We should allow ourselves at least two hours throughout the week to respond to any priority items that may arise. Do not allow drop in visits, accept telephone calls or make appointments during this time period (Guthrie & Reed, 1991).

As stated earlier, we need to find out what tasks are handled by whom, and which members of our staff are competent enough to have authority delegated to them.

To help manage our time more effectively, we should develop an efficient file system. Once this system is in place, we must not allow paper to accumulate. If any item is not absolutely needed, discard it!

In an article about enhancing the school-community relations program, Van Meter (1993) discussed ways to build more activities into the program. He stated, "there are times when the need arises to consider new options, that if warranted, might be incorporated into an expanded community relations program" (p. 82).

At this year's Parent-Teacher-Student conferences, Waverly-Shell Rock High School decided to offer a new feature. Since I was working with Mr. Al Dorenkamp, principal at Waverly-Shell Rock High School, on my practicum, I had the opportunity to assist in this new adventure. Waverly-Shell Rock High School normally has a 75% parent turnout for conferences. Some educators might ask, why try to fix something that is not broken? In response to this question, Sagor (1992) would say,

"An effective leader is one that constantly pushes for improvement" (p. 13).

One of Waverly-Shell Rock's goals for school improvement is to work on bridging the gap between the school and the community. To help achieve this goal, a committee made up of faculty members and administrators decided to have four resource people available at this year's conferences. The topics that would be represented would be parent-teen communication, attention deficit disorder, substance abuse, and eating disorders.

One of the responsibilities that I had, was to help the principal locate and arrange the resource people. This is where I discovered the importance of knowing your community and what is available to you. Mr. Dorenkamp said that he already knew of someone in the community that does a lot of workshops on parent-teen communication, and would arrange for her to come to the conferences. We decided to go through a local hospital to locate resource people for the substance abuse and the eating disorders topics. After communicating with several different agencies, I finally found an attention deficit disorder resource

person. Since the principal already had a positive rapport established with the community, we were able to have our four resource people located and confirmed within two to three days.

After we had the resource people set up, I thought about how much more difficult this process could have been, had Mr. Dorenkamp not had such a good understanding and rapport with the community. This proved to me that an effective leader knows the community and what it has to offer.

During the conferences, I noticed that both the principal and the assistant principal made themselves visible and available to the parents. I thought this was very important, the parents would see that the administration was available and concerned about their child's education.

A total of 11 parents took the opportunity to meet with the resource people. Even though the numbers were low, we heard many positive comments. The parents that met with these people were very pleased that the school had given them the opportunity. The resource people were also pleased and impressed that the school had offered this opportunity to parents. As an

administrator, I would not let the low numbers discourage me. However, I would try to find ways to improve upon those numbers.

Overall, the Parent-Teacher-Student conferences at Waverly-Shell Rock were once again successful. We had 76% of the parents attend the fall conferences.

Another part of the school-community relations program that is very important is the local media. As administrators, we need to remember that the many media resources should be utilized to inform the public about positive things that are taking place in our schools. The local radio station and newspaper were both used to help remind the parents about the conferences.

During my practicum, I was able to meet with many of the administrators in the Waverly-Shell Rock School District. One of the principals discussed a situation that had occurred at the beginning of the school year. A new student to the district, and the state, had a difficult time abiding by all the "new" rules. The principal stated that the rules this student was having problems with were not even written rules, but things that were taken for granted that the students knew would not be acceptable in school.

After we discussed this incident, I thought about how this situation could have been avoided. I think the principal should have organized a new student orientation meeting at the beginning of the school year. This would allow the parents and the student(s) to ask questions and hear the school's policies on acceptable behavior and other school related expectations.

Over the past two decades, a number of changes have occurred that have affected leader performance. One change is the consolidation of schools. In 1933, there were over 127,000 independent school districts in the United States. In 1985, there were about 14,000 public school districts (Wiles & Bondi, 1986). Due to consolidation, schools have become larger and more complex. Because of these larger districts we might say that it is necessary for schools to become more bureaucratic.

Recent development of specialization in professional education is another major change. Areas such as funded projects, contractual settlements, and technical education programs present schools with a

complex layer of administrative authority and responsibility (Wiles & Bondi, 1986).

Another change that has altered the traditional leadership role of supervision is the large volume of tasks required to operate today's schools (Wiles & Bondi, 1986). This is, once again, where effective time management skills, and the ability to delegate authority become very important. If we are to become effective leaders, we must be willing and ready to meet these changes head on.

Prior to becoming involved in the Educational Administration program, I viewed the principal as being a leader and in charge of all the decisions for a building. What I have learned though is something very different.

What I have learned is that I can be an effective leader without having to be a dictator to the faculty and staff. An effective leader needs to allow the faculty to share in some of the decision making processes. By doing this, the faculty seems to take ownership in the decisions and are more willing to accept them.

I believe that to be an effective leader, the principal needs to model the expectations that s/he has for the faculty. For example, if I were to expect the faculty to be visible in the hallways in between classes, I should also be visible in between classes. How can we expect the staff to do something if we can not be bothered to do it ourselves?

An effective leader needs to establish a set of values and beliefs. One of those beliefs needs to be that you care about your school and how it operates. An administrator should not expect the faculty and staff to have and display school pride if s/he does not have school pride.

An effective leader must also be familiar with the community that surrounds him/her. Most communities have a set of values and beliefs that have been in place long before we came into the district. We, as administrators, need to know these values and beliefs if we are to be successful.

During my practicum at Waverly-Shell Rock, I noticed that the daily bulletin on Wednesdays would remind everyone that "today is church night and everyone should be out of the building by five o'clock." It

was very obvious that this policy was accepted and supported by the local community.

An effective leader must also be fair and consistent with the faculty and staff. The rules and policies should apply for everyone. If we allow ourselves to become inconsistent, we may lose the trust and the support of our faculty and may be viewed as a poor leader. In a recent survey, school people agreed that one of the most difficult bosses to deal with is the one who smiles one minute, and snaps the next. Good bosses respond to a situation rather than to the personalities involved (Ficklin, 1984).

Administrators need to have a global perspective for the organization and its activities. We, as administrators, must remember that mistakes are going to be made. This is how we grow and improve ourselves. As the old saying goes, "we must learn from our mistakes." The main thing to remember is that we must be patient. Do not try to improve leadership styles and behaviors overnight.

If we as administrators are to become the leaders that the public and the faculty expect, we must model those practices that communicate our commitment to

excellence. We must practice what we expect of our teachers, which is to become the best that they can be.

To be an effective leader, we must remember to always be ourselves. Leaders are people who help individuals develop their own initiative, strengthens them in the use of their own judgement, and enables them to grow and to become better contributors (Gardner, 1988). Lastly, we must remember that leaders are people who do the right thing; managers are people who do things right (Conrath, 1987).

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