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## A vision of secondary school leadership: A reflective essay

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## A vision of secondary school leadership: A reflective essay

### Abstract

Effective educational leadership involves many characteristics, skills, and attributes. Among these include vision, motivation, change, and empowerment. In addition, professional skills and future leadership skills are necessary qualities of an effective leader today. The primary purpose of this reflective paper is to examine my beliefs and values about educational administration. I will also examine and reflect upon current issues and concepts and their impact upon my vision of educational administration.

A VISION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL LEADERSHIP:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Reese A. Morgan

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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Effective educational leadership involves many characteristics, skills, and attributes. Among these include vision, motivation, change, and empowerment. In addition, professional skills and future leadership skills are necessary qualities of an effective leader today.

The primary purpose of this reflective paper is to examine my beliefs and values about educational administration. I will also examine and reflect upon current issues and concepts and their impact upon my vision of educational administration.

While preparing this reflective essay, I am reminded of a recent movie, entitled, "Flatliners." In "Flatliners" a group of medical students find a way to temporarily stop all bodily functions to experience the mystery at the moment of death. Then they are brought back to life. The medical students who experienced "death" share their experience and how it affected their lives. I identify with one of the "Flatliners" because of the unique set of circumstances that have allowed me to be a "quasi administrator" while completing the Educational Administration Program. I have experienced the theory and application in the course of study at the University of Northern Iowa and have experienced the "reality" of the job as Dean of Students at West High. I deal with attendance and discipline and have had the opportunity to be involved in many other administrative activities. This "slice of the administrative pie" has been

instrumental in helping me shape my beliefs and values about education and leadership.

A variety of sources afforded me during the administrative program have impacted my personal beliefs and values. The course content, the books, papers, lectures, and articles, influenced these beliefs. The interaction with other students and peers during small group, class discussion, and informal discussion have given insight and created a network of support and information. The course design which included more applied learning and practical applications than theory and direct instruction has given me confidence and experience. The unique opportunity to actively learn on the job and to be a part of the administrative team at Iowa City West High School has been an invaluable experience. In addition, the opportunity to interact, discuss, and listen to an eighteen year veteran administrator on our daily two hour drive to and from classes for two summers has been like having a personal mentor. However, the greatest impact has come from the instructors that I have been fortunate enough to have had in the Education Administration Program. These instructors are caring, knowledgeable, and student-centered people who always challenged us to think and evaluate our beliefs.

### Vision

Effective educational leaders must have a vision of education. We must be able to transform ideas into actions to help schools become

places of learning that can make a difference in the lives of children (Payzant, 1987.)

Leaders know where they want to take an organization and they move others toward that vision. Snow and Von der Embse (1990) believe that vision inspires and transforms purpose into action toward a common goal. It creates a sense that, no matter what the sacrifice involves, achieving the vision is everything. Vision and its accompanied commitment causes others to work toward that vision because they know it is important, stimulating, and challenging. However, no vision can be realized unless it is communicated clearly and effectively.

Bennis and Nanus (1989) relate that learners acquire and wear their vision like clothes. They walk it like they talk it. The vision becomes the energy behind every effort and the catalyst that prevails when faced with adversity. A leader with vision is on a mission, and that individual's enthusiasm is contagious. Unity is essential for the dream to be realized. All great leaders have two characteristics: (a) they know where they are going, and (b) they can persuade others to follow.

The vision of any organization is communicated through its mission statement. I can clearly recall working in a small group in Administration of the Curriculum 27:259 and developing a mission statement for our model school. It was a difficult and frustrating task. We wrestled with developing a simple and clear mission statement. Initially we did not understand the purpose and importance of a mission statement. It seemed to be just words with no meaning. We soon discovered that it

served a two-fold purpose. First, it is the real reason for existence. Secondly, it becomes the guiding principle in decisions that affect schools. When faced with a question or problem we should ask, "Does this follow our mission statement?"

I always thought vision was synonymous with having goals. But, I realized that vision is much bigger than that. It is a place where you want your organization to be and an undying commitment to bring everyone toward that vision. The mission statement illuminates the path toward that vision.

