

# The Characteristics of an Effective School Leader

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## Abstract

*Principals are an integral member of a child's education. Their job is not only to manage the day to day affairs of a school, but to be an instructional leader. Much research has been conducted to determine the characteristics of effective school leaders and how these leaders turn their schools into effective learning spaces. Instructional leaders are interpersonally smart, professional and accountable. In the school, the leaders bring their own unique mix to the job and continually reflect on the day's events to promote life-long learning.*

Principals are the individuals one hears over the daily announcements, those who wander the halls during class time, and the people students have to answer to when discipline becomes necessary. The school principal's role has been changing and evolving in the landscape of education. As a result, much time and research are devoted to studying effective principals and their effect on student learning and achievement. Teacher expectations are the first predictor of student success. Nevertheless, the principal as an instructional leader correlates to improving student achievement (Grissom, Loeb, & Master, 2013). Effective principals are instructional leaders who exhibit exceptional interpersonal skills and professionalism. These leaders are reflective learners who hold themselves and their staff accountable while creating a safe and welcoming climate. The above factors, when combined, create a high-powered learning environment essential for the success of a school leader.

## Vision and Direction

The role of the principal has shifted from that of a manager to a visionary of instruction and curriculum. If the school is a high-achieving school, it is the principal who sets goals for the instructional staff. The instructional leader (principal) develops clearly articulated goals that ensure the success of all students who attend school (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013). The goals are clearly communicated to all students and staff. It is these goals that help to develop a shared vision between leadership and staff (Klar & Brewer 2013). These goals ensure that all stakeholders know the expectations and their role in achieving these aspirations.

Once a clear vision has been set and school goals have been clearly articulated, the principal can then spend time on various tasks related to instruction. The effective leader spends time coaching staff and developing educational programming. These two actions improve student learning (Grissom et al., 2013). Effective principals are consistently mindful of best practice while instructing and encouraging the teaching staff to adopt these learning techniques in the classroom (Whitaker, 2012). Ineffective principals are unaware of new approaches and do not keep current on research (Okutan, 2014). Despite the "tried and true" methods that many teachers practise within their classrooms, the principal insists on keeping current with the changing research on student learning. Taking risks and trying something new is common for the instructional leader (Kearney, Kelsey, & Herrington, 2013). With student learning at the centre of any school, all effective leaders think that more can be done to improve outcomes (Meador, 2014b). Spending time on best practice and keeping current with research translate into improved student learning.

## Monitoring Student Progress

If change and trying new things is a pillar of an instruction leader, another pillar is the need to monitor student progress. Instructional leaders need to be specialists in assessment and

tracking progress (Morrison, 2013). Top principals track the progress of all students in relation to student goals and outcomes (Elfers & Stritikus, 2014). Principals may develop common assessment strategies with staff and note how students are progressing in their learning. These data are then analysed and charted to look at weakness or areas that need to be improved upon. Data can come from a variety of sources and address a variety of areas that range from academics to social/emotional well-being. Principals use data effectively and efficiently (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013). When data are used effectively, the principal will manage instruction through funding of budgets. Essentially, money will be put toward resources that will help a school to improve weaknesses or help staff and students to reach collective goals (Klar, & Brewer 2013). Tracking student progress and channelling monetary funds to address weaknesses are other indicators of an effective leader.

Investing funds to nurture improvement can mean many different things. For example, principals could plan professional development activities for staff, fund resources to implement professional development, or develop teacher capacity (Grissom & Loeb, 2011). Effective educational leaders know that investing in professional development is good for achievement and staff development (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013). Investing in staff development connects with the notion of letting teachers be informed with current educational research and best practice. Principals invest in staff development and ensure that leaders keep current.

