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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

Abstract

As I bring my first year as an elementary principal to a close, I have the opportunity to reflect upon the profession from the perspective of a first year administrator. Through this experience my notions of leadership have either been affirmed and have become part of how I lead or they have been changed to compliment what I have learned through experience. Putting the theory of my coursework into practice has been a process which has brought about growth and change. Every day provides new joys and new challenges.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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by

Micky Kingery

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As I bring my first year as an elementary principal to a close, I have the opportunity to reflect upon the profession from the perspective of a first year administrator. Through this experience my notions of leadership have either been affirmed and have become part of how I lead or they have been changed to compliment what I have learned through experience. Putting the theory of my coursework into practice has been a process which has brought about growth and change. Every day provides new joys and new challenges.

As I reflect upon how I viewed the principalship before taking coursework, I realize that I held a very narrow view of what the job entailed. I believed that it was the principal's duty to be the disciplinarian, the public relations expert, and the person who told teachers what to do! Through my course work, I began to realize that participatory leadership, instructional leadership, and reflection were all important components to administrative effectiveness. Now, after completing my first year as an administrator, I know that the

principalship encompasses all of the above plus a great deal more.

There are a number of components of the principalship which I feel are the most significant for successful administration of the elementary school. First, I will reflect upon the concepts of leadership, excellence and vision. These concepts create the foundation from which everything else in administration is built.

Once the foundation is in place, I believe the role of the principal is to create and foster a positive educational environment. The concepts of participatory leadership and collaboration, collegiality, communication, and humor all help to create a positive educational environment. I will reflect upon each one of these areas and describe how they are the threads which make the school a dynamic place for teaching and learning.

I will also address the concepts of the principal as the change agent and the principal as the instructional leader of the school. These two important roles are critical if the

school is to become a place that fosters excellence and maintains high expectations for all.

Foundations

In order for schools to become places for the shaping of young minds, they must be lead by professionals with a commitment to leadership, excellence and vision. These traits are all interrelated and shape the effectiveness of an administrator.

Leadership

I believe leadership can be defined as creatively and successfully guiding a group of individuals in a forward direction toward a common goal. I believe it means serving the patrons of the community with integrity, enthusiasm and dedication. Strong leadership does not mean making decisions in a "top down" manner but it means knowing when to work collaboratively and when to act alone; when to seek answers externally and when to look within; when to view situations with a wide lens and when to view them more narrowly. There is a fine line between these dichotomous elements.

I believe that a great leader is a person who makes decisions systematically and logically while never losing sight of the importance of common sense and intuition. Leaders are clear about their own values, they look toward their colleagues as major sources of new and better ideas, they are open to new ideas whatever the source and exhibit self confidence because experience has taught them they can trust their intuition (Leithwood, 1994).

There are important distinctions between managing and leading people in an organization. Managers use external force which pushes or pulls people toward a desired end, while leaders enable people to respond from within (Sergiovanni, 1992). Managers carry out their duties efficiently and conduct business in a routine manner. Leaders guide, influence and concern themselves with the organizations basic purposes and direction (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). One of the clearest distinctions between the leader and manager is the leader's focus of attention on the vision while inspiring people in the

organization to achieve high levels of success whereas the manager focuses on productivity and efficiency.

The key to leadership, then, becomes less managing of people and more facilitating, supporting, and reinforcing actions and attitudes which progress the school toward the goals and vision which has been collectively established. Emphasis is placed on following a vision rather than following a person (Sergiovanni, 1992).

Vision

Vision is the essence of leadership. Vision is having a dream or an intuitive notion of what lies ahead and then creating a plan of action to attain it. A leader without vision or a point in which to strive cannot move an organization in a forward direction. If there is no focus, no leader to organize resources, and no action, the outcome will be one which maintains the status quo. A leader with vision aims at identifying new opportunities for the school and collaboratively developing, articulating, and inspiring others to help create a vision of the future (Leithwood, 1994).

Leaders who are impassioned with an idea or their own vision of the future can influence others and facilitate the creation of a shared vision. Building a vision means unearthing shared pictures of the future that foster genuine commitment (Senge, 1990). A leader with vision can bring about confidence in employees that instills in them the belief that they are capable of making the vision a reality (Bennis & Nanus, 1985).

