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A preferred vision for administering schools: A reflective essay

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Abstract

My first encounter with the prospect of becoming a principal happened quite by chance in the spring of 1988, during a post-evaluation conference with my principal. After our formal discussion, we talked about the future. He commented to me that I should go to graduate school and enter the principalship. I immediately laughed his suggestion off, first by making light of principals in general, then letting him know that I could not imagine myself sitting in the principal's chair. He ended our conversation by mentioning why I would be right for the principalship and to give his suggestion serious consideration. His confidence in me really left an impression, but at the time the classroom was where I wanted to be.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

_____

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Joseph F. Deutsch

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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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"Where we stand depends on where we sit."

- Steven Covey

My first encounter with the prospect of becoming a principal happened quite by chance in the spring of 1988, during a post-evaluation conference with my principal. After our formal discussion, we talked about the future. He commented to me that I should go to graduate school and enter the principalship. I immediately laughed his suggestion off, first by making light of principals in general, then letting him know that I could not imagine myself sitting in the principal's chair. He ended our conversation by mentioning why I would be right for the principalship and to give his suggestion serious consideration. His confidence in me really left an impression, but at the time the classroom was where I wanted to be.

At that point in my career, I had completed my fifth year of teaching in rural Alaska. Sitting behind the teacher's desk, my perspective of the principalship was not a positive one. The district administration was very autocratic in asserting their authority. I felt the principal's position in this system was that of a middle manager, taking orders from the top, and making sure people under his/her supervision complied with the

directives of the superintendent and the school board. Subordinates were expected to follow the "chain of command," leaving little room for individual expression and creativity. The system was very political and power was held by a select few. People were more concerned with image and doing things right, rather than doing the right thing (Bennis, 1989). I appreciated my friend's confidence in me and respected his professional judgment, but I quickly dismissed his recommendation.

However, the seed was planted. Two and a half years later, I was a student sitting in Dr. Albrecht's class. I had completed my first year as a principal/teacher at a K-10 school in another district, and decided that I needed to learn more about the principalship. I had accepted this new position not because I wanted to be a principal, but because I wanted to continue my career in education. I felt that I had done all that I could in my former position and I wanted to grow professionally. I still had serious reservations about the principalship, and looked upon my present situation as a foothold into a job elsewhere in the district. My feelings toward administration had softened; I was sitting in the principal's chair.

Nearing the end of the summer session, Dr. Albrecht delivered a bit of advice that focused my feelings into a better understanding of myself and the principalship. He stated the only reason a person should decide to become a principal is if he/she, "could make a difference" (Personal Communication, James Albrecht, Introduction to Educational Administration, 1990). After reflecting briefly about what he said, I thought about our discussions during Dr. Jackson's class. I listened intently when Dr. Jackson spoke of creative ways schools could be structured to meet the needs of all learners; children and adults (Personal Communication, Dale Jackson, School and Community Relations, 1990). I imagined what it would be like to be a part of such a school, and I was drawn into the image. I knew that as a principal I could make a difference, and the prospect of doing so was exciting! My mental picture of the principal as manager, troubleshooter, and sole decision maker transformed; I began to see the principal as a leader, facilitator, and collaborator, sensitive to the needs of all who hold a stake in the school. My paradigm had shifted; I had begun to see the principalship through a new lens. I felt as if a light inside of me was instantly turned on (Covey, 1990).

My perception of the principalship has continued to change and become more refined. My experiences as a site administrator and teacher, personal observer, and student in the master's program have allowed me to appreciate the significance of how important the principal is in all facets of the school. Together, these experiences have left me with visions of what I feel are the necessary attributes of an effective principal. I have come to the realization that:

It is not the teachers, or the central office people, or the university people who are really causing schools to be the way they are or changing the way they might be. It is whoever lives in the principal's office. (Blumberg & Greenfield, 1986, p.3)

In essence, the school's culture is largely determined by the character and leadership of the principal.

