



Think Like a Principal

Your habits of thought can lead to success

By Simon Rodberg

“The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” — F. Scott Fitzgerald

Principals’ ways of thinking don’t get much attention because, as opposed to strategies, skills, or even personality traits, ways of thinking are hard to identify. Ways of thinking operate silently, in the black box of the brain. However, just as the teaching of reading has benefited from identifying what goes on in the minds of skilled readers, the development of principals can benefit from identifying how first-rate principals think. They have an ideal vision of education, recognize the unnaturalness of the schools they lead, and make tough decisions by keeping both their vision and reality in mind.

Trade-offs as Key

Principals see, and are responsible for, the school as a whole. Resource

allocation—deciding where to spend money, time, and attention—is a big part of the job. Questions such as: *More reading, or more recess? More class time, or more professional development?* occupy principals’ time and attention.

The ability to see trade-offs is key, and it often distinguishes the principal from other members of the school community. A fact of life for principals is that staff members don’t like to acknowledge trade-offs. Teachers want smaller classes, period. The special education coordinator wants an aide in the reading classroom.

In many instances, the trade-off comes down to individual needs versus the bigger picture. A challenging student may benefit hugely from the assistant principal’s (APs) mentorship, but if the AP isn’t outside for arrival, what does that do to the start of the school day? A principal’s inability, or refusal, to see the trade-offs is a recipe for resentment, inequity, and failure.

Too much focus on one child and their challenges can sometimes, and quickly, lead to disaster. But the reverse is true, too. A calm classroom can contain an isolated child or subtle bullying. Perspective is needed to be able to distinguish and see the big picture.

The Unnatural Nature of the School

“History of American Education” courses are common in education schools—but the perspective principals need is world-historical, even anthropological. We need always to recognize the unnatural nature of our schools, the haphazardness of the whole enterprise.

Take the cafeteria, for instance. The fact that scores of young human beings of the same age eat at large indoor tables at a designated time of day is a bizarre idea that would have been considered ridiculous even 200 years ago in the United States. (In much of the world, it’s still strange.)

So, too, the age-graded system. That 12-year-olds all learn the same thing, in isolation from people of other ages for most of the day, is historically unusual. So is our 1:20 adult-to-child ratio, and our separate and distinct subjects.

None of these things is bad, inherently. But first-rate principals are aware that they could be otherwise—that the current methods of educating young people are simply the current methods. We need to recognize and think about the fact that the way we do things isn't the only possibility.

First-rate principals try to make our schools just right for every child, even as we recognize the impossibility of the task. We do what we do because we care about children, but we often must say no to people wanting to do what's good for individual children. The first-rate principal always thinks about the trade-off between the ideal and the real.

Successful Thinking

The ability to consider both ideals and reality separates thoughtful principals from merely decisive ones. Many of us have worked for or with principals who are authoritative, commanding, and quick to develop and follow a plan. Business analysts define this style as *decisive*. A *Harvard Business Review* article by Kenneth Brousseau and others describes decisive thinkers as valuing “action, speed, efficiency, and consistency. Once a plan is in place, they stick to it and move on to the next decision. In dealing with other people, they value honesty, clarity, loyalty, and, especially, brevity.”

Sounds like a successful principal, right? Perhaps. But the modern school has problems with no clear solutions, so first-rate principals need a creativity that comes from the ability to hold on to a mental image of the ideal. Roger Martin, another writer on top business leaders, describes thinking that doesn't accept either-or as *integrative*.


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In their *Harvard Business Review* article, Brousseau and his co-authors write: “People using the integrative style don't necessarily look for a single best solution. Their tendency is to frame any situation very broadly, taking into account multiple elements that may overlap with other, related situations. Consequently, they make decisions that are broadly defined and consist of multiple courses of action. When working with others, integrative decision-makers like lots of input and are happy to explore a wide range of viewpoints, including those that conflict with their own, before arriving at any conclusion. Decision-making for the integrative is not an event, but a process.”

Trade-offs, in other words, are more complex than they first seem. When we can see that reality is contingent, and strive for the ideal, we can move past status-quo-based decisions to a greater integration of our community and our vision.

The Limits of Thinking

It's worth returning to Fitzgerald's words, with particular attention to the last clause: “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time *and still retain the ability to function.*”

There will always be trade-offs, no matter how carefully or integratively we think. We can only strive for clarity of values, and strive to steer an intellectual course toward those values. We can, as well, clarify our ways of thinking. But the ability to function as a principal is ultimately moral and emotional. It requires an unswerving commitment to the greatest vision, and an acceptance that you won't achieve it. 

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