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A vision of middle school leadership

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A vision of middle school leadership

Abstract

I take a moment to look at my watch and everything seems right on schedule. It's 7:59 a.m. and the date is August 25, 1994, the first day of teacher workshops! A letter sent out three weeks ago to the 14 faculty and four staff members I will be working with assures me that all will be present for our first formal building meeting. Materials I had prepared during the months of June and July to prepare for the upcoming year are sitting ready to be picked up by what I have been told is one of the most "dynamic" groups of people to work with in the Northwood School District. Teacher and staff handbooks which include the revisions made to the district's mission statement, philosophy, and 1994-95 goals are finally back from the press. Prior to my arrival the Northwood Middle School had not yet adopted building goals so I took the liberty of jotting down five goals that I assumed would be accepted by the staff. The rest of the materials were sitting outside the media center door with a note instructing them to take one of each item as they entered for the meeting.

**A VISION OF MIDDLE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY**

**A Research Paper Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
University of Northern Iowa**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Educational Administration**

**by
Steven J. Kwikkel
March 1, 1994**

This Research Paper by: Steven J. Kwikkel

Entitled: A VISION OF MIDDLE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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I was really excited about all of the materials that had been assembled. The new lesson plan books and daily record books arrived yesterday. I went for green this year. Red books were the norm in my last school and to avoid those old paradigms I went with green.

The master schedule was easily prepared. Last year's schedule was set up in traditional junior high fashion. However, being a steadfast believer in the middle school philosophy, I went right in to block scheduling and teaming. Teachers were grouped into four pods consisting of a language arts, science, math, and social studies teacher. They will team teach until lunch then break to teach their assigned exploratory classes in the afternoon. Judging from last year's schedule, I did a fine job of getting people the exploratory classes they had taught previously. No surprises here. Didn't want to overly extend their comfort level on the first day!

The duty schedule was also a work of art. I had heard from the custodian and secretary in the main office that the junior high teachers usually assumed most of the supervision duties at varsity contests so I went ahead and assigned them to the same. Comfort level, right? I managed to do away with morning and afternoon bus duties based on a lead I recieved from the Northwood Job Service director. The director sent me a client whom I didn't get a chance to meet yet but I'm sure this person is qualified. I am taking lunchroom supervision and noon break recess myself. I figure this would be a great way to get to know the kids as well as give the teachers a needed break. A duty free day?

This is sure to win me some points! Who wouldn't like a little extra break time?

The last item in my stack of prepared materials is a "Sub" folder I put together for each teacher to keep in his/her room when absent. Contained inside is a list of substitutes which teachers may recommend as those they feel do an adequate job substituting in their classroom. Seating charts, class rosters, a master schedule and teacher schedule, an emergency numbers and procedures checklist, and a couple of canned lesson plans to make things easier on the substitute teacher. Neat, huh?

I glance back at my watch and it's 8:00 a.m. on the dot. But wait. Where is everybody? O.K. Don't panic. Maybe I am still on Central time instead of Mountain? Quietly the door opens and a petite young lady appears. She greets me with a warm smile and I inform her that school doesn't start until Monday. She smiles again, nods, and enters anyway. That's fine. I assure myself that when she is descended upon by a hoard of eager and enthusiastic teachers she will flee for the door! I casually look back at my watch and only five minutes have passed. Where is everyone? Punctuality is very important to me. I pause again to look at my mystery guest. She smiles and again nods. I fidget

through a few items when suddenly the doors fly open. They're here!
(Subconsciously the reality of the job has taken hold and I fight back the urge to get sick on the newly carpeted media center floor.)

But why hasn't anyone picked up the materials out on the table? It was written in plain English for heaven sakes! I can deal with this. I'll just ask a couple of people to help me pass out the materials instead. I approach two gentlemen and ask for their assistance. They smile. They nod. They sit down. Total disrespect! First this "child" ignores me and now two grown men! Calm down Kwikkel, you can handle this. Move on man, move on!

After a brief greeting I ask them to turn to page one of the handbook. They smile. They nod. What can be so difficult about this I wonder? This is not how I envisioned my first building meeting. Again I ask them to, "Please open your handbooks to page one." They smile. They nod. Enough is enough. It's time to find out what is going on here. Just as I'm about to give them a little firmer directive, my guest child in the back of the room raises her hand.

"Yes," I politely ask.

"Sorry Mr. Kwikkel. I am the only one who speaks any English," she utters.

"What? Nobody else speaks English at all?"