I envision the culture within the school to provide the necessary conditions where administrators and teachers work side by side to provide the best possible education to students, in an atmosphere of collegiality and spirited cooperation, guided by common values and beliefs. I see teachers excited about their chosen profession, satisfied in knowing what they contribute is

important and valued by others, and feel they have a say in the decisions that affect them. Parents and students are also an integral part of the school's culture, contributing in powerful and effective ways. Everyone works collectively fulfilling the shared purpose of the school (Sergiovanni, 1992).

Ideally, this is what the culture of every school in America should look and feel like. More often than not, however, it is quite the opposite. Many schools today carry on much the same way as they did seventy five years ago. The following discussion focuses on the conditions surrounding the context of the principalship in today's schools and my beliefs on how it can be changed. Hopefully, I have expressed my vision of how I see myself performing as a school principal.

Roles of the Principal

The duties of the principal encompasses two major roles; leader and manager. Tom Peters once said about leading and managing, "To take care of any institution--from 3 people to 30,000 people--you have to do an awful lot of both" (Koerner, 1988, p.36). I agree. But I believe people have trouble making a clear distinction between leading and managing. It is very difficult to describe leadership, because everyone seems to have

differing opinions of which qualities are important for effective leadership. I think we can all agree that:

> For most of us, leadership is an elusive concept... We all know we need it, but we're not quite sure exactly what it is that we need. Thus, in our eagerness to establish leadership, we are willing to seize anything that seems remotely related to our foggy notions of what leaders should provide. (Patterson, 1993, p.2)

From my observations, I have discovered that the characteristics of managers defines the leadership style of many principals who, in my opinion, mistakenly believe they are providing leadership when in reality they are managing. There are some unmistakable differences between leaders and managers:

> The manager administers; the leader innovates.
>
> The manager is a copy; the leader is an original.
>
> The manager maintains; the leader develops.
>
> The manager focuses on systems and structure; the leader focuses on people.
>
> The manager relies on control; the leader inspires trust.
>
> The manager has a short-range view; the leader has a long-range perspective.

The manager asks how and when; the leader asks what
and why.

The manager always has his eye on the bottom line;
the leader has his eye on the horizon.

The manager imitates; the leader originates.

The manager accepts the status quo; the leader
challenges it.

The manager is the classic good soldier; the leader
is his own person.

The manager does things right; the leader does the
right thing (Bennis, 1989, p.45).

While managers direct and monitor people and events,
leaders build commitments, motivate others, and work to
insure that mutual goals are being accomplished and
agreed upon values are expressed (Sergiovanni, 1990).

The Principal as a Leader

Each time I reflect upon the distinctions between
leaders and managers, I visualize a picture of what I
believe the principal as a leader should be. Selecting
keywords from this list enables me to chip away at some
of the elusiveness of leadership. Actions such as
builds commitments, challenges status quo, long-range
perspective, originates, focuses on people, inspires
trust, motivates others, and eyes on the horizon,

crystallize my beliefs regarding the sum and substance of leadership. I see the principal as a person who is guided by values and principles, cares deeply about the needs of students and teachers, is visionary and communicates the vision, is willing to take risks, is open-minded, and places a high priority on developing trust.

I believe that leadership is an extension of our character, based upon principles and values that we hold dear. On a daily basis we reveal ourselves to others and, "...what we *are* communicates far more eloquently than anything we say or *do*" (Covey, 1990, p.22). My perception of an effective leader is one who has the ability to develop and maintain strong, positive relationships with people based on the principles of empathy, integrity, and trust. Principals who are true leaders continually express these characteristics; it is the guiding force for motivating others in fulfilling the purpose of the school.

Integrity and communication in building trust. If I were to survey educators and principals about the most common activity principals pursue in the performance of their job, I would be willing to bet the number one answer would be communication. Effective principals are

great communicators; everyone is well informed through
the written and spoken word, but speaking and writing is
only half of the story. The other half is listening.
When we listen, we usually focus our energy on the words
of the person who is speaking, internally preparing to
respond through our own frame of reference. Many times
we miss out on the meaning of what people are trying to
communicate because we are so conditioned to probe,
interpret, evaluate and advise (Covey, 1990).

