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## A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: A reflective essay

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## A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: A reflective essay

### Abstract

Father Theodore Hesburgh, former president of the University of Notre Dame, once said. "The very essence of leadership is (that) you have a vision. It has to be a vision you articulate clearly and forcefully on every occasion. You can't blow an uncertain trumpet" (Bowen. 1987. p. 68). I have a strong vision that will help guide my performance as an administrator. This vision is the result of an educational administrative awareness developed through the integration of information from many sources. These sources include: extensive educational training. experience in the public educational system. my own ethical standards. and a personal vision of my own professional future and for the future of education in the United States. In this reflective research paper. I will describe the four values on which I believe my philosophy rests. They are communication. trust. leadership. and innovation.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Presented to

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and Counseling

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

David W. Sharp

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Father Theodore Hesburgh, former president of the University of Notre Dame, once said, "The very essence of leadership is (that) you have a vision. It has to be a vision you articulate clearly and forcefully on every occasion. You can't blow an uncertain trumpet" (Bowen, 1987, p. 68). I have a strong vision that will help guide my performance as an administrator. This vision is the result of an educational administrative awareness developed through the integration of information from many sources. These sources include: extensive educational training, experience in the public educational system, my own ethical standards, and a personal vision of my own professional future and for the future of education in the United States. In this reflective research paper, I will describe the four values on which I believe my philosophy rests. They are communication, trust, leadership, and innovation.

#### Communication

My first philosophical value for administering schools is communication. Communicating effectively in an organization requires skills beyond the interpersonal level. The principal must be able to develop a sound and trusting relationship with the staff by behaving consistently, objectively, and fairly over time. Rules for communicating must be made explicit regarding the content and the processes that are acceptable within the school. What topics, for example, may be openly discussed by the entire staff? By parent-staff advisory groups? By students and staff?

What structures and processes will be used by what groups to make which decisions about governance of the school? To what degree will autonomy be given to the staff in the decision-making process? Which decisions will be made by the principal after asking for staff input and advice? How do building decisions fit into the scheme of the school district's processes? All these questions need to be answered through the principal's leadership and communication with the staff (Smith, 1989).

Processes are all-important. The principal models commitment to those processes in establishing school goals together with the staff, parents, and students. Resources are committed to the goals, and evaluation systems are established. Frequent reference needs to be made to the goals, and classroom observations, inservice topics, and faculty meetings focus on those priorities.

A clear vision for the school is articulated by the principal to the point of redundancy (Peters & Waterman, 1982). Through slogans, themes, logos, and reminders, the principal makes it known that everyone in the school is headed in the same general direction (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). For example, a principal I know has made academic achievement the school's primary emphasis and has a knack for including the school's slogan, "Where Minds Matter Most," in both his written and oral communications. Individual teachers may choose different means of achieving this, emphasizing different strengths and interests, but the overall direction of

the school supersedes individual whims.

Frequent feedback is given to teachers after classroom visits/evaluations, to custodians and secretaries after performance observations or special contributions, to students for achievement of all kinds, and to parents for their support and efforts. Also, the principal needs to consistently tell those involved in the decision-making processes how their input or involvement affected the final outcome or decision. Regular bulletins, calendars, and newsletters, for example, could be published for the staff, parents, and students to keep them up-to-date on activities and decisions.

At the beginning of each new school year, the principal reviews the expectations for staff performance and the method to be used for supervision and evaluation. If you are using peer observers and coaches, their roles need to be reviewed and clarified. Staff members need to be involved in establishing priorities for inservice training and staff development activities.

In the course, Administrative Applications in Field Settings, it was discussed that faculty meetings need to be well organized and reflect careful planning. The principal should have clear objectives, involve participants to help with the learning of the objectives, maintain or enhance self-esteem of participants, listen and respond to participants with empathy, adjust the time or process to meet needs that come-up during the

meeting, and has methods for closing the meeting to be sure everyone understands what was discussed, checks for understanding. Careful planning for all meetings ensure they are productive and do not waste time on items that can be handled elsewhere.