"Yes," she replies.

"Can you translate? " I ask.

"Maybe," she humbly replies.

As I begin the meeting I am wondering why the central office failed to mention that I was in a non-English speaking building. I press on with Nina as translator. Slowly I continue the meeting. The green books were a big hit. Nina told me that green was one of the new colors the school was adopting for its athletic teams. Chalk up one for the new guy!

However as we began to look at the schedule I sensed some uneasiness amidst the masses. Nina informed me that the staff had previously rejected a recommendation to change the junior high into a middle school. Block scheduling was now as popular as a glass of iced tea at the North Pole! The score? Principal 1 - Faculty 2.

Moving right along I proceeded to discuss the exploratory classes. Again the grumbling began. Nina leaned over and informed me that last year there was a split among the exploratory faculty as to whether these classes should be letter graded or treated as Pass or Fail courses. Being a firm believer in the middle school philosophy I informed

them that we would grade the exploratory classes on a Pass or Fail basis. That pretty much trimmed my popularity in half. Score: Principal 1 - Faculty 3.

With much apprehension I moved on to the duty schedule. Oppenheimer would have been proud of this explosion! Trusty Nina again explained that last year's principal assigned them the varsity duties because it was easier than asking for volunteers from the entire staff. Oops! Why didn't I think to ask for volunteers first? I remember as a teacher how much I hated being assigned duties. If I was at least given a choice it didn't seem so bad. Score: Principal 1 - Faculty 4.

The morning and afternoon bus schedule was bound to be a hit! Wasn't it? What teacher in his/her right mind could complain about NOT having any bus duty to worry about? Imagine a free half hour before and after school without having to monitor buses. Time for a reality check Mr. Kwikkel. When Nina read the name of who would be on duty she started to laugh uncontrollably. What could possibly be so funny about Mr. Perkins. Job Service is usually great about worker placement. Perhaps had I interviewed this person I may have found out sooner that our friendly Mr. Perkins was the town's most frequent patron of the local establishments! The longest he had ever held a job

was two weeks. Nina was beginning to look like the Grim Reaper. So far everything I thought would be a big hit with the staff turned out to be one more nail in the old coffin. Principal 1 - Faculty 5.

The lunch hour arrangement had to be alright. Didn't it? Cautiously I glanced over to Nina who was already shaking her head in dismay. Her big brown eyes spoke volumes of my latest leadership blunder. It had become a deeply held tradition that the lunch hour was a time for the students, faculty, staff, and parents to touch base during the day. Over three-fourths of the students would have one or both parents present during lunch. It was a special time for everyone and a highly regarded social activity linking the school and community. The score wasn't getting any better. Principal 1 - Faculty 6.

By this time the beads of sweat were forming faster than my poor glands could keep up with. My throat was dry, my shirt was wet. I was shaking violently as I gingerly held up my glorious "Sub" folder. In unison they smiled. I had finally scored my second point! Things were looking up, until my secretary entered the room with an invoice for me to sign. It was a bill for the balance of the folders I had printed. I had 14 folders ordered but I had somehow added a couple of zeroes making the order for 1,400 instead!

This was bad. This was very bad. It was bad enough I was going down fast in the eyes of my staff, but what would the central office think? I was doomed. As the boxes of folders began to roll in and pile up all around me, I did what any self respecting administrator would do. I assumed the fetal position and started screaming! When all at once I heard a voice. A familiar comforting voice. Then a gentle tap on the shoulder. "Nina?" I said.

"Nina? Who's Nina? Wake up, you idiot. You're dreaming."

It was my wife Jill. I was dreaming! All of this was just a terrible nightmare! A huge sigh of relief swept over my body until my euphoria was replaced by reality. "Nina, huh? Go sleep on the couch!" Jill said.

The Dream Revisited

I'm sure at some point every prospective principal has a dream similar to this one. A dream in which everything you thought you were doing right turned out wrong. Much can be learned from such a dream and as I hope I have pointed out, even the best laid plans can go astray.

In this dream I make one critical error that manifests itself in every decision I had made prior to our first staff meeting. I neglected

the importance of involving the faculty and staff during the transition process from the "old days" to the "new ways." Those few short months prior to the beginning of a new school year are, in my eyes, the three most critical months of the upcoming year. And if you are a rookie principal these months provide you with the opportunity to prepare for the challenges ahead as well as a chance to meet those individuals who you hope will embrace your part of the shared vision for the future. Taking time to meet with the personnel is not only a great ice-breaker but a time where you, the outsider, can learn some valuable information about the past history of the school, the individual personalities you'll be working with, and some critical insights into the community and the values it embraces.

