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## A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

Aaron M. Gonzalez  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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## A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

### Abstract

In this reflective paper I will describe what I believe are the necessary skills, abilities, and effective strategies which educational leaders should possess as they administrate in a school setting. These skills, abilities, and effective strategies include having the ability to lead an organization through constant changes, monitoring societal trends for future organizational expectations, and developing shared values and vision. In addition, administrative educational leaders must be able to empower teachers, praise teachers for their efforts, coach individuals to reach their potential, communicate effectively to members within as well as outside of the organization, and still must possess personal and professional integrity.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:  
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper  
Presented to  
The Department of Educational Administration  
and Counseling  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
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Master of Arts in Education

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by  
Aaron M. Gonzalez  
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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Norman McCumsey

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Date Approved

Adviser/Director of Research Paper

Robert H. Decker

7-9-93  
Date Approved

Second Reader of Research Paper

Dale R. Jackson

7-12-93  
Date Received

Head, Department of Educational  
Administration and Counseling

In this reflective paper I will describe what I believe are the necessary skills, abilities, and effective strategies which educational leaders should possess as they administrate in a school setting. These skills, abilities, and effective strategies include having the ability to lead an organization through constant changes, monitoring societal trends for future organizational expectations, and developing shared values and vision. In addition, administrative educational leaders must be able to empower teachers, praise teachers for their efforts, coach individuals to reach their potential, communicate effectively to members within as well as outside of the organization, and still must possess personal and professional integrity.

Addressing the literature on leadership is no easy task. This is because there is no commonly agreed upon definition of leadership. There seems to be almost as many definitions of leadership as there are people writing on the topic. This problem is further complicated by the fact that it is unclear if some authors are discussing leadership or management. Definitions of leadership have had different components

throughout time. At one time, leadership was defined solely as the deployment of power and authority, or as leadership traits. More recently, definitions on leadership have focused on the leadership situation itself. Examples of this type of leadership include areas such as the interactions between leaders and followers, the purpose of the group or organization, and defining the way it works.

Barnard (1962) defines leadership as follows:

Leadership is not a function of titles, but a function of relationships. Leaders concentrate on effectiveness rather than efficiency. They selectively chose to focus on areas that are important to the organization. In addition, leaders are concerned with the direction of the organization, making certain that the organization is accomplishing its mission, and its future access to resources. Effective leaders are always monitoring the organizations strengths and growth for long-term stability and survival. Leaders are always learning, and they help others learn by praising their good deeds, reinforcing excellence and creativity, and by providing the opportunity for members to be involved (Nanus, 1989).

Leaders must be able to regulate the speed and rhythm of the organization, and constantly reevaluate its vision, not only in the internal pace of events, but also in the external pace of events. He or she must be a strategic planner. Gutherie and Reed (1991) define strategic leadership as, "the continued need to

appraise conditions both external and internal to an organization, assess the organizations mission relative to environment changes, and consistently evaluate existing organizational procedures..."

In view of these demands, a leader must prepare their organization for adopting and adjusting to change. A leader can begin preparing an organization to change by encouraging mutual caring and trust, open communication, and involvement.

Today's educational leader must understand the dynamic forces that are at work which will strongly influence the kind of leadership needed in today's world. A leader must recognize important trends that are impacting our society, help establish a clear direction and vision for their organization, and have an understanding and knowledge of what is expected of them in their specific leadership role. Nanus (1989) states that instead of solving problems, today's leader is more often called upon to steer the organization through dynamic and perilous situations. Rapid change makes it difficult to use past and present events as a basis for making decisions. All this, therefore, puts a premium on the leader's ability to anticipate,

monitor, and manage change.

We can see change everywhere in our society today, including in organizations. The question is not whether change will occur, but rather, will change be purposeful, productive, and consistent with the organization's vision, to the benefit of its clients.

In a position of leadership, I must be keenly aware of evolving situations and the continuing movement in the environment surrounding the individual situations. For example, trends can be projected into the future to establish anticipated expectations which could evolve, given the current situation. As an educational leader, I must be especially aware of future expectations if I am to benefit the clients - students of the future.

