

# **The Story of 10 Principals Whose Exercise of Social and Political Acumen Contributes to Their Success**

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## ***The Story of 10 Principals Whose Exercise of Social and Political Acumen Contributes to Their Success***

ANDRA MCGINN

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**ABSTRACT:** This article reflects one part of a research study about the need for dynamic leaders to exercise social and political acumen. As part of the study, I interviewed 10 principals who had been nominated as dynamic leaders. The interview questions focused on the principals' experiences and their understanding of the role of social and political acumen in contributing to their success. Discussion with these principals also centered on the role of leadership development and how their leadership development experiences had contributed to their success. In addition, these principals were asked for their ideas about effective leadership development activities.

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### *Role of Social and Political Acumen in Dynamic Leadership*

In order to understand the role of social and political acumen in dynamic leadership, I carried out a research study with principals who had been nominated by their communities as dynamic leaders. The aim of the study was to understand the contribution that social and political acumen can make to dynamic leadership. Individual interviews with 10 school principals were a part of the study. The focus of the interview questions was on the role social and political acumen played in these principals' success as well as the role of leadership development in supporting their exercise of social and political acumen.

To investigate the role of social and political acumen in leadership, it is necessary to attempt to understand the essence of leadership and the influence of humanity and current reality on the profile of leadership. Human beings have always sought to understand the influences of the world in which they live, and therefore they can better understand themselves. In the same way, attempting to understand the elements of dynamic leadership can bring insight to the role that social and political acumen should have in leadership.

Durkheim's theory of the social construction of knowledge (1938, 1955, 1986, 2002) supports such an investigation of the elements of leadership and provides the conceptual framework for this study. His theory recognized the role of the psychological, sociological and philosophical in determining reality (Figure 1).

