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## Critical elements essential for exemplary educational leadership

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## Critical elements essential for exemplary educational leadership

### Abstract

Education is a chameleon that is ever changing. As educators we must be willing to see where change needs to be made and accept the fact that we as individuals may need to change in order to provide the best education that the students deserve. Change is not an easy thing to accept or accomplish. It is more comfortable to sit in the same old place and not look outside our blinders. However we must realize that this does not help students or their parents. Not only does it not help these people it does not help us become better educators.

CRITICAL ELEMENTS ESSENTIAL FOR  
EXEMPLARY EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,  
and Postsecondary Education  
University of Northern Iowa

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In Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education

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by

Kathleen T. Jones

May 2005

Dr. Gregory Reed

Becoming an educator has been within the great crystal ball of my life ever since I was a junior in high school. At that time I volunteered in an elementary special education room for an hour a day. I realized that some students need one on one help in order for them to succeed in life as well as in education. Many times we were assigned to take the students and have them shower and wash their clothes. This only reinforced the feeling that there are kids out there that need guidance.

Upon entering the University of Nebraska I was exposed to other situations that reinforced the belief that help was needed. Working in an inner-city daycare and watching as children as well as parents struggle to just survive cemented this belief.

The belief that there is a need to be met has definitely filtered over into my beliefs of education. I feel that we as educators are not here to fulfill ourselves and we are not here for the great pay, or the summers off. We are here for one reason only and that is to do the best we can to educate the students in any way that is necessary. Many times students look to us for guidance knowledge and sometimes protection. I truly feel that the field of education has teachers as well as administrators in it that should reevaluate why they are in education. I hope that when this job becomes a burden and I do not put my all into it, I will look towards other opportunities.

Education is a chameleon that is ever changing. As educators we must be willing to see where change needs to be made and accept the fact that we as individuals may need to change in order to provide the best education that the students deserve. Change is not an easy thing to accept or accomplish. It is more comfortable to sit in the same old place and not look outside our blinders. However we must realize that this does not help students or their parents. Not only does it not help these people it does not help us become better educators.

Part of being an educator is the desire to continue to gain knowledge. Many people become too comfortable with themselves and the amount of knowledge that they have and do not see the advantage of gaining knowledge. It is possible that they may see the advantage but decide not to do the work that it takes to obtain that knowledge. I hopefully will continue to attend classes in all areas in order to stay current with methods of teaching.

The educational leadership program will give me the vehicle by which I may be able to make a positive difference in student's education. This difference will be on a larger scale than if I were teaching within the regular classroom. I will be able to guide others and give them ideas on how to improve their teaching. I will also have the opportunity to work directly with the public. This in itself will be a challenge since education is not only the concern of teachers and parents; it is the concern of all people whether they have a child within the system or not. I believe that a mistake that is made by schools is not to inform the public about what is going on in the schools whether good or bad. We must have the support of all of society, they are our backbone whether we want them to be or not. We cannot stand alone we need the funding, the support and the encouragement of all.

I do believe that leadership is a part of society that can be lonely. However, I plan to drag people to the top to help lead. You cannot lead alone! In order for education to work best for everyone you must have others help. They must truly believe in and help accomplish what needs to be done. If you do not have others join in to make any necessary change you would feel like your running into a brick wall.

Micro managing is another downfall that is easily attained. As a leader you must trust others to do their jobs and when they do not, it is your job to step in and find out why and help them make corrections. This gives you the opportunity to be involved in making small changes

that are needed to make your school a success and this also gives you the opportunity to share your knowledge with your colleagues.

There are times when being a leader places the responsibility squarely on your shoulders. It is during these times that one must have their values and beliefs clear in your mind. Decisions must be made, and as a leader we must learn to live with any decision that is made whether it is about a single student or whether it is about a budget issue. At no time are we going to make everyone happy. We must be confident that we have done our best for all students.

Another critical element that I believe is essential for exemplary educational leadership is that an educator should work with colleagues, either independently or through association with other, to assure necessary improvements in educational services. An educator should respect the right of other to exercise independent thought and to express constructive criticism in an appropriate and professional manner.

