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The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust Journal of Innovation in Education

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Contents

Reality leadership: the foundation of school improvement

Leadership based on an awareness of social realities is the keystone to educational transformation, say these US educators.

REFORM efforts in public education have been at the forefront of the international agenda for decades. With increased globalization and the realities of the digital age, the world has become a smaller place. These changes present new challenges and new opportunities for leaders and those responsible for training them. The world is constantly changing and all systems - including education - are impacted by change. Living and leading in a world in flux requires evolving skills for school leaders.

Although much of the educational reform effort over the last 50 years has focused on students, the one area that can impact on school improvement and student achievement the most is leadership training for principals. The principalship is the single most influential position in public education (March, 2000). Without improvements in leadership training for school principals, schools are unlikely to see significant or sustainable results.

In years past, the best teachers became the principals. However, today's global economy dictates that school leaders possess skills that extend far beyond classroom experience. It requires a new style of leader who understands the dynamics of building a learning community to educate children who will live and work in a global society. To meet the needs of children in the future, principals need to be viewed first as leaders, and second as principals.

'Reality leadership' reflects the essential

skills, talents and knowledge necessary for principals to be effective school leaders in our ever-changing world. Reality leaders are:

- visionaries
- authentic
- effective communicators
- transformational
- entrepreneurial
- capable of distributing leadership
- aware of, and understand, the context of their environment
- evolving and reflective
- able to create a succession plan.

A reality leader blends these skills so that one skill complements the next. These skills do not operate in isolation; they assist leaders in moving from vision to results.

Reality leaders are visionaries

Much has been written and discussed about the importance of a focused educational vision. Reality leaders craft a compelling vision that challenges the school to focus its activities and learning outcomes on supporting and achieving that unified vision. For a reality leader, vision is the cornerstone of change and improvement that drives the decision-making, policies, procedures and structure of the school. Reality leaders effectively share the vision and allow others to shape the activities that contribute to the school's progression to that ideal end-state.

A reality leader builds ownership and empowers stakeholders within the school to see how their actions contribute to achieving the vision. Reality leaders understand that the whole is the sum of its parts, and that each part must understand its role in achieving the school's vision.

Schools without visionary leaders lack focus and direction. Far too often in schools, vision statements are empty documents with no substance or ownership. They are merely words on paper; not the driving force behind continuous improvement. Visionary leaders design a learning community where all parties filter their work through the lens of the school's vision. They ensure that stakeholders understand that their efforts are essential for the school to improve.

Reality leaders are authentic

Reality leaders see a deep purpose to their efforts. They understand that their work has a long lasting impact on the students in their schools and on society, as well. Fullan (2003) refers to this as 'moral purpose'. There are core values that drive the reality leader, and those core values contribute to building a better society.

Bill George (2005) states that authentic leaders lead not only with their heads, but with their hearts, as well. These leaders communicate their core values every day in their actions and deeds; they are true to themselves first, since it is only possible to be true to others when one is first true to him or herself. *The leadership challenge* (Kouzes and Posner, 2002) identifies honesty as the most admired quality in a leader. The integrity of a leader is essential to cultivating a culture of trust, and according to *The five dysfunctions of a team* (2002), trust is a critical component of a healthy organization.

The authentic component of reality leadership is absolutely essential for the mental health and wellbeing of a school. Without authenticity, the culture of a school will be marginalized, and the learning community negatively impacted (Evans, 2000).

Reality leaders communicate effectively

In a rapidly changing world, the need for effective communication is pertinent. Leaders who communicate effectively build trust, create a sense of community, and contribute to a school's effectiveness in meeting challenges and dealing with the unexpected. Reality leaders understand that communication is much more complex than simply 'telling' or 'hearing' the information; these leaders share information and listen carefully to what is being shared with them. They over-communicate in order to engage stakeholders and increase ownership. A culture of communication develops a high level of trust among staff and administration. Likewise, leaders who do not engage staff with frequent communication foster a culture of mistrust. Listening to what others say allows leaders to gauge the pulse of the organization and to foresee potential challenges.

Reality leaders understand that students and parents are customers. As with any business, leaders who are successful maintain a disciplined focus on the customer. When leaders over-communicate, they are less likely to be caught off-guard by unanticipated conflict. Too often, leaders only see the value of communication after a conflict has occurred. Similarly, leaders of unhealthy organizations, who fail to communicate information even after a conflict has occurred, contribute to a culture of rumors, speculation, and mistrust. School leaders need to communicate with both internal and external stakeholders, using multiple venues. The reality leader understands how communication flows, and builds a structure for a communication system that exceeds the needs of a school and community.

