

Integrative Essay

Module 1.2.3

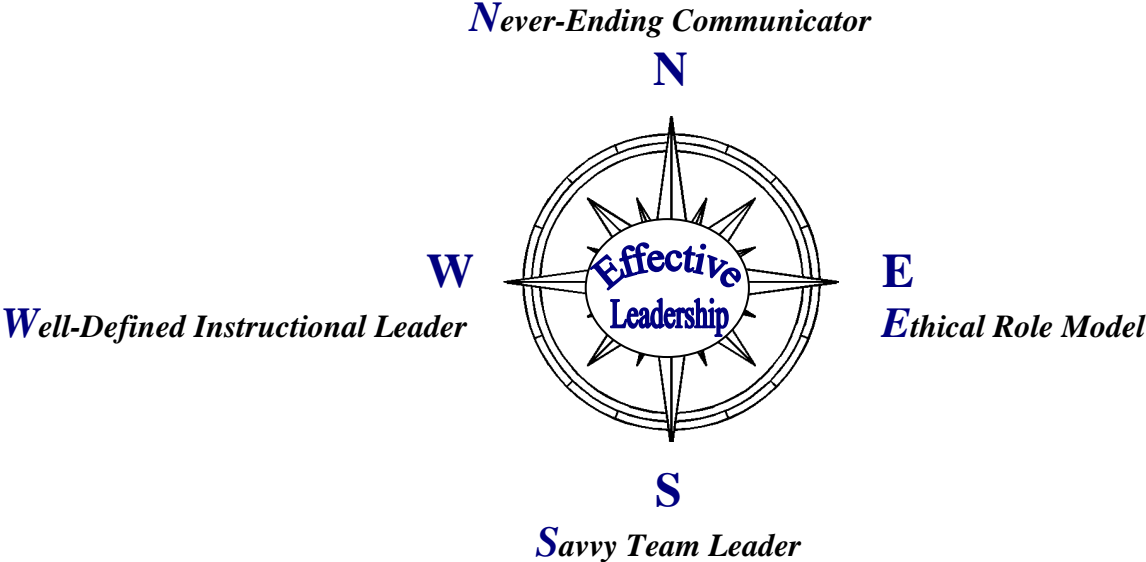
Tina Heckman

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Dr. Gilmour

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I recently had the opportunity to travel to Murrells Inlet, South Carolina. As any traveler would do, I consulted the map often, looking for evidence that I had made progress in my journey. As I looked on the map, I saw a compass rose, and the cardinal directions brought the role of the principalship into focus for me. I came to the conclusion that a principal should be a compass who guides all school stakeholders, teachers, students, and parents in the direction of learning. Just as a compass guides travelers to their destinations, showing where they are and where they should be going, so, too is the principal the navigator toward learning in schools. Throughout history, the principalship has changed according the societal and political climate of the times; however, one thing has remained the same, the principal’s role has never been one-dimensional. Based on many hours of interviews, research, and deep thought about the principalship, these findings have been synthesized into a focused view of my belief of the four guiding directions and accompanying best practices that are fundamental to effective leadership in our schools.



**Figure 1.** Traits of an effective principal, overlaid on the cardinal directions of a compass

## The Principal as the **N**ever-Ending Communicator

The needle of the administrative compass first points to an attribute that a vast majority of administrators hold to be invaluable in their quest to serve as effective principals. This attribute is the principal as the never-ending communicator. Perhaps one of the most important qualities of a sound administrator is his/her ability to be an active and effective communicator, not only within the confines of the school building, but also with the larger community. Research has found that effective principals are “good communicators who share with and solicit information from all groups in the school community” (Cotton, 2003, p. 69). Schneider and Hollinger (2006) suggest the following effective principal communicative behaviors:

- Be honest and direct.
- Be professional.
- Be a leader by listening.
- Be consistent and precise in your message.
- Show empathy.
- Be passionate.
- Be visible, available, and responsive.
- Be yourself.