In Tom Payzant's (1991) video review on leadership skills for the 21st century, he discusses issues and trends in society which are having major effects upon education today, and which educational leaders should be made aware. These trends include: (a) value streams that still must be reached in our society such as excellence and equity among citizens; (b) changing expectations of students in a complex world that is



constantly changing; a world where students have to make adjustments and adapt to the demands place upon them; (c) public demand for better student performance and educator accountability; (d) students failing to succeed in our schools; (e) technology and economy which are shaping a new work world; (f) growing educational knowledge and research which are not being used effectively; and (g) shifting demographics and societal concerns. In addressing these concerns as an educational leader, I must first consider the purpose of education. Secondly, I must help create a vision based on the organization's shared values, and, thirdly apply it to these issues.

I believe a principal, as an instructional leader, is responsible for setting a vision and conveying that vision to their staff. Casey Stengel says, "if you don't know where you're going you might end up somewhere else." If a leader does not know what the focus and direction should be for their organization, then they will be faced with many confusing decisions. Vision is important because it creates focus, becoming the aim and direction to which people can become committed, and the basis for establishing goals and

objectives. Burt Nanus (1989) writes:

If a leader can provide a sense of direction, if they can transcend the confusion with a convincing model of a greatly improved situation they are trying to create for the future, then they can restore a sense of purpose, catalyze people to act enthusiastically, and align their energies. A true vision must provide a clear image of a desirable future, one that represents an achievable challenge, and a worthwhile long-range target towards which people can direct their energies(p. 55).

Having a vision is not just a good idea, but rather, it is the essence, the heart, and the purpose of an organization. I believe an educational leader must have a clear understanding of his/her own values and should be consistent with the vision, if their vision is to be accepted by other members in that organization. Peter Senge (1990) writes, " A vision not consistent with values and the way people live day by day will not only fail to inspire genuine enthusiasm, it will foster outright cynicism." Principals ought to develop shared organizational values, and work collaborative with groups and teams to help develop a supportive network among its members. This can, if carried out effectively, create an atmosphere that promotes commitment, responsibility, and initiative on the part of its members.

A leader should always reassess the organizations' vision. He or she must see how it aligns with the external and internal environments, as well as with the past, present, and future trends. It is only then that the vision can be refined and allowed to grow and develop effectively. Establishing a vision is the first step in the right direction when attempting to successfully lead an organization into the future. But, before an educational leader can formulate a vision, he/she must identify the purposes of education for their specific needs. Ken Michael (cited in Yickstick Blehm, 1992) writes:

We need to examine our basic philosophical beliefs about teaching, learning, the nature of human beings, and the kind of environment that maximize growth for teachers and students alike. We need to sort out values, develop new belief systems, and ultimately create schools that educate as well as train, schools that foster learning in all sorts of ways it can occur. (p. 1-7)

I believe the primary purpose of education should be to enhance the student's total educational life and well being, as well as to promote continuing lifelong learners. This process should involve the participation of stakeholders, thus, enabling students to function effectively and ethically in a multicultural society. These conditions will help

promote students to become contributing citizens for a better tomorrow. Also, students should be able to think and adapt effectively in a continually, changing, complex world.

After collectively identifying the purpose of education, a leader can then begin to formulate a vision involving other stakeholders. When developing the vision, it is good to note that a leader should not work solely by themselves. Rather, they should demand the willing and enthusiastic cooperation of all stakeholders, thus creating ownership, recognition, and responsibility.

In applying Maslow's theory of Hierarchy of Needs (1970), educational leaders who disregard their subordinates physiological needs will create a closed climate, and will themselves be viewed as authoritative, controlling, overly or under concerned about people, and less innovative. A leader who acknowledges and attempts to meet his/her subordinates physiological needs will create an open environment, which emphasizes empowerment, open communication and innovation.

Based on interviews with teachers, administrators, parents, and students, researchers from the University of Oregon conclude with regard to faculty participation in effective schools, that collaboration with staff is an effective leadership behavior (Russell, Mazzarella, White, & Maurer, 1985). Another researcher found evidence of improved student achievement, lower dropout rates, gains in teachers' critical thinking skills, and improved school climate in Georgia's schools that gave teachers a voice in school governance (Gleckman, 1990).

