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A School Leader's Compass

In Whose Interest?

Education is a deeply moral enterprise. How can the administration of such an enterprise be any the less moral?

—Christopher Hodgkinson (1991, p. 140)

Effective leaders continually ask questions, probing all levels of the organization for information, testing their own perceptions, and rechecking the facts.

—Warren Bennis and Joan Goldsmith (2003, p. 3)

To do what you say, you have to know what you want to say. To earn and sustain personal credibility, you must be able to clearly articulate deeply held beliefs.

—James Kouzes and Barry Posner (2008, p. 29)

The underlying beliefs that principals hold about teachers and learning determine the efficacy of their actions.

—Joanne Rooney (2008, p. 90)

Navigating successfully in the turbulent seas of today's school leadership requires that principals have a compass—an inner strength, derived from having examined carefully who they are, what they believe and value, and why they are in the business of education. Such self-assessment and reflection enable leaders to understand and thus better manage their emotions and the intense stress so often related to educational leadership positions. This chapter facilitates school leaders' examination of themselves so they can acquire a fundamental leadership tool: a compass that helps them maintain a level head and a moral purpose in doing what is best for students and student learning as they undertake the responsible position of school principal and their important role in instructional leadership. Regarding the power of having a moral compass, author and former school superintendent Larry Coble writes,

> The idea of the power of the moral compass for leaders is more far-reaching than our traditional views of morality. From my perspective, the axis on which the leader's moral compass spins is the leader's core values, the "deep stuff" of his or her make-up. Many would refer to this as executive character. Leaders must know the line that they will absolutely not cross. (Brubaker & Coble, 2005, p. 175)

INTROSPECTION

CLARIFYING CORE BELIEFS AND VALUES

A life lived well is earmarked by harmony between what a person holds dear and how one is able to practice those beliefs and values day in and day out. Outstanding leaders defy a concrete description. They come in all shapes and sizes, from all parts of the world, from across all of time, and may stand for good or evil causes. However, all are clearly alike in at least one distinguishing trait: Their values and beliefs are so well-defined and articulated, their sense of purpose so strong, that their values and resulting purposes become their passions. They feel so strongly about their beliefs and mission that they are willing to take great risks and perform with much courage to further them.

Underpinning all facets of an effective principal's many functions—even those that may not be so risky or require great courage—is what the principal believes in and values. If principals are to be more than managers, they must have at the center of their work and being a set of core values that will propel their work into the ranks of real leadership. Although managing may be interpreted as objectively performing one's duties, leading requires more. There is no value-free leadership; the term is an oxymoron because at the heart of leadership and its close companion—good decision making—are the values and beliefs that form the framework for guiding behaviors and

action. Without a well-defined core of beliefs and values, there can be no true leadership. According to Christopher Hodgkinson (1991),

> The educational leader as practical idealist [acts] . . . according to personal ideals, to prevent the bad from being born and the good from dying too soon. The leader is not tossed upon the seas by every wave of political opinion, but feels the honor, and the obligations that go with that honor, to participate in an intensely moral vocation. (p. 165)

The education profession has increasingly focused attention in the past couple of decades on issues related to such moral and ethical leadership. The numerous sets of standards for today's school leaders more often than not include a dimension pertaining to *moral or ethical* expectations. Number five of six educational leadership standards first developed in 1996 by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium and updated this year (2008) pertains to this dimension of leadership: *An education leader promotes the success of every student by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.* This standard includes being accountable for each student's academic and social success, being a role model for reflective practice and moral behavior, safeguarding democratic values, making decisions that reflect moral and legal considerations, and promoting social justice and a "student-centered" perspective throughout the school's operation. In fact, the new set of standards replaces the term "all students" with "every student," which is repeated in each of the six standards, giving emphasis to the student's success and well-being as the core mission of the school and its personnel.