As a person in a leadership role, my communication
style would be to "seek first to understand, then to be
understood" (Covey, 1990, p.237). Seeking first to
understand, or empathic listening, is getting into
another person's frame of reference. It means a great
deal more than listening the way we normally do; it
requires people to:

> ...listen with your eyes and with your heart. You
> listen for feeling, for meaning. You listen for
> behavior. You use your right brain as well as your
> left. You sense, you intuit, you feel....you see
> the world the way they see the world, you
> understand their paradigm, you understand how they
> feel. (Covey, 1990, p.240-41)

Communicating a sincere desire to understand goes far in building positive relationships with people. I believe that practicing empathic listening would provide the means to identify core values, to build a sense of community within the school, to validate others' feelings, and to build trust.

Integrity, behaving consistently according to one's principles and values, is the cornerstone for building trusting interpersonal relationships. Principals can easily compromise the trust of a teacher when they continually display a lack of personal integrity. I could expend all kinds of energy and commitment to trust-building but, "...if there is anything that undermines trust, it is the feeling that people at the top lack integrity..." (Bennis, 1989, p.164). As the principal of a school I would reveal my integrity to others by living and leading according to my principles and values. I must be ready to be an advocate and support the staff and students in the moments that matter, honor my commitments and promises, base decisions on moral principles and treat people fairly. Above all, it is important for me as a leader to be open and honest with others. People intuitively sense leadership by way of hidden agendas and withholding

information, which nullifies any attempt to provide virtuous leadership.

Trust is the one quality that cannot be acquired; it must be earned. It is given by the members of the organization and without it, the leader cannot function (Bennis, 1989). Trust builds as people act with integrity; I would define trust as the ability to accurately anticipate a person's actions as they faithfully demonstrate their integrity. I learned my first lessons about trust early in my life as I watched my father working in his place of business; he had captured a high level of trust and respect from his employees and his customers. My father placed a high value on treating everyone he knew with dignity. I remember how my father acted toward people; he looked upon everyone with courtesy, kindness, and respect; his sense of humor made people feel at ease. Living the Golden Rule establishes the basis for trust; it is nurtured and developed through understanding people as individuals, keeping commitments, and making expectations clear. I have tried to live by these ideals, modeling what I have learned from my father.

Holding the teacher's trust is probably the most important asset the principal could ever have. Trust is

a feeling of safeness with another person; when people enter into trusting relationships, there are no hidden agendas. People who trust one another are willing to put their cards on the table in a feeling of open, mutual learning and communication. It is a win/win relationship (Covey, 1990). I feel it is essential for me as a principal to develop, maintain, and protect the trust that people commit to me.

One way I hope to develop trusting relationships with teachers, parents, and students is practice "management by walking around" (MBWA). It is important for me to be visible throughout the school, communicating to those around me that I am truly interested in the events taking place, whether in classrooms, hallways, workroom, or office before, during, or after the school day. MBWA would allow me to get to know students and staff on a more personal level, through casual conservation and sharing common interests. Although MBWA provides ample opportunity for socialization, it primarily is a tool used to touch base with individual staff members, share information that directly affects them, and informally pick up on teachers' concerns.

Maintaining the vision. Leaders maintain a vision that is widely shared, a preferred future of the school

based on core values of all who share in that future
(Patterson, 1993). I feel it is important for the
principal to keep the vision alive because it is what
drives the purpose of the school. I need to be totally
aware of the school's vision and relentlessly
communicate the vision. Also, I need to periodically
reflect upon my own motives and how they affect the
vision of the school because, "...we (principals) are
the leaders and our views shape the views of others"
(Sergiovanni, 1992, p.1). This places an enormous
amount of power and responsibility in the principal's
lap. Reflectively thinking through my motives for
inspiring people to follow would ensure the vision
remains true to our core values and the purpose of the
school.

The Principal as a Manager

Sergiovanni (1990) noted that too many schools are
overmanaged and underled; people in leadership positions
pay more attention to directions (managing) rather than
solving problems (leading). This style of leadership
was instrumental in forming my earlier opinion of
administration and typifies the feelings of many
teachers. Generally speaking, administrators seem to
lead by way of formal authority and control, a paradigm

of leadership borrowed from industry (Patterson, 1993).
This model of strong, central leadership negatively
impacts staff morale and the level of commitment (David,
1989), precipitating an adversarial relationship between
the principal and the staff.

