

When to Lead, When to Learn

The premise that great schools have great leaders can lead to a vision of the principal as a heroic leader working alone to save the day. Yet, the notion of a principal leading in isolation is outdated, and the need for effective leaders has never been more pressing. Today's schools must serve an increasingly diverse student body in an era of high-stakes accountability with rigorous standards, utilizing technology that is expanding exponentially while preparing students to be ready for jobs that haven't been invented.

A quick internet search will uncover a list of research-based attributes a principal should hold and practices to carry out that have elicited high levels of student achievement and a healthy school culture. Most leaders can recite it—communication, integrity, shared values, delegation, etc. The process of living out the attributes is complex and unique to each principal and school. It is in the bridging of research and practice where a chasm often exists. An imperative early step is for a school leader to gain self-awareness in order to identify a starting point and to know when to lead and when to learn.

Get to Know You

Self-awareness is quite possibly the most crucial skill a school leader holds. Self-awareness means having an understanding of your personality, strengths, weaknesses, thoughts, tendencies, and emotions. Even more, it includes understanding how other people perceive you, your demeanor, and your interactions.

Self-aware principals are mindful of what they are good at and recognize what they still have to learn. Schools benefit more from leaders who are transparent about weaknesses than from leaders who pretend to know it all. Lead learners take responsibility for mistakes and admit when they don't have the answer. (It is not a FAIL, it is a First Attempt In Learning.) In education's high-stakes culture, this can seem risky. Many

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school leaders attempt to operate as though they are all-knowing, as if anything less would diminish their effectiveness. In reality, the opposite is true. Whether leaders acknowledge weaknesses or not, everyone still sees them. So, the leader who tries to hide growth areas actually highlights them, creating the perception of a lack of integrity.


When principals identify strengths and growth areas, they are showing that in their school it is OK to make mistakes and it is OK to ask for help. These principals serve as models in schools with learning cultures, and these schools are eager to improve and better equipped to adjust to advances and demands in education.

One of the simplest ways to gain self-awareness is through introspection. It can be as easy as taking time to reflect on the day's events and

asking yourself, "How did that staff member react to me? How well was I able to collaborate with the custodial team?" Given limited time and what seems to be an unlimited to-do list, though, it can be a challenge to set aside time for reflection.

Some people seem to be born with perceptive ability; they display a natural inclination to attend to actions, emotions, and reactions, while other people have to work at it. One strategy to improve is to use a journal. Mental notes fade, but black-and-white notes provide a more accurate record. The adage "hindsight is 20/20" holds true. If principals spend time documenting and reviewing the small things, such as staff engagement at a meeting, tone of responses to an inquiry, or the types of concerns raised by parents, they might notice a larger trend, uncovering areas of strengths and areas for improvement. To gain the greatest benefits from journaling, principals can enlist a partner, a trustworthy and growth-minded colleague with whom to discuss journal entries and what insights can be gained.

Be Authentic

In 21st century schools, one person cannot do it all. Each principal has a unique leadership approach, and types of work for which he or she is best suited. Effective leaders don't pretend to know everything. They hire people who have more expertise in specific areas than they do. The most successful leaders have self-awareness so that they surround themselves with the right people. They ask questions and humbly ask for help. Having self-awareness amounts to being better advised. In the process, principals show vulnerability, respect for the skills of others, and a willingness to listen. That is leadership at its best. 

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