The principal must be an effective communicator through modeling and thoughtful listening to all ideas presented, even if they are contrary to ones own personal beliefs. Listening skills, along with the true desire to understand the message communicated by others, serve the entire educational process.

#### Trust

My second philosophical value is building and achieving trust by maintaining a consistent position. Bennis and Nanus (1985) describe trust as "lubricant that makes it possible for organizations to work" (p. 34). They also contend that leaders can establish trust only by being "the epitome . . . of constancy, of reliability" (p. 35).

Effective leaders are predictable. They establish positions that are consistent with organizational values, make those positions known, and remain relentlessly committed to them. The actions of leaders, not their advice, are what communicate most clearly. Certain observable behaviors suggest what is truly important to a principal. An assessment of a principal's effectiveness in communicating values should look at several important points, which are described below.

First, the principal develops long-term plans that are



consistent with the mission of the school and designed to instill its values. The principal shares those plans and the mission. Finally, the principal's daily planning provides an opportunity to concentrate on the items that are most critical in moving the school toward its vision.

Second, the principal must continually monitor and assess conditions within the school. Peters and Austen (1985) say that simply paying attention to what is important is the most powerful means by which a leader can communicate to and influence others. They repeat the message that attention is all there is.

That message is an important one for principals. A principal who devotes considerable time and effort to the continual assessment of a particular situation within a school sends the message that the situation is both important and valued. Conversely, inattention to monitoring a particular factor indicates that the factor is less than essential, regardless of how often its importance is verbalized by the principal.

Third, principals who truly believe that the presence of certain values is critical to the success of their school will try to model those values in their own behavior. A principal who asks teachers and students to be considerate of one another, for example, should model consideration in his or her dealings with all members of the school community. A school that claims to value its teachers should have a principal who treats them as professionals. In short, to be an effective principal you need to

make a conscious effort to practice the values of the school you lead.

Fourth, the principal needs to reinforce the values of the school through recognition and celebration. Deal and Kennedy (1982) contend that the values of an organization must be celebrated if they are to survive. One of the most critical and powerful means of communicating and reinforcing values is constant attention to celebrating their presence within the organization.

A principal who wishes to communicate values will need to recognize and reinforce those who act in accordance with those values. As Kanter (1983) points out, this public attention is important not only for the individual who receives it, but also for others in the organization who see "that the things they might contribute will be noticed, applauded, and remembered" (p. 151).

One caution, however, is needed concerning the subject of celebration. Brookover (1982) believes that principals often recognize and praise teachers for things unrelated to effective instruction, "for not bothering the principal or for doing other pleasant and desirable things, such as having an attractive room, being well dressed, or being the life of the Friday afternoon get-together" (p. 84).

I agree with Brookover and feel that celebration of behavior and attitudes that are unassociated with the values of the school will send messages that are at best confusing and at worst counterproductive. Celebration can be a powerful factor in

promoting particular values within a school, but the principal must make sure that association between the celebration and the values are clear.

Fifth, the principal has to be willing to confront those who disregard particular values of the school. Although many companies encourage and reward individual autonomy, they insist that core values are observed and are willing to confront those who disregard such values. Their advocacy of these values is often described as rigid, nonnegotiable, and inflexible.

If principals wish to communicate the importance of particular values, they must be willing to confront those who disregard those values. For example, principals who claim to value teaching directed to certain student outcomes must be willing to confront the teacher(s) whose instruction does not address those outcomes. Principals who claim to value the "best effort" of teachers and students must be willing to confront those who give less.

I learned, however, in the course, *Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction*, that an effective principal needs to master the art of constructive criticism. When one masters this art, confronting an individual and offering suggestions can have positive outcomes. It is important to remember confrontation is not synonymous with personal attack, hostile discussion, or threats. Peters and Austen (1985) describe it as:

a form of counseling in which the alternatives and

consequences are clear and close at hand . . . a face-to-face meeting where you bring an individual's attention to the consequences of unacceptable performance . . . . Confronting recognizes that a change is imperative. (p. 373)

The word "confront", nevertheless, may seem harsh to principals who have traditionally been told to promote a collegial, cooperative working relationship with their teachers.