"Vision grabs" (Bennis & Nanus, 1985, p. 28). The principal, along with teachers and stakeholders, are likely to be intrinsically motivated to work diligently together to see that the vision becomes a reality if they have had ownership and have shared in its creation. The process or journey becomes as exciting and motivating as the outcome.

Excellence

Excellence is striving to go beyond the status quo by searching for ways to constantly improve. Excellence means bringing out the best in everyone in the organization. An excellent leader is one who has a sense of purpose, has values

which are clearly defined, and interacts with others in a way which builds positive and trusting relationships.

An elementary principal who is a visionary leader and strives for excellence will establish an environment which nurtures the educational process. Student growth and progress will be the driving force behind goals which are established. The educational leader becomes the resource, the facilitator and the instructional leader who coordinates the activities of the educational team in its pursuit of excellence (Renihan & Renihan, 1992).

Positive Educational Environment

I believe that creating a positive educational environment is how the leader takes the concepts of leadership, vision and excellence and puts them into practice on a day-to-day basis. I believe a positive educational environment can be created through participatory leadership and collaboration, collegiality, communication, and humor.

Participatory Leadership and Collaboration

I believe a participatory style of leadership encourages inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness in schools.

Administrators can be perceived as facilitators who value working with teachers and students. Teachers begin to assume control over decisions which were historically the role of others, especially administrators (Murphy, 1991). This type of leadership style empowers teachers and enhances rather than threatens the power base of the administrator (Shakeshaft, 1986). Teacher professionalism and improved quality of student growth and learning are enhanced through this style of leadership.

Collaboration with teachers. I believe there is value in leading in a more collaborative manner. The people most in touch with the educational needs of the community are the school employees who come in regular contact with students and parents (Tranter, 1992). Decisions should be made, whenever possible, by the people who must implement them (Meier & Schwarz, 1995). When teachers are invited into the

process of decision-making, they are more likely to take ownership of decisions and support them. Teachers become key members of the school as a learning community and can help construct shared values which in turn leads to a commitment to do one's best to make the community work well (Sergiovanni, 1992).

Collaboration with patrons. I strongly believe that the school is serving the patrons of the community and they, too, deserve to have a voice on issues which directly impact them. The potential always exists that someone may possess an idea which may have a very profound impact on the school. Solutions to school challenges are more likely to be found if members of the school staff work in conjunction with community patrons and stakeholders (Tranter, 1992). Through my experience, I have learned that if teachers and stakeholders share in the decision-making, morale improves, communication increases and the climate of the school becomes more positive because there is a sense of common purpose and cohesiveness.

Values and visions. Members of an organization must have the opportunity to express their own perceptions and values, and to hear the perceptions and values of others in order to build a collective sense of mission and shared values (Burnham & Hord, 1993). I have had the opportunity to participate in and facilitate a process which exemplifies the concepts of participatory leadership, collaboration and shared values.

Foundations of Organizational Leadership (Doud & Else, 1993), a process used to help schools identify their mission, beliefs and values through consensus-building, was implemented. Staff members, administrators, board members, students and community patrons helped to establish the values and visions of the school and how they will drive the day to day decisions and actions of all who are connected with the school. Having a shared set of beliefs and a common purpose lay the groundwork for patrons and teachers to participate in decision-making together with administrators and collaborate

on issues which effect the future of the district in its pursuit of excellence.

Empowerment. I do not believe it would be efficient to ask for input on every decision or to run every issue that comes across the principal's desk past every staff member. However, if decisions which are to be made are prioritized by how much impact and effect they will have on the school, the most important decisions can be made collaboratively. Empowerment is giving teachers and others a share in important organizational decisions, providing forums for staff input and giving real leadership opportunities to them in situations which really matter (Renihan & Renihan, 1992).

There is an example of a situation which exemplifies this particular concept which I experienced over the past year. Early in the spring, I presented a tentative plan for teacher assignments and room assignments for the upcoming year. Teachers were asked for their input on how these issues might best be resolved for next year. The shared beliefs and values which had been established became the guide for brainstorming

ideas and for determining what was in the best interest of the district as a whole.

Some very creative solutions were voiced and I believe everyone felt they had ownership in a decision which will impact each person in the school. Teachers felt they had influenced the environment in which they work and this situation strengthened morale and created a positive climate. Even in situations where staff members can not come up with a better plan, at least they know they have been part of the decision-making process if their input has been solicited. (Wilmore & Atkinson, 1992).

