

## ***From the Field:***

# ***Learning Leaders***

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### **Time for Instructional Leadership:**

Leadership is essential to successful schools. One of the ways to support effective school leadership is to share ideas and best practices to address the common challenges faced by school leaders. This question and response format addresses common challenges and questions from practicing school leaders in the manner that a mentor might respond to a question from a new administrator seeking to improve his or her craft.

#### **Question**

I know I need to be an instructional leader. I want to spend more time in classrooms and I enjoy that aspect of my job. However, it seems like the demands of mandates, parents, students and staff occupy all of my time and keep me away from any efforts to spend time on instruction and working with teachers in the classroom. Is it physically possible to fulfill all of the responsibilities of being a principal and still spend time in classroom? Does doing so really contribute to instructional improvement?

#### **Response**

We agree that the demands of being a principal are significant, and at times seem more than one person can physically accomplish. Anyone who accepts the principal position with the idea that it is a prestigious and easy position as the "boss" of a school will either be ineffective or overwhelmed by the demands of the job. The emphasis on increasing student achievement and improving instruction has placed enormous demands on the principal role. Plus, increasing accountability and demands for quick results adds to the stress. On the other hand, the rewards from being a principal in seeing the development and growth of teachers and the achievement and success of students can make principal one of the most rewarding roles in the education profession.

#### **Time Considerations**

Time management implies three important considerations. First, there will be administrative work demanded of

a principal that should be reserved for before or after the school day. Based on our personal preferences, devote time for dealing with communication and paperwork in one of these time slots. Know whether you are a morning or afternoon person. Deal with administrative tasks that require critical thought in your best time of the day and spend your weaker time doing less demanding tasks.

Second, focus on students and staff during the instructional day. An important aspect of this is visibility on campus and in classrooms. Your activities should be focused on interacting with staff and students.

The final consideration is to make sure you provide some personal time in your day for exercise and reflection away from the demands of school. Merely working longer and longer hours is often unproductive. For example, Kathy relied on early morning equestrian for exercise and reflection. The physical demands and concentration of riding forces you to put aside thoughts about school. Plus walking to cool out a horse is a great time to reflect. While you may not have a horse to cool out, use the time driving home from work, running or gardening to think and reflect.

Wherever the place you find quiet time, listen to your "inner voice." Also keep to a schedule that preserves that quiet time. The role of principal can easily become overwhelming unless individuals take the time to maintain their personal health and reflect on their job and their work, away from the demands of the job.

#### **Reflect on How You Use Your Time**

A recent research study (Hornig, Klasik & Loeb, 2009). took a close look at how principals spent their time. This study gives some basis of comparison as you reflect on your use of time. The chart shows the six categories of how time was allocated and the percentage of their time in each category. These totals do not equal 100% since some portion of the day was devoted to personal activities such as eating. The most powerful lesson from the study was comparing principals in high-performing

## Principal Use of Time

| Category                | %  |
|-------------------------|----|
| Administration          | 29 |
| Organization Management | 21 |
| Instructional Program   | 6  |
| Day-to-Day Instruction  | 7  |
| Internal Relations      | 15 |
| External Relations      | 5  |

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schools with principals in low performing schools in terms of student achievement. There were actually very few differences among the categories between high and low performers. However, the two categories in which there were differences were that principals in low performing schools spent significantly more time in administration and significantly less time in day-to-day instruction. It may make sense that administrative details such as disciplining students and handling crises in a high need school demands attention and principals and other administrators have less time for day-to-day instruction. It can also be argued that by spending time in day-to-day instruction in classrooms principals are able to contribute to higher level of achievement.

Begin to keep track of how you spend your day in different activities. Then reflect whether this is the balance you are seeking. If not, begin to make some changes.

### Break the Cycle

One of the most significant time consumers is disciplining students and handling referrals. Unfortunately, too many of these situations are students acting out as a result of boredom and poor instruction. It is really important for principals to break the cycle of having to deal with the results of poor instruction and handling student discipline issues. When principals break this cycle by holding teachers accountable for good instruction, this will result in fewer referrals and discipline problems that principals and other administrators need to address. Instead of spiraling downward by ignoring instruction and dealing with more and more discipline problems, devote more time to improving instruction and reduce the number of referrals.

To begin this effort, principals need to stop jumping to respond immediately to each student discipline incident or parent inquiry. Unless those incidents are truly safety or health related, defer dealing with these to a time that efficiently meets your schedule. Set up a system and a time for dealing with referrals and also involve other administrators in this process. Keep data regarding the number of referrals and constantly reflect on improving these numbers.

Think about the root causes of student discipline problems. They may originate with a specific teacher, relate to a specific rule or occur in a specific location in school. Address the root problem, of a teacher, a rule or a location and there will fewer time demands to deal with the symptoms of the problem.