Empowerment is effective because active involvement of people creates an atmosphere of unity, improves the organizations morale, and promotes people sharing support for decisions, and the quality of decisions which are made. Kouzes & Posner (1990) state that power is not a zero sum commodity, requiring that for others to have more, the leader must have less. The more everyone in the organization feels a sense of power and influence, the greater the ownership and investment they feel in the success of the organization. Burns (1978) stresses the importance of empowerment with the following, "There is nothing so powerful, nothing so effective, nothing so causal as

common purpose, if that purpose informs all levels of a political system." Also, in support of the concept of empowerment, Herzberg (1959) states that responsibility, ownership, and recognition are the best satisfiers for people.

There exists an old proverb that says, "two minds are better than one." The same applies in the administrative decision process. If I, as a principal, can involve staff participation in shared decision making, not only will this increase member support for decisions, but also will enable valuable information to be shared in different areas such as curriculum and knowledge of student needs.

Blase and Kirby (1992) studied teachers attitudes towards involvement. Their studies found that teachers were excited about the opportunities offered by participatory school governance. Feelings of comfort, satisfaction, and heightened self-esteem were associated with involvement. Based on studies such as these, I believe effective principals must make a habit to repeatedly put forth an effort to develop informal and formal strategies which would involve teachers and staff in the decision making process. Aristotle says,

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act, but a habit." If educational leaders could constantly apply this quote to their administrative practices, we could increase the level of effectiveness in schools, teachers, and most of all - ourselves.

In much of the literature identifying effective characteristics of principals, praise seems to remain absent from the list. This may be a reason why praise is sometimes overlooked by school principals. Terrence Deal (1987) also recognized that the school effectiveness literature (with regard to the principal's role) ignores important aspects of schools. He argues that a principal must fill the role of an instructional leader as well as a counselor or parent, engineer or supervisor, referee, and hero. Deal believes because of these great time consuming demands, principals who are eager to develop their "instructional leadership" skills may do so while jeopardizing their interpersonal relations with teachers. One example of this is found in the research of Blase and Kirby (1991), who discovered in their research that praise was the most frequently mentioned influence strategy used by effective principals. For

example, principals used praise by commending teachers for their instructional and classroom management efforts.

Principals can also praise a teacher's strengths. By doing this, principals raise the confidence and satisfaction level of teachers. Bracey, Standford, and Trueblood (1990) state that when you affirm the greatness inside of people, you empower them. If teachers know that their efforts and contributions are valued and appreciated, not only will this build their esteem but it will motivate them to believe in themselves and become productive and contributing members to the organization.

Blase and Kirby (1991) discovered in their research that praise appeared to be an effective strategy for improving school climate because it enhances teacher morale and teachers attitudes toward students. In addition, it also influences the amount of effort teachers put forth, especially in instructional practices.

Another important ingredient in educational leadership is the skill of coaching. Leaders need to discover which members need help and then see that they



get it. As an educational leaders, I must help individuals reach their true potential. I should not simply order members to improve, but rather should challenge, inspire, suggest, and show them ways to improve. This can affect change, because I would empower the teachers that I work with to implement the various strategies they feel will most accurately fit the needs of each individual teacher.

Blumberg (1989) were quite candid about the usefulness of suggesting. For example, in the area of curriculum and instruction, principals knew that teachers considered these areas "territorial perogatives." The principals interviewed planted suggestions for consideration rather than intruding into the teacher's domain. Blumberg addressed these techniques as "seeding." Principals would brainstorm all the possible ways to an instructional problem and select only those that were acceptable, then present those options to the teachers to choose from. They made known to the teachers their preference of choices, yet left it up to the teachers to have the final choices about matters in their professional realm.