### **Managing Time and Working with People**

The tasks that an instructional leader has to accomplish can be overwhelming and daunting: establishing goals, coaching staff, developing assessments, tracking student progress, and channeling funds. Unfortunately, during the day of an instructional leader, it was found that only 12.7% of their time was actually devoted to instructional activities (Grissom, et al., 2013, Table 1). Knowing that focusing on instruction activities helps to improve student learning, principals are learning to free up more of their time. Leaders are bogged down in everyday administration tasks that do not relate to curriculum and student learning. Effective leaders develop a strategy to delegate some of these tasks to others so that principals can focus on instructional tasks that matters to students (Mendels & Mitgang). Principals have a clear understanding of where their priorities are and free up their time to focus on instruction.

Dealing with instruction involves human resources and working with people: teaching staff, students, and the community. Every effective principal must have strong interpersonal skills (Morrison, 2013). These leaders know that significant learning requires a relationship (Hall & Simeral, 2008). To be the instructional coach, the leader must have a relationship with the staff. Ideally, caring and supportive relationships foster growth. All principals need to work effectively with others to reach common goals and to ensure that all staff are working toward collective goals while being available and having an “open door” policy (Spiro, 2013; Whitaker, 2012). Exceptional leaders build trust and encourage communication (Kearney et al., 2013). With such a high importance placed on communication, the principal is an outstanding listener, taking the time to hear the thoughts and ideas of others (Meador, 2014a). Staff meetings are vehicles that teachers look forward to because the effective principal has made them worthwhile (Whitaker, 2012). When the effective principal actually listens to the teachers, the best teachers feel that they have a voice. If the principal is not an empathic listener, teachers will not share ideas and strategies during meetings (Freeman & Randolph, 2013). Through the process of active listening, the principal is aware of issues that arise and uses effective communication skills to deal with these problems. The effective leader spends time counselling staff during times of conflict (Grissom & Loeb, 2011). Additionally, time might be spent to advocate for the employees and teachers working in the school (Freeman & Randolph, 2013). Effective principals focus on people, listening, communicating, and developing relationships.

## **Communication**

Communication is important when issues arise; however, it is equally important to mention the good that happens in schools. Everyone likes to hear about the good things that they do, and everyone loves a pat on the back for a job well done. When given appropriately, praise is very powerful (Whitaker, 2012). Everyone has his/her own unique blend of strengths and weaknesses, but when the contributions of an individual are notable, the effective leader notices it and acknowledges the person for a job well done. Collectively, when authentic praise is given, it will make the staff of a school feel good and improve the morale within the building. Improving the morale of staff is helpful when working with people and developing a positive school climate.

Listening and communicating are two key ingredients to helping the effective leader encourage collaboration. Strong principals share decisions with others (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013). Often, the principal knows that he/she does not have all of the answers to every situation that occurs within the school. Bringing up challenges during staff meetings is a useful tool to use (Spiro, 2013). Collaboration and staff input translate into a democratic way to solve problems. When tough decisions have to be made, effective leaders base the decision on the best teachers in the building (Whitaker, 2012), which translates into developing the leadership skills in others. When a principal shares leadership, he/she capitalizes on the knowledge and wisdom of the collective staff (Spiro, 2013). Encouraging collaboration within the school can be difficult, especially in small schools; however, principals find a way to make it work. Principals establish professional learning communities (PLCs) to support cooperation (Hall & Simeral, 2008). Creatively, principals visit other schools and learn from other leaders about effective decisions and solutions to problems (Lin, 2012). Encouraging collaboration, sharing decision making, and developing the leadership potential of others are strategies that effective school leaders use.

## **Professionalism**

Working in a school and with diverse people and opinions demands professionalism from the leader. Being professional can mean different things to different people, but in terms of effective leaders, being professional means treating everyone with respect (Whitaker, 2012). Every move that a leader makes is subject to scrutiny. The above-average leader models respect in his/her day-to-day interactions and leads by example. Leading by example ensures that the principal is well-respected (Meador, 2014b). When the principal acts respectfully and professionally, staff and major stakeholders will be advocates for the principal (Whitaker, 2012). When respect for the leader is lost, little can be done to make other people work efficiently under his/her leadership and staff members will question the authority of the leader.