Over the years I have developed my own philosophy, or mission statement: "Do your best always and in all ways." This has been my guiding force in teaching and coaching for the past sixteen years. I preached this simple motto in the classroom and athletic field. But that was not enough; there was something missing. Then I asked myself, "What do I really believe in?" As a result of this question, I came up with a series of beliefs that I had about teaching and coaching. Once these beliefs were established, I felt substance and direction in every decision that I made. These beliefs are re-evaluated yearly. I firmly believe that anyone in a leadership role must have a vision and a set of beliefs developed by themselves and their organization.

### Change

Change is exciting, challenging, and it is inevitable. Many voices tell us that security is good and change is bad. Our schools and parents have taught us to maintain stability, take few risks, and work hard to



achieve the "good life." On the other hand, we know that if we don't change, we are doomed. In today's society and in the future we must be prepared for rapid change. Look at the railroads, steel plants, and other manufacturers. In education we are faced with many future changes: site-based management, technology, restructuring, shared-decision making, and outcomes-based education. To become effective educational leaders, we must understand the change process.

Change is not a single event. It is a process which takes place over a period of time and involves a series of events and complexities. It is an individual process where people change at different rates and different times. Knoll (1988) suggests that both administrators and leaders of the change process make a common and serious mistake. They frequently assume that once the change has been introduced and initial training completed, the users will put the change into practice.

In our effort to improve schools, we can't just change for the sake of change. We must examine the reasons for the change, understand the change process and direct purposeful change.

Anyone can be a change facilitator. It could be a superintendent, principal, consultant, specialist, department chair, mentor, master teacher, or teacher. The role of the change facilitator is to support, assist, and nurture. Sometimes the role is to encourage, persuade, or push people to change, to implement an innovation and use it in the classroom. Effective change facilitators engage in change in a personalized and caring manner.

Research about change has produced these results according to Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, and Hall (1987):

1. Change is a process, not an event. A common tendency is to equate change with handing over a new program, which is an event. We now know that the change process occurs over a period of time, usually several years.

2. Change is accomplished by individuals, the key people when implementing a new program. It is easy to consider change in impersonal terms, however change does affect people. The school is changed only when most of the individuals are committed to the innovation.

3. Change is a highly personal experience. Each individual reacts differently to change. Some will accept the new practice more rapidly than others. The change will be more successful if it is geared to the needs of individuals.

4. Change involves developmental growth. Persons involved in change demonstrate growth in terms of their feelings and skills. As the new program progresses, increased growth is experienced. Change facilitators use these new feelings and skills to guide and manage change.

5. Change is best understood in operational terms of what it means to the individual or how it will affect their classroom. Teachers want to know if this change will have a lasting impact, or if it is a passing trend, and

how much time is involved. By addressing these concerns, facilitators can reduce resistance to change.

My beliefs on the change process can best be explained in these steps:

1. Create an awareness of why change is needed.
2. Provide information, present key issues, and give background to the change.
3. Answer these key questions: (a) What do we want to do? (b) Where are we now? (c) Where do we want to go? and (d) How are we going to get there?
4. Develop an action plan and implement it.
5. Assess our change, receive feedback, and decide on how we can continue to improve.

This plan has been used in my teaching and coaching on many occasions. For me, it is simple and it works. However, my greatest shortcoming is patience. I usually forget that change takes time, and that relationships and trust must be earned before any change can be accepted.

If I were to accept a new administrative position at a different school, I would change very little the first year. The most important issue would be finding out about that school, faculty, students, community; and the staff, in turn, finding out about me. Strong interpersonal and public relations skills are critical. Not only is it important to earn the respect and trust of

your staff, the faculty, and fellow administrators, but also the school board, the media, and the community.

At the same time, I would gather information, examine how the school operates, and begin a plan to develop a vision of this school. In my opinion, the biggest mistake a new administrator can make is to arrive at a new situation and make dramatic changes without information or establishing respect and trust.

