

Preface

SUPERINTENDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Mary Lynne Derrington

We hadn't seen each other for many years when we met that August. After hugs, smiles and catching up, we discovered that both of us had been in several other school districts since we last worked together. In fact, between Cathie West's thirty years of experience as a principal and my eighteen years at the superintendent level, our combined administrative experience covered thirteen school districts. Reflecting on what made some experiences memorable and rewarding and others mediocre or challenging, we reached the same conclusion: the most rewarding and successful school districts had the most effective leadership teams. Specifically, it was the leadership team consisting of the principal and the superintendent and the relationship between these two administrators that created either a healthy or harmful working environment. We acknowledged that neither of us had any training in our preparation or inservice programs on how to develop this important relationship. We agreed that we could contribute to the field and assist others in learning from our experiences.

We live life forward but understand our experiences backward. We spent the next two years reflecting and searching for answers and information to describe the critical attributes of the superintendent-principal relationship.

Why I Wrote This Book

Reflecting on my experiences, I believe that becoming a superintendent was akin to becoming a new driver. I learned the rules of the road, passed the test, and had some hours in guided practice behind the wheel. However, once I was alone behind the wheel and steering without feedback, I lacked the refined judgment that experience develops. I was prone to driving fast and missing important signals.

x • Leadership Teaming

Likewise, as a new superintendent I cognitively knew the job and felt prepared for the challenge. But as an inexperienced “driver,” I sometimes ignored warning signals and proceeded too quickly for conditions. Most important, I knew little about developing the critical relationships that support a successful superintendent-principal team. I have found from talking with many other superintendents that this novice experience is not unusual. Like the new driver, you find yourself in control overnight. One changes from being a principal to becoming the supervisor of administrators who yesterday were peers. The expectations others have of you can change in just twenty-four hours.

Fortunately, I learned quickly. I learned that leadership is a team sport. I learned that the complex job of a superintendent can be done only with the goodwill and good thinking of the principals. I learned that the demands of leadership necessitate creating and building the superintendent-principal team. And I learned that building this team requires a set of skills not typically taught but universally expected.

This book is a vehicle through which to share insights and lessons learned, sometimes the hard way, frequently in a moment of enlightenment. This book is also the result of a gift of time. After twenty-five years in administration, I was blessed with a university position that provides the opportunity to research effective teams and reflect on effective practices.

What You Will Learn

There are tremendous demands placed on superintendents by all stakeholders, including principals. I see the frustrations of principals when the superintendent relationship fails to bring about team cohesiveness. I hope to give both principals and superintendents concepts to ponder and suggestions for unleashing the power of the superintendent-principal team. From my perspective, this is the most important team in a school district. It is this team that ultimately determines the schooling outcomes of young people in communities across this country.

PRINCIPAL'S PERSPECTIVE

Cathie E. West

I was a young student back in the 1950s and my memories of that difficult time run deep—as if I had known back then that hanging tight to what I had heard, seen, and felt would make a difference later. My classrooms were sterile, the curriculum lifeless, and the teachers cold and

unapproachable. Their no-nonsense approach to teaching and discipline was so deadening that, despite my immaturity, I knew something was very wrong in my school house. Decades later I became a principal so that I could run my own school. I pictured cheerful classrooms, loving teachers, and a spirited curriculum. Students would thrive, as would their teachers, and—if I did my job right—my unsettling past would open the door to better schooling for today’s children.

I have been a principal now for thirty years, have experienced the evolution of the principalship from manager to instructional leader, and responded to ever-changing demands. My work has been unrelentingly challenging, remarkably stimulating, and extraordinarily rewarding.

However, being a principal has been tougher than I expected. I have found more work to do than I could ever hope to accomplish, teachers who are incompetent, students who are dangerous, and parents who are just plain crazy. I’ve lived with crisis du jour, tangled with malevolent unions, endured mean-spirited school board members, and suffered from the decisions of clueless bureaucrats at all levels. Sadly, along the way there has been little in the way of help. Nevertheless, after all these years, I love being a principal and feel honored and proud to do this job.

Why I Wrote This Book

As I traveled the pathway to principal success, I discovered the most telling marker in regard to my effectiveness—my boss, the school district superintendent. I have worked for a dozen superintendents and know firsthand how their outlook on life, competency level, and capacity to lead affects the perceptions, performance, and confidence of their principals. Whatever the quality of the superintendent, I also discovered that doing my best work required getting the most out of our relationship. This meant building a strong alliance, working collaboratively, and supporting each other’s work. In other words, it meant becoming a superlative team.

What You Will Learn

For my part in the book, I covered concepts and strategies that will help superintendents work more effectively with their principals, the people whose work underlies their own success. For principals, I included both good and bad stories from the trenches. The “bad stories” about superintendent-principal relationship gone awry are meant to be instructive. The “good stories” about relationships that thrived will show principals how to forge powerful alliances with their superintendents.

ABOUT OUR BOOK

We look at the leadership team from two perspectives—that of the principal and that of the superintendent. The reader will hear two voices addressing four major themes: leadership teaming, leadership qualities, leadership team essentials, and leadership learning. Chapters alternate between these voices, with the superintendent speaking about the theme first after which the principal adds her voice on the same theme. Like the six blind men describing the elephant, we sometimes grabbed on to a different part. In the final analysis, however, we describe the entire animal. Each of us identifies critical team components from her unique set of experiences, research read, and studies undertaken. We also describe team components from the perspective of our different leadership roles. Although each of our voices is unique, we share many views.

Special Features

At the conclusion of each chapter, Closing in on Key Concepts summarizes the big ideas. This is followed by Extending Your Thinking, which invites readers to apply what has been learned to their own team experience. Resource material is included so that administrators may implement suggested strategies.

Who This Book Is For

Taken as a whole, the book taps into the powerful forces at work in the superintendent-principal team and describes how to harness this energy to improve education for students. New superintendents and principals will find concepts and suggestions not typically taught in schools or seminars on how to form a superintendent-principal team. Experienced superintendents and principals will be able to reflect on their practice and project forward into new plans of action, and superintendent-principal teams will get the chance to discuss their responses to these critical questions:

What characterizes a superlative relationship between superintendent and principal?

What makes this team distinctly different from teams at all other levels in a school district?

Are there systems and strategies that support this effort?

How does the superintendent-principal team communicate, make decisions, and solve problems?

What insights can you share regarding the roles and management styles of both the superintendent and the principal in a team relationship?

This book is also for university instructors who wish to incorporate discussions about the leadership team into educational administration curriculum. We observe that this topic lacks attention in the preparation of both principals and superintendents.

Overview of the Contents

We bring the dual perspective of principal and superintendent to these pages. Each chapter provides a framework for understanding these viewpoints and their impact on team relationships. The reader will also find the means to equip oneself for success. The critical themes leadership teaming (Part I), leadership qualities (Part II), leadership team essentials (Part III), and leadership learning (Part IV) present vital team-building concepts, each of which is supported by vivid examples and practical tips. The reader will learn what effective teaming looks like and how to attain it.