

Web Exclusive

Principal

May/June 2009

We Know What to Do, So Why Do We Fail?

A study of corporate leadership provides a meaningful model for successful principals.

Susan Penny Gray and William A. Streshly

For decades, school leaders across the nation have wrestled with the difficult task of implementing what they know their schools should do. Three years ago, the challenge of turning knowledge into action was tackled head-on by a select group of educational leaders who met on the campus of a major university to brainstorm ways the university's educational leadership department might assist school districts in their efforts to improve student learning.

A member of the department offered a familiar observation: "Much research points to the promise of increased student learning when school leaders and teachers work together as a professional learning community, sharing the vision and collaborating for such important functions as data analysis, lesson study, and curriculum alignment."

At this point, a noticeably uncomfortable superintendent pointedly asked, "Well, if we know what needs to be done to get good results, why can't we do it?" Responses from the school leaders in the room immediately focused on the usual barriers: the changing student population; inadequate teacher preparation; English-language learner difficulties; lack of parent involvement; bureaucratic requirements; union stalemates; insufficient fiscal resources; and the unreasonable pressures of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Finally, one superintendent interjected: "But there are schools out there where student achievement is improving in spite of the barriers we are all talking about. How are they able to get past those barriers?"

Going From Good to Great

This crucial question prompted us to seriously ponder just how some schools succeed in the face of seemingly impossible barriers, while others don't. Looking for answers, we turned to the research of Jim Collins, as reported in his bestselling book, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't*. Collins was asking the same question we were asking—but in the context of the corporate world. His research

zeroed in on how good companies become great companies—and stay that way.

The great companies Collins studied faced the same constraints of similar companies, yet they made gains and sustained them while the other companies made little or no gains, or were unable to sustain the gains they did make. Collins' research found that key to the successes of these companies was their chief executive officers—more specifically, CEOs who exhibited certain powerful characteristics and behaviors that were absent in the leaders of the less successful companies.

It occurred to us that Collins' research about private sector leadership might hold pieces to the puzzle about what constitutes effective school leadership, and why some schools are successful in raising student achievement and others aren't. At the time, our interest in successful school leadership was being put to a practical test in California, where we were working to redesign educational administration preparation programs to better prepare principals for 21st-century school leadership. Suppose our preparation programs were missing the point?

Applying Corporate Research to Education

Thus, we set out to determine whether Collins' research could apply to school leaders. For example, are there identifiable characteristics of successful school principals that can be correlated with long-term educational success? Could the absence of those characteristics be the reason why many school leaders fail to accomplish what they set out to accomplish? Can the characteristics of great school leaders be taught and learned as part of an administrator preparation program?

To answer these questions, we replicated the interview questions used by Collins in his research of successful private sector companies, with modifications for public school leadership. We then interviewed a group of "superstar" elementary principals whose schools had moved from good to great in student achievement, based on student test performance, and stayed there over a period of time. For comparison, we also studied

Principal

principals whose schools also were good but did not move to great. The purpose of our interviews was to examine and compare the leadership characteristics and behaviors of the highly successful and less successful principals, as reflected in their responses to our questions. What ensued was a research project that ultimately became a book published jointly by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and Corwin Press (Gray & Streshly, 2008).

Characteristics and Behaviors of Superstar Principals

Not surprisingly, we found that the principals of highly successful schools in our study exhibited the characteristics and behaviors of the very best “Level 5” executives of Collins’ research, with one important addition: All the highly successful principals also demonstrated a well-developed ability to build relationships among their faculties. Our interviews revealed this quality, along with four characteristics and five behaviors that distinguish the superstars.

The dominant leadership characteristics were:

Compelling modesty. When things go well, leaders with this trait give credit to others; when things go badly, they accept the blame. When one highly successful principal was asked what his leadership style might be, he responded: “I don’t think of myself as the leader of the school. It’s really them [the teachers], not me. If they were not doing the work, the work would not be done.”

Resolving to do what must be done. Leaders with this trait typically are driven by an unshakable need to produce results and to do whatever it takes to make their schools great. One principal’s resolve was clear in how she dealt with reticent teachers: “I prepared all of the materials for them, so they had no excuse. If a teacher said, ‘This program is not working for me,’ I’d say, ‘Can I come in and teach it?’ I just would not let them not do it.”