A number of well-known educational scholars (e.g., Kouzes Posner, 2008; Sergiovanni, 1996, 2006; Covey, 1991, 2004) have described what constitutes the moral imperatives of leadership that they espouse. Michael Fullan (2008), for example, offers "practicing fearlessness"—albeit selectively—as one of ten guiding principles for school leaders. "Effective principals," he asserts, "are men and women who take independent stances on matters of importance and in most cases, are all the more respected for it" (p. 31). Three criteria might be to be selective, to do it on a small scale, and to make your stand a positive rather than a negative act of courage.

Another of Fullan's (2008) guiding principles is for principals to "decide what you are *not* going to do" (p. 37). Fullan describes the hectic nature of a principal's routine day and makes a case for the absolute necessity of a principal setting priorities and not being swept up in the momentum of a school's constant stream of interruptions. In both of these principles set forth by Fullan, the principal's knowledge of his or her beliefs and willingness to stand up for them are key.

From extensive studies related to the principalship, William Greenfield (1985) concludes that a true leader "believe[s] in the worth of what [he or

she] seeks to accomplish and exhibit[s] in . . . daily action a commitment to the realization of those." Similarly, Thomas Sergiovanni (2006), researcher and eloquent advocate of "moral leadership," contends that a "good principal needs to have some sense of what she or he values, something to be committed to, a compass to help navigate the way—a personal vision" (p. 334). Without such commitment and vision, researcher and contemporary author Roland Barth (1990) suggests that "our behavior becomes reflexive, inconsistent, and shortsighted as we seek the action that will most quickly put out the fire so we can get on with putting out the next one" (p. 211).

And finally, yet another example of the current focus on values, commitments, beliefs, and the way good leaders demonstrate such moral strength comes from Schwahn and Spady (1998), who claim that "total leaders reflect deeply on their values and principles, are open to their organization and the public about them, and consistently model them" (p. 73). In their fifteen performance roles of a total leader, two directly relate to the leader's personal integrity, which is derived from having and demonstrating a clear set of core values and beliefs: (1) creating and sustaining a compelling personal and organizational purpose and (2) modeling core organizational values and personal principles.

Principals must reflect deeply on their own value systems, particularly as they relate to their role as school leaders, and must be able to articulate their strongest beliefs and values regarding key aspects of schools. Joanne Rooney (2008) offers these suggestions for principals who are so busy "doing" that they find it difficult to have time for thinking and "digging" deeper to find out who they are and what they really believe:

- Seize times for reflection, such as while driving in a quiet car or while sleepless. The saying "the unexamined life is not worth living" is as true for principals as it was for the Greek philosophers.
- Network with other practitioners. Blogs, chat rooms, and e-mail can connect us without formal meetings. A quick lunch to brainstorm with a colleague often offers insights not discovered in isolation.
- Take risks! Few great leaders have played it safe. Let teachers know you are venturing into new territory. It encourages them to do likewise. (p. 88)

Stephen Covey (2004) suggests that all good planning begins by identifying what one believes in and values most dearly. Certainly, identifying one's core beliefs and values, particularly about teaching, learning, and schools, is a fundamental tool for enabling the leadership potential of a principal. Thomas Sergiovanni (2007) encourages all educators to clarify their educational beliefs by articulating them in an educational platform, which he describes as the assumptions or beliefs that deal with the way children and youth grow, with the purposes of schooling, with the nature

of learning, with pedagogy and teaching, with educational programs, and with school climate.

Developing an educational platform is not easy. Even veteran educators sometimes find it difficult to describe succinctly what they believe about these important dimensions of school. Developing an educational platform requires a great deal of reflection, introspection, and clarification. The process can be facilitated by reading to learn more about the issues of schooling and education in this country in order to clarify your own thinking about your beliefs and position on issues. But the process of deliberation will surely make you a stronger educator, and one without which you will surely not succeed as a school leader and principal. As Kouzes and Posner (2008) so aptly put it, "To do what you say, you have to know what you want to say. To earn and sustain personal credibility, you must be able to clearly articulate deeply held beliefs" (p. 29).