Another method used in helping teachers reach

their potential is to provide them opportunities to acquire the knowledge necessary to warrant classroom autonomy and authority, over school wide decisions (Kirby, 1991). This can be accomplished by empowering teachers. Principals need to provide their staff with informal as well as formal opportunities for acquiring needed personal development. Similarly, principals can provide professional literature to help enhance teacher growth. Leithwood and Jantize (1990) noted in their findings that teachers are much more open to growth opportunities such as professional literature when there exists a strong commitment to school improvement goals.

The above are some ways in which I would help to develop and nurture teachers, as they strive to reach higher levels of professionalism. A leader's role as coach is essentially a skill which will aid by helping others to self-discover. As a coach the leader is a teacher, learner, facilitator, role model, and friend (Nanus, 1989).

Communication is another key ingredient for effective leadership. Lundy (1990) quotes, "Everything an effective leader does is based on communication,

whether planning, controlling, organizing, staffing or directing." Ziglar (1987) emphasizes that communication especially of caring, is incredibly important both in oral and written form.

In the book, Managing From the Heart, Bracey, Sanford, and Trueblood (1990) describe the skill of listening used by leaders. They suggest that leaders should try to understand other people's concerns during a discussion by summarizing his/her understanding of what they have just said. Also, they suggest if you paraphrase what others say to you, you remind them that you are listening and trying to understand. And if you missed some important point they were trying to make, this would give them a chance to clarify their meaning.

In my opinion, communication is the most important skill in life and is the key to effective interpersonal communication. Leaders must first learn how to listen, and listen with empathy. The most important step in improving your listening skills is to adjust your basic attitudes during communication (Lundy, 1990). To do this you must put yourself in the other person's shoes and not just listen with your ears, but with your eyes and heart. Often times people interpret without truly

understanding. The ability to really listen will only come from a sincere desire to understand.

As an effective leader, I must listen and communicate throughout the organization, and across organizational boundaries, bridging the internal and external environments together. I must continually reach out to talk and learn from the consumer of the services (the students), and the front-line workers who deliver those services (the teacher and staff).

As an educational leader, it is important for me to apply personal and professional integrity to my leadership. Personal integrity is a vital quality for a leader to possess. In America's legal system, one can discredit an individual's image if he/she can prove the individual to have a lack of credibility. Proof of the absence of ethics, trust, and integrity are several elements that are necessary in order to accomplish this. The same holds true for administrators. If they do not possess ethics, trust, and integrity their credibility will diminish. The only way to avoid this is to set high personal standards for yourself, and constantly exhibit behaviors that are in sync with those standards. This is done so that no question

about your integrity will arise. Nothing is noticed more quickly than the discrepancy between what leaders preach and what they expect their subordinates to practice.

Trust is a necessary virtue for the cooperation and reliability of others. It implies reliability, predictability, and mutuality of concern. A leader whom the people trust will not have many problems getting other members to commit to the organization.

Professional integrity is also necessary for a leader to have. This would include both ethics and respect for others. Acting in a professional manner is regarded highly and respected by others.

As a leader I must be a role-models to others. Peter Drucker (1987) reminds us: " Leaders are expected to set an example. They are not supposed to behave as we know we behave. They are supposed to behave as we know that we ought to behave..." (p. 28). Educational leaders must learn to practice what they preach, practice the behaviors they want others to emulate, and role-model the expectations which they expect from others.

As one might easily conclude from this discussion,

there are no easy or fast ways to become an effective educational leader, but effective leadership can be developed through valuable experiences, direction, and encouragement. Most of the experience gained in leadership is learned on the job. For this reason, decisions, actions, and behaviors are critical when one is in a leadership position. It is good, however, to note that experience is not necessarily what happens to you, but it's what you do with what happens to you. Educational leaders must keep this in mind when they lead their organization.

In addition, I believe educational leaders need to be proactive. Most people are driven by circumstance, conditions, and their environment. The ability to subordinate this impulse is difficult, but essential, for leaders to do if they do not want to be the victims of everything that goes on around them. Proactive leaders focus their attention on those things which they can do something about, and not on those things which they have no control over. In short, in order for me to become an effective educational leader I must continually plan strategically and organize, anticipate change, monitor and adjust to that change, develop

shared values and vision, praise other members for their efforts, coach, communicate and be an example and role model to others.

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