However, management functions cannot be ignored; they
are critical to the smooth operation of any organization,
including schools. The quality of the school program
depends on the range of the principal's administrative
skills. Since I began the master's program, I have
learned that:

> Proficient principals are skillful in managing a
> myriad of tasks and responsibilities....they are
> responsible for managing the school plant, student
> services and records, personnel, and the various
> programs that support instruction. They develop and
> implement policies and procedures that establish
> routine practices. (National Association of
> Elementary School Principals, 1991, p.15)

In addition, the principal is responsible for managing the
school's fiscal resources and deals with any political
pressures that may have an impact on the school (National
Association of Elementary School Principals, 1991).

Principals who choose to overlook managerial duties are inviting serious trouble. Dr. Robert Decker commented, "The number one reason administrators get fired is for lack of management" (Personal Communication, Robert Decker, Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction, 1991). Management responsibilities are the most observable function of the principal, therefore it receives the most attention from superiors. After all, "... neglect of the administrative role tends to carry a greater penalty than neglect of the instructional role" (Lyons, 1990, p.44). Yet, without leadership, "...an organization is like a lifeboat in turbulent seas with no oars, no compass, no maps - and no hope" (Nanus, 1992, p.xviii). It is a dilemma all principals must come to terms with.

The management paradigm. Operating within today's construct of schooling, it seems logical for the principal to be an expert in many areas. While trying to be everything to everyone, the principal assumes the role of accountant, counselor, custodian, disciplinarian, diplomat, evaluator, lawyer, mediator, public relations agent, and teacher. This "Superprincipal Complex" (Chamley, McFarlane, Young, & Caprio, 1992), illustrates the working conditions of many principals today; with

constant demands, changing roles, and obligations to fulfill, they work longer, harder, and tougher, pushing themselves and the staff beyond what some would consider humanly possible.

This is the context in which many principals are expected to perform, and perform well. Bennis (1989) posited people who are leaders master the context rather than surrender to it. I believe the superprincipal is one who has surrendered to the context, becoming a servant of the system (Bennis 1989), rather than using the system to define and achieve the purpose of the school. But how can the principal in today's school master this context? It seems so overwhelming, and speaking from experience it truly can be. If many of today's principals are unable to master the context of our present day educational system, then we need a new paradigm, one that reshapes the context surrounding education in America. This new paradigm must fulfill the purpose of schools, meet the professional needs of teachers, and lessen the managerial pressures of the principalship, allowing leadership to take place.

A new paradigm--collective practice. I believe the school should be a place where relationships among all stakeholders are founded in a sense of community, based on

a common vision of core values shared by all (Sergiovanni, 1992). This concept of community transcends the practice of teaching from an individual perspective to a group effort; the collective energies of people join together to achieve the school's vision, thus improving the school as a whole. As the collective practice of teaching becomes rooted into the culture of the school, "... the principal can afford to give much less attention to the traditional management functions of planning, organizing, controlling, and leading, for these become built into the everyday life of the school" (Sergiovanni, 1992, p.50). The manager role of the principal evolves; he/she becomes a supporter, facilitator, and cheerleader, which validates and enhances the professionalism of the teachers. Based upon my observations and experience, as teachers gain (or reclaim) their sense of professionalism and empowerment, they become more deeply committed to collective practice.

Balancing the Role of Leader and Manager

Elmore (in Joyce, 1991) described three orientations which encompass the restructuring movement in education: the technical orientation (changes in curriculum and instruction); the political/social orientation (changes in client relationships); and the occupational structure of educators (redefining the role of teachers), either by

creating a more collegial workplace or granting teachers a
greater voice in the governance of education. In my view
of the principalship, redefining the political/social
relationships and the occupational structure of educators
is the most exciting because it involves the people side
of restructuring, and without it, changes in the technical
orientation would not materialize. It means inviting
teachers, students, and parents into the administrative
arena to participate in the decisions that affect the
school, creatively building new avenues for pursuing the
school's vision. This truly powerful concept of site-
based management (SBM) is central to the theme of
restructuring (Harrison, Killion, & Mitchell, 1989).

