

# **HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: ACCOUNTABILITY, RECIPROcity AND THE NEXUS BETWEEN EMPLOYER AND EMPLOYEE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The article addresses teacher retention challenges employers are experiencing in the quest to effectively meet standard human resource management practices. The quality of the employer-employee relationship forms the foundation upon which effective management practices thrive. Teachers who remain in education value students and their personal impact within the learning community. Career educators also appreciate autonomy and collaborative decision making. Effective leaders who create learning environments that embody these characteristics provide optimal work places for teachers. The portrait of an effective leader includes a dynamic persona who may inspire the purposeful work of others through artful performance. He realizes a purpose much higher than himself and commits to the patient, focused pursuit of the ideal learning community. Effective leaders view employees as resources and align them accordingly with objectives to find the best “fit” for success.

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## **Introduction**

One of the business world’s most desirable commodities is the ideal employee. Organizations fuel a continuous search for pristine candidates who sell themselves to the highest bidder and promise impeccable performance. Public and private organizational entities thrive on the dividends such performance

delivers, dividends that have propelled organizations to the very stratosphere of financial success.

The same is true for school systems and the employees they recruit. In their quest to develop optimal learning environments for students, school districts have steadily raised the bar for existing teachers and teacher candidates. Districts that lead the nation in terms of the quality of education they provide have adopted a somewhat post-modernistic approach relative to the caliber of educator they hire. For example, Plano Independent School District requires that all teachers hold a masters degree in addition to the requisite state teacher certification. Many school districts promote ongoing staff and professional development for educators at all levels and positions, the cost of which is primarily absorbed by the employee. The status quo is that employees generally acquiesce to each new initiative towards self and organizational improvement, despite personal sacrifice and regardless of whether they truly believe the initiative's promises. Teachers are held to tremendously high accountability standards and are in the dubious position of being scrutinized and evaluated by campus administrators, the school district and the state education agency. The school district demand for bigger, better, faster and smarter is a unilateral arrangement that promotes teacher dissatisfaction and leads to increased teacher turnover.

Studies indicate the tide is gradually turning in the employer-employee relationship, and especially so in the field of education. Talented employees who represent a portrait of the ideal have found their collective voice and demand some measure of reciprocal accountability from the employer as partial incentive for organizational loyalty and continued good performance. Teachers market themselves as commodities and negotiate deals with districts based upon the personal rewards and benefits of the arrangement. Benefits speak volumes and are evinced in terms of employee retention efforts, the quality of the leader/administrator and the quality of the work environment. In addition to receiving commensurate

financial compensation, employees must feel valued by their employer and must enjoy where they work.

### **Purpose of the Article**

The purpose of the article is to discuss the connections among teacher retention, reciprocal accountability, effective leaders and human resource alignment. The article addresses various concepts of effective leaders and explores their common themes. It also examines how the employees sense of belonging and purpose impact employee retention. The relationship among the elements is shown below:



## Teacher Retention

Literature supports that teacher retention should begin early in the formation of the employee- employer relationship. Butcher and Kritsonis (2007) state that “Employee retention starts at Orientation” (Butcher & Kritsonis, 2007). Likewise, studies by The Annie E. Casey Foundation support this declaration and add that program participants should “start to internalize the ‘elements of retention’...long before placement” (Fischer, 2008). When school districts or principals discover candidates who surpass their hiring criteria, the dynamics of the interview should change such that both employer and candidate are promoting themselves to the other. In contrast to traditional hiring practices, employers must now provide candidates with compelling reasons and incentives for joining their organizations. Those incentives must exceed the parameters that an attractive salary once provided. The Casey Foundation studies reveal that long-term employee retention is best achieved when the employer provides extensive and continuous employee training and supportive services for employees (Fischer, 2008). Butcher and Kritsonis (2007) continue by stating that employees “...change jobs to work for companies that make them feel valuable, offering the opportunity for empowerment, career and personal growth, and the development of new skills.” The value of this initial contact during the recruitment phase is hugely motivating to the prospective employee. Todd Whitaker writes, “I have had teachers tell me several years later how empowering that original contact was, and how they never forgot its message” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 49). It stands to reason that teachers impacted in this way would positively impact teacher retention rates for a school district. The Casey Foundation studies emphasize the importance of maintaining a high level of employee- employer engagement after hiring (Fischer, 2008). Employers who desire to keep outstanding employees must communicate that desire by improving and maintaining the relationships they have with their employees. Acknowledgement and positive recognition speak directly to the employees’ sense of self-esteem and valuation. This is accomplished in a number of ways; employers may express their appreciation