I believe that in order for a leader not only in education but in any situation to become successful we must learn to delegate various assignments. We need to be confident that the staff that we have working with us is competent. If we do not feel that the staff is competent then we should definitely look at why and make changes. The students that we serve deserve only the best this best must not only be the best to work with them but also the best to work with us.

I believe that delegating tasks provide a sense of ownership throughout the system. As stated by Cunningham and Cordeiro, "The democratic style of leadership is collaborative it encourages the team effort to narrow possibilities and make final decisions" (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2003, p.139). This type of leadership is essential to the ownership of a system. People must believe in what they are working for. In order to have people believe we must give them an active part.

Make no mistake that there are definite limits set within their duties that will be followed.

After all as the administrator the final responsibility is ours.

Not only is the delegation of tasks necessary for the maintenance of a successful school it is necessary for us as administrators to work effectively. As Stephen Covey states in his book *Principle Centered Leadership*, "We must simply delegate, to increase our discretionary time for high-priority tasks. Time spent delegating, in the long run, is our greatest time saved" (Covey, 1991, p.237). Delegation is necessary to allow time that we need to deal with priority tasks. We must stay somewhat involved with the items that we delegate however we must put trust in the people that we have working for us. We must have professional, competent people working for us and the students. This is not a wish however it is a necessity. If you must take steps to replace the people that you feel are not competent then so be it, that is the job of a leader, we cannot lead those who we do not feel are completely competent in their jobs.

John C. Maxwell states, "Only secure leaders give power to others. But an insecure leader hoards power. In fact, the better his people are, the more threatened he feels – and the harder he will work to limit their success and recognition" (Maxwell, 1999, p.237). We cannot be that insecure leader. We must recognize the success of the staff. In the long run this is a reflection upon our leadership. Without the ability to take on tasks our staff cannot see some of the successes that they are capable of. We cannot see what they are truly capable of. Leadership is not only the control of everything it is also the ability to let go of something. For many this is the most difficult thing to do.

What if something goes wrong? Ultimately we are to answer. This I feel is a chance that true leaders must take. We must have staff that has ownership in our school in all aspects. The only way to accomplish this is through the delegation of tasks.

According to Covey, "People and organizations don't grow much without delegation and completed staff work, because they are confined to the capacities of the boss and reflect both personal strengths and weaknesses" (Covey, 1991, p.237). For a leader to admit that they may be the cause of stagnation within the system is a very difficult thing to do, however, if we are effective leaders we must look at all aspects of our organization including ourselves.

Educators want to create students that are creative and can stand on their own. This is the ultimate goal of the school system. To produce young adults that have a mind of their own that can solve problems on their own to become productive citizens. It is also our job as leaders to insure that the staff that we employ uses their abilities to be productive citizens and be creative as well as show their strengths. In doing this we ensure that they will be able to allow their students to do the same. We must give them the responsibilities that they need to accomplish this and not just become clones of the administration not using their own strengths and imagination and skills.

Whether it be one person or a multitude of persons' communication between them is essential in order to develop exemplary leadership. In no way can we feel that we can lead as a dictator and not communicate with others. As stated by Ronald Heifetz, "Exercising leadership and bearing personal responsibility requires seeing the difference between oneself and one's role." (Heifetz R., 1994, p. 263). We must be able to decipher the difference between people's reactions to our decisions and the reaction to our personality. Many times people will react to a decision that was made and the administrator takes it personally. It is essential that we realize that not everyone will be happy with every decision that is made. We must do our best to make decisions that are in the best interest of students and their education.



It is pertinent that as educational leaders that we develop ownership of new and current ideas with not only ourselves but with our staff, students and public constituents. In order for a school to run smoothly communication must be present to establish ownership of programs, current and future ideas and changes in the system. Discussions of changes and decisions should be made prior to the decision whether it is with fellow administrators, committees or staff. The ultimate decision is in the administrator's hands. However, people are motivated by giving their opinion of a situation; we all would like to be heard and if given the opportunity to be heard whether the opinion is used or not it creates ownership within the system.