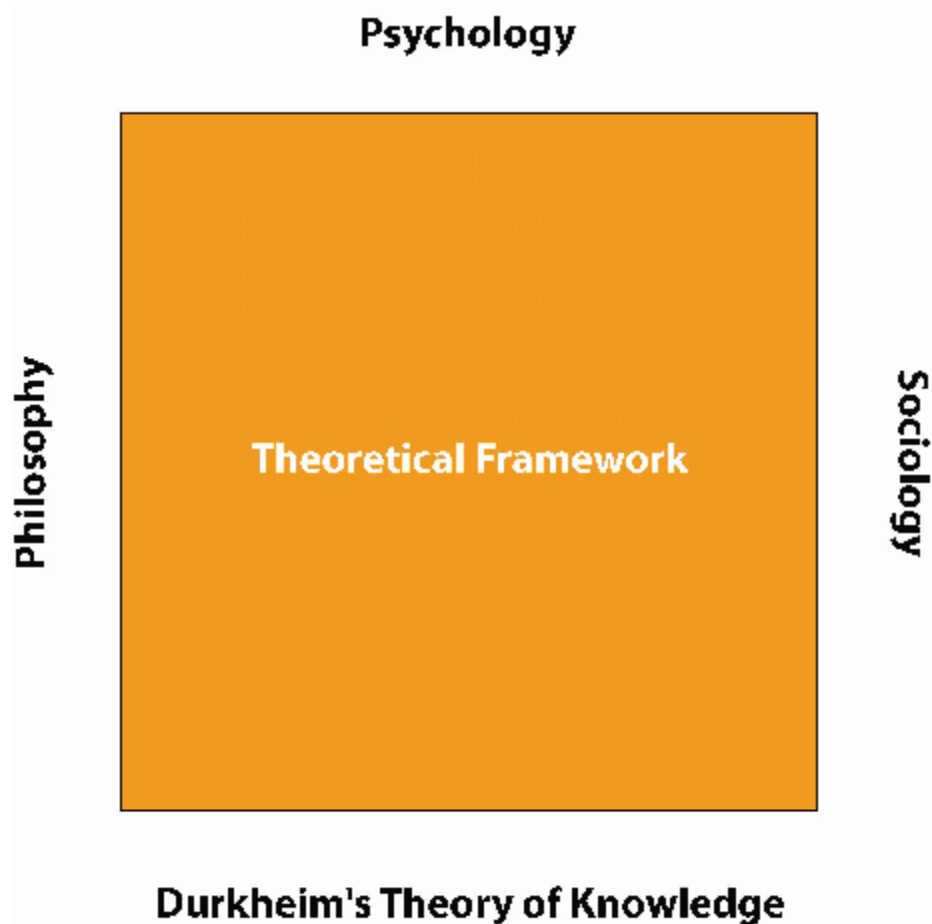


Figure 1. Durkheim's theory of knowledge.

The particular relevance of Durkheim's theory of knowledge for this study is the implication that educational leaders need to be aware that their preconceptions and typifications influence how they fulfill their roles. Because actions are grounded in subjectivity (Hodgkinson, 1978, 1983), leaders need to understand the composition and role of this subjectivity. This will bring insight and potentially support dynamic leadership. Indeed, Durkheim believed that by understanding the laws of social reality, it is possible to bring about change (Mestrovic, 1992). An integral element of leaders operating within their social reality involves how they exercise social and political acumen. Durkheim's theory implies that educational leaders who have an understanding of their social reality will exercise social and political acumen with insight and therefore they have a greater potential to affect change. In this way, subjectivity can be submitted to objective scrutiny and impact reality (Searle, 1995). Another implication of Durkheim's theory is that educational leaders needed to understand not only how their perception of reality impacts their view of leadership, but also how others' perceptions of reality impact the leadership role. This understanding has the potential to contribute positively to leadership roles because it hones the leader's awareness to what contributes to individuals' expectations and needs of leaders. In the same way, this understanding can contribute to leaders' effective exercise of social and political acumen.

The questions posed to the ten principals involved in the face-to-face interviews focused on these principals' perceptions of their social reality as leaders; an understanding of how preconceptions and typifications impacted their leadership role; and an investigation of how they exercised social and political acumen.

Definitions of social and political acumen were discussed with the principals who participated in the interviews. Political acumen referred to the ability to use the knowledge of structures and relationships. Social acumen referred to the ability to communicate and foster productive relationships. There was a recognition that social and political acumen overlap and that the successful exercise of social and political acumen supports initiating and making positive changes that contribute to dynamic leadership. The questions posed in the interviews attempted to reach an

understanding of the contribution of social and political acumen to these educational leaders' success.

Today educational leaders need to be more than maintainers or sustainers. Indeed, if leaders are to fulfill their roles effectively, they must operate in a dynamic manner. In fact, educational leaders must be accountable for ensuring that effective teaching and learning occur in their learning communities (Shellard, 2003), which involves more than meeting expected standards. Leaders need to ensure that their learning communities are evolving to support learners; thus, effective educational leaders must possess the skills and knowledge to support structures that foster the evolution and growth of learning communities (Czaja, Livingston Prouty, & Lowe, 1998).

Societal influences on the role of leaders also need to be understood by dynamic leaders, be integrated into their environment, and become part of their operational style (Gladwell, 2002). Globalization, developments in technology, and the information age have changed the delivery model of education and have broadened the scope of education (Courchene, 2001; Mortimore, 2000). Leaders need to recognize the potential role of such developments and appropriately embrace them for the future direction of education (Chenoweth & Everhart, 2002).

Parents hope that education will provide their children with tools for success in the future, adult participants in education seek to develop skills that will support their achievement of desired goals, and governments look to education to fulfill future needs of society (Mandel, 2000). If educational leaders are to be dynamic, they must be able to exercise social and political acumen to balance the fact that education is regarded as a means of providing society with educated citizens (Courchene, 2001), supporting the wealth of society (Manzer, 1994), and meeting the holistic needs of each student (Gaskell, 1995).