By arbitrarily choosing building goals, changing the master schedule, randomly assigning duties, and assuming responsibilities that were a valued part of the school, I squandered an opportunity to establish the much needed trust between a principal and the faculty and staff.

A Personal Introspection

Heading into the 21st century will be an exciting and challenging time for education. I feel our changing world is demanding that its

inhabitants be better educated, are able to work with others more cooperatively, possess the critical thinking skills necessary to solve complex problems, demonstrate coping skills and learn to be better stewards of the land. As an educational leader, the responsibility of the principal is to blend these skills into the shared vision for the future, while learning from past successes in order to revitalize the present.

Critical to effective leadership is sharing the vision for the school with interested stakeholders and articulating this vision in all the school hopes to accomplish. This shared vision includes the goals and aspirations the principal, faculty, staff, and community share for its children. In a paper presented to the American Educational Research Association, Daresh and Playko (1992) provided research on principal preparation programs suggesting that reflection and development of a vision for education are important components in any post-graduate work for aspiring principals. While the traditional training programs dealing with school law, finance, personnel, public relations and evaluation are valuable programs, they must be linked via this reflective process and the development of an overall vision. If nothing else the reflective process has served as a sort of values clarification

process. By thinking, practicing skills and rethinking old paradigms which I have embraced, I have challenged my own belief system as it applies to education. I now realize that the person who started this program two years ago is not the same person who will graduate in a few short months. My convictions are stronger and my values are more clearly defined. More importantly though my vision for education is much more clearly shaped.

In my opinion necessary steps in developing one's vision include: (a) analyzing and understanding a school's past accomplishments; (b) identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the school's infrastructure; (c) getting input from faculty, staff, students, and parents as to where they would like to see their school be several years down the road; and (d) blending this information into a vision for the school based on shared goals derived from these areas.

A Foundation for Visionary Leadership

Developing a vision for yourself is easy. Implementing that vision into practice is the difficult part. In a nutshell my vision is simple and I think it is one that most everyone shares; to make an educational system good enough for your own children. For me that involves gaining a total understanding of the system I will someday be

charged with guiding. Step one in that process is to accurately assess what the school has accomplished in the past. For instance I would want to know which programs, both academic and activity based, have shown continued success. This in part would help me define what some of the values and commitments this district has worked to develop.

Step two involves a thorough inspection of the perceived strengths and weaknesses within the system. Here I would be looking for such academic items as course offerings, scheduling procedures, grading and discipline policies, student graduation rates and standardized test scores. On the other side of the coin I would look to the instructional staff to give me some additional perspective as to where they and the school seem to excel and where both could use some professional growth. Much of this data could be accumulated through the formal and informal evaluation processes, staff development work and one on one conversations with each instructor. Again I am looking to paint a total picture of the school before we collectively investigate any proposed changes.

The third step in this process is to become acquainted with the community. I have been involved in enough committee work to

realize it is easier to bring people along with you for the ride than it is to drag them behind the bumper! Involving stakeholders in various committees is an extremely powerful method in bringing a shared vision to life. Other vital components of the community process are the use of a district newsletter and parent teacher conferences. These indirect and direct contacts can portray the school as open places where stakeholders can feel they are a part of their child's education. Once you open the lines of communication between the school and the home you not only invite active parental participation but you begin building a foundation of trust on which everything else can rest.

The final step in fine tuning a shared vision is the need to work collectively with all stakeholders in developing a shared vision and district goals. Hopefully by this time I will have gained a more comprehensive understanding of the school and community which could allow me to better coordinate my individual efforts with both entities. Through this final process the course through which to navigate the school in the years to come can more accurately be charted since the lines of communication will have been opened.

Being a proactive principal guided by vision and a commitment to students is easier in word than in deeds. Too often many of the

sights we set before us crumble under the weight of those who choose to support the status quo. A popular teen movie of the early 1980s, The Breakfast Club (Tanen, N. & Hughes, J. , 1985), is a vivid reminder of how Hollywood likes to portray the average principal. In this picture the principal is depicted as a rigid, unyielding disciplinarian who feels that students no longer respect authority. In one particular scene the principal is visiting with the custodian about how "kids have changed." To this the custodian simply suggests that the kids hadn't changed but the principal had (Warner Brothers, 1985).

