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Critical elements for leadership in education : a reflective essay

Joan C. Schueller
University of Northern Iowa

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Critical elements for leadership in education : a reflective essay

Abstract

An educational institution will not perform better than its top leader and will not carry a vision that its leader does not promote. Effective leadership is essential in education today with unprecedented demands on educators and the ever-changing culture of children and families. Ethical leadership, instructional leadership, visionary leadership and organizational skills are critical elements of effective educational leaders in our schools.

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This research paper by: Joan Schueller

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Robert H. Decker

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Date Approved

Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Gregory Reed

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Second Reader of Research Paper

John K. Smith

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by

Joan C. Schueller

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Dr. Robert Decker

"The bottleneck is at the head of the bottle" (Davis and Harden, 2002, p 1). As in the quote, leaders are the head and they can lead or they can create a bottleneck. An educational institution will not perform better than its top leader and will not carry a vision that its leader does not promote. Effective leadership is essential in education today with unprecedented demands on educators and the ever-changing culture of children and families. Ethical leadership, instructional leadership, visionary leadership and organizational skills are critical elements of effective educational leaders in our schools.

I cannot remember a time when I did not want to be an educator. As most of my friends grew out of this stage in grade school, I grew into it. I attended Audubon Elementary in Dubuque. At the time, all students with moderate and severe disabilities in the district attended Audubon, which gave students a unique learning experience. I remember very clearly in sixth grade working in cooperative learning groups. This was long before cooperative learning groups were the trend in education. My teacher placed a special education girl in my group; today she would be considered a high moderate student. I loved working with her and explaining things to her; I celebrated every gain she made. The experience of working with Angela instilled in me a love of teaching and working with people.

I have had the great pleasure of growing up in the middle of six children, and among that brood was my younger brother, Jeff. Jeff had both medical and

developmental difficulties when he was young. Jeff began his education in special programming with preschool and continued in special education throughout his school experience. Today he is a college graduate and a successful businessman. My experiences helping Jeff find strategies to learn encouraged me to pursue education and developed my belief that all students can learn given the appropriate instruction.

I believe the learning community should address the needs of all students. All students can learn. Every student has the right to quality instruction that meets his or her needs. Meeting the needs of students and helping them learn and grow is the root of our very existence. Every student matters in a school and the learning community needs to behave like that is the gospel. In a learning community, individuality should be valued and celebrated. When students do not learn and are not successful, the entire community suffers.

My values and beliefs in education were formed in grade school through experiences with all types of students in the learning community. I have experienced excellent teachers and administrators as a student and an educator. These role models have instilled a love of teaching as well as the drive to develop and promote an educational community for the success of all students. These experiences have developed my belief system in education and encouraged me to seek a new challenge in my career as an educator.

A leader in education holds the bar for the entire learning community, as an administrator advances, the learning community for which they are responsible is larger. A leader models expectations for staff and holds them to these expectations. An educational leader assists in meeting these expectations by providing professional development and support to the teachers who are struggling to meet the expectations of the learning community. A principal is more than a leader of the community but a model and mentor to all in that community.

"The character of an organization is established by the character of the people who work there. And that character is determined by the integrity of the leader" (Rosen, 1996, p.283). This quote is true in both educational leadership and leadership in business. Integrity is the heart of strong, effective leaders. Ethics may change according to the time or place, but "Integrity is a timeless virtue that is central to living a healthy, ethical life" (Rosen, 1996, p. 281). Ethical leadership is a critical element for effective leadership.

The character of a leader and the behavior modeled sets the tone for the learning environment. One speaker describes it in this way, "Your character is who you are when no one is looking. It is what you do in secret" (Byron, 2003). Character is who you are, developed by long held teachings and beliefs. People of integrity are grounded in their beliefs, and others sense the strong character in

them. People are more likely to follow a person who has a clear set of values and has gained respect.

Ethical Leadership

Leaders with personal integrity stand firm in the face of tough decisions. They are well grounded and have a strong sense of self worth. Leaders of great integrity understand that consistency is important. People sense deceit and hypocrisy, and leaders "know that consistency is better than hypocrisy, and acting ethically is better than deceiving" (Rosen, 1996, p. 283).