Furthermore, principals are people, too, and feel the basic human desire to have the approval and esteem of those whom they work. Confrontation seems both anti-collegial and unlikely to result in the approval of the person who is challenged. Nevertheless, the principal who wants to lead will place the values of the school above the desire for popularity. Bennis and Nanus (1985) describe this ability to do without the constant approval and recognition of others as one of the keys to leadership. Burns (1978) puts it this way, ". . . no matter how strong this yearning for unanimity . . . [leaders] must settle for far less than universal affection . . . . They must accept conflict. They must be willing and able to be unloved" (p. 34).

Principals must be willing to advise students, parents, or staff members when their conduct goes against the values of the school if those values are to be communicated in a clear and unequivocal manner. My former principal in Brownsville, Texas once told me that "nothing reduces a principal's credibility

faster than the unwillingness to address an obvious problem" (C. Garza, personal communication, September 3, 1991).

### Leadership

My third philosophical value is leadership. The principal must be perceived as knowledgeable, competent, and secure to be an effective leader. This is "expert power" (Smith & Piele, 1989, p.2). Sergiovanni (1987) agrees that the mere presence or symbolic force of the principal is not adequate leadership and that the principal's expert power must be earned through knowledge and sincerity. "Employees can spot genuine interest at 50 yards away" (Crosby, 1986, p. 234).

The active component of leadership, according to Sergiovanni (1987), is called "enabling others." This enabling empowers others to be leaders within the school. Sergiovanni also says, "One rarely finds an effective school without an effective principal. By the same token, rarely does the principal accomplish much without empowering others to act (p. 7).

The principal must be prepared to delegate those duties that are appropriate to individual strengths and provide a reasonable assurance of success for those enabled others. "Effective executives build on strengths - their own strengths, the strengths of their superiors, colleagues, and subordinates; and on strengths in the situation, that is, on what they can do. They do not build on weakness" (Drucker, 1985, p. 23).

To be successful, delegation must be used wisely so that

time and energy can be devoted to those issues which are most important to the principal, thus leaving other items of less importance to be selectively neglected or delegated to capable others. Through delegated empowerment, teachers and others respond not only with increased motivation and commitment, but with surprising ability as well. They become smarter, use their talents more fully, and grow on the job.

It is important to remember, however, that empowerment is not simply turning people loose and hoping for the best. A principal who wants to empower his or her teachers must, at the same time demand that the values of the school are observed and continually monitor the progress the school is making toward its vision.

As was discussed in Introduction to Educational Administration, schools must be both "loose" and "tight." Principals must encourage innovation and insist on compliance. They must remember the advice of Rosabeth Kanter (1983) who writes: "Freedom is not the absence of structure - letting employees go off and do whatever they want - but rather a clear structure which enables people to work within established boundaries in a creative and autonomous way" (p. 151).

My individual leadership style might be best described as situational. Principal leadership must include both flexibility and resiliency (Sergiovanni, 1987). Each individual set of circumstances dictates the administrative technique that is most

appropriate. For example, there are times when one must be direct and take immediate action. At other times, my style might be participatory in which I would incorporate school-based management strategies. Sometimes the technique might be that of a facilitator to help provide the means and remove the obstacles for others to accomplish their goals. At all times, however, the principal must be flexible, as no two situations require the same response.

My style will feature timely decision-making because knowing when to react and produce a decision is often the key to the solution. The principal must be proactive. Proactivity serves as a model of the type of problem-solving that is valued within the school as an effective organization. When principals become preoccupied with solving problems by just putting out fires, very little forward movement toward educational excellence can be made. Staff members tend to copy this bad habit. "Each time we change everything around in order to accommodate some crisis, we encourage people to fight and fix rather than to prevent and achieve" (Crosby, 1986, p. 54).

Many times staff members are looking for a simple directive. I feel that it is the principal's duty to give this direction. No question should be viewed as unimportant and trivial. As in any leadership position, mistakes will be made. Every decision involves some risk. I know that I am not afraid to make mistakes, be different from others, or be too proud to admit when I am

wrong. I am not afraid of failure; progress results from learning from our mistakes.