through the presentation of awards and public recognition; social outlets that encourage appropriate employer-employee interaction; tuition reimbursement and opportunities for employees to participate in continued, high-level training. These strategies, coupled with appropriate salary gains, provide employees with the appreciation and compensation factors necessary for improved employee retention. Many organizations subscribe to the notion that increased employee satisfaction leads to increased customer satisfaction. In education, teachers who feel appreciated and adequately compensated will transfer these benefits to the students they serve.

### **Why Teachers Stay**

Why do some teachers stay with a particular school or school district for years while others never seem to be satisfied? Although individual priorities may differ somewhat, the undergirding theme is that people gravitate to environments in which they are comfortable. This entails that the work environment or the job itself has to meet certain criteria on a personal level for each individual teacher. The work must fulfill some need, aside from the financial, that each teacher uses to define her life's purpose. The following quotes were submitted to an internet blog hosted by *Education Week* in response to the question above. The theories and personal accounts offered provide insight into this very compelling issue.

“In my case, once I got into teaching it became entirely about my students as I love working with them. It is for them that I am considering staying in the field for more than my required two years.”

“...I have seen some teachers with 30 years of experience hate hate the principal, the school board, etc, but they simply bloom when they are with the students.” (Shyu, 2007)

These comments reflect the most fundamental reason why teachers sometimes stay in a profession or environment that is

otherwise unappealing to them – because they like to work with students. Teachers who demonstrate this attitude are natural educators and nurturers. They understand the content knowledge intimately and understand the skill it takes to impart that knowledge to students. Their personal satisfaction lies in seeing students learn and in facilitating the process. They may rail against the establishment but their dedication is to the children. The teacher-student relationships and their personal commitment to education keep them in the classroom.

“I stay in teaching because I feel really good about the job I’m doing. I know I am making a difference, I know I am doing what is right, and I go to sleep at night feeling really good about the work I’ve done.”

“The reality of why teachers stay is that they have found a school or community which has welcomed them, given them opportunities to grow, learn, and to use their talents to benefit those around them..” (Shyu, 2007)

The comments above reflect conclusions opined in The Casey Foundation studies regarding teacher retention; they show that appreciation and support resonate profoundly with teachers and can provide enough motivation for them to remain in a profession that has been accused on many levels of undervaluing them. Teachers must believe that they make a difference in the lives they touch and must believe that they contribute to the organization’s value. The quality of the “fit,” that is so often analyzed when placing teachers at a campus, in a department or on a team, works for this collection of teachers. Teachers are as much a part of the learning community as it is of them.

“I think if a teacher really feels like they are a part of something larger than themselves...and everyone is really working together...it can be a reason why some stay.”

“...afford staff the opportunity to assume leadership, new roles, and to grow and develop.” (Shyu, 2007)

These comments suggest that career teachers recognize their roles in furthering the mission, vision and goals of the learning community. Educators believe teachers are instructional experts. They should welcome the input that teachers provide. Relationships with colleagues, some degree of autonomy and participative decision making are factors that encourage teachers to remain in education.