If you have not engaged in deliberate clarification and articulation of such a platform, the questions in Box 1.1, based on the work of Sergiovanni and Starratt (2007), should be helpful in developing this fundamental piece so critical to effective leadership in general, but even more critical to effective instructional leadership.

BOX 1.1

My Educational Leadership Platform

1. What are the purposes of education?
2. What should the major achievements of students be?
3. What is the role of schools in students' education process?
4. What is the role of the learner in schools?
5. What is the purpose of the curriculum? Who should develop it?
6. What is my concept of an effective teacher?
7. What kind of pedagogy do I favor? Why do I favor this form of pedagogy?
8. What kind of teacher–student relationship is best to support learning?
9. What kind of school climate is best for learning?
10. How do I perceive school leadership?
11. What is the principal's role in school leadership? How do I see myself in this role?
12. What roles should parents, community members, business leaders, teachers, staff, and students play in school leadership?

PERSONAL SKILLS ASSESSMENT

A major part of understanding oneself is identifying "what makes you tick" and identifying your strengths and weaknesses—both personal and professional. Reflecting on and articulating an educational platform as proposed in this chapter are major steps toward self-appraisal and understanding. Done well, such a platform provides the grounding essential for evaluating and making tough decisions and taking action. "Without such a reference point," admonish Razik and Swanson (2001), "the administrator drifts like a rudderless ship on a stormy sea" (p. 351).

Although learning to be a reflective practitioner is probably the best, most reliable form of self-assessment, a host of assessment inventories and instruments are available—usually at a cost—to help individuals clarify their thinking and understand themselves better, both personally and professionally. The keener an individual's awareness is of his/her personal makeup (i.e., likes and dislikes, emotional and social skills, biases, personality, aptitudes, and character traits), the better able he or she is to apply that knowledge objectively and thus effectively in the workplace. Strategically gathering data about oneself is often the first step recommended in career planning. Yet many experienced, practicing principals have done very little to explore their own proclivities in a systematic, objective way.

Dale Brubaker writes about the "power of wanting to be there," a concept that is especially important for educators to understand about themselves—preferably when they first choose to enter a career. "The secret to 'wanting to be there,'" explains Brubaker, "is to know that what you are doing is an extension of what you really value" (Brubaker & Coble, 2005, p. 75). It is no secret that finding work that you are passionate about and really enjoy is often the key to success in it. But in the education profession, the risks of damages to others caused by a person being in a profession he or she does not enjoy—and perhaps even detests—is particularly heinous. As Brubaker aptly puts it, "Teachers probably look to administrators, and children look to teachers, with the same question in mind: *Do you want to be here with me?"* (p. 75). The best favor you could give yourself, your peers, and your students is to find other work if you are not happy being in education, even if it means having to re-tool to make a career change.

It is never too late to make a conscious effort to learn more about oneself. Ideally, this is a lifelong pursuit because, as we continue to learn and grow, we change. Remaining cognizant of how we change as individuals is essential to being our best . . . at home or in the workplace.

PROFESSIONAL SKILLS ASSESSMENT

In addition to self-analysis of personality, personality traits, and personal skills, further deliberate exploration of your leadership style, skills, and

behavior can add significantly to understanding yourself and how others may perceive you. Although there are many instruments that are quite good and are appropriately designed to help with leadership analysis, be careful to choose instruments that are based on current research and knowledge about school leadership and that are well normed with subjects that reflect the diversity of today's professional leadership population. Unfortunately, some of the available instruments lack reliability and relevance for today's school leaders because they rely heavily on constructs and models of leadership from more than thirty years ago. The characteristics and behaviors of more recently recognized leadership styles labeled as transformative and integrative are fundamental to reflect the models of leadership needed in today's schools. In addition, the exclusion of minority and female subjects in the norming processes of the older instruments used to measure leadership renders them useless now. With the current literature that widely substantiates and acknowledges gender-as-a-class differences that exist in leadership styles, it is inexcusable to continue to measure leadership with instruments that have not been validated by a representative norming population that includes minorities and women.

