Instructional Leaders for the 21st Century: Seven Critical Characteristics

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Futuristic thinking of principals as instructional leaders is required for education in the 21st century. As information bases increase at an astounding rate, as more and more students enter schools at risk, and as political, social and technological systems change radically, traditional educational structures are rapidly becoming dysfunctional. In order for instructional leaders to successfully restructure school systems from the debris of traditional structures and create structures which will meet the needs of a multicultural and increasingly unpredictable society (Peters, 1987), seven critical characteristics will be required. Principals who wish to survive as instructional leaders for the 21st century will need to be visionary leaders, strategic planners, change agents, great communicators, role models, nurturers, and disturbers.

Visionary Leaders

Educational research has long indicated that effective leaders must have a vision for the future. Effective schools research (1989) called for a clear mission for schools. Kanter (1983) stated that change masters must develop a shared vision for the direction of the organization and its participants. Lewis (1988) stated that organizational leaders must be vision makers. Researchers who have studied excellent schools have likewise noted that effective leaders were charismatic, visionary leaders (DeBeVoice, 1984). Vision is a vital characteristic of leadership. Bennis and Nanus (1985) defined the vision as a way of organizing meaning for the members of the organization. Peters (1987) offered the following characteristics of effective vision: The vision should be inspiring, clear and challenging and about excellence, stand the test of time in a turbulent world, stable but constantly challenged, a beacon and control when all else is up for grabs, aimed at empowering our own people first, pre-

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paring for the future while honoring the past, lived in details, not broad strokes (pp. 486–490).

Principals as instructional leaders must think globally—they must know where education and educators should be headed to best prepare students and staff for the 21st century. Only a clear vision of the future and a flexible blueprint for arriving at that vision will equip instructional leaders adequately.

Strategic Planners

Strategic planning will be a prerequisite skill for survival of principals as instructional leaders, especially in turbulent times. Strategic planning allows new administrators to gather a quick picture of an organization and provides a mechanism for developing appropriate short and long-term goals for the organization. Instructional leaders must be astute at assessing internal and external environments (Greene, 1987). Such assessment should include a review of the organizational structure and member relationships to one another. Successful staff development efforts will revolve around the existing educational structure and personnel interaction, perceived and real leaders, power centers, and blockers. Informal organizational structures are very fluid and constantly changing. This state of constant change requires that leaders constantly check perceptions of the organizational relationships. An effective, excellent administrator will always have a good feel for the organizational pulse and temperature (individual and groups). The external environment consists of the structures and behaviors which connect to and support the educational structure. Connections and support systems examples include community organizations and political organizations. External politics will determine the status of the building organization within the total educational structure. Instructional leaders would do well to spend a high percentage of their time listening when first arriving at any organization. Instructional leaders must understand the workings of the organization, proper channels, and real and perceived leadership pools. Support from the school community will be vital to making successful restructuring changes. Input and involvement from the school community are important aspects of successful school change (Peshkin, 1978, 1986). Awareness of power holders and blockers in the community will also be crucial to the success of any innovation.

Short and long-term objectives are elements of strategic planning that add flesh to the leader's vision. Leaders must have the big picture in mind, but also possess an ability to "chunk down" that vision into realistic, tangible short-term objectives for staff, students, parents, and community. Allowance must also be made to see that such visions are flexible enough to allow for a rapidly changing future. Long and short-term objectives also demand development of methods to measure the achievement of objectives. Again, administrators must rely on internal and external environment awareness in order to continuously evaluate the validity of the vision and objectives for meeting the needs of the organization and its members.

Strategic planning offers a modus operandi for instructional leaders. Equipped with a vision, instructional leaders using strategic planning can offer tangible guidelines and charts for achievement of the vision.

Change Agents

Principals as instructional leaders must be change agents. As the information base and major technological/echnological advances increase daily, a knowledge of the change process will be crucial. Students of the future may expect to change jobs as often as four or five times in their

careers as new businesses bloom and die in 5–10 year cycles (Lezotte, 1989). Obviously, instructional leaders aiming for a restructuring of the educational system must be informed about the multiple realities of change. An awareness of the stages of change can help leaders guide staff members through an age of change. Fullan (1982) listed the following stages of change: initiation/adoption, implementation, and institutionalization. In addition to knowing the stages of change, administrators must be aware of the readiness stage of an organization before even attempting to make a change. Again, awareness of the internal and external environments will offer data to define the organization's readiness. Following a readiness check, instructional leaders should begin procedures to alter organizational readiness by developing needed attitudes for initiating a change, or by actually initiating a change if the readiness is present. Knowledge of leaders and blockers will enable change agents to properly assign roles for successful adoption, implementation, and institutionalization. Kanter (1983) suggested employing identified prime movers within an organization as initiators of change.