Serra and Jacoby (2004) provide an all-encompassing view of the role of communication when they indicate that communication is the “genuine exchange of information, ideas, and thoughts, whereby an agreement is reached, a schedule is established, a goal is promoted, or a conflict is resolved” (p. 17). The importance of far-reaching communication first became apparent to me while gathering my group’s and the entire class’s data from our principal interviews. Those whom my group interviewed all gave a resounding ten when asked to rate the

importance of communication with school stakeholders on a scale from one to ten. Another administrator noted that communication is the most important conceptual construct (F. Hall, personal communication, March 7, 2006).

In many ways, communication is the “glue” that holds the school together. Schools contain complex networks of people working to achieve various goals, such as teachers engaging in curriculum alignment, cafeteria personnel preparing school lunches for timely serving, and the custodial staff maintaining the school’s physical plant to maintain safety. Even though these different people with seemingly different tasks may feel that they are working independently, the principal can, through effective communication, show everyone that these jobs, when broken down to their simplest parts, all have the goal of effecting positive student achievement. This vision may not always be accepted by all stakeholders. Therefore, the changing dynamics of the principalship requires that principals learn effective communication skills to make this vision a reality (Schneider and Hollenczer, 2006). Serra and Jacoby (2004) state that an effective means to communicate with all staff is to publish weekly bulletins that include the school’s mission statement in the letterhead. The bulletins should contain information such as calendars of weekly meetings, special testing, paperwork that is due, motivational quotes, and birthdays. Dr. Robert Ike, in his presentation on leadership, indicated that he makes it a bi-weekly practice to include messages with the pay checks of all employees (personal communication, March 7, 2006). These communicative best practices have the power to strengthen the bond that holds the staff together.

The communicative relationship between principals and students is also the key to the establishment and maintenance of effective schools. When surveyed, students voiced their desire for principals to communicate by speaking and listening to them (Markow and Scheer, 2003).

Effective student-principal communication may be established by the principal being visible in the hallways at the beginning and end of the school day and by the principal conducting morning announcements and encouraging students to report their sports scores or Girl Scouts/Boy Scouts events for inclusion in the morning announcements (L. Daley, personal communication, February 1, 2006). Other modes of communication include making eye contact with students, following through on student concerns, eating lunch with students, and recognizing student achievement by writing notes to students (Harris and Lowrey, 2002). These best practices provide students with a sense of belonging within the school building.

The role of communication throughout the wider community is also of great importance as principals strive to effectively communicate with groups such as the PTA, PTO, media, neighbors, and politicians. Serra and Jacoby (2004) indicate that critical to the success of the principal is how he/she embraces the community and how the community embraces the principal. It seems logical that open lines of communication with all parties are the keys to this partnership in the interest of student learning.

Principals have at their disposals several means by which to communicate with the community. Fliers, brochures, bulletins, and calendars are excellent means by which to disseminate information pertaining to school happenings. The school newsletter is also perhaps the single-most important vehicle of communication between the home and the school. Schneider and Hollenczer (2006) indicate that principals should produce at least one school newsletter per month. The newsletter should be printed, posted on the school's website (if available), and be sent to stakeholders via e-mail. The newsletter should be produced consistently, clearly, and in a timely fashion. Kirschenbaum (1999) indicates that phone calls, parent-teacher conferences, parent education classes, and parent involvement activities are all

excellent means by which to communicate. The media could also be notified of the school's "good news" through the use of press releases. There are several means by which to communicate with school stakeholders and the key to my success is both to develop a repertoire of communication modes that will meet the situational nature of communication and to make a conscious effort to devote time to communication with all stakeholders.