The leading educational administration organizations have well-developed, frequently updated, easily accessed, free sets of standards for school principals that can easily be adapted to self-instruments. In addition, literature outlining the skills, behaviors, knowledge, and dispositions principals need to provide for sufficient leadership are also readily available. There is no dearth of standards for school leadership; the key is to find the ones that have most authenticity for today's school leader, and for you to study and use in assessing your own professional attributes.

The standards established for principals by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) have had a major impact on principal licensure. As of 2006, forty-three of forty-nine states with administrator certification and leadership standards reported having based their standards on or aligned them with the ISLLC standards. A number of states have also contracted with the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to develop a licensure assessment based on the ISLLC standards, which many of them now use as the required principals licensure examination. Thus, the ISLLC standards, with their supportive functions, provide an excellent source to use as a trustworthy, relevant set of standards by which to undertake self-examination and reflection of one's professional strengths and weaknesses for school leadership today. School principals and leaders should certainly be familiar with this nationally endorsed set of standards since it has such widespread influence on today's policy makers. Each of the current six ISLLC school leadership standards (listed in Chapter 2) is illustrated with a set of exemplary functions. The complete version of these standards (ISLLC, 2008) is quite lengthy but easily accessed from the Council of Chief State School Officers' Web site (www.ccsso.org/ISLLC2008Research).

In its 2008 edition of *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do,* the National Association of

Elementary School Principals (NAESP) offers its six standards for "effective principals," followed by sample behaviors that demonstrate each standard. In addition, each standard is illustrated by what NAESP titles "Inside a School: A Focus on Practice," a real-world example of the standard from a practicing principal. These standards and illustrations can be found on NAESP's Web site (www.naesp.org).

More specific than "standards" are "proficiencies." One excellent resource to assist a principal in a more skill-specific self-assessment process is Daresh's (2006) handbook for principals, *Beginning the Principalship: A Practical Guide for New School Leaders.* This handbook offers a personal leadership checkup complete with summaries of several credible lists of principal proficiencies. Daresh suggests that the list of leadership skills developed by the NAESP in 1991 is a user-friendly tool for self-assessing one's leadership strengths and those areas in need of improvement or refinement.

Being reflective and analytical about yourself and what you believe is essential to being at your personal or professional best. Keeping abreast of the ever-changing standards for leaders developed by the profession and seeking honestly to assess oneself with these standards is one way to stay tuned in and sensitive to the areas needed for professional growth as a leader. Of course, the real usefulness of such personal and professional examination and clarification depends on what is done with it. To this end, Larry Coble contends, "Tapping the power of your moral compass will be a way of guaranteeing that you are being true to yourself and the people you lead. Using this power means that you must act. You can talk the talk and you can commit volumes of your philosophy to writing, but unless you live out what you believe, you are a fake" (Brubaker & Coble, 2005, p. 182). Once areas of personal and professional strength and weaknesses are identified, it is important to develop a plan of action with goals, specific strategies, and a timeline for accomplishing them. Personal and professional development should be an ongoing part of every educator's life. Outstanding educational leaders are exemplary lifelong learners who continue to grow personally and professionally, and hone their professional skills as long as they remain active in the profession. Such leadership will occur only with deliberate attention to and reflection about oneself and one's job performance and professional disposition. The time spent in self-assessment and reflection usually reaps rich dividends in the long run by increasing skill level and heightening a sense of enthusiasm and energy that is so essential to the work of good leadership.