The timing of change can be a most crucial component. Instructional leaders must constantly check the organizational barometer and know whether or not the time is right for a specific change. Smith, Kleine, Prunty and Dwyer (1988) reinforced the importance of timing in their organizational trilogy about a school "caught in its own time."

In order to guide educators safely through turbulent changing times, instructional leaders must be well versed in strategies of change. They must know the phases, frustrations, and assumptions of change. The reward will be institutionalization of necessary change.

Communicators

Principals as instructional leaders must be master communicators. Verbal and nonverbal behaviors have a great impact on other people (Bailey, 1988). Vision will be of no use to an organization without an ability to communicate that vision. The language of leaders is noticeably different from followers. Charismatic leaders have an ability to reduce complex initiatives to simple, tangible, realistic and desirable actions, beliefs and attitudes. Educational wordsmith Ernest Boyer (1988) stated a need for leaders who can communicate the fact that schools must provide a sense of belonging for students and staff alike. All forms of school improvement must address this basic need, both publicly and privately. Kanter (1983) stated a need for leaders with an ability to be explicit. Effective schools research correlates have also included clear expectations (1975). Expectations must be communicated in a way that is recognizable and achievable. Administrative presentation must be varied to accommodate the individual styles and unique experiences of all listeners.

Instructional leaders must not only be able to see the big picture, but must also take every opportunity to communicate that vision with staff, students, parents, and community. These are tough times of change. Leaders must be able to stand tall in the face of challenge and give clear, steady guidance to followers who are facing an unknown, sometimes frightening, future.

Shared language (Joyce and Showers, 1988) will be a result of an effective leader's communication skills. Members of a restructured organization must work together to expand their knowledge base. As knowledge increases, language changes. Staff members begin to talk about change reflectively and with an increased awareness of all its aspects. Leaders with strong communication skills will be able to move rapidly toward a shared language for positive, forward-moving change.

The instructional leaders of tomorrow will be unable to get by without speaking to staff, students, parents and community about the future and importance of education. The turbulence of the coming times requires those with vision to share their view of the future and the urgency for school personnel to restructure their thinking.

Role Models

Principals as instructional leaders for the 21 century must practice what they preach. The old adage "do as I say, not as I do" will not hold up in this era of change. A more accurate adage would be "actions speak louder than words." Educators are hungry for leaders who are value-driven (Lewis, 1988). Educational organizations also need leaders who are organizational patriots (Sergiovanni and Corbally, 1984). Such patriots must model their belief in the direction the organization is heading. The future of innovations and their hoped-for institutionalization is often tied with the leadership at the time of initiation. Often, the innovation lasts only as long as the leader stays with the organization (Latham, 1988). Changes must be designed to provide maintenance and integrity as well as innovation. The integrity and continuity of the leaders will be closely tied to the integrity and continuity of the system—the leaders often become the system. Instructional leaders must have a high level of group loyalty and commitment in order to foster that loyalty and commitment in others (Kanter, 1989).

Instructional leadership is evidenced in staff development and curriculum activities (Bailey, 1988). In meetings and presentations, leaders must model a variety of teaching styles to demonstrate an awareness of the needs of the listeners. Expectations for others must be matched by similar expectations for leaders. Leaders must not be isolated from staff and community members, but must be integral members of all educational activities—as a positive, dynamic, value-driven leader who has vision and can not only communicate that vision but can live the vision.

As proponents of change, organizational members must believe that leaders are behind them. Only then will they be comfortable enough to take the necessary risks to make required changes (Peters, 1987). Leaders must model those beliefs and they must show members that the beliefs are right and needed and realistic. As leaders state the beliefs in the required changes, they must follow by spending their own time on activities to develop the change and by supporting member activities with resources to accomplish the change.

Nurturers

Principals as effective instructional leaders must be sure that working and learning environments are healthy and productive. In order for changes to flourish, Kanter (1983) has suggested a team-oriented cooperative environment. Effective schools research correlates (1989) include a safe orderly environment for learning. Environmental checks will prove helpful as leaders develop their awareness of organizational concerns, gripes, satisfiers, and dissatisfiers. A well informed leader can develop a positive atmosphere by being aware of and dealing with minor problems and issues before they become major problems. A nurturing atmosphere is one in which participants feel comfortable and safe. At the same time, high expectations must encourage innovation and experimentation. An atmosphere for safe failure and reflection is vital for restructuring organizations.

