

Integrative Essay

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As I reflect on the information that I have learned about the principalship, I find it extremely difficult to separately categorize the characteristics of a good principal. I believe that each component of the principal's job is inexorably connected to the others and that if a principal does one part of his job poorly, it will affect his ability to do the other parts well. So, although I have chosen to divide the principal's job into three basic categories for the purpose of this paper, I believe that great principals devote themselves and their staff to continually addressing all three areas. The general areas are management, communication, and educational leadership.

In order to get to the true "meat" of the job, educational leadership, a principal must first address the basics. Without communication, management is ineffective, and without communication and management, educational leadership is impossible. Figure 1 explains the relationship among the three areas. This is not to say that all principals must be experts in all three areas. The best school leaders will find a way to delegate tasks so that most weaknesses are imperceptible.

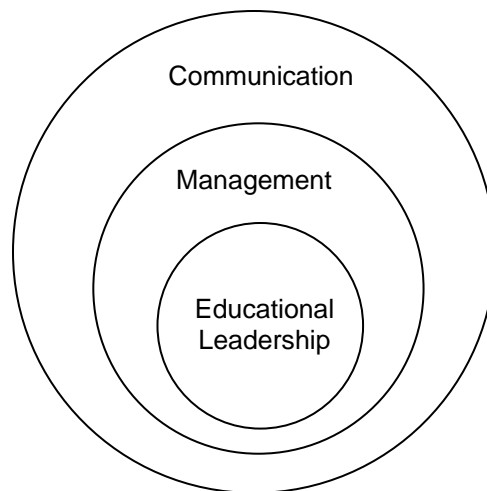


Figure 1. The nested relationship between communication, management, and institutional leadership.

“Effective communication is inseparable from effective leadership” (Daresh, 2002, p. 110). The principal of a great school can be envisioned as a symphony conductor. He/she must communicate with all members of the orchestra in order for the symphony to commence. A principal who cannot communicate effectively with all stakeholders will be unsuccessful in all other areas. Thus, making a connection, either personally or via messenger with staff, students, parents, and the community should be the principal’s first priority.

A principal must communicate well in one-to-one, small group and large group settings (Smith and Andrews, n.d.). Therefore, polished skills in both written and oral communication are extremely important. Knowing what to share, how to facilitate and cooperate with groups to solve problems, and how to resolve conflicts are also skills of a good communicator (Smith and Andrews, n.d.). Finally, and perhaps most important, the principal must be visible, approachable, and a good team member (K. Proulx, personal communication, September 17, 2004). Common methods of communication for principals include direct discussion, personal notes, mediation of conflict, observation, technology use, purposeful meetings, active listening, the use of the media, school newsletters, school calendars, and parent involvement (K. Proulx, personal communication, September 17, 2004). Through the use these mediums, the successful principal will communicate management expectations and educational goals. Communication will be revisited when we explore these areas.

A symphony is not a one person band, and no where is this more apparent to the principal than in the area of management. Without management, chaos will prevail in a building and efforts for improvement will certainly fail; yet, if a principal attempts to

manage a building alone, there will rarely be time for anything else. Thus, if a principal is to have time to focus on his/her vision for the school and effectively manage a building, he/she must have help. This is the area in which a principal must first begin to build a “community of leaders” to help in the smooth efficient operation of the building (ASCD, 1999). Management tasks must be done but not necessarily by the principal. Flexibility and the ability to delegate responsibilities, to trust staff members, to manage time, and to organize duties will directly affect the delicate balance that must be maintained between daily management duties and long range goals.

To manage well, a principal must actively prepare, plan, organize, direct, model, evaluate, and improve (Speck, 1998, p. 20). Management duties of a principal include ensuring a safe and orderly school environment, having a working knowledge of the law, shaping a schedule and prioritizing a budget in a way that will help communicate his/her vision and goals, and managing the daily activities in the building (ASCD, 1999). A principal must have a hand in all of these duties, but the degree to which he/she is involved in each depends on a perception of the job (Mawhinney, n.d.). The principal who enlists more help, and thus creates more personal choice in the area of management, will enjoy more opportunities in the critical area of educational leadership (Mawhinney, n.d.).

