

DO YOU HAVE A MENTORING MINDSET?

TEN TIPS to help new principals make
the most out of a mentoring relationship.



By Linda J. Searby

This article is the third in a series that is focused on the needs of early career principals.



As a new principal, recognizing your need for a mentor is not an admission of weakness, but rather a sign of strength. It demonstrates your commitment to continuous improvement of yourself and your leadership abilities. It also shows a desire to be quickly socialized into the leadership culture and to be as effective as you can be at the technical side of your job. Research-based evidence reveals that a quality mentoring relationship results in many career-enhancing benefits—and protégés have at least 50 percent of the responsibility for making or breaking it.

What's in It for You?

Consider the following scenario:

Mary Thomson was eager to start her new position as the principal of Sugarloaf Elementary School, having had the summer to prepare for the opening in August. With three years under her belt as an assistant principal in the district, she felt fairly confident that she could handle the job. Thus, she was somewhat surprised when her superintendent called to inform her that she would be assigned a mentor.

Many questions danced through Mary's head: Does he think I am incompetent before I have even started this job? What is the mentor going to do? Will my mentor be reporting my performance to the superintendent? When will I possibly find the time to meet with a mentor? But, being a leader who was committed to continuous improvement of her leadership skills, she politely thanked him, hung up the phone, and waited to hear from her mentor.

Principal mentoring programs have become widespread, responding to the numerous reports and studies that identify the difficulties principals—and new principals in particular—face. The Public Agenda report *Trying to Start Ahead of the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk About School Leadership* states that “virtually all superintendents (99%)

believe that behind every great school there's a great principal.” However, although a new principal is armed with enthusiasm, a leadership degree, and certification, he or she usually does not feel ready for the overwhelming responsibility of being the senior leader of a school.

According to researchers Thomas Alsbury and Donald Hackman, approximately 32 states currently have legislative policies that support mentoring programs for new administrators, so most newly hired principals can expect to enter into a mentoring relationship.

Making the Case for Principal Mentoring, a report published by NAESP and The Education Alliance at Brown University, explains that principals are traditionally “thrown into their jobs without a lifejacket,” unprepared for the demands of the position, feeling isolated and without guidance. However, when new principals receive comprehensive induction and mentoring, they enter schools “confident in their ability to foster a strong learning community” and are “sensitive to the culture they are joining,” according to Susan Villani in *Mentoring and Induction Programs That Support New Principals*.

So how can a mentor help? A wise mentor can be a lifeline to maintaining sanity in the first two years as a principal. Research demonstrates that new principals can benefit from mentoring because it gives them the opportunity to:

- Receive support from an outside, more objective administrator in the field;
- Share ideas and practices and collaborate with another school leader;
- Get help through constructive discussion of their work that helps them reflect on how to improve their leadership;
- Receive guidance on their goals and how to be reflective about current practices in their schools;
- Feel increased confidence in their professional competence;

- Find help in making practical leaps from theory to everyday implementation of leadership concepts; and
- Reduce their isolation, integrate more with their professional community, and become more socialized in the profession.

Protégés need to feel comfortable assessing both the strengths and weaknesses of their leadership skills, reflecting on these attributes, and planning to make adjustments as needed. According to Lois Zachary in *The Mentor's Guide*, a healthy mentoring relationship is a prime example of adults engaging in a learning endeavor together, where responsibilities are mutually defined and shared.

How to Be a Great Protégé

To pinpoint the characteristics that demonstrate a mentoring mindset, I interviewed mentor principals as a part of a larger research study. The 10 experienced mentor principals, trained through the NAESP National Mentor Program, were asked to describe the ideal characteristics of a principal protégé—behaviors, skills, knowledge, dispositions, and attitudes—that demonstrated the protégé's readiness to receive the most from a mentoring relationship. Their feedback led to the development of the following 10 tips for protégés that demonstrate a mentoring mindset.

TIP 1: TAKE INITIATIVE. Busy mentor principals want you to initiate communication. They appreciate a self-starter who is committed to regular meetings and takes the mentoring seriously. Be intentional about keeping regular communication with the mentor and show him or her you are action-oriented.

TIP 2: BE A LEARNER. Mentors recognize when a protégé is passionate about learning how to be a better leader. Exhibit curiosity and ask probing questions. There are usually no quick fixes to problems, and mentors are wary of new principals who want them. Keep that continual “I want to know” learning orientation.