Reality leaders are transformational

Reality leaders adjust to conditions that arise and manage them expertly. They understand the change process and adapt to a changing landscape. Successful leaders realize that the external environment is in a constant state of change, and

schools as learning communities must adapt to these changes and transform accordingly.

In many countries, government legislation has had a significant impact on education. Reality leaders can transform themselves and their school to meet the increased levels of accountability. Transformational leaders constantly reinvent themselves to adjust to both internal and external demands that impact on student achievement. However, transformational leaders never lose sight of the vision or moral purpose. They do not change to chase the latest educational fad; rather they change to remain the same. In other words, transformational leaders make accommodations in their leadership in order to remain fixed on the overall vision of the school. These leaders see that structures are in place that allow the organization to achieve its vision. Transformational leadership is not about changing for the sake of change; rather, it is about changing for a purpose, and purposeful change translates into purposeful results.

Reality leaders distribute leadership

The essential role of reality leaders is not to create more followers, but to create more leaders. Reality leaders empower others to lead. They create an environment that fosters the development of new leaders, by allowing individuals to try new ideas, take risks, and assume greater responsibility. Reality leaders offer individuals and teams opportunities to share in the decision-making process, in order to build a culture of shared ownership.

Distributive leaders organize the learning community into teams and create a structure where they have the opportunity to meet on a regular basis to examine student data and make informed decisions. When reality leaders provide teachers and their peers time to examine, share, and reflect on data, and encourage them to make adjustments based on this reflective process, the learning community is improved (Eaker, 2002).

Distributive leadership extends beyond the teachers. All stakeholders within the school (support staff, custodians, secretaries, cafeteria workers, and students) need to have leadership opportunities. Leaders in many schools omit these groups from leadership positions, which only fragments the organization. Each stakeholder group within the school must experience authentic, meaningful, and purposeful opportunities to lead. When this happens, a true learning community can be established.

Some mistakenly view distributing leadership as 'giving up control'. Leaders who distribute leadership tend to possess a high level of self-confidence. Leaders who lack self-confidence will rarely distribute leadership, which often contributes to a culture of control and micromanagement. However, when reality leaders empower others, they foster a healthy school culture and climate that contributes to a seamless transition in times of succession.

Reality leaders understand context

When reality leaders immerse themselves into the culture of their school community, they understand the norms of the community and can adapt accordingly. Each community, and therefore each school, is unique. Understanding and embracing that uniqueness is an essential skill for a principal (Johnson, 2000). Having solid leadership and management skills alone does not ensure that a leader will be successful, however. A principal who does not have an understanding of, and appreciation for, the norms of the community will face significant challenges.

Matching principals to specific school communities is also important, as not all individuals adapt equally well to different environments. It is rare that a principal will have equal strengths working in urban, suburban, and rural communities. Leading schools in communities with high levels of poverty and crime differs from leading schools in wealthy, affluent communities. Each situation is unique; one is not better or worse than the other, but the school leader who understands the specific contexts will be better prepared to lead the school. Schools are just a microcosm of the greater society. If it exists in the community, it will exist within the school. Therefore, prospective principals and hiring committees need to reflect on the needs of the school and community and the strengths of the candidates.

Educators teach based on their own life experiences. The same applies to principals, who have also accumulated a life of personal and professional experiences. Those experiences can impact on a leader's adaptability to a particular school and community. A reality leader will understand that his or her life experiences may differ from those within a school and community, and will therefore do what is necessary to truly understand the norms of those who are served by the school.

Reality leaders are entrepreneurial

Reality leaders take risks, seek opportunities and see the value in building internal and external networks of individuals and organizations. They realize the importance that relationships and personalization play in effective leadership. Risk-taking is the hallmark of a reality leader. Here, the principal understands that doing things the way they have always been done will net the same results. Attempting new ideas and strategies that are grounded in research and best practice are fundamental to the reality leader who is entrepreneurial.

Leaders with an entrepreneurial spirit seek out and create opportunities that support the school and the students. Within every community, there are untapped opportunities, organizations and individuals that are

willing to support schools. Establishing a network within the community helps students appreciate the world beyond the school walls, especially in communities with high poverty. Students here are often socially isolated and not afforded the opportunities that are available to other students.