### **The Effective Leader**

There are myriad ideas as to what defines an effective leader. Numerous educational pundits have framed their personal defining traits to give meaning to the term and more still are on the horizon. The topic is vast and far beyond the scope of this paper. There are prevailing themes that link the ideas of some of the most noteworthy educators of our times. The theories of these educators will be discussed relative to what effective leaders do and seek.

Servant Leadership is a concept first articulated by Robert Greenleaf, the former Director of Leadership Development for AT&T. Servant Leadership is the theory that the best leaders empower and entrust employee-stakeholders to make crucial decisions and that doing so raises the employees' level of trust in and commitment to the organization (Spears, 2004). Dr. Fenwick English states:

Servant leadership is about empowerment. It isn't giving power to people. Rather it is enabling people to become powerful, finding the leaders in themselves. While it is practical and patient, it is also very spiritual, not so much in any religious sense, but in the way it cares for the interiority of human beings and respects differences and believes in the possibility of human growth. A servant leader first wants to serve and second wants to lead to serve. (English, 2008, p.188)

*“Servant Leadership: A Powerful Tool for Fast Change,”* juxtaposes the “ego-centered” leader with the visionary leader and

demonstrates how the latter, as a superior leadership model, encourages innovation, evolution and collaboration which, in turn, engenders cutting-edge organizations whose stakeholders thrive on individual and team productivity, personal satisfaction and universal change. Effective educational leaders who subscribe to servant leadership recognize teachers as professionals and instructional experts. They provide teachers with resources and facilitate learning in any way they can.

Dr. Sandra Harris, through her study of thirty-four award winning secondary principals, discovered six predominate themes that categorized their success:

- Leadership with a mission – Effective leaders articulate a purpose, are visionary, “emphasize (d) shared goals...and empower(ed) faculty.” Her study revealed that effective leaders who embodied these traits knew what they wanted to accomplish, enlisted the advice of others and involved teachers in data analysis and planning. Teachers also played a pivotal role in developing the instructional strategies used to address student academic deficits. Building “meaningful and caring relationships” among administrators and faculty was instrumental in cultivating loyalty and commitment (Harris, 2008).
- Leadership that Shapes Positive Campus Culture – Effective leaders are committed to cultivating a positive campus culture that allows all stakeholders to thrive. Such a culture exudes trust and dedication, demonstrates a focus on student learning, sets high expectations, nurtures relationships, promotes social skills and citizenry and pledges to create an optimal learning environment (Harris, 2008).
- Leadership for Communication and Collaboration – The quality of communication between leaders and their constituents is key in transforming leaders to exceptional status. Misperceptions that may undermine initiatives at school improvement can be



eradicated if communication among stakeholders is enhanced. Some of the principals who participated in the study identified written weekly parent newsletters, school newspapers, school websites, personal meetings, brochures and press releases as vehicles to get accurate information to all stakeholders. Enhanced communication lead to increased collaboration as teams and committees were formed to address issues that arose as a result. Some principals reported that stakeholder perceptions about their competence as leaders improved as well (Harris, 2008).

- Leadership for Curriculum and Instruction – Effective principals must maintain close ties with teachers and students in the instructional arena. The principal’s job makes it impractical for her to spend the majority of her time in the classroom. She must maintain a connection to the curriculum by collaborating with teachers on improving instructional strategies and by empowering teachers to make decisions regarding instructional interventions. More importantly, she should laud the efforts of teachers and students with verbal or written recognition and awards (Harris, 2008).
- Leadership for School Improvement – Effective leaders demonstrate competence in every area of the learning community; there is no one area that is more important than the other. Effective principals are cognizant of all areas of need and develop committees, task forces and advisory groups to address those concerns. The leader creates opportunities for others to lead effectively in terms of developing programs or interventions that improve the campus climate (Harris, 2008).
- Leadership for Personalizing the Learning Environment for All – Dr. Harris’s study revealed that effective principals emphasized the celebration of cultural diversity. These leaders recognized the inherent, nuanced inequities that may exist regarding educational opportunities for culturally diverse students and were committed to finding a remedy. These principals also resolved to refrain from

explaining perceived student inabilities through deficit narratives. Instead, they strove to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students (Harris, 2008).