For example, a safe and orderly school environment is everyone’s responsibility. The principal can and should expect the help of faculty members and the assistant principal in this area. The assistant principal can help with attendance and discipline while other staff members can assist in enforcing clearly communicated expectations for

student behavior (ASCD, 1999). With this system in place, the climate of the school will be stable and the principal will be free to build a culture consistent with his/her vision.

Shaping the schedule, prioritizing the budget, and managing daily building activities are also tasks that can be partially delegated by the principal (ASCD, 1999). If a principal trusts the office staff, they can be asked to manage daily budget, payroll, cafeteria, custodial, and transportation issues. Most principals also seek help with the schedule from department chairs and staff members who have a “knack” for the logistics of scheduling (S. Williamson, personal communication, September 21, 2004). This type of delegation of responsibility not only helps take pressure off the principal, but it also gives employees a sense of ownership, pride and responsibility for the organization. Accordingly, instead of attempting to manage the building alone, the principal manages by walking around, personally contacting various leaders throughout the building. “It is the principal who gets around, who visits teachers in their offices, who investigates areas of potential trouble, who smoothes the flow of messages from one area of the building to another, who is on call and easily summoned by those needing assistance” (Speck, 1998, p. 74).

Once the principal establishes systems of communication and management in the school, the music of the symphony can begin. Yet, without a common piece of music even the finest musicians will collectively produce a sound that makes no sense, since each will be playing a personal favorite. It is the common music provided by the principal’s educational leadership that will enable the symphony to truly perform. Educational leadership differentiates good schools from great ones. A principal must

possess and communicate a vision for the school while taking the lead in the areas of climate, culture, and instruction.

I must confess that educational leadership is the part of the principalship that appeals to me most. I have a passion for education and I love teaching. Like many other principals, I want to become an administrator because I want to affect more students. I hope to motivate my teachers to fill students with knowledge and enthusiasm. I chose to combine climate, culture, and instructional leadership into one category called educational leadership because each is an integral part of inspiring a school community to achieve.

The educational leadership process must start with the leader. The principal must be a strong, healthy person with visible convictions. Principals often find strength and direction in the area of educational leadership by knowing and caring for themselves. Speck (1998) suggests that the principal's inner person clarifies beliefs and manages stress. To take full advantage of the inner person, Speck (1998, p. 81) advises the principal to:

- Clarify and commit to beliefs about teaching and learning;
- Act ethically and honestly;
- Practice good habits in physical and emotional wellness;
- Balance life;
- Plan for financial security;
- Enjoy family, friends, and social activities;
- Read widely;
- Reflect often;

- Tolerate ambiguity; and,
- Tap inner resources for strength and humor.

Through these methods, principals can discover the “bedrock beliefs” that inspire them and muster the courage to “swim upstream” on behalf of these beliefs (Goldberg, 2001).

Once a principal has utilized these strategies to tap inner strengths and convictions, he/she must next familiarize himself/herself with the school. A principal can’t enter a school and start making changes. This is a recipe for certain failure. A principal is part of a district and there are limits to his/her autonomy (ASCD, 1999). Consequently, the principal must first become familiar with the policies and procedures of the district.

Next, the new principal must get to know his staff and students and take inventory of the school situation. Speck (1998) suggests that it is the leader’s responsibility to appraise the present, envision the future, and determine the capacity for change. Only after taking these steps should a principal begin to take small steps to institute his/her vision. Cotton (2003) suggests that the principal start with a simple goal and then use the momentum of success to move toward the more ambitious goals associated with a vision.

In order to achieve a vision, a principal must get the school community on board. Communicating the vision is important, but just as a teacher who builds good rapport with students has an easier time teaching, a principal who builds a trusting, caring, collaborative, and supportive school culture will have an easier time achieving goals. There are a variety of things a principal can do to garner staff support and build a strong team. Trusting and being trustworthy, recognizing achievement, building close relationships, being sensitive to the needs of teachers, listening, having a sense of humor, and empowering staff members will all contribute to teacher loyalty (Cotton, 2003).