If leaders preach ethics and equality, they must be the gold standard. Educational leaders model ethical behavior for both staff and students every day. Being an example is the most important part of ethical leadership. Therefore, leaders must ensure their actions are consistent with the values and beliefs they have expressed (Brown and Townsend, 1997).

In their article, *Developing an Ethical Framework*, Brown and Townsend (1997) give an example of the "do as I say not as I do" mentality from Nelson Mandela's book, Long Road to Freedom. Mandela was told that while on duty he must "exercise authority with assurance and control. But when you are off duty, you must conduct yourself on the basis of perfect equality, even with the lowliest soldier. You must eat what they eat; you must not take food in your office but eat with them, drink with them, not isolate yourself." (Brown and Townsend, 1997, p. 3). Mandela wrote that he was thinking how admirable this advice was when a

soldier came in to ask the colonel a question. The colonel's response? "Can't you see that I am talking to an important individual here? Don't you know not to interrupt when I am eating? Now get out of my sight." (Brown and Townsend, 1997, p. 3). The lesson Mandela learned did not come from what the colonel said, but from what he did.

The above example illustrates the power of observance. People learn more from what is done than what is said. Effective educational leaders model desired behavior for both staff and students and realize they are the rule not the exception. Therefore, an ethical educational leader always leads by example.

When discussing what went wrong for Captain Ahab in Moby Dick, Brown and Townsend (1997) noted that Ahab lacked an essential quality of effective leadership, "an ethical framework with a value system that would have enabled him not just to do things right, but to do the right things" (Brown and Townsend, 1997, p.1). That quote sums up what it means to be an ethical leader; we must do what is right every time.

Implementing ethical leadership is the most challenging of effective leadership. Without integrity a leader is not effective, yet it is challenging to be ethical and act with impeccable values at all times. Making ethical choices is not an easy path to maintain. Decisions are difficult and the stakeholders will demand reasoning for nearly every decision made. Nevertheless, employees need a leader who stands by his/her expectations and standards.

In educational administration it is not only about the staff, it is about the students as well. An ethical administrator treats all kids fairly, which can be very difficult. Fair does not mean equal, an ethical administrator understands that fair means meeting the individual needs of each student. When an administrator is doing their job, students know they will be treated fairly. Although students may protest discipline, deep down they know the score, and they are keeping track.

An ethical educational administrator acts with integrity when working with students as well. In some cases, teachers and administrators may be the only example of integrity students sees. An educational administrator shows a strong set of values by example to all kids. "Learning environments share responsibility for preparing students to become productive and contributing citizens of our democracy" (Brown and Townsend, 1997, p.1). Students see values on the playing field, in classrooms, hallways and at the grocery store. Although the expectation is difficult, an administrator exemplifies strong values in every facet of their life.

The integrity displayed by an educational administrator affects their ability to effectively lead staff and serve as a model for students. Integrity is the bedrock of good leadership no matter what the organization, and in education it is especially important.

"The prime responsibility of all education leaders is to put in place learning that engages students intellectually, socially, and emotionally"

(Hargreaves and Fink, 2004, p. 1). The purpose of schools is to provide a strong academic program to challenge students to maximize their potential. Effective educational administrators are instructional leaders that create a learning environment to benefit all students.

<div align="center">Instructional Leadership</div>

Many skills are needed to be an effective instructional leader. Instructional leaders use data to identify problems in the learning community and analyze the data to develop solutions. The instructional leader is aware of the curriculum expected in the classroom and effective teaching strategies designed to engage students in that curriculum. Instructional leaders know the population their learning community serves. Effective instructional leaders provide ample opportunity for educators to expand their skills with quality staff development and educational opportunities. Effective instructional leaders communicate the educational goals and the expectations of the building. Most importantly, the leader of a school shows through their actions that all children can learn.

