Three Keys to Success for Principals

(and Their Teachers)

by A. Lumpkin

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A principal's emphasis on values, people, and teamwork will positively impact a school's culture.

What is successful leadership and how can leadership concepts be applied to schools? Hundreds of books and articles and a plethora of executive seminars describe what leadership is and propose strategies for what effective leaders do. Most of these writings and presentations, however, focus on business, with much less information available about how to lead schools. In addition, there is a diversity of opinions about what makes leaders effective. This article suggests that it is possible to extract, reframe, and apply the best of what is known about leadership to help principals be more successful. Moreover, if principals are successful, teachers also are positioned to be successful, with the ultimate impact being successful student learning.

Approaches to Leadership

Numerous educational theories describe a specific approach to leadership in advocating for its efficacy. For example, the *great person theory* states that leaders possess remarkable abilities or attributes; the *great trait theory* espouses that leaders display one distinguishing characteristic or one unique trait, such as charisma.

Transactional leaders are directive as they act based on organizational goals, structures, and systems. *Transformational leaders* are visionaries who set new high goals and create commitment through shared values. *Strategic leaders* envision, innovate, build, motivate, and

energize organizations and people. *Servant leaders* are devoted to serving the needs of organizational members by listening and building a sense of community.

Leadership theories, characteristics, and abilities have the potential to benefit many aspects of society, including education.

Applications to School Leadership

Deal and Peterson (1999; 2000; 2007), Bolman and Deal (2002; 2007), and others have borrowed from the publications and presentations about effective leadership and applied insights into school leadership. A perusal of the literature dedicated to school leadership in the United States since 1900 revealed a steady increase in the number of published volumes, from fewer than 20 in the first half century to hundreds each decade between 1950 and 1990. Since 1990, more than 1,000 volumes have been published per decade, including advice from as many inside as outside of the field of educational leadership. Cubberley (1923) provided an early seminal work about the leadership of principals in elementary schools, with a focus on organizational or managerial aspects. Throughout his career, he wrote extensively about the history of education and administration of schools.

Many school leadership publications have emphasized *instructional leadership,* which, broadly defined, may include activities spanning from formal supervision of classroom instruction, through provision of professional development for teachers, to a more collaborative focus on helping teachers improve practice (Blasé and Blasé 1999). Another theme for books on school leadership, especially in the 1990s, has been educational reform and dealing with change (e.g., Schlechty 1990; Goldring and Rallis 1993; Tyack and Cuban 1995; Sizer 1996; Alvy and Robbins 1998).

Recent focus has been on principals leading a teaching-learning process centered on student learning (i.e., McEwan 2003; Blasé and Blasé 2004; Lindstrom and Speck 2004; Shaver 2004; Bolman and Deal 2007; Deal and Peterson 2007). This emphasis on student learning seems especially timely given the growing concerns about accountability and improvement of test scores.

Emphasis on Student Learning

With mutual trust and respect as the foundation of their relationships, principals today collaborate with teachers in emphasizing student learning. In practice, then, the leadership of principals is intertwined with the development of teachers. Thus, the three keys to success suggested for principals are equally beneficial to teachers, who partner with principals in this shared endeavor. First, principals should be paragons of integrity and model values such as respect, fairness, and trust (e.g., Terry 1999; Brewer 2001; Fullan 2003; Tschannen-Moran 2004; Holloway 2006; Strike 2007). Second, because people are the most valuable resource in schools, successful principals focus on the professional development, ongoing support, and active engagement of teachers (DuFour and Berkey 1995; Blasé and Blasé 1999; Perry 2002; Lamperes 2004; Drago-Severson 2007). Third, successful principals facilitate and nurture teamwork among teachers so they can collaboratively ensure that student learning is each school's central mission (DuFour 2004; Shaver 2004; Veersteeg 2004; Donaldson 2007).

The Importance of Values in a School's Culture

Principals directly shape and mold a school's culture. This culture includes unique beliefs, traditions, and norms within each school that impact attitudes, motivation, and performance. According to Richards (2004), new teachers most admire principals who establish a culture based on fairness, honesty, and trustworthiness. Teachers want principals who ensure that integrity serves as the guiding principle upon which decisions and actions are based.

Stephen Covey (2004), reporting on a survey of thousands of individuals, identified integrity as the number one essential quality for a leader. Principals with integrity create alignment with shared values and make decisions based on those values. Principals, by how they live their lives and make decisions, build commitment—individually and collectively with teachers, parents, and the public—based on mutual trust and respect. Teachers find their work more enjoyable when they are working with principals who emphasize values-based leadership.