### **The Principal as a Savvy Team Leader**

My experiences working on an issue-analysis project in EAD 601 taught me the sheer synergistic power of the team process and how the dynamics of teams can lead to more than originally thought possible. Schools have within them groups of trained educators and support staff whose individual talents are often truly remarkable. The compass to effective leadership points in the direction of being a savvy team leader who not only taps the potential of individual teachers, but also brings people together to create new and effective programs that effect student achievement. Principals in high-achieving schools have been shown to establish an environment in which they and their staffs learn, plan, and work together to improve their schools (Cotton, 2003). The principal as a savvy team leader has the potential to make the school a truly synergistic environment, where collaboration and learning thrive.

The principalship has evolved into a truly dynamic and multi-dimensional role within the school culture. The many tasks of the principal seem to precipitate the need for team-building within the schools of today. Taking a team approach within a school requires that the principal create a collaborative culture where team processes are embedded into the everyday functioning of the school. DuFour (2002) suggests that the school should be organized into "genuine teams – people working interdependently to achieve a common goal." The key to this is to develop team goals and protocols and to always stay true to the focus on student learning.

Every team that is created, whether it be on the basketball court, on a ship's crew, or in the school, must have individuals who represent and possess different skills and viewpoints that when brought together, merge into a unit that collaborates to meet group-established goals. Teams within the schools may need to consist of teachers, support staff, parents, students, and community neighbors. It is the principal's responsibility to build teams that are composed of those whose input will be essential for the goals to be met. For example, to form a committee that will explore better preparing sixth grade students for junior high school, the principal would first make a list of all those who are affected by these transition issues (teachers, parents, students, school psychologists, guidance counselors) and invite these individuals to serve as members of the committee. Once teams are formed, Wheelan (2005) suggests the following team leader principles:

- Clearly define the organization's mission.
- Support innovation.
- Expect success.
- Pay attention to detail.
- Value team recommendations.
- Set clear expectations for group output, quality, timing, and pacing.
- Reward teamwork rather than individual performance.

As a high school tennis coach, the direction of savvy team leadership skills appears on my coaching compass as well. I see many similarities between being a team leader on the courts and being a team leader within the school building. One of my main objectives as a coach is to observe the players and place them in positions that will allow them to most effectively contribute to the team. I realize that the keys to my success as a principal will be on building

teams that will effectively work together to solve problems and create new programs, and to motivate my school team to reach new levels of success for the purpose of improving the educational experiences of students. Following the direction of developing savvy team leadership skills will result in a resounding “victory” for the students in the school that I lead.

### **The Principal as an Ethical Role Model**

Throughout history, educational leaders have had several responsibilities that consume the majority of their days such as disciplining students, managing budgets, and evaluating teachers. The third direction on the effective leadership compass that principals must follow underlies the daily activities of a school principal. Principals must exist as ethical role models in their personal and professional lives. Holding a position of leadership is a privilege, and school administrators serve as role models for all stakeholders within the school community. As an educational administrator, it is the principal’s duty to demonstrate respect, justice, service, and honesty in his/her thoughts, actions, and words. An ethical environment begins with the leader, as leading ethically is living ethically. Cotton (2003) indicates that effective principals model the behaviors that they expect from both staff and students. This is achieved by treating students, staff, and stakeholders with respect. As an administrator, I realize that I will be the role model, the compass, the barometer that will shape the school environment.

Ethical leadership also stems from the principal’s responsibility to consider the beliefs of all stakeholders within the school culture, as schools are microcosms of society. Each stakeholder possesses his or her own set of principles. It is the principal’s responsibility to venture beyond his/her personal beliefs and experiences to consider issues from others’ perspectives, as all stakeholders have the right to be considered. Daresh (2002) indicates that administrators must analyze the values and beliefs of those around them and gain insights into a wide array of

personal orientations. The principal also must facilitate ethical decision-making by including all stakeholders in an open dialogue. The principal must promote shared decision-making so that the views and values of others are considered when making decisions that will affect students (McKerrow, 1997). The key to learning the views of stakeholders is to constantly reflect on philosophical historical perspectives and to consider the ramifications of decisions both before and after they are made. This open-mindedness will ensure that decisions are based on empathy toward all involved in every situation.