Collegiality

Creating a collegial environment means providing opportunities for interaction, communication, and cooperation among and between teachers and the administrator. Many relationships in schools tend to be adversarial and we must work hard to make our schools a place where ideas are shared and freely exchanged in a cooperative manner (Barth, 1990). I have found that there are many people, groups and

organizations within the school setting which have personal or organizational agendas and each feels theirs is very important. These groups provide our schools with progressive ideas and support, but poor communication and failure to keep the mission of the school visible allow for relationships to break down and tension to develop between groups.

Spending emotional energy trying to patch relationships that have gone awry takes away from instructional time and creates an environment not conducive to learning. School personnel may not have been trained to work as a team with other people and I feel it is a mistake to assume that people know how to behave collegially.

The principal can play a major part in developing a collegial school by being a good role model and by facilitating staff development in this area. Professional development which establishes activities toward building a schoolwide capacity for change, creating a professional community, and developing a shared knowledge base can move teachers toward collegial relationships (Odden & Wohlstetter, 1995). Walking

teachers through the steps of brainstorming together without value judgments, allowing everyone to have a voice, sharing ideas and teaching consensus building behaviors can be the foundation for collegiality. These concepts can also be used to teach students how to work in a collegial manner in the classroom.

Communication

Collegiality can also be fostered and nurtured through open communication. Positive, trusting relationships can be created if the administrator has an "open door" policy, is a good listener and communicates information which is pertinent to everyone through memos, informal meetings, and formal meetings. When this type of communication is consistent and ongoing teachers begin to communicate and inform the principal of issues which are critical to improvement in the school. The cycle strengthens relationships and creates a positive educational environment.

Humor

Having a sense of humor is a critical trait for survival in the role as an elementary principal. Humor can make the principal seem more human and approachable and it also creates a positive climate for learning. A study by Burford (1987) suggested that humor of principals may have important social-psychological functions. Group cohesiveness, avoidance of tension and conflict, socialization, openness and creative stimulation are just some of the functions and advantages of having a sense of humor (Burford, 1987).

The ability to blend, and at times separate, humor and business is a trait which adds to the effectiveness of an administrator when dealing with staff, students and situations which create stress. The impact humor can have on principal/teacher relations is reflected in teacher job satisfaction, loyalty to the principal and school effectiveness (Burford, 1987). Humor can be used to initiate and facilitate communication and it can foster positive social and working relationships. Creating an atmosphere which encourages

people to interact, see the lighter side of daily events, and laugh with one another in a supportive manner can truly develop a positive educational environment.

Change

School is a dynamic place where challenges and new adventures await everyday. An effective principal anticipates change and confronts difficult situations with confidence, courage and an open mind. Change can be the inspiration for a better future. An inspired leader recognizes that they operate in an environment which is unpredictable and ambiguous and one in which expectations and demands fluctuate capriciously (Renihan & Renihan, 1992).

Individuals who are willing to serve as instigators of change may encounter fierce resistance as they work in the trenches (MacRae-Campbell, 1991). Educational innovation will become valued as positive results are achieved.

Innovation is a process that must become a regular force of school life, enabling initiation and implementation of change within the school.

Threat of Change

Change can be perceived as very threatening for those individuals who have found their comfort zone in the daily routines of school. The need for change may infer that past methods or performance of a person or an organization has been inadequate. Fear of the unknown and fear of more work in the future can create stress and an unwillingness to stray from the status quo. One of the most critical change skills is the willingness to ask for and take action on feedback from the people who are being served by our schools (Walker & Vogt, 1987). One may have to look closely at shortcomings which may be a difficult process, but it allows for a plan of action to be developed. This is the essence of change. Improving on weaknesses to bring about better methods of delivering services to our children must be the driving force behind educational change.

For change to be adopted, the anticipated outcome must be compatible with the values, attitudes and skills of the teachers and other stakeholders who will be effected by the

change. In other words, if people do not perceive the need to change, they will have a very difficult time doing so. Teacher susceptibility to change is strongest when they are not satisfied with present circumstances and are feeling the disequilibrium associated with those feelings. "Adopting a new educational practice requires more than absorbing the supported benefits of the innovation. Acceptance requires a level of commitment" (Aquila & Galovic, 1988, p. 52).

