

Leaders in TRANSITION

The “passing of the torch” of leadership is a critical juncture at which school improvement can either benefit from new energy or lose momentum.

“I became a principal so young,” muses Carol, a retired New Jersey superintendent. “I had no business being a principal at that time.” She shakes her head regretfully. “I thought I knew everything. I didn’t know what I didn’t know! Nobody could tell me a thing.”

Being selected for a principalship can be a heady experience – true for any leadership position representing a significant promotion or advancement. As Carol reminisces, retaining a sense of humility can be challenging for some. Their eagerness to put their stamp on a place and its team may unfortunately cloud their judgment as its newest member, or in their newly elevated status within it, as when assistant principals are promoted to principalships of their own schools.

Forward momentum already under way may stall or stop as the denizens wonder what the new leader will do next, what she values, and whether to keep pouring their energies into the same initiatives that

were supported and valued by the previous leader. Even small, initial missteps can snowball quickly into bigger problems.

This conundrum is not, of course, unique to education, but unlike other sectors, the compelling issue for schools and districts is the ultimate impact on students and student achievement. Building and sustaining momentum in key strategies that will most dramatically improve learning outcomes is a complex task. The intricate web of staff interactions that are needed to support that momentum can be damaged without a new leader even realizing it.

A small thing becomes big

A bright young leader we’ll call Allison, an AP at a large high school, is promoted to the principalship. To her credit, she has a plan for interviewing the classified and teaching staff in small groups about their views on the school’s strengths and potential growth areas. But being an insider, she

By Terry Wilhelm

is itching to tackle some needed changes that she couldn't make as an AP, like the traffic flow in the front office. It's a logjam, especially at the busiest parts of the day.

Soon after her promotion, late one day when the office staff had left, she commands a night custodian to help her rearrange two of the clerical stations. It takes over an hour, but by the time they finish, they agree that the result is 200 percent better.

The following morning, Allison, in her office, is shocked to hear cries of dismay as the secretarial staff members arrive. When she walks out to face them, one is in tears and the others are clearly outraged. Allison struggles to understand their extreme negative reaction to the changes she has made, and can't get a word in to explain her rationale. Not only do they hate the new arrangement, their interpretation of Allison's motives are completely bizarre!

Even after she feels she has somewhat soothed their upset, and apologized about a dozen times, she hears muttered comments as she walks away, like, "Control freak," and "This is never going to work."

Now she has to face them all in the "sensing interviews," ostensibly scheduled to find out what things are important to the people who work at this school. Since Allison began taking action before asking a few questions, she's already created a breach of trust with these staff members. While it seems like a small thing, it was a big thing with them, and small things can add up quickly to create what Stephen R. Covey (2006) terms a "depleted trust account."

Staying mindful of the school culture

Although it would seem logical that promoting from within – such as advancing an AP to the principalship of the same school – would lead to a smooth and easy transition, this is far from guaranteed. And sadly, it is not just brash, young, novice leaders who make these blunders. As outsiders are selected to lead, regardless of past leadership experience, a lack of knowledge of the culture – or an outright disregard of it – presents an immediate potential barrier to a smooth transition.

Leonard is selected to lead an important, high profile team at the district office.

Although he has a wealth of experience in a school setting, leading this kind of team is significantly different.

Almost immediately he begins calling impromptu staff meetings – sometimes with barely a day's notice. When alarmed staff members call in to say they already have commitments, Leonard responds to each by saying, "Make whatever arrangements you need



to, but be there." After several such mandates in less than a month, staff members begin to circumvent Leonard and complain.

Belatedly, a supervisor begins to attempt to coach him about the culture of his new workplace, and how it differs from his past assignment. Leonard's feelings of being overwhelmed emerge – he has begun to realize the magnitude of his new responsibilities. He has felt staff members' panicked calls of concern as resistance, threatened by what he perceived to be challenges to his authority as a new leader. His responses have been an attempt to project confidence he does not feel, and to establish his authority as the new head of this team.

Common patterns

While it is impossible to predict or prevent every misstep a new leader might make, certain common patterns do emerge, and district leaders can proactively minimize them with specific support to new principals and other new leaders before they assume their positions. This is increasingly important with the number of new California ad-

ministrators rising steadily for at least the next seven years.

A recent WestEd study (2011) projects school-site administrator needs region by region, in two-year increments through 2017-18. According to the study, only the Bay Area will have a declining need, based on projected student enrollments and administrator retirements. All other areas will

have increased needs, led by the Inland Empire with a projection of 42.2 percent more school administrators needed between 2010-11 and 2017-18.

Leadership matters

As more new school-site leaders assume their positions, and those currently at sites move to the district level, the potential for loss of forward momentum because of poorly executed transitions is greatly magnified.

Robert Marzano and co-authors describe and elaborate upon the work of Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), which synthesized decades of studies on leadership effectiveness at the site (2005) and district (2009) levels, in which researchers' foundational conclusion was that "leadership matters."

Researchers further identified specific leadership responsibilities at both levels that are significantly correlated to student achievement. The "passing of the torch" of leadership is a critical juncture at which upward momentum can either benefit from a

new spurt of energy, or grind slowly toward a halt.

We developed our annual summer workshop, *Principals in Transition*, to support first-time principals as well as those with experience who are being reassigned to another school, along with their district administrators. It includes several strands: assessing the needs of the new site, developing trust quickly, maintaining the focus on students, and creating a plan for the first 100 days. For promoted leaders at the central office level, the principles are essentially the same.