I've often reflected upon that scene as a teacher and thought to myself what a wonderful reminder of how our perspective can change when we lose sight of what we, the school, are all about. I believe that many of us do lose sight of the fact that while our perceptions of children may change dramatically we must remind ourselves of who we are here to serve. And now as an aspiring principal I am more inclined to agree that we as adults tend to change the most and not the kids. As a student my perception of our principal fit the stereotypical model which meant he was the dispenser of discipline whose purpose was to keep law and order. As a teacher my view of the principalship grew immensely due in large part to some very gifted principals with

whom I had the opportunity to work. What I enjoyed most about these individuals was their willingness to allow their personalities to play a role in their leadership style. I think this can and will be an extremely important facet of my leadership style. A very visible trait in my personality is the work ethic I possess. While I may stumble from time to time one thing is for sure; few will outwork me. What I may lack in experience and knowledge I can more than make up for in my ability to take on new challenges with relentless energy. Challenges that come before me in the principalship can be viewed as obstacles or opportunities; it is a matter of perspective--a matter of choice. If effective change is a matter of choice and little can be done to force changes, then allowing individuals to be an important part of that process can turn obstacles into opportunities to initiate change (Campbell, Cunningham, Nystrand, & Usdan, 1990).

There is little doubt that today's graduates must be equipped with greater skills in mathematics, science and technology, writing, and critical thinking skills. Consequently the new era principal must model the need for students to embrace a more global approach to learning while providing teachers with the resources to meet these new instructional demands. Therefore, schools need to have

educational goals established for the district which closely parallel the outcomes or skills students must possess as they prepare for the 21st century. In the simplest terms, I believe a school's goals should support the student's educational efforts by providing the resources necessary for student achievement.

I suggest that if we as principals can convince some of our more skeptical teachers to believe that it is not the body of knowledge per se that is important for students to comprehend but rather giving students the skills necessary to "learn how to learn" then, and only then, will we build life long learners. To make sure that we are teaching kids how to learn I would make it a point during any formal or informal classroom visit to ask the teacher to answer the following three questions about his/her lesson:

1. Why is this information important to these kids?
2. What relevancy does it hold for students' well-being?
3. What can students expect to gain from this information?

So much of what we teach is a product of our past paradigms. If we can get teachers to keep these questions in mind as they prepare their lessons, perhaps a small step towards initiating instructional change may occur.

At one time the principal of a school was often a teacher who was given the task of overseeing the daily routine of a few classrooms. The job was mainly clerical in nature. As classroom sizes expanded so did the job responsibility. Soon, this principal teacher was unable to maintain both teaching and clerical duties and the need for a fulltime principal was created (Campbell, Cunningham, Nystrand, & Usdan, 1990). Now being viewed as an instructional leader, today's principals must assume a more comprehensive approach to their job. It's no longer enough to make sure that "law and order" is maintained; it is equally important for a building principal to help chart a course aimed at academic, instructional, and professional excellence.

Today more than ever we need to reestablish the principal in a true leadership role. This leader must be skilled in drawing out the strengths that lie within individual stakeholders and wise enough to funnel these talents toward the school's vision. In the face of tightening budgets and/or declining enrollments a principal doesn't have to be the sole proprietor of the school's affairs. Increased collaboration among all stakeholders will in my opinion become the new foundation by which effective schools approach education. In light of this movement principals must polish their interpersonal

skills as they seek to blend the school and community together. This concept illustrates how, like a marble cake, there is no distinct level or layer isolated from one another (Campbell, Cunningham, Nystrand, & Usdan, 1990). Instead what gives a marble cake its unique appearance is the blending of the separate ingredients into one cake of unique color and flavor. Sharing the decision making process with teachers and community stakeholders can enable principals to blend individual talents in the pursuit of building the best schools possible. As Phil Schlechty suggests, by trusting the leadership qualities of the staff and community patrons, a principal can readily tap into a tremendous professional resource that has for many years been under utilized (cited by Brandt, 1993).

Leadership and Shared Decision-making.

I have chosen to pursue a career in school administration for three reasons: Ally, Christian, and Holly. As my children enter our educational system the issues and concerns that have been at the forefront of education have now taken on a more personal tone.