Although there are many definitions of SBM, I find
the most inclusive to be:

> ...bringing the responsibility for decisions as
> close as possible to the school....defining how
> school staffs can work collaboratively to make
> these decisions rather than having the principal
> make all of them. Site-based management means
> creating ownership for those responsible for
> carrying out the decisions by involving them
> directly in the decision-making process and by

trusting their abilities and judgments. (Harrison,

et al, 1989, p.55)

The goal of SBM is, "to empower school staff by providing

authority, flexibility, and resources to solve the

educational problems particular to their schools" (David,

1989).

In my view of the principalship, the idea of SBM is

inspiring; we hear almost daily that teachers need to be

empowered. I am truly convinced that SBM is the way to

enhance the professionalism of teachers, allow the

principal more opportunity for leadership, develop

collegial relationships between all who have a stake in

the school, and involve the parents and students in

decisions that affect them. As the principal and

involved others share in decisions, trust, cooperation

and collective practice enter into the school climate. I

have no doubt teachers' sentiments about administration

as I described earlier would dramatically decrease, and

new models of school leadership with teachers as leaders

(Sergiovanni, 1990) would replace our old notions of

school administration. Teacher leadership takes hold as

teachers assume responsibility for selected management

roles, thus empowering them to have an impact upon the

direction and purpose of the school.

I would impress upon others that decisions instituted through SBM must be consistent with our core values and the school's vision. For me as a principal to feel confident that we are all heading in the same direction, everyone must know up front what we collectively believe in. A great deal of soul-searching and open discussion on core values and vision needs to take place before SBM can be implemented.

Implementing SBM requires me as the principal to delegate responsibility to people and yield some authority and control over decisions that are made. This is what teacher empowerment is all about. I need to be willing to trust the abilities and judgment of others, and communicate that willingness to whomever would listen. Additionally, I must be ready to accept SBM decisions, without imposing conditions, except in extreme circumstances.

Delegating responsibility with the authority to form, act, and follow through with decisions places ownership on those who are involved in the process. In return, persons involved in the decision need to be accountable for insuring the decision has been carried out.

The Principal as a Change Agent

Despite my belief that SBM is good for education, most teachers feel comfortable with the present system (Evans, 1993). The potential for changes SBM offers is refreshing, yet it can also be intimidating. In the words of Bolman and Deal, "Change raises hope because it offers growth and progress-but it also stirs fear because it challenges competence and power, creates confusion and conflict, and risks the loss of continuity and meaning" (Evans, 1993, p.20).

The changes that happen as a result of SBM offer schools an opportunity for true growth and accomplishment; yet the challenge of change forces us to leave our comfort zones and venture into unfamiliar territory. I realize as a principal I need to listen empathetically, place my faith in teachers' judgment and problem solving capacities, provide direction, and work side by side with the staff to support people in their efforts to change. The result of these endeavors opens the door to creativity and risk taking. After all,

A school needs to be a place where adults too, can grow and change and learn. The only way a principal can survive in a growth-oriented environment is to relinquish control in many areas and let people work

in their own ways....When people are involved in
solving their own problems and working out their
ideas, a school has a rich body of creative energy
to draw upon. The principal has the freedom to
spend his or her time helping to develop and direct
that energy toward ends that count. (Sergiovanni,
1992, p.44)

<div align="center">Pulling it all Together</div>

To summarize my beliefs about the principalship and
the role of principals, I would describe it with these
two words; *servant leadership*. As a teacher, I served
students by meeting their needs in the classroom. As a
principal, my role becomes much broader; I see myself
leading by serving the needs of students, teachers,
parents, and community through guidance, support, and
direction, encouraging and drawing upon other's
leadership qualities to fulfill the purpose of the
school. Diana Lam, during her tenure as superintendent
in Chelsea, Massachusetts, said, "Leadership belongs to
everyone....Our role is to cultivate the leadership
potential of every single employee, student, and parent
in our school system" (Sergiovanni, 1992, p.1). To me,
becoming a leader of leaders would be the most exciting
role that I as a principal could ever pursue.

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