Instructional leaders must also subscribe to current research strategies for staff development. To nurture a positive atmosphere for change, teachers must be encouraged to use Joyce and Showers' (1988) strategies for instructional improvement in staff development activities: theory, demonstration, practice, feedback, and coaching. Attention to peer coaching will reflect a move toward shared decision making and will also address empowerment issues. Staff members must feel they have a part in setting up procedures and policies.

Nurturing includes sharing the vision often in order to keep staff focused on the big picture of long-term objectives. Slack time (Clark, Lotto, and Astuto, 1984) was included in a list of characteristics for successful institutionalization. Staff members need time to adjust and experiment. Instructional leaders must find ways (financial and otherwise) to support innovation as well as ongoing successful activities.

Schoonover and Dalzier (1986) called for leaders to be integraters. Administrators need to find ways to integrate curriculum with student needs and curriculum outcomes. They need to integrate organizational and individual needs and match them with the short and long-term objectives of the organization. Sergiovanni and Corbally (1984) called for leaders who know their people. Nurturers will know the needs of all their people and be able to mesh those needs with a focused vision which will meet the expressed needs. Anne Lewis (1988) describes a leader as one who is able to see other viewpoints and act on those varied viewpoints. Instructional leaders need to be able to mold diverse learners into a group of lifetime learners who can appreciate their differences and find ways to complement each other and make the total organization stronger.

A nurturing leader achieves satisfaction from seeing others develop and grow within the organization and will effectively communicate that satisfaction by recognition of self and staff growth. Nurturers are able to decipher which pieces of organizational history need to stay in place (mainstreams) and which new ideas (newstreams) need to be encouraged and can develop strategies to provide stability for both types of activities (Kanter, 1989).

Leaders of the future will nurture leadership training and skills in all members of the organization. The needs of the future are great enough that traditional views of hierarchical leaders will not be adequate. Shared leadership and a new structure will replace the traditional structures. Leaders of the future will be unafraid of being replaced by movers and shakers within the organization. The new organization will be flatter and groups of leaders will move within and around the organization.

Disturbers

Leaders of tomorrow must find ways to disturb those who are comfortable with the status quo. Because of the rapidity of change within our society, educators cannot afford to become comfortable, but members must be comforted as they face the turbulence of the coming era. The class of 2000 has already been within the public school system for two-and-one-half years (Lezotte, 1989). If educators are to effectively prepare those students for their future, a future which cannot be defined, they must undergo a reorientation in the way educators think and operate at school (Caldwell and Wood, 1988). Schools cannot continue to operate the way they have for the past 100 years. Educational leaders must take strong stands against traditional schools which have in reality never served students well.

Summary

Principals as instructional leaders for tomorrow must be visionary leaders, strategic planners, change agents, communicators, role models, nurturers, and disturbers. All skills must then be applied to the tasks of instruction. Instructional leaders must attend to staff development, curriculum development, and student achievement.

Principals as instructional leaders must possess multiple philosophies which translate into a belief system. Administrators must have a Theory Y type of management philosophy (Peters and Waterman, 1982). They must believe in the innate goodness of people. Leaders must realize that employees will usually follow objectives which they helped develop. Shared decisionmaking must be an important method of achieving such commitment. Long term goals should be directed at achieving staff efficacy. Self direction at all levels (administrators, staff, students, parents, and community) must be encouraged and expected. Evaluation could easily reflect an opportunity for members to set their own goals, expectations, and outcomes. Staff development activities must include modeling of any processes taught and expected of staff. Leaders can also model lifetime learning by becoming a learner with staff members.

New trends in education must be examined for effects on student achievement. Staff must be encouraged to experiment and evaluate. As schools begin the task of restructuring, integration of disciplines must be addressed as a way to reduce job overloads and dependency on textbooks. To reduce isolation and separation of students and staff, activities must increasingly aim toward intergenerational, interdisciplinary activities.

To reduce reliance on standardized norm-referenced tests for verification of achievement, learning communities must develop their own outcomes and measurement methods. Activities and goals must become increasingly child centered. Real world connections must increase, hands-on activities must proliferate, and activities must be future-oriented. Instructional strategies must focus on process thinking skills which can apply to any situation students may face.

In order to deal with the excitement and frustration of the coming times, leaders must develop advanced coping skills. Stamina will be sorely tested. Change is part of this new era. Schools are in the throes of major restructuring efforts. It is important that educators stay on the cutting edge of positive change as they work toward school improvement and restructuring. The seven critical competencies identified in this paper will help propel educators and education to that cutting edge. The importance of moving rapidly toward that edge now was best affirmed by Albert Shanker (1990) when he said:

> We in public education will either change the schools, or public education will be changed for us. Public education will either improve or be destroyed.

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4