Being an entrepreneurial leader also required strong relationship building skills. Reality leaders understand the power of building relationships with internal and external stakeholders, and they seek opportunities to cultivate these relationships for the benefit of their customers: the students.

Evolving and reflective

The evolving leader challenges him or herself to constantly improve. This type of leader understands that there is always more to learn, and takes advantage of life experiences and professional opportunities to shape his or her leadership abilities and skills. Reality leaders are highly reflective. They take time each day to reflect on their practice and challenge themselves to improve. They seek the input of others and seriously reflect on it. Reflective practice is essential to personal growth and development (Murphy, 1996), and leads to constant improvement in personal and professional practice.

Reality leaders design a personal professional development strategy to achieve enrichment and growth. They regularly confer with peers to share ideas, experiences and strategies. Leaders at this level don't plateau; they constantly reinvent themselves to adapt to new challenges and a changing landscape. Individuals who are skilled at reflection can step back from a situation, event, or challenge and depersonalize it in order to think logically. They take time each day to reflect on their professional practice, and analyze ways to improve. They look for input from others and reflect on that input. Reflective practice is essential to personal growth and development (Murphy, 1996). Individuals who take the time to reflect improve not only their personal and professional practice, but the health and wellbeing of the organizations they lead.

A succession plan

A true visionary has a plan for the future well beyond his or her time with the organization. Reality leaders have a plan of succession for when they are gone. The mark of leadership is as much about what happens after the leader leaves as it is about what he or she does during his or her tenure. Too often, organizations suffer when the leaders leave. The reality leader understands that transitions of leadership are challenging times for organizations. The succession-minded leader will put structures in place so there will be a seamless transition during a change in leadership (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006).

The leadership qualities discussed so far contribute to an effective transition in leadership. The visionary leader understands that all members of the organization contribute to achieving the vision and, as principal of a school, ensures that the pursuit of the vision continues to be paramount. An authentic leader who nurtures a culture of shared responsibility and moral purpose perpetuates the success of the school.

The true reality leader has distributed leadership and responsibility to stakeholders throughout the building, who are highly functional even in the principal's absence. In schools, teams of teachers operate as a decision-making body that is a visionary group linked to the overall school purpose. Team members understand how their subsystem complements a bigger system for the benefit of the learning community.

Reality leaders design a personal professional development strategy to achieve enrichment and growth. They regularly confer with peers to share ideas, experiences and strategies.

Evolving and reflective leaders create other evolving and reflective leaders. Leaders who plan for succession create independent thinkers who collaborate, focus on the needs of the learners, and move the school closer to its vision. Principals who embed a culture of collaborative and shared leadership within a school create more opportunities for students to succeed.

Hargreaves and Fink (2006) state that constant turnover in a school is disruptive to the health of the school. Turnover in key leadership positions, such as the principalship, impacts on all facets of the school. It takes time for a reality leader to institutionalize change, and build a structure that is embedded in the school culture. Without consistency and stability in leadership, establishing a strong foundation is impossible.

Final thoughts

With the ever-changing landscape of education, the need for reality leadership has never been greater. Schools will only improve with visionary leaders who can assist others in seeing and achieving the school's vision. Reality leaders are authentic, and understand the impact that their schools have, not only on individual students, but on society as well. Reality leaders have a high moral purpose and instill this in the culture of their schools.

Reality leaders are communicative; they clearly articulate their message to multiple stakeholders. They use multiple venues from which to communicate their message and they realize that they will need to adapt the delivery of the message based on a specific population in the learning community or the community at large. To continually adapt, reality leaders are entrepreneurial. They take calculated risks, forge new partnerships, and design and redesign the learning community for the benefit of their students.

Reality leaders understand that they cannot operate in isolation; they must develop new leaders who will share the responsibility of achieving the school's vision. When leadership is distributed, there is greater ownership. If leadership has been effectively distributed, the school is able to maintain its focus during periods of leadership transition.

Reality leaders also understand the context of their learning environment and the community. They are able to make adjustments, based on the needs of the community and its residents. Reality leaders also reflect daily on their own practices. Without reflection, a leader cannot evolve.

Reality leaders encompass all these skills. Acquiring them may be a challenge but there are a variety of training programs, leadership initiatives and professional organizations that can provide development in one or more of these skills.

The task of the prospective school principal or the veteran school principal is to seek out opportunities to continue to assess, reinforce and to develop these skills. Those who make this effort create learning communities that take schools to a new level.

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