### Make Classroom Observations a Priority

Classroom observations should not simply be the formal required evaluations. Set goals and mark out time in your daily calendar to devote to classroom visits. Even working with over 100 classrooms, Kathy tried get in each classroom once a week. She even carried with her those mounds of paperwork that needed to be reviewed and signed. You can multi-task in the back of a classroom; observing and also reading paperwork.

Make classroom observations important! In one school, we noticed when assistant principals were observing classrooms they were constantly being called on the radio and pulled out to deal with a student referral or a discipline issue. This conveys the message that working on instruction is one of the least important priorities. It should be the most important priority. By spending time in classrooms, teachers will see you in a different role. Principals that are seen as constantly in their office are perceived as decision-makers and bosses to handle school wide issues. When both students and teachers see principals in the classroom they become aware of the significant principal role as instructional leader.

In Kathy's experience, she noticed as students saw her in classrooms more often observing instruction, they frequently came to her with instructional issues to complain about teachers that were boring or arbitrary in their teaching. This gave Kathy specific problems that she could address.

It is also not simply about holding teachers accountable for good quality instruction; it is about improving and expanding your experience to make better decisions about instruction. By spending time in classrooms, you have a much deeper understanding about the quality of instruction, the level of student-teacher relationships and the actions of students.

### Defining Instructional Leadership

The educational literature is full of references about the importance of instructional leadership (Flath,1989, Fullan,1991, Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1988). There are also many unique leader labels such as servant leader (Russell & Stone, 2002) and distributed leadership (Ritchie & Woods, 2007) that tend to obscure the definition of what an instructional leader actually does. What role should an instructional leader play when trying to empower others in taking leadership?

Visibility in classrooms and the school campus and conversations about instruction are important symbolic roles to influence instruction and also provide stronger evidence to your decision-making regarding instruction. However, principals need to also address what we feel are visible aspects that define effective instructional leadership.

### Suggestions for Instructional Leaders

- Instructional leaders must have a clear target for instructional improvement. It matters less what that target is than the fact that you do have a target and focus on it. Examples of good targets are literacy, rigor and relevance or student engagement. Raising test scores is not a target; it is a way of keeping score.
- Principal behaviors for being an instructional leader include providing a context for instructional improvement. Context is the precondition of culture necessary for instructional improvement. This includes staff relationships, opportunities to collaborate, accountability for collaboration, access to data and a sense of urgency.
- Principals also view the "big picture" of school practices to make sure that all school initiatives, such as teacher evaluation, hiring, professional development or grading systems all align with your instructional target.

- Leadership has been shown to be the second most important characteristic, next to teachers, in raising student achievement. Fulfilling that role as an effective instructional leader requires us to reflect on our use of time and activities to ensure they are focused on instruction.

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## Passionate People:

Leadership is essential to successful schools. One of the ways to support effective school leadership is to share ideas and best practices to address the common challenges faced by school leaders. This question and response format addresses common challenges and questions from practicing school leaders in the manner that a mentor might respond to a question from a new administrator seeking to improve his or her craft.

### Question

How do you deal with passionate people? Passion is generally a good thing. Passionate people excite you when they believe in the same thing you do, but passionate people that do not believe the same as you seem annoying and confrontational. How do you effectively manage passionate people?

### Response

We can identify with this problem. While we often refer to passion as a positive aspect of leadership, it assumes that all are passionate about the same thing. As a leader we hope to inspire passion in others to accomplish

the school goals. We have frequently worked with teams where a team member takes a very passionate position that stands in opposition to the idea we suggested and hoped the teams would endorse. This passionate person is intense, sometimes very vocal, attracts attention from other team members and when advocating a different approach becomes an obstacle to a group moving forward. This person can become a formidable leadership issue.

In leadership conversations, we talk about the virtues of building strong teams and team building. We often naïvely assume that every potential team member is a willing participant to eagerly engage with the leader's aspirations, to form goals around the team and move forward in unison. This is certainly the ideal vision of forming a team, building a strong consensus, and accomplishing the work the team sets out to do.

The situation described in this question occurs when individuals may object to a specific decision, procedure or program and argue with a strong point of view, with great passion. In one sense, it is nice to admire a person's passion, but this can be seen as counterproductive to the entire team.

## What is Passion?

The historical root definition of the word passion is "to suffer." Someone that has great passion is willing to suffer for what she or he strongly believes. Someone with great passion is able to bring to the work a high emotional level based on his or her individual beliefs. So, it is safe to assume that when we see or observe someone with strong passion, they are talking about something that relates to their core beliefs. They feel incredibly committed to these beliefs and are willing to suffer to accomplish the goal or hold true to those values. You can recognize passion by listening to an individual's word choice that includes exaggerated adjectives and dramatic phrases. Passion does not always result in an emotional outburst. Often passion influences a person to persevere against all odds to accomplish a goal. Passion is actually a desirable trait for individuals and teams. This same intensity that accomplishes goals in one situation can be counterproductive in another (Maiers & Sandvold (2010).