Expectations of an informed society, an evolving technology (Webber & Robertson, 1998), increased globalization (Courchene, 2001; Mortimore, 2000), and political influences on education (Kneebone & McKenzie, 1996) are part of the reality that educational leaders must integrate into their leadership style. The premise of this study was that the exercise of social and political acumen enables leaders to ensure that structures and relationships meet the needs of this reality. Leadership development programs therefore must play a role in building those elements of social and political acumen that empower dynamic leaders.

#### *Selection of the Participants*

Two Albertan school districts that included schools in rural and urban areas agreed to participate in the research and collection of data. Nominations for identified dynamic leaders were requested from 300 school communities in these two districts. School staffs and parents from the two selected school districts were invited to nominate a principal who fulfilled one or more of the following descriptors of a dynamic leader:

- successfully implemented a change or initiative
- style of leadership increased the capacity of those with whom they work
- communication and interpersonal skills improved the culture of the school environment
- effectively created an environment in which others were successful dynamic and effective for other reasons.
- Thirty-five principals were nominated as dynamic leaders.

#### *The Process of Data Collection*

In the research I attempted to capture the degree of understanding and exercise of social and political acumen by this group of principals who were nominated as dynamic leaders, and I carried out face-to-face interviews with 10 of the nominees. Such interviews are an effective form of data collection in qualitative research (Patton, 1987).

I also attempted to capture a slice of the reality of these principals' lives through documenting the actual language (Guba, 1978) that they used in the face-to-face interviews. For this reason the description and report on the collected data focus on the use of direct quotations from the research participants.

#### *Profile of the 10 Principals*

Ten nominated leaders from each of the school districts were randomly selected for the face-to-face interviews and represented:

- three senior high school principals
- two junior high school principals
- five elementary school principals

- five male principals
- five female principals

The interviews occurred at each of the principals' schools and were recorded in the principal's office, which provided a familiar and relaxed atmosphere for them. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes. They were unstructured in that they allowed the participants the opportunity to develop their line of thought (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) and that they involved open-ended questions, with a focus on questions ascertaining these leaders' perceptions of the role of social and political acumen in their leadership and in leadership in general. I designed the questions to assess each individual's definition of social and political acumen. Each question was limited to a single idea or a single reference. The sequence of questions followed a funnel sequence that involved the more general questions first. Then the questions became more specific, such as personal involvement in leadership development (Kahn & Cannell, 1957).

#### *Analysis of the Face-to-Face Interview Transcripts*

All of the principals were eager to talk about their school communities. They all referred to experiences that had required their exercise of social and political acumen. In fact, these principals believed that the reason for their nomination as a dynamic leader was that they effectively exercised social acumen and/or political acumen in dealing with particularly difficult situations within their school community.

All of the principals expressed confidence in exercising social acumen. Only one principal, however, expressed confidence in exercising political acumen and believed that it contributed to personal leadership success. In fact, references in the other interviews to lack of success were connected with challenges related to political acumen. Nevertheless, nine of the principals stated that some level of political acumen must be part of leadership. Half of the principals (5/10), however, acknowledged that political acumen was not their strength.

#### *Role of Social Acumen*

Analysis of the face-to-face interview transcripts reflected recurring themes related to social acumen. These principals believed that it was essential for dynamic leadership to include effective:

- relationships
- communication
- people skills
- networking ability

This was reflected in their comments that are reflected in this comment, "It is all about relationships. It's all about communication."

All of the principals talked about the need to actively develop relationships within and beyond their school community: I see being principal as a whole series of relationships.

Once I had developed relationships with those people, they became really strong allies and supported the school.

Other people see me as approachable. I have good people skills and I make people feel comfortable and relaxed.

Even social situations are important. If you are at the grad and you are sitting with the Chair of the Board, or if you are sitting with a client of your spouse, you have to be aware of your conversation.

There needs to be relational trust. I think that needs to be established before you enter into the risk-taking zone because our work is messy and you never know what's going to come at you from one day to another.

If you are not able to relate to people and understand where you fit and where others fit and how you work together socially, then I think that you're in big trouble.

In fact, all of the transcripts also reflected these principals' commitment to ensure that they had effective relationships with students, school staff, and parents:

I know every one of our students. Might not know their name off the top of my head, but I will know a little something about them.