One way the level of commitment can be attained is to work through the process of developing shared values and visions. If teachers can have a voice in determining what their vision is and what changes need to be made in their present situation to make the vision a reality, they are much more likely to commit and be supportive of change efforts. Working through the change process in this manner makes change purposeful and significant, not arbitrary and capricious.

Change Agent

The principal is the key to change and conventional wisdom also suggests that change will not occur without the

approval and encouragement of the principal (Aquila & Galovic, 1988). The principal must develop a school climate that will foster rather than frustrate change efforts. The change agent's job is to help school personnel discover and build on their commonalities while fostering a foundation of respect and trust which permits differences to be used as a source of creativity (Shepard, 1975).

People must feel ownership of the changes which occur in their school and the principal is in a prime position to allow that to occur. The principal needs to have many frameworks and strategies for creating and working through the process of change (Shepard, 1975). Collaboratively developing shared values and a vision for the school can be a strategy the principal can apply to foster change. It is important that all information is gathered, input is solicited and change is implemented for the improvement of education and student growth. If these concepts are followed, change can be exciting, challenging and bring out the best in everyone in the organization.

Instructional Leadership

The principal can play a distinctive role in the pursuit of excellence in classroom instruction by serving as the instructional leader. The administrator can use district beliefs and values to help guide instructional practices and to help support teachers in the classroom.

An instructional leader must recognize there are generally accepted teacher traits and behaviors that make an effective teacher. There is an emerging and impressive body of research on teacher effectiveness that can be used by principals in their function of instructional leadership (Rosenshine & Furst, 1971). A principal who has knowledge of effective teaching behaviors, is aware of what is happening in the classroom, and can work collaboratively with teachers to improve instructional techniques can help refine the teaching process while gaining the trust and respect of the staff.

Methods of Instructional Leadership

A number of different methods for providing instructional leadership can be implemented by the principal.

Staff development workshops or meetings which are facilitated by the principal or experts in the field can provide valuable information to teachers. I also believe the principal should participate and play a visible role in staff development meetings. Modeling lessons in the classroom while teachers observe or assist, and encouraging teachers to visit other classrooms to learn new techniques can also impact teacher effectiveness and improvement in the classroom.

Finally, the formative evaluation process consisting of the pre-conference, observation and post-conference can also facilitate instructional improvement. The teacher, in partnership with the principal, can reflect upon effective teaching practices and collaborate on strengthening the positive components of instruction while improving areas needed for growth. This process encourages the principal to take an active role in classroom instruction and helps to develop positive school relationships.

Educational Risk Taking

The principal, as the instructional leader, should encourage growth and improvement in the techniques and methods teachers use in the classroom. An environment which allows teachers to take educational risks to improve instruction without fear of failure or reprimand, therefore, should be developed.

Students can experience new and exciting ventures in learning and teachers can teach without fear of being solely responsible if a lesson is not a complete success if the principal provides support, encouragement and a safety net. A principal needs to share the responsibility with the risk taking teacher (Barth, 1990). Growth and improvement occur when people learn from past experiences which may not have been completely successful and then have the opportunity and fortitude to try again to improve.

There are specific strategies that principals can use to encourage teachers to take risks. First, it is important that a trusting relationship be established between the administrator

and the teacher. This occurs when the teacher recognizes that the administrator will respond to similar situations in a similar manner each time, thus decreasing uncertainty and distrust in the future.

In order for trust to be generated, there must be predictability (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). The ability of teachers to predict the responses and decisions of the administrator removes suspicion and creates trust. If the administrator is consistent and honest, trust grows. It is at this point that risk taking can begin. Publicly recognizing teachers who take risks and including educational risk taking on the summative teacher evaluation rubric are other ways to encourage teachers to try new, exciting, and dynamic strategies in the classroom and to maintain high expectations for all.

Conclusion

A strong foundation of leadership, vision and excellence must be built to create a school which fosters a positive educational environment. The principal is in a position to put these building blocks into place. Once the foundation is in

place, participatory leadership and collaboration, collegiality, communication and humor can be developed and fostered.

Facilitating change and providing instructional leadership are other roles the principal can play to promote excellence.

Having completed my first year as an administrator, I can truly see the importance and the necessity of putting the concepts reflected upon into practice. I look with excitement toward the future of education and my role in creating an excellent school. I know that each year will bring opportunities for growth and opportunities to affirm or adjust my philosophy as I attempt to blend my experiences from the past with my vision of the future. It will be a fantastic journey!

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