Being professional and treating everyone with respect go hand in hand; another aspect of professionalism is having good values. Effective leaders have a good internal conscience and solid moral compass (Morrison, 2013). They know the difference between right and wrong and base their decisions on what is right, not on what is easy. Courage, conviction, and principles are engrained in the psyche of effective leaders (Day, 2014).

Basing difficult decisions on what is right, and permitting teachers to do the same, make principals effective. Knowing that teachers make the biggest difference in student achievement, principals provide teacher autonomy (Lin, 2012). Instructional coaching and planning will help teachers to become increasingly effective; however, some professional courtesy must be extended from the leader to the teachers. Proficient teachers are reflective and want to improve. Encouraging staff to develop according to self-identified needs is beneficial (Whitaker, 2012). Good leaders expect professionalism and self-reflection from the teaching staff.

## **Self-Reflection**

Principals should not live to a double standard; expecting self-reflection of teaching staff should be met with principal self-reflection. Exceptional principals learn from themselves and engage in regular reflection (Kearney et al., 2013). Not every decision a principal makes will be the best one; that is a fact of life. There will be triumphs and pit-falls, but effective leaders analyse the good and bad decisions and ask “Why did this happen?” and “How could I have handled the situation more appropriately?” When reflecting, leaders set high expectations of themselves (Whitaker, 2012). Being reflective and learning from the past is the principal’s first step in holding him/herself accountable. A good school leader opens him/herself up for criticism (Whitaker, 2012). This act makes the principal vulnerable to staff and other stakeholders; however, the effective leader recognizes that he/she is human and does not have all of the answers. The first people from whom the principal should solicit feedback are the teachers (Radinger, 2014). In reality, appraisals and criticisms will occur, whether in an open transparent format or in secret behind the leader’s back.

Principals hold themselves accountable by opening themselves up to criticism; principals must hold others accountable as well. Good leaders do not settle for average: they hold their staff accountable for the learning that takes places in classroom (Meador, 2014a). A climate of self-reflection and reflection on data is well established to help staff focus on student needs (Lin, 2012). The leader establishes clear expectations and follows them through (Whitaker, 2012). Tough love occurs when a member of the collaborative team does not meet expectations.

## **Establishing a Culture**

Creating a culture of respect, collaboration, and progress within a school is important to the effective principal. The culture, or “feel,” of a school is a safe one that is orderly, supportive, and welcoming to learning (Spiro, 2013, p. 29). A safe place is what students need in order to develop their potential. Additionally, positive relationships are nurtured and encouraged within the school (Lin, 2012). Principals know that learning cannot occur without a relationship, and they make sure that attention is paid to the teacher-student relationship (Hall & Simeral, 2008; Lin, 2012). The teacher-student relationship is just as important as the teacher-principal relationship. Within a school, teachers will feel safe and valued under the wing of an effective principal (Spiro, 2013). The culture, or the way that a school acts collectively, is safe and based on positive relationships wherein people feel valued.

Creativity, although difficult to define, is found with the effective principal. Similarly to instruction, principals are always trying something new. Principals adapt well to constant change (Whitaker, 2012). Good principals try to redesign the organization through building relations with families and connecting the school to the community (Klar & Brewer, 2013). Building relationships with the community in a meaningful way demands a certain amount of creativity. Networking, using local media, and developing relationships have proven to be effective at engaging the community (Lin, 2012). Winning the support of the community requires communication that is done in a creative way.

## **Conclusion**

Much research has been completed on what makes an effective educational leader. These leaders are unique and have their own strengths and weaknesses. What is clear is that effective school leaders focus on instruction and people. Through their day-to-day actions, they act in a professional manner and engage in regular self-reflection. They hold themselves and others accountable for student learning and create a safe, welcoming culture within their schools.

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