Indisputably, routine clarification of one's personal beliefs, values, moral compass, and leadership skills can facilitate a person's ability to function well and to continue to grow and develop as a leader. The process is never complete, of course—what better model is there for teachers, parents, and students than school leaders who themselves demonstrate the power and benefits of lifelong learning, remain open to new ideas, and continually

seek feedback, reflect, and then act on it for improvement? Writing on the importance of leaders' moral foundations, Schwahn and Spady (1998) assert, "quality leaders openly endorse, consistently model, and clearly exemplify the core values of excellence and productivity and the professional principles of accountability and improvement. Together, these four moral elements define and shape their commitment to continuous improvement—of themselves, their employees, and their organization's processes and products" (p. 91). School leaders could benefit from asking "In whose interest?" which acts as a compass to guide their daily work in schools. If decisions are not made and action is not clearly taken in the best interests of students and their learning, how can it be justified? *Nuff* said!

SAMPLING OF PUBLISHED ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS

Leader Behavior Questionnaire (LBQ), Revised (1988–1996). Authored by Marshall Sashkin. Published by Human Resource Development Press. Can be used by the principal to self-assess or to get feedback from faculty on leadership skills.

Leadership Competency Inventory. Authored by Stephen P. Kelner. Published by Hay/McBer. Can be used to self-assess or to get feedback from faculty on leadership skills.

The FIRO Awareness Scale (1957–1996). Authored by Will Schutz and Marilyn Wood. Published by Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc. Can be used to evaluate interpersonal relations by the individual or as feedback from a group.

Gregorc Style Delineator (1982–1998). Authored by Anthony F. Gregorc. Published by Gregorc Associates, Inc. Can be used by the individual as a means of self-assessment or to enable members of a group to understand each other and their varied approaches as individual to dealing with information.

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Form M (MBTI; 1943–1998). Authored by Katharine Briggs, Isabel Briggs Myers, Mary McCaulley, Naomi Quenk, and Allen Hammer. Published by Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc. Can be used for self-assessment by an individual for understanding her own personality type or with a group to enable the group members to understand each other's varied personalities.

School Principal Job Functions Inventory (SP-JFI). Authored by Melany Baehr, Frances M. Burns, R. Bruce McPherson, and Columbus Salley. Published

by London House, Inc. Can be used by the principal and/or faculty to rate the leader's ability to perform various functions. Different forms are available for individual self-assessment and group assessment.

Walking the Talk

An example of introspection and continuous improvement from the field

I have found that surveys are a great way to get information (for assessing the school's progress). Although principals do need to have conversations and meetings with our teachers, surveys enable us to question a wider audience and get thoughtful and candid perceptions. I regularly survey staff members and parents. I always ask parents to agree or disagree with the statement "My child's individual needs have been met." That's an intimidating measure, but we need to hear parents' responses. I always ask teachers if I have been helpful to their growth. It's important to end all surveys with an open-ended invitation for the respondent to share thoughts on any issue. Eliciting others' perceptions in this way is an important first step in creating a team.

As we review the year, principals need to reflect on personal performance. What did we accomplish? In which areas were we successful, in which areas do we feel frustrated, and in which areas do we wish we could have a "do-over"? What practices should we continue and what should we change? . . . As we look ahead to the re-opening of school, we need to think about preparing *ourselves*. What can we do this summer to refresh ourselves as people, not just educators? (Hoerr, 2008, pp. 88–89)

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POINTERS FOR THE PRINCIPAL

- Develop your educational leadership platform.
  - Clarify by putting in writing your most basic beliefs about students, teaching, learning, and leading.
  - Differentiate between your core beliefs and values and those open to change.
  - Look for inconsistencies in your actions and your stated beliefs.
  - Try daily to behave in concert with your beliefs about what is in the best interest of students.

- Know thyself.
  - Take routine, objective stock of yourself—personal characteristics, biases, personality.
  - Find out how others perceive you (the good, the bad, and the ugly)!
  - Act on the results to make a personal plan to improve.
  - Always consider yourself a "work in progress."
- Know thyself as a leader too.
  - Take stock of your leadership skills.
  - Do self-assessments and actively seek anonymous input from relevant others (i.e., supervisors, faculty, students, staff, parents).
  - Be objective and open to the feedback, then act on it to become a better principal.