

Giving the Principal the Shaft

I don't think words can adequately describe walking into your own classroom for the first time. I will never forget the first time my principal walked me to room 109, shook my hand, and wished me the best. There I was, alone in my very own classroom: bright, large, acoustically perfect, and freshly painted. During the three years I called that classroom home, I decorated it many different ways, changed the desk arrangement, and moved my own desk to just about every spot imaginable. In essence, the space shaped my instruction.

Nearly two decades later, I experienced another first: my first principalship. As the departing principal guided me through the halls for the first time, every inch of that school seemed to imprint itself on my memory.

At the end of the main hall, right next to the cafeteria, was a plywood partition no more than eight feet wide, with a flimsy wooden door. As I peeked inside, assuming it to be a small conference room, I was surprised to hear my predecessor say enthusiastically, "And this is your office!"

I made her repeat her words, because I could not believe that this improvised nook was the principal's office. She explained that in the school's original plans, this area was to be an elevator shaft, but the elevator was never installed. As the school grew and space became precious, the shaft space was made into the principal's office. In this school, the principal was literally given the shaft.

This was not what I had expected at all. My previous office as a high school assistant principal was large and bright, with walls covered in a rich wood paneling and a carpeted floor. I had enough room for a desk, bookshelves, a computer table, and a round conference table.

In my new office, in order to get to the desk, I had to stand sideways and squeeze between the desk and the wall. The tiny office offered little privacy, and for three hours a day was ground zero for the noise from the cafeteria next door. The office also had insufficient heat and no air conditioning.

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Shaped by the Shaft

For three years I operated out of that shaft. During those three years, standardized test scores continued to rise, behavioral problems decreased, students learned leadership skills, and teacher morale was high. There were many contributing factors: highly dedicated teachers; an active and knowledgeable assistant principal; and involved parents. I cannot, however, neglect the importance of the shaft. Just as my first classroom shaped my instruction, the shaft shaped my administration.

Whenever we look at a school's success, we cannot overlook the leadership of its principal. A recent study scrutinized research on the effects of the principal's leadership on student achievement and identified 66 leadership practices in 21 areas of leadership responsibility. Two of the leadership responsibilities that have a high corre-

late with student success are communication and visibility. The responsibility of communication includes being easily accessible to teachers, parents, and students; maintaining open lines of communication with staff; and providing means for the staff to frequently communicate with the principal. Visibility essentially means having frequent and meaningful contact with staff, students, and parents. It didn't take me long to realize that the shaft made it easy for me to meet both of these responsibilities. Let me explain.

A Very Accessible Principal

Most school principals are safely tucked away, shielded by the school secretary and office personnel. In my little office, everyone had access: parents, students, teachers, and especially salespeople. More often than not, I was the one to approach with questions about missing mittens, misplaced newsletters, and free and reduced-price lunch forms. Every teacher stopped by my office to talk on the way to the faculty lounge. Sometimes they talked about their own children or grandchildren, sometimes about the weather, but at other times they would casually mention a concern or frustration. Parents, too, might linger a little longer than necessary after picking up their children, which usually indicated that there was some small matter that needed to be discussed.

The students ate their lunch right next door to the shaft. And I liked the fact that I could get up and walk in if the noise got too loud. It also made it easy for me to see all of the students daily, or for them to tell me their news: Someone's mom had a new baby; someone else was being picked on; and it always seemed to be someone's birthday.

The after-school program was also held in the cafeteria and children would sheepishly come into my office to ask for help with homework, talk about something that was troubling them, or share some good news. I think I loved this most about the shaft, because in a regular office, students

would have rarely been able to reach the inner sanctum of the principal to ask for help with double-digit addition.

The shaft's walls were decorated with student work: pictures, handmade birthday cards, and elaborate art projects. In one corner, I hung smiley-face behavior charts as a means of recognizing children's efforts at good behavior. Children, especially the younger ones, would parade their parents into the shaft to see these things, and this gave me a chance to praise them in front of their parents.

Lessons Learned


I will never forget the lessons about accessibility and visibility I learned in the shaft:

- People may not make appointments over small matters, but they will stop in to share small concerns;
- Children need to be able to walk into the principal's office;
- Everyone needs to see the principal at work;
- The principal needs to see and talk to each teacher and student every day;
- The principal feels better when he or she sees everything that's going on in the building; and
- Parents feel secure when they know that the principal is keeping a watchful eye on their children.

About a year after I left that school, I learned that my successor moved her office to a new location. I certainly didn't blame her, but I felt sad. I sometimes wonder if she knew what she was sacrificing for heat and quiet and privacy.

Today, I have a normal office with a window, a radiator, an air conditioner, lots of privacy, and even a bathroom. But if I could design the perfect school, one that promoted communication and visibility, I would give the principal the shaft. ■

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