Principals who lead their schools successfully also ensure the teaching of values, which, according to Mondale and Patton (2001) in *School: The Story of American Public Education,* was one reason why schools in the United States were established. One way principals and

teachers can emphasize values is through a school-wide program, such as Character Counts! That national approach to teaching character in schools and communities involves teachers, parents, and especially students in learning about and practicing six pillars of character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship (Josephson Institute 2007). Principals who model values and facilitate student learning of values through this or a similar program have made significant inroads in changing cultures in schools.

Principals daily are entrusted with the lives and well-being of children and adolescents in schools. Most principals realize that moral lessons students learn each day may be related more directly to what they see modeled than to what is written in textbooks or spoken in classrooms. Principals have a responsibility to fulfill the public trust by ensuring that students will learn and act in respectful and responsible ways. Communities expect principals to display self-discipline and have the courage to do what is right regardless of the difficulty or challenge. Acting on values such as integrity, principals and teachers can help students learn and develop values.

Building Relationships

Teachers are the most important asset of a school. Every school reform effort in recent years has emphasized the centrality of caring, qualified teachers in helping students achieve their potential as learners. Teachers attest that the most important person in facilitating their achievement of this goal is the principal. When principals serve as collaborative instructional leaders, teachers report that they feel supported, validated, and recognized for how effectively they teach and their students learn.

Leaders are able to unleash the potential of people by aligning values, systems, structure, and strategy. Because leaders place a high premium on people, acquiring and retaining good people is a leader's most important task. To maximize the potential of a school, principals as leaders develop the abilities of each teacher. This developmental process includes enabling each teacher to capitalize on his or her unique talents and passions.

Principals as leaders do not micromanage. Rather, they delegate responsibilities to teachers, provide concomitant authority needed to execute tasks, and hold teachers accountable for results. When this scenario exists, teachers feel empowered to fulfill their educational responsibilities in ways that work optimally for them and their students. The triumvirate of

giving responsibility, providing authority, and holding accountable is important in developing caring, qualified teachers and validating their enhanced self-worth.

The principal as leader taps into passions and energies of teachers by connecting through their values, thereby unlocking human potential and increasing the likelihood of success. Ways to empower teachers may include soliciting their advice and opinions, asking them to model effective instructional practices for other teachers, and praising and reinforcing their efforts in helping students learn. This type of environment may yield extraordinary results.

Principals as leaders nurture relationships with teachers based on mutual trust, honesty, loyalty, and respect. As principals work with teachers to set clear goals and establish priorities, they concurrently build consensus around shared goals. In working individually and collaboratively to achieve values-based goals, principals are dedicated to expanding the abilities of each teacher.

The Synergy of Teamwork

Principals facilitate teamwork by working cooperatively and collaboratively with teachers as equals in the educational process. Inherent in this teaming process are consistent affirmations or validations of each team member's contributions and potentially positive impact. Principals who are caring, loyal, sensitive, respectful, and responsible facilitate productive relationships among team members. They nurture this teamwork in three essential ways. First, principals work collaboratively with teachers to design realistic and attainable learning outcomes for students along with developmentally appropriate curricula to achieve those outcomes. Second, principals provide timely, relevant, and ongoing professional development to affirm, extend, and reward teachers' instructional abilities and strategies. Third, principals and teachers accept joint responsibility and accountability for the quality of teaching and student learning.

Closing Thoughts

The importance of values, people, and teamwork to success for principals, teachers, and schools is affirmed in the work of Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005). These researchers examined the effect of leadership on student achievement and identified 21 leader

responsibilities or competencies impacting student learning. Each of these 21 can be associated directly with values, people, or teamwork. A few examples specific to the three essentials to success for principals illustrate a strong connection with these leader competencies (see "Characteristics of a Successful Principal").

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Characteristics of a Successful Principal

Values

- Communicates and operates from strong ideals and beliefs about schooling

- Establishes clear goals and maintains a focus on those goals

- Adapts leadership behaviors to current needs

- Inspires and leads new and challenging innovations

People

- Establishes strong lines of communication with teachers

- Ensures that teachers are aware of current theories and practices and makes discussion about them a regular aspect of the school's culture

- Provides teachers with materials and professional development necessary for successful execution of their work

- Recognizes and rewards individual accomplishments

Teamwork

- Involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies

- Monitors the effectiveness of school practices and their impact on student learning

- Contributes to the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices

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- Develops shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation

Based on Marzano et al. 2005, 42–43

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Values, people, and teamwork are three keys to the success of principals, as they model integrity and other values; focus on nurturing, supporting, and developing teachers; and team collaboratively with teachers. Successful principals establish a school's culture based on integrity and values, enhance the competences of each teacher, and create alignment with a shared focus on student learning through teamwork.

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