Gathering data before taking action

Participants learn several options for the all-important assessment phase, including a transitions survey, a history map, or “sensing interviews.” The point of gathering data with any of these tools (prior to taking almost any kind of new leadership actions, other than those involving student safety) is to share the data with the staff.

This is for the purpose of celebrating what is working (and for determining, for

the new leader’s own elucidation, where the sacred cows are), and developing initial steps for long-term plans for issues that need to be addressed, as well as immediate solutions to “simple” problems that just need a quick

With so many transitions on the horizon, district leaders will need to help new principals move from novice leadership to wisdom, and support experienced leaders as they move to new settings.

fix. These short-term wins set an immediate positive tone.

The strategies we suggest for quickly developing trust are vividly described in Stephen R. Covey’s “The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything” (2006). Covey has identified 13 behaviors of a high-trust leader; all grounded in what he

has called “the four cores of credibility” – intent, integrity, capabilities and results.

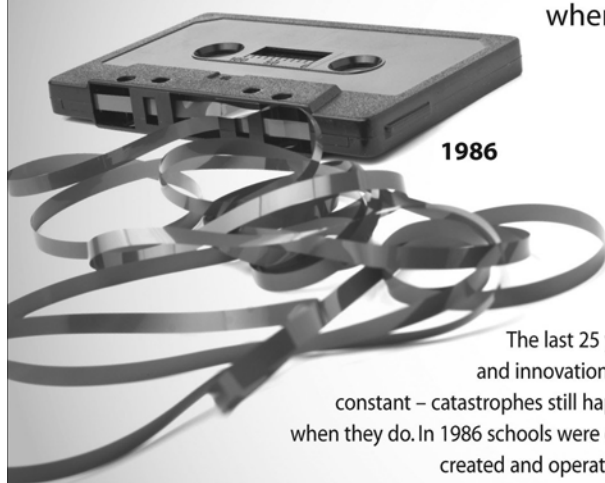
In a leadership transition, the old saw, “You only have one chance to make a first impression” is painfully true. Whether the newly arrived leader is replacing a beloved or less-than-beloved predecessor, and regardless of either the school’s achievement status or the viability of its operational systems, if staff members experience the new leader’s words, demeanor or actions as disrespectful in any arena of interactions, s/he will be viewed as “worse than” the leader who just departed.

Thus, we also share examples of common pitfalls that immediately hinder development of trust, such as misuse/overuse of positional authority, as in Leonard’s case. One self-aware participant said, “I already know from my years as an AP that my automatic fall-back is command and control. I have to change that.”

Another is a lack of understanding of the “loose/tight” principle, often discussed by Richard and Rebecca DuFour (2010). Some

Some things stay the same.

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leaders in a new setting feel they have to be “tight” on everything – clearly an impossibility – in order to establish themselves as leaders, while others are so afraid of making a mistake, they are “loose” on just about everything. Being able to rethink poor decisions and actions are the hallmark of a wise leader, but new leaders sometimes believe that changing any decision is a sign of weakness.

In addition, we greatly advocate for “Rule #6” from the video, “Leadership: An Art of Possibility” (2006), in which orchestra conductor and leadership guru Benjamin Zander delightfully makes the case that the cardinal rule for any leader should be, “Don’t take yourself so #@*% seriously!” New leaders on an ego trip create their own barriers to effectiveness.

One final axiom

Although it would seem to go without saying, our observations of leadership transitions compel us to include a final axiom: Don’t gossip. The new (or any) leader who engages in, entertains, or appears to encourage negative remarks or discussions about team members in absentia disintegrates his own team.

A generous segment of the workshop addresses the question: What is the most important work of the school leader? New principals can be even more susceptible than experienced ones in finding themselves constantly derailed from their focus on student learning by myriad operational and staff/student/parent issues.

We spend time revisiting the student focus through the lens of the Questions of a Professional Learning Community (PLC): What do we want the students to know? How will we set them up for success? How will we know if they learned? What will we do if they don’t? And what will we do for the students who did learn, or already knew what we taught before we taught it?

During the entire day, but especially during this time, the mix of experienced and new principals brings great value to the reflection and discussions, with many of the experienced principals being well grounded in the PLC journey from leading that work at their previous sites.

The last part of the session provides time for participants to create a plan for their first 100 days, with a template and samples, including the drafting of their “welcome back” letter. The day ends with brief coaching conversations about their plans, each with



another transitioning principal – where we pair new with experienced as numbers allow – or with their own district leaders who may be in attendance.

Follow-up includes first- and second-semester half-day breakfast “reunions,” with all the participants from the summer’s several cohorts invited, where we facilitate the sharing of experiences and learnings. We typically present one additional segment of content, based on our ongoing communication with cohort members, who have an open invitation to call or e-mail the facilitators for additional links to resources or information.

We also have a small number of new-principal coaches – retired principals who have several years’ experience in the coaching role – for interested first-year principals in districts that are willing to cover a modest fee for their services.

From novice leadership to wisdom

With so many leadership transitions on the horizon across the state, increasingly important aspects of district/county office roles will be to help new leaders move rapidly from novice leadership to wisdom, and to support experienced leaders in new settings, including helping them to avoid step-

ping on – or creating their own – potential landmines.

This is not just about adult morale among the followership. Student learning and achievement hangs in the balance, and no school or district can afford to lose any valuable momentum of continuous improvement as the leadership torch is passed. ■

Resources

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