



The Expectations for Today's Principals

A tale from Joe . . .

I was a counselor and golf coach on the east side of Wisconsin. I had a great job, wonderful people to work with, and a comfortable lifestyle. When I decided to get my administration degree, I didn't really know when and if it would be used. I knew I loved to lead, but I was getting that need met in my current school. Coaching golf in high school was also an incredible job. As I finished the degree, I only applied for one job, and that was to help get my wife back into an area of the state that she really enjoyed. I was offered the job, and at the last golf match of the year, I was telling the other coaches in the conference that I was

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leaving to be a principal. Their support for the move was . . . nonexistent! “Are you out of your mind?” “How old are you . . . thirty?” And my favorite, “Are you really giving up the golf job to get yelled at by parents and teachers?!?” Clearly, they were not on board with the move. I think part of my thought process was that it could be different. I also figured I had spent enough time in that office as a kid, so I knew how things operated! People usually get into administration because they have worked for a wonderful administrator and want to emulate him or her, or they have worked for a horrible administrator and know they can do it better. I had the opportunity to be in both scenarios. The idea that we could make this job whatever we wanted was really enticing to me. The principalship does not have to be what it was when we were kids. If we are given the opportunity, it can be and has been one of the best jobs I have ever had.

When considering the role of the principal, many envision the disciplinarian who handles all the behavior problems, the organizer of all things unfolding throughout the school day, or the individual who supervises the main office. Although these are responsibilities that typically fall under the purview of the principal, the daily expectations go way beyond these needs. A school leader today is supposed to act as an entrepreneur and a person of vision, able to inspire, empower, and motivate his staff under the auspices of a shared mission statement that fosters common goals for the entire community (Engels, Hotton, Devos, Bouckennooghe, & Aelterman, 2008). The position of principal has evolved tremendously over the last century from a basic program manager or administrator to today’s expectation that a principal is a transformational leader who shapes instruction and impacts student performance (Hallinger, 1992). Transformational approaches to leadership expect that the principal is able to communicate a vision for the school that becomes a common goal for the entire community (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000) and to ensure that sound instructional practices are permeating the classrooms, which lead

to high levels of student achievement. This is what the school principal is expected to do today—be a transformational instructional leader and still oversee the daily administrative responsibilities of the building.

Hallinger (2003) conceptualizes instructional leadership in the following three dimensions: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school learning climate. When analyzing the expectations of being an instructional leader, school principals must carefully consider the learning unfolding within their schools. James Lytle (2010) wrote about his experiences as a principal in Philadelphia. He described how he discovered leading for learning, as opposed to just leading, while serving as the principal of Parkway School. In that school, Lytle spent time developing a clear understanding of the strengths and needs of the entire school community. He also devoted time to encouraging innovation and risk-taking on the part of the staff and students. Additionally, Lytle spent a lot of his time supporting the staff in their work and promoting the concept of entrepreneurship among the teachers. This was a way to help develop human, social, and organizational capital as a means to his desired end, which was to improve the learning opportunities for students. Although Lytle describes the work specific to one school, from our personal experiences as school principals over the last decade, his efforts reflect what we view as the general expectations for a transformational instructional leader in our schools today.

EXPECTATIONS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS (AKA BUILDING PRINCIPALS)

- Lead for learning—be the lead learner
- Have a clear understanding of the strengths and needs of the entire school community
- Be visible—be in classrooms and learning spaces throughout the day

- Support staff in their efforts to be innovative risk-takers with their learning and teaching
- Focus on student learning
- Communicate a vision for the school that is embraced by all constituent groups
- Ensure that sound (research-based) instructional practices are the norm in each classroom
- Offer the supports and resources necessary for high levels of student achievement
- Inspire, motivate, and empower all members of the learning community
- Be transparent and focus on telling the school story

There is widespread research that speaks to the specific impact of principal leadership on student performance (Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003), which is very much a part of being a transformational leader. A recent study indicated that the learning-centered leadership of the principal, which emphasizes instruction and student performance, enhances the prediction of student outcomes on standardized assessments beyond the prediction based on students' socioeconomic statuses alone. Principals who devoted a significant portion of their time to instructional leadership found that this eclipsed their focus on other "managerial" aspects of their job as the effects on students and their performance was evident (Reardon, 2011).

Boyatzis and McKee (2005) also wrote extensively about the resonant leader who could impact change within the organization by building resonant relationships with those around him or her. Transformational leaders and resonant leaders are one and the same because they can impact sustainable change within a learning community in a balanced and effective way. Boyatzis and McKee argue that resonant leaders inspire their organizations and communities to reach for goals that seemed unattainable in the past. In order to achieve this level of resonant leadership, which we would argue is the goal of many building principals, Boyatzis and McKee state that great leaders are emotionally intelligent and are mindful of the

needs of those around them. Furthermore, they believe that great leaders are able to inspire the community through an optimistic perspective and a clear vision focused on collective goals. In light of these characteristics described by Boyatzis and McKee, there seems to be a direct correlation between the idea of resonant leaders and the expectation that current building principals are transformational instructional leaders who are able to face challenges and difficulties by focusing on a common vision intended to impact the community in a positive way. In considering the layered impact that a principal's instructional leadership can have on variables such as daily instruction, student performance, and the functionality of the educational community as a whole, an examination of the professional development opportunities that currently exist for principals must be undertaken.

Effective principals (a broad category with many characteristics, depending on who is surveyed) can manage the organization as a whole and the implementation of curriculum as long as they have the appropriate professional support and development (Elmore & Burney, 1999). Principals must deal with competing expectations and with the dilemmas inherent in concurrently overseeing the building, supervising instruction, being available to members of all constituent groups, delegating, accepting responsibility, and leading professional development and learning opportunities for the entire staff (classroom teachers, aides, specialists, etc.). Multiple personal and professional qualities seem to be needed to carry out the job successfully. As a result of these daily expectations (or pressures, depending on one's position), principals have felt a need for professional development to help them perform their arduous and ambiguous role successfully (Johnson, 1994). This is inherently one of the biggest problems facing the implementation of successful professional development for effective principals. If the educational community cannot agree on the job description of the effective principal and, in turn, the skills necessary to be effective in the position, how can "necessary" professional development opportunities become available? A distinct answer is lacking here, but there is clearly a need for professional development that can be tailored and personalized to support effective principals and their daily work.

CHAPTER 1—TWO TAKEAWAYS AND A TIP

- **Takeaway #1**—A school leader/building principal today is supposed to act as an entrepreneur (an innovator and disrupter) and a person of vision, be able to inspire the community, empower those around him or her, and motivate her or his staff under the auspices of a shared vision statement that fosters common goals for the entire community. The principal must be able to be the voice for what the community believes in and stands for.
- **Takeaway #2**—In considering the layered impact that a principal's instructional leadership can have on variables such as daily instruction, student performance, and the functionality of the educational community as a whole, an examination of the professional development opportunities that currently exist for principals must be undertaken.
- **Tip**—There will never be extra time in your day. Lead learners model learning by integrating the learning into an already full day. Begin by developing the learning in places you already go on a regular basis. Setting Google Alerts on a particular topic, developing a Twitter list of educational organizations or leaders, or creating a list of podcasts will help you to create consistency in your learning.