

The Principal as CEO

Charlie Hollar

In many ways, the principal's job resembles that of a corporate executive trying to bring new life to an ailing company.



The times demand that we act with courage, vision, integrity, moral purpose, and extraordinary caring for both our colleagues and the children we serve.

—*The Hero's Journey*, John L. Brown and Cerylle A. Moffett

They may never grace the pages of *The Wall Street Journal* or *Fortune* magazine, but they might possibly be the most important CEOs in our country. They are elementary school principals. Each of them typically serves the learning needs of 350–400 clients (students) while overseeing a multimillion-dollar facility staffed by 20–25 teachers and 10–15 support people. In many schools, students are fed breakfast and lunch. Some stay after school to attend programs or until a parent can pick them up. As many as 50 percent are transported to and from school by buses. It is the principal's job as CEO to supervise these activities as well as provide educational leadership. It's a tough job and the stakes are high.

I have had the opportunity to observe and become acquainted with many successful Oklahoma principals and here are some findings from interviews with 35 of them that I consider turnaround principals.

- Over 90 percent inherited dysfunctional schools in their first principalships. In several cases, their predecessors had abdicated authority to the teachers—and, in a few cases, to their secretaries.

- Initially, teacher trust in the new principal was very low. Most of the teachers didn't even trust one another.

- There was very little pride in the building and grounds. At many schools, building exteriors were covered with graffiti. Often the interior of the facility was dirty and smelly. Outside, there were weeds and high grass; shrubbery was sparse and flowers were nonexistent.

A Vision of "Could Be"

How did these new principals take a school that wasn't working for students and teachers and turn it around? Almost all of them said they had a vision of what "could be." Some had

formulated such a vision before accepting the position, while there were those who walked into their buildings before envisioning what could be a reality. Others took a little longer.

One principal was enraged when she entered her new school in Oklahoma City. Jean Hendrickson's previous school was in an affluent neighborhood. Now she found herself assigned to lead a school in one of the city's most impoverished areas. Her anger stemmed from a question she asked herself: "Why aren't these children entitled to the same education and benefits as my former students?"

Another elementary school principal, Maudye Winger, entered a decrepit building in Muskogee, Oklahoma, and immediately had a vision of how it could be transformed into an arts academy. A few years later, the vision became a reality.

Roxie McBride, an Oklahoma City principal, credits her "Peace Corps mentality" with the decision to move at age 50 from an affluent elementary school to an impoverished one where 91 percent of the students qualified for free or reduced-cost lunch, and the majority spoke Spanish. In order to be

IN BRIEF

The author, a retired businessman, compares the principal's job to that of a CEO whose clientele are students whose needs must be met. He cites examples from the experience of 35 turnaround principals in Oklahoma. Almost all took over dysfunctional schools with a vision of "could be," a set of non-negotiable values, and an ability to build trust and cultivate "buy-in" for change from teachers and parents.

effective, she took two years of Spanish at a university and then immersed herself in Mexican culture by living with a family in Mexico.

Cultivating Buy-in

Barely on the job, these new leaders knew the direction they wanted to take their schools. But how could they cultivate buy-in? They used a variety of approaches.

- They communicated immediately the fact that their values were not negotiable, and that they were anchored to a common resolve that "we will do what is best for students."

- Pam Flood, a principal in Claremore, Oklahoma, invited each teacher to her home, one by one. She asked them two questions: "What are you expecting?" and "What do you want to see changed?"

- Carol Berry, a new Oklahoma City principal, said, "I had a vision that the school could be a National Blue Ribbon school even before I interviewed for the principal's position. I talked with the staff and parents about this being a five-year goal, and they passionately bought into it." Five years later, her school won National Blue Ribbon honors.

Initiating Change

By the start of their second year, the turnaround principals were ready to actively initiate changes. Each had his or her own style, but the message they

conveyed to their teachers was that they had better change if their values were not aligned with those of the principal, or else move on.

It takes courage to send that message. One principal had to terminate a relative. In a rural area, half of the teachers were gone after the first three years.

Once trust is established, and the teachers understand that this principal knows how to lead, visits to classrooms are not seen as threats. Successful principals have a presence throughout the building. They greet students by name in the morning. They are in and out of classrooms all day and spend a lot of time in the cafeteria with the students. At the end of the day they are outside bidding them good-bye.

Qualities of Turnaround Principals

What are the qualities of turnaround principals? Those I interviewed share certain characteristics: they are bright; they are goal-oriented; and their

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authenticity is apparent. They are inspiring, tireless, and intuitive. They make certain that teachers have time to process and develop plans. They show their heart. They have mastered timing. They have not forgotten they were once teachers. They don't want to be center stage. They are always learning. They place the bar high, and their teachers, support staff, and students strive constantly to reach it.

In turning around dysfunctional schools, these unsung CEOs are having a profound impact on American education. ■

Charlie Hollar, a retired businessman, is a founder of the Principals' Academy at Northeastern State University in Oklahoma and the Educators' Leadership Academy at the University of Central Oklahoma. His e-mail address is cha@poncacity.net.

WEB RESOURCES

The Principals' Academy at Northeastern State University in Oklahoma trains 25 to 50 principals each year in leadership principles based on corporate middle management methods.

www.principalsacademyok.org/index.php

The Educators' Leadership Academy at the University of Central Oklahoma, founded by author Charlie Hollar, is a year-round program that trains more than 100 Oklahoma educators in leadership perspective and skills.

<http://bronze.ucok.edu/ela/>

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