Rensis Likert shows through a series of studies originated at the University of Michigan Social Research Center that the ideal style of leadership dealt with management trusting employees, regards them as working willingly toward the achievement of organizational objectives. People were motivated by the rewards when involved at all levels of decision making (Likert, 1967, p. 3).

I believe that an essential part of communication is not only verbal communication but also the listening element of communication. Without this communication does not exist because it is totally one sided. As stated by John C. Maxwell, "The unwillingness to listen is too common in poor leaders. It is very easy to say that we will communicate with others and make this communication a smoke screen for doing what we wanted to do anyway" (Maxwell, 1991, p. 45). We must listen and at times possibly admit that our ideas do not work or need to be modified in order to work the best for the school. We must put our own ego aside for the benefit of all. Hard to do but very necessary, to many schools and businesses end up with micro-managers and nothing is accomplished.

Steven Covey believes that communication is the prerequisite to problem-solving and one of the most fundamental skills necessary in life. He feels that the first challenge is to say what we mean and the second is to listen so that we understand what others mean when they speak (Covey, 1993, p. 142). Too often we do not communicate well and the idea that we would like to get across is misunderstood or totally lost. If we do not learn to listen then other ideas will be lost and opportunities for better systems missed.

Infusing the element of communication into practice as a principal would be challenging. It would range from the element of being visible to staff and students in the halls and classrooms to communicating with administrators from other districts as well as communicating with constituents of your district.

Being visible is essential to the smooth operation of a school. Students, staff, parents and community members must know that you are committed to an excellent educational setting. An effective and time consuming way to do this is to be visible not only during school time in your building but also at events outside of school hours, whether it be at games, concerts or the local fireman's fish dinner fund raiser. This demonstrates that you are committed to the community as a whole and not just to yourself and the job. It is after all the whole community that votes on issues that are school related and not just the parents of the students. As an educator I truly believe that we must draw the whole community into working with the school and the students in order to become totally successful. The public wants to see community involvement in all areas. Students are encouraged with the mere presence of staff, it shows that they matter. Students are influenced by many outside forces other than the school and we need these forces to be working with us and not against us.

The belief in communication aligns with the Iowa Standards for School Leaders in that the administrator has knowledge and understanding of effective communication, the inclusion of all members in the school community. The school community being involved in school improvement efforts would be evident when community members are placed on various committees that would look at various items concerning the school. Communication also allows students and staff to feel valued. Communication is essential to the existence of all portions of society. We as educators must become experts at communicating whether it is through discussion or listening or just observation.

A critical element that I believe is essential for exemplary educational leadership is that an educator should work with colleagues, either independently or through association with other, to assure necessary improvements in educational services, also that an educator should also respect the right of other to exercise independent thought and to express constructive criticism in an appropriate and professional manner.

I believe that in order for a leader not only in education but in any situation to become successful we must learn to delegate various assignments. We need to be confident that the staff that we have working with us is competent. If we do not feel that the staff is competent then we should definitely look at why and make changes. The students that we serve deserve only the best this best must not only be the best to work with them but also the best to work with us.

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John C. Maxwell states, "Only secure leaders give power to others. But an insecure leader hoards power. In fact, the better his people are, the more threatened he feels – and the harder he will work to limit their success and recognition" (Maxwell, 1999, p.123). We cannot be that insecure leader.

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chance that true leaders must take. We must have staff that has ownership in our school in all aspects. The only way to accomplish this is through the delegation of tasks.

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Educators want to produce students that are creative and can stand on their own. This is the ultimate goal of the school system. To produce young adults that have a mind of their own that can solve problems on their own to become productive citizens. It is also our job as leaders to insure that the staff that we employ uses their abilities to be productive citizens and be creative as well as show their strengths. In doing this we ensure that they will be able to allow their students to do the same. We must give them the responsibilities that they need to accomplish this and not just become clones of the administration not using their own strengths and imagination and skills. As administrators it is our job according to M. Kay Alderman to give our teachers feedback and support when they try new things (Alderman, 2004, 274).