Lost in the beauracracy of traditional managerial requirements, are those principals who have been unable to blossom as educational leaders. Trapped within an archaic structure of top to bottom

management techniques, principals who once saw themselves as educational leaders were forced to succumb to this century long tradition either by accident or design. Adopting a school based shared decision-making philosophy to school governance will allow me to use my time more effectively. By sharing the leadership role with the staff, I can focus on improving the educational climate of the school by: (a) helping teachers develop new and innovative programs of instruction; (b) providing students and teachers with the tools they need to perform their respective tasks; (c) ensuring a stimulating, exciting, safe and orderly environment for both learner and teacher; (d) being a proactive administrator instead of reactive; and (e) providing visionary leadership through my thoughts, words, and actions.

Time is a commodity that everyone who operates on a tight schedule wishes they could somehow expand. From conversations and interviews held with various principals, each one has indicated that he/she feels time constraints brought on by tight schedules, staffings, meetings, paperwork, budgeting, and other management functions. As a result, each was somewhat limited in what he/she really wanted to accomplish as opposed to what had to be done (Spear, 1992). Here again, by opening up the system to willing groups or

individuals to some genuine leadership opportunities, I can concentrate a little more of my time on instructional matters.

More than ever schools need to have a principal whose primary concern is to assemble a staff that is capable of meeting today's instructional challenges. Principals need to hire teachers that are in touch with the social, emotional, and physical problems that are becoming commonplace with our student population (Hodgkinson, 1991). Drug and alcohol abuse, child abuse, blended families, single parent households, and latch key kids are just a few of the rising concerns that new teachers must be trained to deal with if they are to effectively operate in the classroom. A principal's hiring practices should be reflected in a staff that is ready and able to meet these demands and share in the decision-making process. Only by working together can we create the best eight hours out of any child's day.

Breaking the Old Paradigms

Unfortunately, traditional management duties will always exist. In order not to detract from my "preferred" responsibilities, I intend to set a new priority where educational and professional development are at the forefront of my efforts. In a planning assessment survey conducted by Gorton and McIntyre (cited by Campbell, Cunningham,

Nystrand, & Usdan, 1990), principals, on a bi-weekly basis, planned for program development first, personnel needs second, and school management third. The actual time spent saw personnel getting top billing (which included teacher evaluation, advising, conferencing, and recruiting) and school management needs right behind. Program development was third on the list which included areas such as curriculum, instruction and leadership development. Unless the order changes it will become increasingly more difficult for principals to effect significant changes when much of their time is spent handling school management needs.

A willingness on my part to get stakeholders involved in the affairs of the school can be a win-win situation. For example one of the worst parts of the principalship has to be when it comes time to assign people their "other duties". I would just as soon wash my hands of this situation for the simple fact that I am basically setting myself up for failure. Rather than arbitrarily assigning duties I would instead ask for volunteers for the needed duties and accept them on a first come, first served, basis. Once they have been assigned why not turn over the rest of the unclaimed duties to the building advisory group? This could serve as another opportunity to create ownership and accountability in

an area that has traditionally been a real sore point between the faculty and the administration.

Another meatier area to involve the staff in is budgeting. While I am ultimately responsible for the bottom line, I believe this is one area that can gain the principal numerous bargaining chips down the road when she/he may really need them. At no other time during my school year do I feel less professional than when it is time to prepare room requisitions. Each school handles this differently, but I strongly believe that if you tell each teacher what they will have to spend you are communicating to them a message that speaks volumes for your trust in their professional opinion. In a game where trust is paramount, it's a card you can ill afford not to have in your hand.

One reason why I am working to become a principal is to make some changes in our current way of doing things. I am sincerely interested in not only retooling our typical heirarchical approach to administration but also in how we are educating our students. I am not aware of any profession that has people so rigidly scheduled as education. From a student's perspective we typically have them so routinely scheduled that there is really no need for them to learn their own time management system. We have taken away the opportunity

to allow children to grow in this area by scheduling them like airplane arrival and departure times. Consequently teachers are locked into this traditional paradigm of time management with little opportunity for their own professional growth.

I foresee a middle school having a schedule set up similar to those utilized by college campuses. We will have to rethink our current paradigm of time and schedules because today's methods simply do not allow teachers to consistently act as leaders and innovators in the classroom (Cole & Schlechty, 1993). Teachers could be assigned certain instructional periods and the rest of their day could be devoted to small groups of students or one-on-one assistance. During these open times teachers could be available to students for additional experiences in science, writing workshops, home economic labs or time in physical education to work out. The key factor in this system is that we often cut short those teachable moments that are sometimes few and far between. In order to expect success from our students we must give them the tools to succeed. A critical tool in anyone's learning success is sufficient time.