I take my coffee cup to the door in the morning and I can say hi to parents, staff, and students as the day begins.

I make sure I am out of my office at the end of the day and take time to stop and talk to people as they leave.

My approach is very open door, even to the point where I identify a time of the day that I was going to actually hide behind the door so that I could actually keep up with some of the paperwork.

The big thing is that people know that when they need to be heard, they will be heard, and all the administrivia type of things is put on the back burner.

All of the principals referred to the need to have successful relationships beyond the school:

You need to understand patterns and social relationships on a larger scale in the board.  
I decided to intentionally, very, very purposefully build relationships with people in central office who could support the school.  
The principals discussed leadership attributes connected with social acumen that included an emphasis on the possession of good people skills, the ability to build a sense of community, and the ability to be an open communicator and a good listener.  
Prevalent throughout the transcripts was the principals' belief that they needed to exercise social acumen in order to create a culture in which people feel safe and comfortable:  
I think people have a clear sense of who I am as a human being, and that makes a big difference.  
You have to be able to communicate effectively and understand the nuances and differences in how people react and behave. I think it's important then to be able to work with them.

### Role of Political Acumen

All of the principals discussed difficult situations with which they were dealing that required political acumen. Some were concerned that their exercise of political acumen was inadequate and did not allow them to:

- Know how to fit into the system.
- Understand people politics.
- Need to be able to speak the political language.
- Need to see the big picture.
- Develop a network of support.
- Know where the political leverage exists.

Five principals, however, specifically referred to times when their exercise of political acumen supported the fulfillment of their roles and responsibilities:

Making connections and building a network helped. I need to gain the ear and not the ire.  
I know the system politics, and I feel good about the people politics. I know how to operate within the system.  
You need to understand the structure you work in and the systemic thinking. You need to know who your allies should be.

The other five principals talked about using political acumen to support their leadership, but it was as though political acumen was a necessary but not undesirable part of their leadership:

A person in leadership walks a very fine line. Political undercurrents exist, and it can have a good impact or a negative impact, depending on which side of the line you stray over.  
I would not invest myself in the politics for the sake of politics. But you should use political acumen for the sake of your school.  
Political acumen is not my forte, but the need for it is on the increase.  
It is not a natural thing for me to look at the political, but it is something I need to know.

Despite five of the principals' statements that political acumen was not their strength, they made comments later in their interviews that reflected their belief that political acumen is a necessary part of leadership:

It is necessary to understand the big picture.  
I garner support, not enemies.  
You cannot always be fighting against bureaucracy.  
You need to go beyond the classroom focus and the school focus. I need to go beyond and see the big picture, and, you know, I strategize a little on how to get everyone by.  
I purposefully work to understand the school community, and that goes beyond these walls.

Four principals (3/10) specifically referred to leadership development impacting their development of political acumen:

Leadership development should have a networking component, and this would help leaders develop political acumen.  
I found belonging to a network really helped.  
Leadership development helped me to hone my skills in political acumen.  
Particularly my master's and different courses that I have taken helped my political acumen.

The other seven principals, however, spoke positively about the potential role of leadership programs and professional development enhancing a leader's exercise of political acumen:

You need to make sure you are providing professional development.  
The mentorship part of leadership development can support people's political acumen.  
Professional development can develop an awareness of self and others that helps political acumen.  
You can teach people political acumen, but you need to teach them how to read the landscape.  
Definitely on the political side, have a leadership program. That side can be learned.

This indicates, therefore, that although the principals did not believe that their experience of leadership development had contributed to their political acumen, they did believe that leadership development could and should support leaders in their exercise of political acumen.

All of the principals referred to the need for leaders to possess political acumen at some level, and in the open-ended questions they all gave examples of how they developed and exercised political acumen:

Political acumen is awkward for me. I want to tell everyone that I am not a political person, but I have to be political. I need to know where I sit in the strata of things. I think this is the coming of age for political acumen. Because the system is constantly changing, you have to be dynamic and know how to figure out the system.