Dr. Harris states, “I noticed that all of these leadership practices were framed within three important ideas: “we, not me, ““people, not programs” and “students, not schools. ...every principal attributed their success to a team effort; recognized that programs were effective because of the people who administered them; and understood that school was about students and their successes” (Harris, 2008, p. 5).

These ideas are expanded in Todd Whitaker’s *What Great Principals Do Differently: Fifteen Things That Matter Most*. Whitaker acknowledges key differences that distinguish effective leaders. Like Harris, Whitaker’s experiences confirm that effective principals recognize their responsibility regarding “all aspects of their school” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 15). Although other campus educators may bear responsibility for various aspects directly, effective principals realize that the bottom line rests with them. An effective principal accepts that she is “the decisive element in the school” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 16) and the one individual others look to when change needs to occur. Treating people respectfully and understanding the power of praise are additional practices that enhance leader efficacy. Whitaker advises that principals “...decide the tone” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 33) of their schools; those who are effective combat misperceptions by providing accurate, more positive perceptions (Whitaker, 2003, p. 32). He further states that “Great principals focus on students – by focusing on teachers” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 35). Exceptional principals realize that teachers whose own needs are met by the administration have a much easier time meeting the needs of students, and will go the extra mile for those students when times are tough. Effective principals also “keep testing in perspective” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 55) by recognizing that test scores simply do not reflect all the positive things that happen on their campuses. They refuse to allow test anxiety to permeate the campus climate and act as buffers for their teachers against the

constant and sometimes discouraging reprimands by the district and the state. Despite the frenetic pace the principal's job requires, effective leaders make time to nurture the emotional side of any stakeholder who needs help navigating personal and professional difficulties (Whitaker, 2003).

Although Greenleaf, Harris and Whitaker explore aspects of leadership that distinguish each from the others, recurrent themes form the connection that provides the very essence of the effective leader. Practices that involve maintaining substantive relationships with faculty; understanding that people, not programs, make the difference; collaboration; cultivating campus culture and climate; empowerment and a student-centered focus contribute to the universal portrait of an effective leader. It is no mystery that such practices underscore the essential elements of teacher retention as well.

Dr. Fenwick English is one of the most influential professionals in education today. His latest title, *The Art of Educational Leadership: Balancing Performance and Accountability*, promotes the attitude that effective leaders possess an integrated composition of talents that are separate and distinct from any previously identified leader skill set. The resulting synergy produces a leadership dynamic that transforms exceptional leaders into legends. Dr. English writes:

Leadership is both a science and an art. The science is easier to teach and to measure. ...The art of leadership, however, involves performance. It is anchored in practice. It has to be modeled, observed, and carefully constructed, and it must pass the test of credibility in real schooling situations. (English, 2008, p.1)

Dr. English makes clear his desire to redefine educational leadership and scoffs at historical determination to categorize it as an isolated science. He suggests that the static, two-dimensional concept

of leaders is inaccurate and is presented out of context; he describes his efforts as follows:

It is my hope and my intent to redirect the teaching of educational leadership by regrounding it on different axes. The social sciences have all but petered out in telling us anything new or different about leadership. Leadership studies must move beyond the sciences and recognize that effective leading is about drama and performance – artistry! Artistry involves the whole human, not simply the head, but the heart. Human action contains vision, emotion, and belief embodied in artful performance. (English, 2008, p. xi)