Every school or organization has its own internal power structure. It is usually an informal structure of people who possess power and influence in that school. To successfully initiate change, one has to involve and convince the people in that power structure. Once they have an awareness of the vision, then it can succeed. Without the support of these key people, successful change will not work.

### Professional Skills

There are five professional skills essential to successful principalship: (a) communication skills, (b) organization ability, (c) interpersonal skills, (d) judgment, and (e) face-to-face leadership (Dr. Decker class notes [Administration of Secondary Schools, 27:228]).

Sharing information and communication are key elements in successful leadership. According to Dr. Decker, the number one reason for firing a building principal is because of poor communication skills. Oral communication involves the skill of listening and talking. Talking is an overused communication skill. When talking, your ideas should be

clearly and simply stated and your comments should be appropriate to your audience.

Listening is a critical communication skill that needs to be fostered and valued. Royer (1987) says that administrators should shut up and listen 90% of the time and talk only 10% of the time. We need to become more active listeners. Ash (1986) maintains that the biggest mistake you can make in trying to talk convincingly is to put your highest priority on expressing your ideas and feelings. What most people really want is to be listened to, respected, and understood.

Colleges of education do not teach listening skills. Listening skills are usually self-taught. In order to become a better listener one must practice listening to others.

We can not confuse listening and hearing. Hearing is a passive process. Listening is an interactive process. Although we hear sounds and words, we may choose not to process the information. Listening, on the other hand, is an active process. It involves more than receiving sounds and processing them so we understand the message. Listening requires that we react to the speaker.

Engler (1988) states that whether we know it or not, we are always communicating. Even when we do not speak words, we communicate by using nonverbal communication. Body language elements such as facial expression, posture, gesture, and proximity are all powerful forms of nonverbal communication. Effective communication requires that we are sensitive to nonverbal factors in others and ourselves.

Written communication is an essential and time consuming process. I feel this skill can be enhanced through practice, experience, and sharing your written thoughts with peers. Grammar, spelling, and content are all necessary in producing an effective piece of writing. Perhaps the most important outcome is how clearly the written message is understood.

Organizational ability is paramount for anyone who is in a position to manage. The ability to plan and schedule are critical traits for instructional leaders. The skills of effective time management, the ability to prioritize, to delegate responsibility, and to solve problems are all organizational skills that can be developed through personal and professional growth.

However, one can't get caught up in being a "boss" rather than being a "leader." Maxwell (1993) used prose to illustrate the difference:

The boss drives his men; the leader coaches them.

The boss depends on authority; the leader on good will.

The boss inspires fear; the leader inspires enthusiasm.

The boss says "I"; the leader says "we."

The boss knows how it is done; the leader shows how.

The boss says "go"; the leader says "let's go" (p. 7 ).

Everyone has the ability to make judgments. Making good judgments as an instructional leader is a skill which takes experience and analysis. A leader with good judgment is able to reach logical conclusions based on given information. Good judgment requires reflection and synthesis, and the ability to analyze all sides of an issue.

One who has good judgment must also be decisive. A decisive administrator is a doer, who backs up his words with action. Teachers appreciate a leader who displays good judgment.

Face-to-face leadership is leadership from someone who possesses integrity and respect. This leader is someone exhibiting strong beliefs and values, and committed to living their mission statement. Teachers know where they stand with a leader who will look them in the eyes and communicate trust, sensitivity, and concern for others.

From my perspective, successful communication skills are vital for all educational leaders. Every day I am orally communicating with teachers, students, educational associates, custodians, parents, and community members face-to-face or on the telephone. Being organized and having the proper information can make these oral communications positive experiences.

My experience has shown that no matter how involved I am at the time, when a teacher comes in the office, the concern should be immediately addressed. Regardless of whether the concern is simple or complex, to that teacher, at that time, it is very important. Active listening is an area I am working on to improve, because its benefits are long lasting. When staff know you care enough to listen, you earn trust.

An awareness of the impact of non-verbal communication is also needed in day to day relations with people. The physical arrangement of the office can strengthen or weaken relationships. My office is arranged

so that I have direct contact with those who are present. There are no desks or tables as barriers between others and myself.