Some Final Thoughts

In order for me to be a successful principal, I must retain the

images and memories that I have of spending a considerable amount of time in the classroom (Vann, 1993) . Remembering where I have come from is important for me as I take on the role of principal. If I am going to lead a group of teachers I must keep in touch with life as a classroom teacher. This role is not about "who's in charge" but about simple human relations. Teachers must be recognized for the professionals they are and solicited for the expertise they bring to the classroom. Students probably are not cognizant of their principal's vision but that's OK. How I conduct myself in their presence, the various levels at which I interact with them, under what circumstances I have individual contact with them, and the images I portray to them can all serve as channels to get my vision of education and learning out to them at a level they can comprehend and easily identify.

Leadership and enthusiasm certainly go hand in hand. Encouraging leadership and innovation in the classroom is saying, "I trust you as a professional educator." Creating a risk-free learning environment for students is as important for a student's learning process as it is for an educator's professional growth. I have always been excited about education and the possibilities that it holds for our youth. I believe that as a principal my greatest asset is my restlessness

with the status quo. I have often said that I have a genuine fear of failure and this fear keeps me striving for something better.

The Principal as a Leader

In a television address on the Fourth of July, 1960, President Kennedy spoke about the role of leadership as a new era in history that was unfolding with his presidency. He said, "It is time for a new generation of leadership, to cope with new problems and new opportunities. For there is a new world to be won" (Bartlett, 1968, p. 1072a).

Each Sunday morning I scan the want ads to get an idea of what the job market in education is looking like at the present time. It never ceases to amaze me the growing number of opportunities in both the fields of special education and educational administration. In an excerpt from a commentary by Dr. Gene H. Hall (1990) of the University of Northern Colorado, one particular statistic reinforced what I was perhaps seeing already. Hall estimated that during the next five years, over 60% of all school administrators would reach retirement age. In the state of Iowa the previous figure is supported when you see the average administrator is nearing retirement age as well (Iowa Department of Education, 1993). While this is great news if you are one

year away from your master's degree in educational administration, it also signals an opportunity for a true reform in education to take place. This massive turnover in administration may pave the way for a new era of instructional leadership.

While I'm not proposing that we throw the baby out with the bath water, as a classroom teacher for eight years I have seen how slow the wheels of change turn. Much can be learned from previous experience and what was an effective practice then can still be appropriate for today. Earlier in my paper I made the statement that a principal should "never forget from where he/she came." Man would not be where he is today had he not learned a little something from his past. If Hall's (1990) figures are even close to being accurate, scores of principals across the United States will be passing the torch to a new line of principals who view their role as an educational leader/innovator and not the wheel reincarnate.

Leadership Qualities

When I think of a leader, I envision someone with a General MacArthur-like presence. Someone who not only has the technical skills and intelligence to be a leader but also the charisma to enamor those he/she is to lead. In the field of education however, I believe

this singular approach to leadership is what has stagnated the system for so many years. We are now beginning to understand that collaboration is a key ingredient in a successful approach to leadership in any field. While some of the qualities mentioned previously may have their place at specific times, knowing when, where, and how to use these qualities is a critical skill to develop for upcoming educational leaders.

At the beginning of his biography, His Own Man , Bob Knight (cited by Mellen, 1989) of Indiana University is quoted as saying:

I want him (the athlete) to go away and say, well, I learned more in basketball than in any class I took at Indiana. Basketball was by far the most educational experience that I had when I was at Indiana. And if that kid says, well, Chemistry 401 was my best, then I want to find out what the hell that guy is teaching in Chemistry 401 because I ought to be teaching it in basketball.

(p. 3)

I believe one key aspect to leadership is recognizing your own strengths and weaknesses. By defining myself as the instructional leader I feel that I am placing the onus of responsibility on all of the learning that takes place in the building on my shoulders. I'm not sure

anyone is truly capable of such a task. I choose to think of teachers as being the instructional leaders (Reilly, 1984). Asking teachers to be the instructional leaders suggests they are capable of making and executing the decisions they feel will maximize their instructional efforts. As principal I am in the position to help them evaluate their efforts and together we can sort out what are the most effective approaches in educating children.

Thinking of myself as the educational leader helps me to clarify in my mind what my job is within the system. I would define an educational leader as someone who is there to oversee the educational process in its entirety. This means getting those people who are best qualified to do a job in the right positions to do so, giving them the proper resources to achieve these goals, and being there to support and evaluate their efforts. Like Bob Knight I believe we must understand where our strengths and weaknesses lie, seek help from the experts, and do what is necessary in order to better our own situation. From my point of view that's what school leadership is all about--having the vision to lead but also the good sense to learn from others what works and what doesn't.