An instructional leader assesses both students and educators and uses the data to make educational decisions. "Diagnosis requires understanding a school's strengths and weaknesses. It means setting priorities, spurring others to act, and thinking for the longer term" (Portin, 2004, p. 16). Effective educational administrators analyze the testing of students to identify educational needs. Ultimately the responsibility for the learning needs of the students lies with the

principal. "Understanding and delivering what the school needs is the principal's core job" (Portin, 2004, p. 16).

The instructional leader is a strong educator who identifies effective teaching strategies as well as models them. A strong educational administrator works with both teachers and students in the classroom. Cuban, in an article titled *Meeting Challenges in Urban Schools* (2004), described a principal that made regular visits to classrooms and even occasionally took over a class. She also collected student-writing samples so she could comment on them (p. 65). This principal exemplifies instructional leadership behavior that benefits the educational experience for students.

Effective educational leaders understand the population their learning community serves. Different situations pose varying challenges for educators. "Although parents in low-income communities want the same opportunities for their children as middle- and upper-income parents do, they live in places that threaten their safety and lack the resources to support their aspirations" (Cuban, 2004, p. 64). Schools mirror the communities they serve and those communities vary in resources and support available for kids. Effective instructional leaders know and understand the community in which their students live, and provide appropriate supports to maximize their potential.

Educational administrators provide ample opportunities for staff development. Educators cannot improve the learning community for students

without training in effective teaching strategies, opportunities to work with peers and reflection on new approaches. In a progressive learning environment, educational administrators promote and provide appropriate staff development. "Such systems provide ample time and opportunity for leaders to network, learn from and support one another, and coach and mentor their successor" (Hargreaves and Fink, 2004, p. 11).

Instructional leaders encourage, or even require, teachers to work together to develop effective learning strategies and explore ways to address learning difficulties. Staff development does not stop after the two hour in-service; it continues into the classroom and employs data collection to monitor program effectiveness. Staff development addresses weaknesses and further develops educator's strengths, which in turn benefits students. "It [sustainable leadership] carefully husbands its resources in developing the talents of all its educators rather than lavishing rewards on a few proven stars" (Hargreaves and Fink, 2004, p. 11). Instructional leaders provide ample, appropriate staff development to develop the skills of their staff.

An instructional leader communicates the learning goals with all the stakeholders. Only clear and open communication encourages parents and community members to promote school goals. Quick response to parental concerns ensures support for educational and behavioral expectations. In Cuban's article, *Meeting Challenges in Urban Schools* (2004), Cuban describes a principal

who has been successful in setting high expectations for her students. This principal effectively communicated with parents, "Belt responded quickly to their [parents] concerns and kept them up to date on school and district policies" (Cuban, 2004, p. 66). Ms. Belt understood that parents were powerful allies and effective communication would help her achieve the school's goals.

"In a highly complex world, no one leader, institution or nation can control everything without help" (Hargreaves and Fink, 2004, p. 11). To effectively promote school improvement, educational administrators communicate and work with all the stakeholders. Instructional leaders use all the resources the community has to offer to improve educational experiences of the students. "All improving districts that we know about have active external partners- such as business groups, foundations, community-based organizations, or universities- that help build the district's professional capacity." (Fullan, Bertani & Quinn, 2004, p45) Community resources provide needed expertise, support for reforms and additional resources schools badly need. Effective educational leaders are actively involved in the community and communicate the educational goals of the schools to all of the stakeholders.

As in all types of leadership, being an instructional leader encompasses many skills and leadership roles. Most importantly, an instructional leader promotes the learning of all students. The backbone of an effective instructional

leader is the belief that all students can learn and all students have the right to a quality education.

Visionary Leadership

"The visionary principal is the one who knows what needs to be done, how to go about doing it and how the finished product ought to look" (Davis, 1998, p 2). The visionary leader cooperatively establishes a vision for a learning environment and continues to promote the vision in the learning community. "The leader's vision is the organization's blueprint" (Rosen, 1996, p 30).

In her book *Principal Leadership,* Wilmore (2002) lists four steps to effective visionary leadership. Those steps include "development, articulation, implementation and stewardship of the vision" (p 20). Following a specified path to create and maintain the vision is critical to effective leadership. As Rosen (1996) states, "to be inspired people need something to believe in" (p 30). The entire learning community must buy into the vision, believe in the vision and internalize the vision to create an environment in which the vision will grow.