During extensive discussions on human relation and motivation in the course, Administration of the Secondary School, it was pointed out that as the leader, the principal must recognize and understand human motivation and how it fits into schools. Intrinsic satisfiers are more likely to motivate teachers than money. Teachers are more likely to work harder when they feel appreciation for their work. The staff needs to feel like they have ownership of things. Properly used, positive reinforcement of the items that teachers truly value will help motivate the professional staff. Leslie (1987) has identified several teacher motivators: (a) achievement--feelings of having reached and affected students; (b) recognition--letters, verbal statements, gifts, incentives, and committee appointments from principals, supervisors, parents, students, and peers; (c) responsibility--allowed to help make decisions; and (d) interesting work--opportunity to associate with children or young people.

#### Innovation

My fourth and final philosophical value in my vision for administering schools is innovation. Innovation is the ability to think in new ways. It is natural for human beings to continue to learn throughout their lives. This continuing process is important for teachers and administrators, as well as students.



It is human nature to stay with or move to that which is felt safe. Safety is an important concept for the administrator to understand. One must be willing to occasionally move away from that which is deemed safe, the status quo, and move to that which is unknown.

Our country was settled by those who were willing to risk their safety and go into the unknown to look for that which was better. I am concerned that this important quality is being lost in our country. In our educational system, it is much easier to stay in our own classroom or school building where we feel safe, thus becoming isolated from new ideas and other people. Under such circumstances, ideas can become stagnant and innovation lost.

Principals can promote innovation by encouraging teachers to continue their education and by de-emphasizing failure within the context of innovation. Penalties must be done away with for thoughtful risk-taking to take place. New ideas need to be tried regardless of their success or failure. To be innovative, one cannot always afford to just play it safe.

In Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction, it was also discussed that a principal can help a teacher to grow professionally by developing a plan called a Professional Improvement Commitment (PIC). A PIC should be developed cooperatively and individualized to meet the needs of each teacher. The PIC should be written in a clear and understandable manner with specific and measurable outcomes. In order for the

PIC to be realistic, the goals must be achievable. By every teacher having his or her own PIC, innovation and improvement in the quality of education within the school should prosper.

#### Conclusion

Those who become educational leaders assume enormous obligation under our compulsory educational system. The most important obligation, in my opinion, is to build a structure of relationships within schools so that all children learn. To fulfill this, the most important function of educational leadership is to create good schools. By creating good schools, I mean that the principal uses his or her professional knowledge and skills to create conditions where all children can grow to their full potential.

I agree with John Goodlad (1984) that teaching is a moral profession--that is, only good things, or the right things, should happen as a result of our behavior. It is thus the role of the administrator to organize the activities of teachers so that good things do happen in the school.

I believe that the research done by Ron Edmonds (1979), the effective schools, supports the idea that what the principal and teachers do collectively on a day-to-day basis has a powerful influence over the behavior of individual teachers as they work with students in their classrooms. Also, the role that the principal plays as he or she interacts with the teachers makes a profound impact on teacher behavior and student learning.

My vision for leading a school, as principal, will be fulfilled during times of personal reflection. I do not expect fireworks to alert me to success because that indicator can also accompany failure. Also, I do not even expect to be thanked. It is always difficult to determine, in concrete terms, the exact moment of accomplishment or whether it has even been attained. As stated by Blanchard and Peale (1988),

Nice guys may appear to finish last, but usually they're running in a different race. For those who enjoy real success, the road is often long and quiet. The only indicators are often the footsteps along the way. They do not always go forward. (p. 61)

During times of disappointment, the principal needs to hold onto those convictions that symbolize his or her beliefs and values. The principal must forge ahead using those beliefs and values as guides. "Every problem can be solved if you take some time to reflect, seek guidance, and put things into perspective" (Blanchard & Peale, 1988, p. 78).

The writing of this essay has been both an educational and personal experience. Thinking deeply about the meaning and purpose of being an educational leader has led me to develop a better appreciation of the immense importance of the position. This reflection has also helped me to consciously examine and define my beliefs and values. I will continue to develop, refine, and change my philosophy throughout my professional life.

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