Surrounding themselves with good people has been the

hallmark of many outstanding leaders. This notion is the cornerstone of which I intend to base my leadership. Not new to the principalship is the idea of having an advisory council. Allan Vann (1993) of James H. Boyd Elementary School in Huntington, New York, refers to such a group as the Principal's Advisory Committee on School Improvement (PACSI). In this case PACSI serves as a way for educators, dedicated to making the necessary school improvements and recommendations, to provide input directly to their building administrator in a collaborative atmosphere. PACSI's role is to: (a) gather information; (b) set goals; (c) help develop policy; and (d) to be a shared decision-making partner for various stages of budgeting, staff selection, development of procedural and organizational strategies, and textbook and curriculum recommendations. This kind of proactive involvement is a critical ingredient that I can bring into the development of our vision-- everyone drawing from each other's expertise toward a common goal.

A Vision for Education

"Your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions" (Bartlett, p. 35b).

Two decades ago, we landed a man on the moon which took true visionary leadership and careful design. A key component

guiding this accomplishment involved the constant monitoring and correction of the program designed to achieve such a formidable task (George & Grebing, 1992). In developing a vision for education I find this just as daunting a task given the fact that I have little practice in being an educational/school leader. Or do I? By the time this paper is finished, I will have spent eight years being the instructional leader in my classroom. Having the good fortune of working along side some very gifted instructors has enabled me to piece together what I believe are effective teaching strategies and what constitutes a desirable learning environment. Heading into the role of visionary I can bring the past classroom expertise of the individuals I have worked with to a new faculty which when combined with their unique accomplishments can create a powerful problem solving cadre. Consequently, as we prepare our vision, this extensive knowledge base can enable us to make the constant course corrections we feel are necessary.

I agree with Barth (1988) in so much that the school I would like to be associated with is a school I would like to have my own children attend. As parents become more involved with their local schools, they tend to better scrutinize the quality of education taking place

within the classroom. Therefore, as my children enter school, I will have helped to lay the visionary foundation on which the school's educational system is built. I would hope that my confidence in what has been put in place is a type of security blanket that parents can rest assured in as well.

Edward Chance and Marilyn Grady (1990) quoted an excerpt from the 1987 Principal Selection Guide: "effective school leaders have broad visions that are clear, active, ambitious, and performance oriented" (p. 12). Definitions of what vision is vary tremendously from person to person. I believe a vision as defined by Shieve and Shoenheit is the most tangible and applicable to schools. They refer to a vision as "a blueprint of a desired state", and "a preferred condition that we work to achieve in the future" (cited by Chance and Grady, 1990, p. 13).

My piece of the shared vision for the school itself is people-based and built on the premise that the school exists for the students. Four key groups make schools what they are: the kids, the teachers and staff, the parents, and the principal. The broadest aspect of my building vision will focus on the importance of these stakeholders as the four wheels of a car. The school must be a place where all parties feel they

have a viable stake in what happens. Like a car, should one wheel go flat the other three are left to carry the load lessening the efficiency of the car.

The first wheel on my visionary car is the kids. Simply put, children need to be provided with the safest and most comfortable learning environment possible (Reilly, 1984). For example, in the River Valley District I would estimate that 70% of the student population could fit the at-risk definition. Obviously not all are, but the point is so many of our kids are coming into school each day with so much excess baggage that it makes learning, and more importantly the wanting to learn, a formidable task. In order to create the best eight hours possible for these kids I would start with the staff and provide them with literature addressing the specific wants and needs of the age group with whom we are working.

For example, during the early teen years when children are in junior high or middle school, I believe these children are generally more occupied with who they are than with what they are learning. Arguably their social ranking is more important than their class ranking, therefore our delivery strategies should build upon this need by providing activities that allow them to work cooperatively and

share openly at various points throughout the day. All learning should be relevant. That is to say we must make a concerted effort that what is taught is or can be directly related to their lives. Therefore, the knowledge learned may not be as important as how they learn it.

Another way to remind us of what our jobs are really all about might require a trip to the movies! Earlier I mentioned a movie called The Breakfast Club (Tanen, N. & Huges, J. , 1985) . If there ever was a movie meant to be used at teacher workshops this would be it. Its message reminds me to listen to students and avoid being to judgmental. When we stop listening to students I feel we become less effective educators.