According to Dr. English, effective and artful leadership involves the creation of a public persona. This “public face” differs from the leader’s natural persona but effectively captures the attention, devotion and constituency of those he leads. English asserts that the quality of the leader’s performance is inextricably linked with his powers of persuasion. He further establishes that an effective leader approaches the position in much the same way that an actor prepares for a role (English, 2008). The difference here is that an artful leader adopts a dramatic countenance to further authentic beliefs and behaviors, and to move constituents toward organizational change. English’s research yielded a profound revelation about effective leaders – “that leaders engage in a purposive construction of self, that is, they actively engage in creating the persona they want to become and what they perceive potential followers want and need them to be” (English, 2008, p. 6). Dr. English’s conclusions add a largely unexplored dimension to the effective leader concept that has forced educational leaders to re-evaluate traditional leadership ideals. As testimony to the power of self-construction, Dr. English quotes Louis Fischer, Mohandas Gandhi’s biographer, and writes:

How then did this rickety and fearful little man become the mighty leader of a huge country like India? Gandhi invented himself. He created a persona based on action, which steadily

fed his self-confidence. Gandhi advanced to greatness by doing...Using the clay that was there he turned himself into another person. He was a remarkable case of second birth in one lifetime. (English, 2008, p.7)

This quote suggests that effective leaders begin their awakening with the realization of a passion that inspires their self-transformation. The moment is epiphanic and life changing and helps to elevate artful leaders to unprecedented realms.

### **What Do Effective Leaders Seek?**

The answer to this question lies in a purpose much greater than the leaders themselves. Effective leaders seek the realization of a goal through direction and the purposeful and inspired work of others. The goals that require leadership of this magnitude are impossible for a single person to accomplish; their repertoire of skills must be masterful enough to incite passion among the masses and fuel a movement to effect change. Effective school administrators face similar challenges. As educational leaders, they seek the best new teachers and to improve the ones they have (Whitaker, 2003). They seek optimal learning environments for every child and the satisfaction of needs for every stakeholder. Successful administrators embrace the teachings described herein and seek continual rebirth, rejuvenation and self improvement. Their purpose is their life's work and they never tire of the pursuit of excellence.

### **Alignment Models in the Context of Teacher Retention and Leadership**

“Resource” is variously defined as something that is used to accomplish a goal, or a source of aid or support that may be drawn upon when needed. Human resource management is the philosophical approach that views employees as valued resources that help to

achieve organizational goals. It should be the aim of every principal to retain the exceptional professionals she hires.

Alignment models are the tools organizations use to ensure that their mission and goals, culture, job assignments and processes can be supported by their human resources – their employees. According to [hralignment.net](http://hralignment.net), “The core HRA principle is that Organizational Effectiveness begins with the alignment of Human Resources and Business Objectives. The essential message here is organizations should strive to hire the best candidates and place them in work assignments that utilize their unique, respective skills to the greatest advantage of the employee and the organization. Alignment models focus on aligning human resource processes, organization and jobs and organizational culture with employee talent, business objectives and performance requirements (HR Alignment, Ltd., 2008). Precise and accurate alignment, leads to greater organizational efficacy.

In the school setting, alignment is essential to campus success and each stakeholder reaps the benefits in ways specific to his needs. In terms of recruitment, school districts should first conduct a needs assessment to articulate their mission, vision and goals and recruit only those applicants who meet the criteria. Hiring standards for teachers should be in alignment with state or national certification requirements but should also reflect skill sets that student learning goals dictate. Professional and staff development should be precisely aligned to offset deficits in teacher preparedness. Curriculum alignment should be the result of both campus and vertical teaming as well as continuous, formative student assessments. In the simplest terms, alignment is the practice of ensuring that all pieces of the puzzle fit. Alignment, coupled with the tutelage of an effective leader, reaffirms that improved teacher retention will result.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, employee retention, reasons employees stay on the job, effective leadership practices and vision and alignment are all pieces of an expansive puzzle that must fit perfectly for an organization to thrive. The quality of each element is contingent upon the quality of the others. Connections impact organizations and transform them from ordinary to extraordinary. Individuals who lead extraordinary organizations are organic, dynamic personas who employ scientific as well as artful leadership practices to effect change.

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