## Don't confuse Power Play with Passion

Listen carefully to a person you label as the passionate obstructionist, to determine if the underlying motivation for their behavior is to simply exert power over the group rather than expressing a point of view to accomplish the group goals. Sometimes people become emotional when they perceive a loss of power and influence. When trying to develop a team approach to decision-making, there may be team members who are forced to shift from a hierarchical leadership position, where they individually made decisions and subordinates followed. That type of powerful position often makes people feel successful and changing to a system where they no longer have such influence is scary and threatening. Often people react with emotional intensity. When you can determine that an individual seeks to simply retain or acquire more power and influence, remind them that decisions come from the team rather one person's perspective.

## Encourage Passion, Discourage Emotional Outbursts

We advocate for passion-driven leaders; bringing great passion to the leadership role is more likely to generate enthusiasm and harness high levels of energy from those who work with you. Passion is infectious! We enjoy being around passionate people that raise the level of excitement about the work. Passionate leaders make the work less burdensome. The *Passion-Driven Classroom* (Maiers, 2010) digs into this concept of passion and how it influences positive education. In general, passion is a good thing that should be encouraged. The emotional outbursts or distractions that emerge in teamwork are the issue. As you work to discourage the emotional disruptions, do not discourage a person's passion.

One of the ways to deal with an emotional disruptive person in a team is to have clear operating guidelines and follow those guidelines. Hopefully within your guide-

lines you have statements such as, "Each person freely expresses opinions," "No one person is to dominate the conversation," and "Everyone shows respect to each member of the team." When behaviors emerge that are counter to guidelines, it is time to remind the team of its operating procedures. Remind violators their behavior is not consistent with the guidelines, and they personally are still a valuable part of the team.

## Don't Be Quick to Remove Passionate People

While the first reaction might be to remove a passionate person from a team effort to eliminate the distraction, go slowly in making such a change. Explore the underlying motivation of a passionate person; their strong emotional outbursts reflect some deeply held beliefs. It is most important to listen through a team member's use of a different word to determine what is the core value this individual holds so dearly. He or she may be arguing about a specific program, practice or decision, and probably perceives this to be in conflict with the goal or value that they hold very dear. It is important to listen through their conversation to identify what is driving their passionate argument. We are willing to bet that their core values may not be all that different from the values you aspire to with the team.

While passionate team members demand our attention, when their core values are consistent with the team goal, they can be an excellent conscience or "moral compass" for the team. Teams sometimes become myopically excited about a current project or idea that may not be the best path to take. A passionate team member committed to common core values can raise cautionary questions and perspectives that can lead to better decisions.

It is important to find a common ground with that passionate staff member to redirect his or her particular argument back to the core values or goals common with the team. This redirecting of a passionate person is only effective if your team has established clear values and goals. If the team has only been assembled to accomplish the work in a group fashion and has not taken time to develop shared vision, values and goals; it is not a team, it is simply a workgroup. So, an important aspect of redirecting the passionate team member is making sure your team is prepared with a sound underpinning of values and perspectives.

## Don't Escalate the Noise

When team members exhibit high levels of emotion, they are occasionally very verbal and loud. This gets our attention! Our human reaction is to confront this loud person with an equally or even louder rebuttal, talking down the other person. This is how heated confrontational arguments occur where no one wants to back away. As a leader it is important to not escalate to the same volume level of an emotional outburst, but to speak softer and slower in the conversation. As a leader, keep your emotions in check and respond and question in a quieter tone. This will avoid

elevating emotions and allow you to listen more carefully to the underlying reasons for the emotional outburst that you can deal with. You want team members to keep their passion-driven intensity. Genuinely admire and compliment individuals on their intensity, but seek to lower emotional outbursts without squelching emotional intensity.

### **Reconnect Passionate People with Team Goals**

When listening and confirming the core beliefs of a passionate person, you have an opportunity to reconnect the person with group goals. Hopefully, their goals relate back to a goal of benefiting students in schools. Build a connection of benefiting students with those of the team. If a person is passionate about some other issue that has nothing to do with students or education, it is easier to push aside the passionate person's argument because it does not match the overall goals of the team. Tell them to refocus on the team's work.

### **Productive Passion**

Passion is a key element to any team's success. Remember passion does not always come from your ideas or a team decision. Passion originates with core values and goals. Passion exists in the individual and may create occasional conflicts in teams trying to reach consensus in their

work. When passion appears to be an obstacle to a team moving forward, it may be time to reaffirm team and organization goals and redirect that passion toward productive team efforts. Harness the energy of passion to allow a team to be innovative and productive rather trying to make a team a passive protector of the status quo or a workgroup to follow your orders.

### **References**

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