The leader of the learning community facilitates the vision. In an article on multi-level visioning, the job as facilitator of the vision is described clearly. "In a sense you will be on stage as the emcee" (Yearot, Miles and Koonce, (2001, p 1). The visionary leader directs and leads the process for developing and maintaining the vision for the learning community. The leader holds credibility with colleagues and staff to make the process successful. "As facilitator you must

be viewed inside your organization as credible and effective" (Yearot, Miles and Koonce, 2001, p 3). To engage people in the process, a leader must establish him or herself as an ethical person who is knowledgeable about the entire learning community. A facilitator pulls the entire learning community together to develop and maintain the vision.

The first of the four steps described by Wilmore (2002) is development of the vision (p 20). A vision is successful when the learning community is on the same page. In order to make that work, staff and faculty discuss the vision of the school. "By letting everyone shape the vision, the leader inspires people and builds commitment" (Rosen, 1998, p 29). The development of the vision is a group effort; the leader cannot develop the vision alone. Enlisting the help and opinions of everyone in the learning community ensures the vision will be a reflection of the entire community, not just the leader.

There are three attributes of the development of the vision. (Yearout, Miles and Koonce, 2001, p 3) First, identify the reason the organization exists and what values matter to the organization. The facilitator must focus discussions on the direction of the organization and the core values that will support the vision. Second, keep the discussions on target. Groups need time to develop a consensus because many disagreements and conflicting opinions will arise. The process will build group cohesion and commitment to the vision. Without this process, staff will not believe in the vision. Lastly, the vision must be relevant to

the organization. The vision must encompass the needs and the goals of the learning community and be reflective of the people in that community. (Yearot, Miles and Koonce, 2001, p 3)

The next step in visionary leadership is articulation of the vision. Articulation is communicating the vision to everyone in the district and community. Without knowledge of the vision, others will not support and nurture the vision. "Everyone in the organization needs to believe in the vision" (Rosen, 1996, p 29). In order for the vision to be successful, the visionary leader enlists those involved to communicate the vision to the community. The leader clearly communicates the vision, goals and values of the learning community so the stakeholders can share the vision with the community and district personnel. "The leader needs to enlist the support and cooperation of the whole organization in order to turn that vision into a reality" (Rosen, 1996, p 30).

The third step is the implementation of the vision. In this step, goals are developed that align with the vision of the learning community. Effective visionary leaders monitor the progress of the vision using effective measurement of the goals. As Wilmore (2002) states, "What gets measured gets done" (p 22). Measurement provides the learning community the means to evaluate the goals and the vision. Visionary leaders are constantly re-evaluating the vision for its relevance to the students and the community. Feedback on progress fosters growth in the learning community; "... a learning organization needs plenty of

feedback which can only be obtained through careful monitoring and tracking of the vision" (Nanus, 1992, p 20).

The last and most important step of visionary leadership is the stewardship of the vision. The leader is the keeper of the lighthouse and weathers all storms to keep the light of the vision bright. The visionary leader continues to communicate and support the vision of the school by keeping the momentum moving forward within the learning community. The visionary leader works through failures of their own and others and learns from those experiences. Most of all, the visionary leader keeps all the stakeholders involved. The visionary leader "encourages everyone to be a visionary leader" (Nanus, 1992, p 23). By continuing to involve the teachers, students and parents, the visionary leader encourages everyone to steward the vision and take ownership in the success of the school. Wilmore (2002) said it best, "people support what they helped build" (p 24).

The visionary leader is the facilitator of the vision and goals of the school. They lead the discussion, development and implementation of the vision, but they do not own the vision. The visionary leader promotes the ownership of the vision to all the stakeholders and communicates with them on the success and the failures of the goals.

The three critical elements for effective leadership discussed demonstrate the high expectations for educational administrators and those expectations

continue to grow. Educational administrators are expected to be fundraisers, money managers, strong instructional leaders, disciplinarians, moral and ethical leaders, active participants in the community and provide a safe learning environment. "Today's principal is compelled to perform a greater number of tasks at an unrelenting pace" (Speck, 1999, p 70). In order to live up to the ever-increasing expectations, educational leaders are organized and effectively manage their time and stress.