Confident, accountable and persistent leaders who are strong role models are also easier to follow (Cotton, 2003). Thus, the principal should continuously model high standards for professional development, set examples for core values, and show love, appreciation, care and respect for children (Cotton, 2003, p. 42).

A principal who has the confidence of his/her staff is unlimited in what he/she can accomplish. This is where the concept of a community of leaders is most important. The community of leaders is the cultural backdrop for successful educational leadership. Principals, particularly at the high school level, can't possibly be experts in every subject area, yet they are surrounded by teachers with various levels of expertise. It is of paramount importance that a principal utilize his best teachers to communicate his vision, to assist in the change process, and to serve as instructional leaders for others (ASCD, 1999). These teacher leaders are the key to success for both the school and the principal.

So, what do successful educational leaders do? In their roles as instructional leaders they mentor teachers, encourage professional development, strive for continuous improvement, and create and sustain a climate conducive to learning. In their roles as visionaries they support and sustain the long term goals of the school. I will further explore best practices in each of these areas. Specific best practices in each of these areas are outlined below:

In the area of teacher mentoring for instructional leadership, good principals:

- Clearly communicate their expectations to teachers (Cotton, 2003);
- Closely monitor instruction and worry less about what teachers are teaching and more about what children are learning (ASCD, 1999);

- Evaluate instruction, document performance and offer help to struggling teachers (ASCD, 1999);
- Utilize their best teachers as models for the staff (S. Williamson, personal communication, September 21, 2004);
- Are students of educational research who share their knowledge (ASCD, 1999);
- Constantly challenge teachers to higher achievement levels (ASCD, 1999); and,
- Allow teachers to be autonomous and take risks as long as they are supporting the shared vision of the school (ASCD, 1999).

In the area of professional development for instructional leadership, good principals:

- Hold frequent discussions about curriculum and instruction (ASCD, 1999);
- Encourage collaboration among teachers (ASCD, 1999);
- Provide opportunities for professional development both outside the school and within the school between colleagues (ASCD, 1999); and,
- Actively participate in staff development (Cotton, 2003).

In the area of instructional leadership for school improvement, good principals:

- Analyze performance and assessment data and identify strengths and weaknesses (S. Williamson, personal communication, September 21, 2004);
- Design programs and intervention services for students who are not learning (ASCD, 1999);

- Continually monitor progress on instructional goals and plan for improvement through refinement and alignment of curriculum (ASCD, 2003);
- Use shared decision making to empower staff (Cotton, 2003);
- Encourage parents and the community to take an active part in the education of children (K. Proulx, personal communication, September 17, 2004); and,
- Expect and strive for continuous improvement (ASCD, 1999).

In the area of instructional leadership to create and sustain a climate conducive to learning, good principals:

- Are visible, accessible, aware, and make frequent classroom visits (Cotton, 2003);
- Protect instructional time from intrusions such as phone calls, announcements, and assemblies (Cotton, 2003);
- Protect the staff and school from external pressures from the community and central office (Cotton, 2003); and,
- Support and encourage cultural and intellectual diversity.

In the area of supporting and sustaining the vision and long term goals of the school, good principals:

- Have ceremonies and rituals that instill pride and support vision (Cotton, 2003);
- Are able to articulate their vision and display behavior that is consistent with it (Cotton, 2003);
- Work with staff and community members to develop goals that are directly related to the district's mission (Cotton, 2003);

- Shape the schedule and prioritize the budget in a way that supports their vision and goals (ASCD, 1999); and,
- Evaluate all proposals for change based on their potential to enrich education (Cotton, 2003).

Although there are other practices that contribute to good educational leadership, I believe that the principal who communicates and manages well, who champions a vision, who builds a community of leaders and learners, and who implements these best practices for educational leadership will be well on the way to achieving success for his/her school.

The responsibilities of a principal seem endless. This becomes quite evident when one writes an eleven page job description that merely scrapes the surface of what is required for success. I have learned a great deal about the job of principal in this course but I am still certain that the things that I don't know about the job far exceed the things that I know. This is both exciting and unnerving. One of the things that appeals to me most about the principalship is the opportunity that I will have to continuously learn and discover new challenges. I know that it will be an uphill battle but I am ready.

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