As an effective principal we must hold ourselves to the standards that we expect the teachers to be held to. As stated by Todd Whitaker, “Like effective teachers, effective principals treat people with respect” (Whitaker 2003 p.21).

Being a leader within a school today directly aligns with Iowa Standard Four which involves being a Collaborative Leader. It is the school administrator’s job as an educational leader to promote the success of all students by collaborating with the families and community

members. I believe that this is extremely evident when it involves the students that are in our Special Education programs.

According to Bartlett, Weinenstein and Etscheidt (2002, p.234)

Principals can model interest in and acceptance of all students, staff, and programs in the schools; they can distribute space, schedules, and resources so as to minimize conflict; they can structure new roles and new formats in which staff members can work together supportively.

I believe that as an administrator that I must show the staff and the public that I truly believe that all students deserve nothing but the best that we can offer them. It is through this leadership and understanding that I truly hope that others will see that it is essential to provide the best to everyone. It takes time and dedication to prove to the public and staff that this is important to give to all students.

The beliefs that are stated by Goor, Schwenn, and Boyer that I feel are excellent are the following (Goor, Schwenn, and Boyer, 1977, p.134-135):

1. Believe all children can learn
2. Accept all children as part of their school community
3. Believe teachers can teach a wide range of students
4. Believe teachers are responsible for all students
5. Believe that principals are responsible for the education of all children in their building.

Within these beliefs I feel that the fourth one which states that teachers are responsible for all students is extremely important. We cannot just sit within the walls of our own little rooms and concentrate on the students that we have for that hour or year we must look at students as a whole. Education is not a one time incident it is ongoing and as educators we must look at

everyone and the extent of their education so that we can give them the full extent of our knowledge to make them successful for a lifetime.

I believe that the statement that Carol Dweck makes concerning drawing conclusions about groups is very appropriate to education and it is something that we should all keep in mind. Dweck states, "Dangers arise when people lose sight of this complexity and go beyond the evidence to conclude that some groups are inherently superior or inferior to others, or that most members of a group share the same qualities" (Dweck, 2000, p. 94). As educators we must keep an open mind. All students are individuals and as such we must look at their individual behaviors and needs. Again we cannot get too comfortable and forget that we are teaching individuals and not a group as a whole. Students have a separate identity just as all teachers do.

To be a successful administrator you must be a visionary leader. As I learned reading *Fighting to Save Our Urban Schools and Winning* (McAdams, 2000, p.255) the Superintendent, Principal and the majority of the School Board must have a common vision. They must work together for the common goal. Building principals are the ones who put reforms into effect they are the ones on the front lines. As education changes it is the principal who will have to discuss with staff, students and the public that the aspects of change is a process and not an event (Hall and Hord, 2001, p.4). I also realize that it is necessary to have individuals within the organization change before change can really occur. As administrators we are the necessary elements to bring about change, we must truly believe in it in order for it to happen. One of the great quotes that I feel all educators should remember comes from a simple book called *Who Moved My Cheese?*. This simple quote is, "If you do not change you could become extinct" (Johnson, 1998, p.46). We should know only too well as educators that change is necessary, our culture and society is

constantly changing and if we do not change with it and adapt and at times work against that change we are doing our students a great disservice.

The role of the principal in the urban school according to Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker and Jefferies will be to place priority on teachers and others in the system they will create new visions and muster commitment to those visions (Fitzhugh-Walker, Jefferies, Thomas, 2000, p.20). Getting teachers to commit to a new or different vision will always be a challenge however when as a principal you do all of these things in combination and lead by example your staff will follow and if not then it is your job to find out why they will not and to rectify the situation.

It was never said that life was easy however no one ever explained how challenging being a true leader is. It is through time and dedication that I will be able to lead a school system into the future. I truly believe that the students deserve the best that the education system has to offer. The system is not only the best within the teachers but the best within the administration. Good administrators encourage and model what they want staff, students and the community to become. I will always try to model what will be best for the students and the school system. The most important reason to do this is so students will strive to become the very best that they can be. We must all remember that this moment in time will never happen again and as such we must make the best of it. Time and education are too precious to waste.