The telephone nearly slipped out of my sweaty hands as I stammered my acceptance of the principalship. I had longed for this position since my mentor and principal, Judy, encouraged me to consider becoming an administrator. Like most teachers, I had imagined what it must be like to lead a school. I worked with others to positively influence the practices within our school by chairing several committees and leading schoolwide initiatives. I also had a great example to follow in Judy, the school’s beloved principal of more than 20 years.
Now it would be my turn, but my excitement contained seeds of self-doubt. Thoughts of safety, security, student achievement, school climate, change, instructional best practices, finances, staffing, and community relations caused my palms to sweat again. I felt uneasy about how to accomplish it all at a high level. Judy reminded me that the principalship, like the classroom, provides opportunities for learning and growth, and that many of the skills of teacher leadership would be important in my new role. New principals must remember to take advantage of the skills they honed as teachers. While they no longer have their own classrooms, as principals, they can instead influence the entire school community.

In the 13 years since Judy gave me this advice, I have developed a clearer picture of the habits that can help teacher leaders transition into effective principals.

1. EXTREME CONFIDENCE
Perhaps the most important characteristic educators should possess is the belief that they can positively influence high levels of learning for every student. A sense of efficacy and deep commitment to student learning is perhaps the critical trait that teacher leaders can bring with them to the principalship. Principals understand, and research supports, that teachers have the greatest influence on student outcomes. The research goes on to show that right behind the teacher’s influence is the impact of the school principal. To create a great school, everyone has to be confident in their ability to positively affect student and school outcomes.

First-year principals will probably question everything about their decisions, and even their competence to continue. This is normal and has the potential to cause tremendous growth. It does get easier.

Efficacious principals are models of continuous learning and positive influence, supporting and encouraging their staff’s focus on the core mission of enhancing students’ learning. Efficacious principals, like teacher leaders, are optimistic and enthusiastic in searching for solutions and next steps. They benchmark their success against the work of others, and are willing to collaborate and share their knowledge to help others improve their practice.

While they know they might not always succeed and might face resistance to change from within, they are courageous and take risks. Their confidence and positive attitude tends to persuade colleagues to join and, in turn, steers events in a positive direction.

2. COLLABORATION
Principals build “collective” efficacy by creating high functioning collaborative teams through their schools’ professional learning community (PLC). The research and examples of successful practices in developing PLCs has exploded in the past 20 years. PLCs are the most powerful staff development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement.

New principals will want to maximize the concept in their schools. As former teacher leaders, they likely know this concept well, have been on highly effective collaborative teams, and successfully implemented the practice. As principals, they are responsible for leading and cultivating successful growth of this concept within a school.

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Collaborative PLC teams accept learning as their fundamental purpose and evaluate all practices based on how their practices impact the children they serve. In a PLC, educators commit to building a collaborative culture to work as a collaborative team. Team members focus on the results of their work, seek relevant data, and use that information to refine their practices and promote continuous improvement. Collaborative teams embrace four essential questions, which guide their collective work:

- What do we want all students to learn and be able to do?
- How will we know if they learned it?
- How will we respond when they have not learned?
- How will we meet the needs of those who already know?

New principals will be expected to improve their school. They do this by leading the learning and by developing the collective capacity of teacher and school teams. Teams get better by developing the emotional commitment and technical expertise day after day within a culture that believes
it can be more effective through the job-embedded learning of educators. Building a culture that truly functions in this manner is hard, yet rewarding work. The principal is responsible for ensuring it happens.

3. INFLUENCE
Modeling the learning and expectations for staff go hand in hand with establishing a PLC culture. Principals, like teacher leaders, positively influence those whom they mentor, programs and initiatives that they grow, and their school as a whole. Successful leaders at all levels have a targeted mission to improve student achievement. New principals must ensure that they communicate their excitement over new learning and discoveries, interest in the craft and science of the profession, what they are reading, and what informs their thinking in this quest.

If principals expect their staffs to be knowledgeable about how to implement best instructional practices (and who doesn’t?), they need to embrace this learning wholly, be an advocate, and provide support and guidance for staff. For example, if a principal expects staff to promote positive relationships with parents by inviting them into the classroom or asking them to volunteer on special projects, then he or she needs to do so as well. By walking the walk, principals ensure that they are never “off message” about what they want to achieve. They not only make known what they value and embrace, but also allow others to become part of their vision as well. A principal’s example will ignite in others the desire to do the same.

4. INVOLVEMENT
New school leaders must be willing to interrogate the reality within their school. They must design methods of practice to protect their time and keep the avalanche of paperwork and meetings from taking them away from ensuring that the important work of the school is being done, and being done well. A new principal must be in classrooms, be a part of collaborative teams, and provide teachers frequent feedback and build a shared understanding of effective practices, which promote and improve student learning. Principals need to confront mediocre teaching and ineffective practices. This can only come from being part of the learning taking place in the classrooms throughout a school.

5. RELATIONSHIPS
Principals routinely cite isolation as a stressful factor in the work that they do. Teacher leaders moving into the principalship will need to recognize that relationships with peers, colleagues, and friends in the profession will change because they “crossed over” to the supervisory ranks. New principals may feel more isolated because they recently left behind a comforting place where opinion was shared without reservation to one where conversations are more measured.

Leadership is a relationship. New principals should look to develop a trusted team. Exemplary leadership requires a high level of trust and collaboration. In order to help ease these feelings of isolation, principals should consider the following strategies:

- Invite others to join them in shared leadership;
- Find a coach or mentor; and
- Develop a network of principals.

New school leaders should understand that more people will be aware of their success or failures than ever before. While successful teacher leaders may be relatively unknown outside of their school community, the practices of the principals may invite commentary from many directions.

Principals should carefully consider all stakeholders, including students, parents, staff, community members, central office administrators, and school board representatives as they seek positive change in their school. By carefully considering the goals and expectations of those served and being able to successfully achieve these goals, principals can better serve the school community and create supportive learning environments for children.

HEART OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP
Teacher leaders moving into the principalship should understand that the new role offers the opportunity for learning and growth. New principals should cultivate a culture of trust that embraces the job-embedded learning of collaborative work among school teams, effectively monitor best instructional practices, and meet and achieve the goals and expectations of the communities they serve.

People will work hard in a school where they are able to collaborate with colleagues who support them and where there is an expectation that they can improve their school. That is the heart of school leadership. Teacher leaders who embrace learning, cultivate a culture of collaboration and trust, and build collaborative teams that focus on results will thrive when they accept their first principalship.

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