Wheel number two is the teaching staff. Shared decision-making is a must to create the ideal environment for the faculty and staff (Scannell, 1988). Teachers, as professionals, were hired to do specific jobs and must be given the support mechanisms necessary to do so. The first of these mechanisms is a restoration of professionalism. When people feel they have greater control over their jobs I suggest they are less apt to perform poorly since they have become a valued part of the total process. George and Grebing (1992) have compiled a list of seven key areas that every teacher can and

should be involved with at some point. Many of these items have usually fallen under the responsibility of the principal and have included such items as:

1. Scheduling of classes and courses.
2. Developing goals in conjunction with a mission statement.
3. Handling individual room budgets or department budgets.
4. Initiating curriculum reforms and/or textbook purchases.
5. Assimilating of various duties.
6. Recommending school improvements.
7. Revising organizational practices.

To me these are just a few chips I can easily afford to relinquish. Speaking as a father of three I can honestly say there is no crisis outside the family unit greater than the turmoil from within. If I allow some outside force to tamper with the harmony of my family, I place in jeopardy everything that is most important to me. The same can be said for the school. There are a vast number of external forces (Hodgkinson, 1991) working to erode the successes of what we are trying to accomplish in schools today. What we need to avoid are the internal forces working against us as well. If we fail to work as hard at creating a better teaching environment, what we have tried to put in

place instructionally will never become reality. Greater teacher and stakeholder involvement is cheap insurance when the investment you are working to protect are our children.

The third wheel is comprised of parents and community members. These individuals are critical elements who can not only help shape the vision but also support it outside the school building. Assembling a parent advisory council is one way of networking the human resources within your community. Soliciting the brainpower of stakeholders within the community is a solid foundation on which change can gain a foothold. This largely untapped resource can provide schools with a wealth of knowledge and experiences. These groups and or individuals can not only provide us with valuable resources such as time, money and talents, they also represent a powerful problem solving cadre if we will only allow them to be a part of what is going on inside the schoolhouse.

The principal is the fourth wheel. I know my strengths and weaknesses and I am not an expert in the instructional methodologies of each and every subject. My responsibility to the school starts with the understanding that I am here to help establish the best learning environment possible for the students, help teachers grow and develop

within their profession, and provide leadership and vision for the school community. In a sense I am the conductor of an orchestra of which my importance is neither less nor greater than the individuals in the pit.

Conclusion

Jung notes, "If there is anything that we wish to change in the child, we should first examine it and see whether it is not something that could better be changed in ourselves" (Bartlett, p. 936a).

I truly believe it is time for professional educators to begin drawing upon one another's expertise in restructuring our schools. James Q. Wilson (cited by Darlin, 1993), a political scientist at the University of California, offers an appraisal of the federal government's seemingly endless involvement in nearly every facet of our lives which I feel strongly parallels government intrusion in education today. Wilson suggests that, "Many schools are waiting around to see how the federal or state government is going to make education better" (p. 97). Is a new wonder law going to be passed automatically making schools better? What new fad will invade the world of education next? Will more money be given to public and private schools to make them better? Will a voucher system make

schools more competitive thereby weeding out the weaker districts or will open enrollment take care of that for us?

In recent years, people have come to believe that the federal government is responsible for everything that is of relative concern to the entire country. In Wilson's eyes nobody has really bothered to ask what the proper role of the federal, let alone state government, should be (Darlin, 1993). Herein lies my argument: What is the proper role of the federal government in public education?

The assumption in America is should a question, problem or concern arise the government should act on it immediately and the Congress or President needs to develop a law or policy addressing it. This has allowed Americans to project on our government all of our concerns, fears, demands and wants (Darlin 1993). We have become so entrenched in this paradigm that we blindly wait for someone to tell us what to do. We can no longer afford to wait for more money, new laws, or the latest educational fad to deliver us from an educational meltdown. We as professionals must become more reflective, introspective, trust our instincts and begin searching and researching the answers on our own.

All over the nation there are schools accomplishing wonderful

things without a directive from the state or federal government. This is what needs to happen across America, teachers, principals, and community members working collaboratively to build better schools based upon what we know as professional educators and concerned stakeholders. This is the part of a shared vision I intend to bring into my leadership role someday. A heightened awareness and reawakening in our own professionalism that can begin to address our concerns at the grass roots level. It is at this level and this level only, one school at a time, one state at a time that a true restructuring of our schools will succeed.

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