Sometimes it gets political and you need to know what to do. Last year there was a tough situation with the union. There was some political posturing, but I just kept focused on the things we do well, and I think as a result we came out of last year quite a bit better off than some schools.

By asking the trustees before they read our information, we got a feel what they needed to hear from our perspective. Whether you agree or not, you are the political leader and you have to function as a political leader.

To get that big picture perspective is key. You can't always be reactionary; you can't always be upset with the bureaucracy. You fight the fights you need to, but you also have to know how to work within the system and appreciate how all the pieces fit together.

You get conflicting messages as a school principal as to what you need to do. So there was the conflict for me, and the tension was very difficult this year. One of the things that I struggled with this year was that I needed to advocate for my school community, but I am also an employee of the district.

I had to deal with an allegation of sexual harassment from one student to another.  
Our numbers are dropping, and we need to have new programs to stay viable.  
I am supposed to be neutral, but it is my fundamental belief that the school should remain open.

Our school was part of a special project because we were seen as a have-not school. Suddenly, the school that had been have-not for years was the have school, and other schools began to say, Why should we have the project?

With the establishment of the School Councils in the '90s, there is a greater need to have political acumen. You need to give parents a voice to advocate.

The transcripts also revealed that these principals experienced personal tensions in exercising political acumen:

I am reflecting some personal disappointments that I feel about the politics. But I don't speak to people about that in an open way within our school system because that would make it even worse. And yet when we are working with the parents in our community, we have to throw aside our own feelings where we are in work and speak positively and reflect the system in a good light.

#### *Analysis of Face-to-Face Interview Transcripts Relating to Leadership Development*

None of the principals referred to leadership development as the key factor in their development of social and political acumen. All of them, however, referred to leadership development as important and having the potential to positively impact leaders' exercise of social and political acumen. Neither did the principals refer to undergraduate studies as impacting their social and political acumen. Five of the 10 principals, however, believed that their postgraduate

university programs contributed to their development of social and political acumen. Indeed, these principals spoke strongly about the influence of their master's program and postgraduate courses:

Real growth for me was finishing my master's degree. It was key and a turning point in my life.

I did courses and went back to university to work on my graduate studies. I took a lot of that away with me. That is kind of where I was making connections, building relationships, and understanding that different groups have different needs. I was raising that awareness level for myself personally, and that was my own professional development.

I did a wonderful postgraduate university program. The professor emphasized relationships. My master's program was actually a real pleasant surprise to me. It took me twenty years to convince myself to go back to school. The professors brought a lot to the table, and all of the interactions with people in the courses was great.

I had innate skills, but I developed them through the different master's courses that I have taken.

Five of the 10 principals commented on the positive role that professional development played in supporting their exercise of social and political acumen:

Professional development is an important piece and provides an opportunity to network.

There is a leadership program with our district, and that helped.

I pick high-quality conferences to go to with a theme that I tie into my growth plan.

Workshops, courses, and books have been important.

I am part of a book group, and that is great.

The principals also indicated that school districts should support the development of social and political acumen through leadership development:

The institution has a responsibility, a very large one, to be open enough so that individuals can say, "I just don't have this skill."

### *Importance of Mentorship*

Although there was no specific question directed to the principals about the role of mentorship, the transcripts strongly indicated that every principal emphasized the role that mentors had played in their lives. There was particular focus on the mentor as role model and coach. All of the principals acknowledged the role of mentors in supporting their development of social and political acumen and contributing to their success:

Good mentors have contributed to my development of social and political acumen.

Mentors for me are significant in terms of what and who I've become. I can identify three very significant people in my life.

The mentorship piece is really important for new principals.

You need some mentors. I know that I had a mentor who nurtured me in such a way that I was able to practice my craft and get better. He gave me feedback and encouraged me to be reflective.

Probably the things that had the greatest impact on me as a leader were not programs, but they were people. If I were designing a leadership program, I would look into the right kind of mentorship program. How are we going to match people because matching needs to be done carefully? And how are we going to provide time?