The volume of written communication has been almost overwhelming. I have learned some valuable lessons:

1. Do as much writing before or after school as possible.
2. Make time for people during the school day.
3. Have a few sample form letters on disc that can be easily adapted for similar information.
4. State the message clearly, simply, and in a positive manner.

I believe that organizational ability can be taught, improved, and developed through a variety of methods. I'd like to focus on judgment and face-to-face leadership.

Making judgments is a daily ritual for all of us. When that tough decision must be made, I think there are two critical questions to ask: (a) "What is best for our students?" and, (b) "What is best for our school?" These questions have been the basis for many of the tough decisions made over the years.

Face-to-face leadership, is nothing more than your character. What type of person are you? What do you believe in? What do you value? What are your beliefs? A face to face leader is one who walks the talk and lives that vision.

The ability to work with people is the most important skill a leader can possess. The Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina, studied successful executives and found (Maxwell, 1993):



1. They admitted their mistakes and accepted the consequences, rather than trying to blame others.
2. They were able to get along with a wide variety of people.
3. They had strong interpersonal skill, sensitivity to others, and tact.
4. They were calm and confident, rather than moody and volatile (p. 119).

### Motivation

Effective leaders will understand that people are the most valuable resources in our schools and motivating these people is the key to successful leadership. According to Maslow, individuals have a hierarchy of needs that consists of five levels. Lowest on the continuum are physiological needs, followed by safety needs. Next, is the need to be loved, and having self-esteem and respect. Finally, the highest level is self-actualization (Guthrie and Reed, 1991). By applying the Maslow Theory to interpersonal relations, effective leaders can develop strategies to provide for these higher-order needs.

Maxwell (1993) cites that there are five assumptions needed to motivate people:

1. Everyone wants to feel worthwhile.
2. Everyone needs and responds to encouragement.
3. People "buy into" the leader before they buy into her/his leadership.
4. Most people don't know how to be successful.
5. Most people are naturally motivated.

All people want to feel important and worthwhile. The highest compliment someone can pay you is, "I like me best when I'm with you." Successful leaders will enhance self-esteem and make others feel important. Simple things like calling everyone by their first name, talking about something the other person is involved in, or asking about their family, are all ways to make people feel important.

Positive encouragement brings out the best in others. In Maxwell (1993), Victor Frankl said, "If we take people as they should be, we help them become what they can be." (p.107).

We all respond favorably to someone who has a positive attitude and high expectations. The successful administrator has a unique ability to bring out the best in people, through encouragement.

The title of a principal is not what makes the leader - it is the person who occupies that position. Strong leaders are nurturers and builders, who care about people. They put their egos in their back pocket by putting others first.

They earn the respect and belief of those with whom they work.

Many people feel success is equated with luck. Most success is directly related to planning and hard work. Success is not a simple event, but a process of growth and development that occurs over a period of time. Successful people fail. However, they use their failure as an opportunity to learn.

The presumption that most people are naturally motivated is illustrated in McGregor's Theory X. The highest level of motivation comes from

recognition and reward for achievement. Other strong motivators are, (a) involvement in the shared decision making process, (b) having opportunities for professional and personal growth, and (c) working in an atmosphere where belonging and mutual respect are practiced (Guthrie and Reed, 1991). These higher needs will be the lasting motivators developing your most valuable resources - people.

In looking at what motivates people and their higher-order needs, I noticed examples in schools which demonstrate these principles. Where can a young person feel worthwhile, receive encouragement, get recognition, be a part of a special group, and have respect? One area is the extra curricular activities programs such as sports, drama, debate, music, and clubs.

We do have examples from business, industry, and education where these motivators are valued. It doesn't cost a great deal of money and can be done on any level. I feel that using these motivating factors and being a true "leader of leaders" is the key to a successful administrator. We have more impact on the school than anyone and we should be accountable for this influence.