At first look, the art of ethical leadership looks quite complex, especially when principals are faced with the daily “administrative moments” inherent in the principalship. I received a truly profound message pertaining to ethical leadership by listening to practicing administrators speak about ethical leadership. The administrators made this challenging issue quite simple when they stated that there are not difficult ethical decisions to make because solutions should be based on what is best for students (S. Vigliotti, personal communication, February 2, 2006 and R. Ike, personal communication, March 7, 2006). Remembering that the best interest of students should be at the heart of every decision will crystallize the challenging dilemmas that I will meet and will lead me in the direction of ethical leadership.

### **The Principal as a Well-Defined Instructional Leader**

Recently, I had the pleasure of working with a second grade class in which the students were to create a video tour of their school. The students were each assigned to interview a certain individual within the school building. The student who interviewed the principal introduced her as the person who "teaches the teachers" who then "teach the students." Through the profound insights of a second-grader, the compass turned me in the direction of the importance of the principal as a well-defined instructional leader. This principal trait “encompasses” the other

three in that instructional leadership lies at the foundation of the principal as a communicator, team leader, and ethical role model. Highly effective principals are intimately involved in their schools' curricular and instructional lives (Cotton, 2003).

The principal's role as an instructional leader is relatively new in the overall history of the school principalship; however, this task has become one of the most important responsibilities of the school administrator of today. Principals are no longer being hired to "run" school buildings. School districts are recruiting and hiring "instructional leaders" (Schneider and Hollenczer, 2006). The effective instructional leader actively promotes more effective practice in the teaching and learning processes in his/her school. The key to instructional leadership is in the principal defining his/her role in terms of recognizing instructional priorities rather than by serving as a school manager (Daresh, 2002). The well-defined instructional leader is the principal who makes instructional and learning excellence the center of his/her actions, communications, and decisions.

The effective instructional leader is involved in several facets of the school culture. This individual is involved in the coordination of staff development, receiving input from all stakeholders in planning and implementing staff development programming. The well-defined instructional leader supervises and evaluates all staff members by collaborating with them to set instructional goals and objectives and by meeting with them to check their progress. He/she secures resources to ensure that effective teaching can take place (Daresh, 2002). The instructional leader also assigns staff members to positions according to their personal strengths (Smith and Andrews, 1989). He/she facilitates instruction by supporting teachers who have innovative ideas and by making instruction a priority in terms of time. An effective instructional leader resolves student problems by assisting teachers with student discipline, enforcing

attendance policies in order to increase instructional time, and by interacting with students daily (Daresh, 2002). He/she also actively researches and knows effective instructional strategies and shares these with staff on a regular basis in venues such as faculty meetings, grade level/departmental meetings, and during the pre- and post observation conferences (Smith and Andrews, 1989). Another key to effective instructional leadership is to “create a process and structure for learning” by forming teacher teams that collaborate within and across grade levels and to analyze data to adjust instruction (L. Smithling, personal communication, February 7, 2006). Having the mindset that all school activities are centered on the effective implementation of instruction and the achievement of student learning goals will set the well-defined instructional leader on a course to effective leadership.

### **Conclusion**

I have gained valuable insights into the dynamics of the principalship through engaging in interviews, research, and class discussions, with many contemplative hours spent on synthesizing the principalship as a way of life. Certainly, there are many ordinal directions that a principal must take, including being a statistical wizard (southwest) and a no-nonsense enforcer of discipline (northeast); however, the principalship has truly evolved into a way of life that takes on several forms within the school culture. As I continue my journey on the path of educational administration, I realize that there are many directions that I will take; however, all roads of the principal as a never-ending communicator, sound student manager, ethical role model, savvy team leader, and well-defined instructional leader will lead me to an awareness of effective leadership within our schools today. With compass in hand and my experiences to guide me, I will strive to stay the course on the path to effective principal leadership.

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