Seven of the principals specifically referred to the role of mentor as the most important part of leadership development programs. All of the principals, however, talked about the huge contribution that their mentors had made to their evolution as educational leaders. In addition, four of the principals specifically stated that there was not enough done in leadership development programs to support the role of mentors:

I think mentorship is really important, and leadership development has to happen more directly through mentorship.

If you are going to ask us to come out and spend time in leadership development, there needs to be modeling by senior leadership.

What is really missing are opportunities to learn from other administrators.

Great mentors or mentorship is what I think needs to happen.

The transcripts also included a number of comments from the principals about their vision of a leadership development program reflecting the need to support social and political acumen:

Get them to understand their role and the bigger picture.

It would have networking as a component.

We need to learn the existence of politics, but also how to deal with it and be most effective.

I think mentorship is an extremely important part of a leadership program supporting social and political acumen.

Social and political acumen can be learned in leadership programs, but it must have meaning for what you are doing.

High-quality conferences that support developing social and political acumen will help.

The theoretical component of leadership development needs to have a real-life application that we could have a chance to practice.

Workshops and courses rarely say how social and political acumen actually work.

University programs should be included that allow you to build your skills in social and political acumen.

Leadership development should help people understand what is social and political acumen. Then focus the energy on what aspects or what strategies we have to use to support the school.

### *Conclusion*

The group of ten principals who were interviewed clearly loved their jobs:

I love what I'm doing. I could retire, but as long as I am having fun, I am staying.

It's a lot of work, but it is all well worth it. The interviews revealed that these leaders' preconceptions and typifications contributed to their view of the reality of their leadership positions and impacted how they exercised social and political acumen. This was evident in all of the principals' discussion regarding what is needed in dynamic leadership. The following table summarizes these principals' view of dynamic leadership.



Table 1  
*Social and Political Acumen Link to Dynamic Educational Leadership*

Social acumen ↙	Political acumen ↙	Dynamic leadership ↙
Effective communication	Shared vision	Realize shared vision
Productive relationship	Valuable network	Shared leadership
Knowledge of self	Understand role in structure	Function at local & global levels
Knowledge of others	Understand other's roles in structure	Empower others
Ability to operate at formal & informal levels	All elements of structure engaged	Parameters are not limitations
Recognize leverage points	Integrate influential elements	Extend potential to realize vision
Build collaboration	Elements of structure working together	Effective alliances
Integrate emotional intelligence	Functioning relationships at local & global levels	Systemic alignment
Appropriate directive leadership	Support participants within structure	Clear direction of leadership
Appropriate collaborative & consultative leadership	Involvement of participants within structure	Build leadership capacity & leadership density
Conflict management	Positive environment	Productive human interactions
Share big picture	Integrate value of micro & macro structures	Function effectively at local & global levels

It was also clear that these principals believe dynamic leaders need to be able to exercise social and political acumen. When these principals were asked for their opinion on why they were nominated as dynamic leaders, each responded giving an example of a difficulty that required the effective exercise of social and political acumen. These included:

- school closure
- removal of a successful literacy program
- reduction of teaching staff
- low exam results
- dropping enrolment
- divided staff
- difficult evaluation situation
- budgetary concerns
- staff morale issue

The interviews also revealed that these leaders had a greater level of confidence in their exercise of social acumen. Although they generally had less confidence in their exercise of political acumen, they believed that the exercise of political acumen is necessary for effective leadership. It is also noteworthy that these principals emphasized the role of mentors in leadership development as a means to support leaders.

It is evident that any leadership development program needs to support leaders' exercise of social and political

acumen. In addition, such programs need to recognize that those leaders who understand the role of preconceptions and typifications can more effectively exercise social and political acumen.

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Author's Address:

Dr. Andra McGinn  
Superintendent of Educational Services, Area B  
Calgary Catholic School District  
1000, Fifth Avenue, S.W.  
Calgary, Alberta  
T2P 4T9

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