Principal ONLINE

Access the following Web resources by visiting *Principal* magazine online: www.naesp.org/JanFeb13

✦ In “Mirror Mirror: 6 Development Conversations to Have With Yourself,” mentoring expert Lois Zachary provides **reflection prompts protégés can use for goal setting.**

✦ Find out more about **NAESP's National Mentor Program**, which nationally certifies mentors across the nation.

TIP 3: BE OPEN. Being open involves seeking feedback and accepting it graciously. Admitting with humility that you don't know everything and that you really want advice shows that you value the wisdom and experience of your mentor. It has been said that "If you are unteachable, you are who you will be."

TIP 4: BE KNOWLEDGEABLE. This is not contradicting Tip 3, which admonishes you to admit that you don't know everything. You likely were promoted to the principalship because you possess a good grasp of leadership concepts. Discussions with your mentor will often center on your understanding of these concepts and your own continuous professional development.

TIP 5: BE BIFOCAL. A bifocal perspective allows you to see the big picture (your vision for your school) and to prioritize the short-term goals to achieve the vision. Know the value of proactive planning as opposed to reactionary behavior. Pay attention to the details, but take the time to step back and "go to the balcony" to reflect on the impact of your leadership behaviors.

TIP 6: BE A COMMUNICATOR. Keep the lines of communication open with your mentor. As issues arise, use phone calls, emails, and text messages to connect between scheduled meetings. Good communication also requires active listening during mentoring sessions. If either you or your mentor is doing all the talking during a meeting, the learning is likely going to be derailed.

TIP 7: BE RELATIONAL. Relational savvy is the ability to build relationships with others. As such, you should develop good people skills and take opportunities to network, be sensitive to others in social situations, and be appropriately confident but not arrogant.

TIP 8: BE REFLECTIVE. Place great value on knowing yourself. Take advantage of opportunities to gain more self-knowledge through personality inventories, leadership audits, and other self-understanding instruments.

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Be transparent and share your private reflections out loud with your mentor. Humbly admit your mistakes and learn from them.

TIP 9: BE ETHICAL. It goes without saying that trust has to be built in a mentoring relationship. Trust is earned through being honest, keeping confidences, and doing what you say you will do.

TIP 10: BE POSITIVE. Keep a positive outlook and demonstrate to your mentor that you welcome your mentoring sessions—in fact, that you really look forward to them. Show appreciation to your mentor through words and tokens of gratitude.

Overcoming Hurdles

Every mentoring match is not made in heaven; mismatches do occur. However, this does not reduce the value of having a mentor to turn to during your first years as a principal. To obtain a better match, identify someone you would desire as a mentor and approach that individual with the request to be your mentor for a specified period of time. Taking the initiative to get your own learning needs met and seeking the regular counsel of a wise, veteran principal will pay dividends in your professional growth and leadership development.

Most principals are extremely honored to be asked to mentor, and want to help. If a potential mentor you have identified does turn you down, it is usually because he or she truly does not have the time, or the individual might worry about his or her capacity

to deliver on a commitment to you. Granted, finding the time to meet with your mentor will be the foremost challenge in your relationship, but as in other areas of life, we make time for what we value.

Putting It All Together

In *Making the Case for Principal Mentoring*, NAESP Executive Director Gail Connelly states that "most of the research shows that principals who are successful in their leadership roles have had some very deliberate coaching and mentoring during their first, critical years." The national effort to place new principals in mentoring relationships with experienced principals is certainly a noble one. We have thrown new principals into the deep water without life jackets for far too long.

Giving new principals the keys to the building, the policy manual, and a wish of "good luck" is not only insufficient, it is unacceptable. Fortunately, mentoring for new principals is becoming more common, and your state or school district likely has a mentoring program in place. Perhaps veteran principals in your district have received training in the NAESP National Mentor Program, which is designed to create a cadre of mentors who can support first year or newly assigned principals.

Potential new principal protégés must be informed about the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to bring to the relationship for it to be an effective one. Your mentoring mindset as you enter the relationship is at least one half of the equation for success.

An old African proverb states, "If you want to travel fast, travel alone. If you want to travel far, travel together." May you and your mentor discover this to be true as you walk your mentoring journey together. □

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