Organizational Management

"Managerial competence is a clear expectation that districts, parents and communities have of the principal" (Speck, 1999, p 69). In order for managers to be effective, organization of tasks and time management are essential. An effective educational leader develops a balance between leadership roles and effective management of the building. An organized principal is prepared for all expected and unexpected matters that "will invariably arise" (Speck, 1999, p 70).

According to Speck (1999), in her book, *The Principalship, Building a Learning Community*, the principal's role as manager includes "preparing, planning, providing resources, scheduling and monitoring, budgeting and bookkeeping, maintaining facilities, handling student problems and keeping a safe environment" (p 69). The job can be overwhelming. Effective educational leaders manage a building effectively so teachers can focus on teaching and students can focus on learning. Effectively managing a building involves three

skills: organization, effective time management, and stress management. In order to fulfill all the expectations of the position and stay sane, principals must demonstrate these three skills.

"The bad news is time flies. The good news is that you are the pilot" (Glenn, 2003, p.1). Time certainly goes by quickly and in order to complete all the tasks necessary effective principals engage in time management. First, principals analyze tasks and prioritize them. The trick is to be sure to not neglect either the big or little things. As one principal put it, "Don't sweat the small stuff, but pay attention to it. Keep things in balance, but remember that the small stuff, in all of its myriad and trivial facets, is balancing the big stuff" (Capelluti and Nye, 2002, p 8). The principal is like an acrobat on a high wire, they need to balance all parts of the job and the time delegated to complete tasks. At times the large tasks seem daunting and the tendency is to put off the big things while dealing with the small stuff. "Many leaders are so busy putting out fires that they lack the time to prioritize and work on long term goals" (Irwin, 2002, p 41). Principals need to prioritize the jobs to be completed to be sure that nothing gets left by the wayside, unfortunately the very situation principals are placed in every day make the task very difficult.

In order to fulfill all expectations, educational administrators develop a daily calendar to organize activities and prioritize tasks. The daily calendar is an external structure that assists with maintaining organizational skills. In order to

maintain order in their life, principals stay in control of their time. Administrators become robotic when they lose control of their calendar; they may not even know what the events are that are listed. "...my calendar should be a tool- not to keep other people happy, but to keep me and the school on track to be successful" (Capelluti and Nye, 2002, p 8). Organized principals use their calendars to complete tasks, organize activities and manage their time. Effective managers then have time to be effective leaders.

A principal with good organizational skills develops routines that take place throughout the school day. These routines define the school and how it is run. Principals develop these routines to provide structure and organization throughout the entire school. The school can function as a learning environment for students and staff when they can take care of managerial things. Principals with good organization skills can focus on leadership. Effective administrators, who manage operations of the school and the demands on their time, will find more time to focus on leadership in the building. "Effective management helps a school achieve its goals, in part by making the school function well enough to allow the leadership role of the principalship emerge" (Speck, 1999, p 69).

Stress is a physical response that enduces mental or bodily tension. Principals who expect to be successful in the learning community balance work and home and find ways to manage stress in their lives. In an article in *Principal Leadership* (2002), Serber described three important steps in handling stress;

recognizing what stress is and how it feels for you, taking steps to counter the effects of stress and exercise to address the physical issues of stress (p 48-49). Administrators use of stress reducers to maintain themselves because without stress reducers, administrators will burn out and cease to be effective.

As Capelluti and Nye (2002) stated in their article, *8:30 Bailey 301*, "if you're going to be a principal you're going to have to learn to stay in control of your professional life" (p 9). Effective administrators maintain control by organization, time management and managing stress.

One Final Thought

The critical elements of effective educational leadership are ethical leadership, instructional leadership, visionary leadership and the ability to manage the entire school building. Effective educational leaders demonstrate these skills and the willingness to continue to develop their leadership skills. Principals are grounded in the knowledge that all children can learn and have a right to an education. In summary, the principal is responsible for all facets of the learning community.

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