### Empowerment

A successful administrator finds a way to have his or her faculty take ownership in their schools. The educational leader of the future can not accomplish the goals of the school without empowering others. Active leadership is described as empowering others to be leaders (Sergiovanni, 1987). It is essential that the instructional staff be actively

involved in the decision making. Snow and Von der Embse (1989) stated that empowerment has four major components. The first component is significance - a sense on the part of the teachers, students, and community that they are making an important difference. The second component is competence - involving constant development and learning. The third component is a sense of community - the belonging and joining of others for a common purpose. The fourth component is enjoyment, or "fun." Empowered people like what they are doing because it is challenging and exciting. Empowered people are drawn to a vision and feel a sense of partnership in that vision.

Increased empowerment also means increased accountability by the empowered people. Barth (1988) stated that a school can fulfill no higher purpose than to teach its members that if they strongly believe, they can make anything happen. A school should also encourage its members to contribute to the leadership of others. When it's "our" decision, it is more effective than when it's "their" decision.

For effective empowerment, teachers need to understand how to work with groups of people. Being aware of group dynamics allows leaders to understand group roles, processes, consensus, and sources of conflict. Directing a group and establishing group consensus is becoming increasingly useful. Conflict management skills are useful when reconciling differences of empowered people. These group dynamics will contribute to a team effort. Sergiovanni (1989), describes an educational leader as one who communicates, meets, plans, sets

priorities, gives feedback, evaluates, praises, and gives credit to those for their efforts. Through this team effort, a sense of trust and involvement are nurtured by the team builder.

I believe that teachers need to be empowered for a leader to be successful. The degree of the empowerment depends on the style and comfort level of the leader. What frustrates many teachers is spending hours of time involved in a shared decision making process and then to have the recommendations overturned or never used. Setting the ground rules ahead of time, letting everyone know their role, and understanding the difference between recommendations and decisions is essential for effective empowerment.

My personal belief is that the teachers need to be involved in the development of the school's mission and belief statements. Ownership in the school's shared beliefs allow direction and purpose for the empowered staff. Getting the staff to help solve problems and creating an attitude of "we can" is highly desirable.

#### Visibility

MBWA (managing by wandering around), is an accepted and desired practice in the Hewlett Packard Corporation (Peters, 1990). Being visible in the hallways, classroom, lunchroom, and school activities is a tremendous way to build support and show that you care. Walking down the hallways, smiling, and exchanging greetings is a positive and refreshing experience that takes little time. More importantly, you are out of your office in the real world where you can get the "feel" of the school.

It is difficult to get away from the phones, letters, meetings, and other responsibilities, but it is critical to be visible. Gorton and Schneider (1991) indicate that visibility is a positive way to enhance staff and student relationships and is a deterrent to student discipline problems. By using the MBWA principle, a successful leader can solve problems on the move. Not only do teachers come more readily with problems, concerns, and small talk, they feel a sense of comfort in their environment rather than "the office."

Time is a great obstacle but it can also be an ally in accomplishing increased visibility. It forces you to set a specific time to "make the rounds" and be seen through the entire building. I know a principal who makes it a daily practice to verbally communicate with every staff member and to visit every area of the building. Someone asked him, "How do you have time to do all of this?" His response was, "How can I afford not to?"

In my role as Dean of Students, I have discovered the importance of being highly visible. Both students and staff are reassured when the educational leaders are visible and, more importantly, accessible. Being seen often and as a person who listens, is a doer, and follows up on issues, creates a positive school climate.

### Future Skills

Hoyle (1989) suggests that educational leaders in the 21st century need to be skilled in technology, life-long learning, and learning styles. These future skills will allow leaders to obtain new insights into education.

A working knowledge of computer technology gives leaders an ability to adapt the technology to meet new tasks. They will need to know about microcomputer programs, satellite television transmission, and the use of interactive video for instruction. A working understanding of hardware and software can help a leader answer and ask questions. They need to be competent in the utilization of technology as a powerful ally (Hoyle, 1989).

Daggett (1992) suggests that we need to examine the relevancy of the subjects taught, and gear our students to be prepared for the workplace. Technical reading, technical writing, technical math, and applied physics are areas in which Daggett feels future students must show competency.