Blending professional will and personal humility. On the surface, the great CEOs in Collins’ study seemed quiet and reserved, yet hidden within each of them was an intense dedication to making anything they touched the best it could possibly be. What separated the highly successful principals from these CEOs was the more subtle way in which they responded to questions about their actions in working directly with others. One principal in our study shared that while he was successful in leading his school to improved student achievement, “as an instructional leader, I have grown tremendously ... with this talent [the teachers] I have out there.”

Displaying ambition for school success. Our star principals displayed ambition for the success of their schools, rivaling that demonstrated by the successful CEOs of the Collins study.

One principal responded: “I want the school to keep moving forward. It has a very strong foundation ... I feel proud that I was part of it all.”

Collins’ work expands on the idea of core leadership characteristics working in tandem with leadership behavior. We believe five behaviors to be especially relevant to effective school leadership:

“First who ... then what.” Great business leaders know how to, as Collins states, “get the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats.” In schools, the great principals learn to manipulate their systems in order to gather the right personnel to do what must be done—often confronting overwhelming bureaucratic obstacles. In our study, all the highly successful principals employed a variety of strategies for getting the right teachers, and eliminating teachers who did not fit with the vision or focus of the school, before making decisions about the way to go in moving their schools forward.

Confronting brutal facts. Great business leaders maintain unwavering faith that their companies can and will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties, and have the discipline to confront the most brutal facts. All our highly successful principals demonstrated this behavior. A case in point: One of our principals confronts the fact that the majority of the student population at his school have poor reading skills. “We started with a school with over half of the kids below the 20th percentile in reading,” he says, “so we put our emphasis in reading instruction and creating environments where kids read more.”

Using the hedgehog concept. Collins identified a behavior that he termed the hedgehog concept, borrowed from ideas expressed by Isaiah Berlin in his famous essay, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (1993). Berlin divided the world into hedgehogs and foxes, based on an ancient Greek parable: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” For school principals, the hedgehog concept consists of knowing what teachers are best at (e.g., skill and determination), determining what drives the educational engine of the school (e.g., increasing time spent teaching reading), and being a fanatic about the school’s educational engine. One of our principals responded: “Teaching reading and ensuring that kids read is the most important thing elementary schools do. The kids who read most read best. All of those things come together because of a staff that is good at creatively coming up with ways to help kids read.”

Creating a culture of discipline. Collins notes that great leaders exemplify a “culture of discipline” made up of “disciplined people, disciplined thought, and disciplined action,” where

“The purpose of our interviews was to examine and compare the leadership characteristics and behaviors of the highly successful and less successful principals.”

Principal

people understand they have a responsibility, not a job, and have freedom within the context of that responsibility to take action. All the highly successful principals and their staffs in our study reflected this culture of discipline.

Building relationships. While we found the Collins research methodology useful in characterizing principals of great schools, during our research we discovered an additional critical leadership quality—the ability to build relationships. It surfaced prominently during conversations we had with the highly successful school principals in our study. Building relationships is understandably essential in an environment that embraces collaboration, communication, and professional learning communities in schools.

In this article, we have attempted to answer the question, “We know what to do, so why do we fail?” Part of the answer may lie in our administrator preparation programs. We believe the time has come to rethink these programs and to focus them on developing leadership behaviors and characteristics that are typical of exemplary principals, and that have an impact on school success. A program whose goal is to prepare great school leaders must focus on what great leaders do.

References

Berlin, I. (1993). *The hedgehog and the fox*. Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks.

Gray, S. P., & Streshly, W. A. (2008). *From good schools to great schools: What their principals do well*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Susan Penny Gray is a lecturer and consultant in educational leadership at San Diego State University in California. Her e-mail address is penigray@aol.com.

William A. Streshly is professor emeritus of educational leadership at San Diego State University. His e-mail address is streshly@cox.net.

To read more about this study, the authors' book, *From Good Schools to Great Schools: What Their Principals Do Well*, is available in NAESP's National Principals Resource Center at www.naesp.org/Resource_Center.aspx.