Effective leaders are lifelong learners. When learning stops, improvement stops. The opportunities for this lifelong learning can be provided by our post-secondary institutions.

Future instructional leaders need to be constantly involved in the learning process. Leaders may envision a nontraditional view of the utilization of our local schools. Community education will be on-going at our school sites. The school becomes a center for learning that is open twenty-four hours a day. The technology within the school allows

learning to be provided at various times to all age levels of the community. A partnership between business and schools provides corporate education, training, and retraining of the work force.

Cooper and Boyd (1987) indicate that becoming educated about learning styles will allow us to obtain new insights into the process of learning. According to Dunn (1990), current research about learning and teaching styles has shown that student achievement increased and attitudes toward school and learning improved when teaching methods matched their preferred learning style. Educational leaders are asking themselves whether the existing programs in their district are addressing the learning styles of all the general population. These leaders must take this research, and educate the teachers about these new findings, by providing staff with the time and resources to develop strategies to support and accommodate the different learning styles.

In addition to learning styles, future leaders need to rethink the role of education. Because of the vastness of information available, we must move from an information provider to a much higher level. Students of the future need to absorb, process, analyze, and apply information quickly and effectively (Wirth, 1993). Students of the future need to be creative problem solvers.

Lifelong learning, and the knowledge of technology and learning styles are issues of the future that strong visionary leaders must employ and model. We have the research which tells us how people learn, but



now we need to apply it. As educational leaders, we must lead the field in the modeling and application of these future skills.

I believe that administrators should have a basic knowledge of the technology that is in the school building. However, there are others who possess the expertise in the technical areas and are your "local experts."

As a future principal, I would assign a staff member as our technology expert. This person could in-service teachers, and provide support in the technology area. Because this area changes so rapidly, it would be nearly impossible for an administrator to become a technological guru.

Lifelong learning should be modeled by the building leader. The best thing I have ever done was to enroll in graduate school. The growth opportunities and the intrinsic rewards are valuable. I would like to see us create an atmosphere where teachers would take part in professional yearly growth opportunities. I also think each local school district could provide a five to ten day paid summer institute for the purpose of providing additional teacher training.

Business seems to always be one step ahead of education in terms of management and motivation. The similarities between education and business can be found in books, magazines, research, and other professional publications. What employers want and what we are teaching are not one in the same.

In a recent conversation with Dr. Leonard Ransom, president of MCI communications, he said he wants his employees to possess the following desirable traits and proficiency skills: (a) being capable of

working as a member of a team, (b) exhibiting good speaking and listening skills, (c) showing discipline to be on time for work, (d) displaying self-esteem, (e) possessing a set of values and beliefs, and (e) utilizing technical skills. When I look at this list, I see one place in our curriculum where we provide most of these skills - our extra-curricular activities program. I am a strong advocate of the importance of students participating in extra-curricular activities. I believe that the lessons learned are relevant and valuable for future preparation.

### Conclusion

Leaders come in many shapes and sizes. They all have their own style which makes them unique. I have targeted leadership from three perspectives: beliefs and values, issues and concepts, and personal reflection. Future educational leaders need to be strong in the professional skills of communication, interpersonal skills, organizational ability, visibility, judgment and face-to-face leadership. They understand that education is a people business, yet the future skills of technology, learning styles, and lifelong learning are essential tools in achieving educational excellence. The foundation of a leader's beliefs begin with the concepts of vision, empowerment, and instilling a thorough understanding of the importance of change.

These are just a few of the many skills that the leaders of the 21st century must demonstrate competency. I have omitted one important skill - just plain old "common sense." You may call it a "gut level feeling" or intuition. Some have it; some don't. But everyone can develop it.

Common sense will be the basis of many decisions made by those in leadership roles. By using the training, education, experience, and knowledge we possess, and applying common sense to it, leaders will be prepared for a future filled with great possibilities. Our role as "leader of leaders" is to inspire others to do their best always and in all ways.

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