Do You Have A Mentoring Mindset? 10 Tips for New Principal

“If you want to travel fast, travel alone. If you want to travel far, travel together.”

African Proverb

Linda J. Searby, Ph.D. Auburn University
NAESP Mentor 2012

Mary Thomson was eager to start her new position as the principal of Sugarloaf Middle School, having had the summer to get herself and her school ready for the opening in August. With 3 years under her belt as an assistant principal at another middle school in the district, she felt fairly confident that she could handle the job. Thus, she was somewhat surprised when her superintendent called a week later to inform her that he had turned her name into the state principal’s association so she could be assigned to 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 herself and her leadership skills, she politely thanked him, hung up the phone, and waited to hear from her mentor.

Making the Case for a Mentoring Mindset

As a new principal, you have probably experienced something similar to Mary. Since approximately 32 states currently have legislative policies that support mentoring programs for new administrators, most newly hired principals can expect to enter into a mentoring relationship (Alsbury & Hackman, 2006). The best case scenario is one that allows you to select your own mentor, based on your self-assessment of where you want to grow. Recognizing your need for a mentor is not an admission of weakness, but a sign of strength. It is your demonstration of commitment to continuous improvement of yourself and your leadership abilities. It shows your desire to be quickly socialized into the culture and to be as effective as you can be in the technical side of your job, as well. So, if you can choose your own mentor, based on your perceived compatibility, that is the optimum situation.

Let’s go back to the next-best-case scenario. Most formal new principal mentoring programs are organized to assign experienced principals to novices, with or without any attention being given to compatible matching procedures. So, if you are assigned to a mentor, it is likely to be “luck of the draw,” as the saying goes. You may receive a trained, competent, best-practice principal as your mentor, or you may be paired with an uninformed veteran who thinks that mentoring is telling you one war story after another.

Before you decide that having a mentor is not worth the risk, please read on. There are research-based evidences that a quality mentoring relationship results in many career-enhancing benefits, and you, as the protégé, have at least 50% of the responsibility for making or breaking it. Let’s look at the potential benefits of mentoring for you, and then delve into the characteristics of the mentoring mindset that will assist you in making the relationship a positive one.

What’s In It For You?

In one report on school leadership, it was noted that “virtually all superintendents (99%) believe that behind every great school there’s a great principal” (Public Agenda, 2001, p. 21). However, the new principal, though armed with enthusiasm, a leadership degree, and certification, usually does not feel ready for the overwhelming responsibility of being the senior leader of a school. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP, 2003) reported that principals are traditionally “thrown into their jobs without a lifejacket” (p. 8), unprepared for the demands of the position, feeling isolated and without guidance. The task of school leadership is daunting, pointing to the need for new principals to receive “comprehensive induction and mentoring programs so that they can enter schools confident in their ability to foster a strong learning community and be sensitive to the culture they are joining” (Villani, 2006, p. 5).

In a review of research on how new principals gain the knowledge and skills they need to survive in the first years of administration, Lashway (2003) found that novice school leaders experience high stress as they try to translate their textbook understanding of leadership into real world practice. Major sources of stress for new administrators include the need to master technical skills, demands from a wide array of constituents, feelings of inadequacy, the fast pace of schools, the challenge of supervising teachers, and most of all, the experience of isolation in the job. Villani (2006) explains that there continues to be a shortage of applicants for the principaipship because of insufficient compensation, job stress, excessive demands on time, conflicting demands of the role, societal changes, and accountability pressures.

So how can a mentor help you? A wise mentor can be a lifeline to maintaining your sanity in the first two years as a senior principal. Research demonstrates the following benefits of mentoring for new principals:

- Receiving support from an outside, more objective administrator in the field;
10 Tips for Being a Great Protégé

I recently conducted a study in which I interviewed 10 experienced principals who had each mentored one or more new principals. The veterans were all trained mentors, through the NAESP Mentor Training. I asked them to describe a new principal protégé who seemed especially ready to benefit from their mentoring relationship. I asked about behaviors, skills, knowledge, dispositions, and attitudes that were displayed by their exemplary protégés. Based on their descriptions, I created “10 Tips for Protégés” that will demonstrate that you have a mentoring mindset and are equipped to garner the maximum benefits from your mentoring relationships.

**Tip #1: Take Initiative**

Busy mentor principals want you to initiate contact to set up your meetings. 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/her you are action-oriented.

**Tip #2: Be a Learner**

Mentors love it 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.

**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 you value the wisdom and experience of your mentor. Someone who is stubborn or can’t admit a weakness is not going to grow. 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 a senior principal position because you possessed a good grasp of leadership concepts. Discussions with your mentor will often center around your understanding of these concepts. With the expectation that today’s school leaders are instructional leaders first, you likely have a basic grasp of curriculum and professional development. Your mentor will appreciate hearing you talk about what you are reading in professional journals and leadership literature, as well as paying attention to your own professional development by taking advantage of additional training in specific areas.

**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 get to the vision. You have good time management skills (or at least, you desire to manage your time well and are working on it!). You know the value of proactive planning, as opposed to reactionary behavior. You pay attention to the details, but you can also 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. You may meet formally once a month, but a short email or quick text message to touch base with your mentor between meetings is appreciated. One mentor told me of a protégé who never answered her emails which really made her wonder if she wanted to continue the mentoring relationship. Active listening in the mentoring sessions is also part of being a good communicator. If either you or your mentor is doing all the talking in a meeting, the learning is likely going to be de-railed.

---

- Having the opportunity to share ideas and practices and collaborate with another administrator;
- Getting help through constructive discussion of your work and helping you reflect on how to improve your leadership;
- Receiving guidance on your goals and how to be reflective about current practices in your school;
- Feeling increased confidence in your professional competence;
- Finding help in making practical leaps from theory to everyday implementation of leadership concepts;
- Reducing your isolation, integrating more with your professional community, and becoming more socialized in the profession.

(Daresh, 2004; Ehrich, Hansford & Ehrich, 2005; Rich & Jackson, 2005).

You will need to have someone with whom you can feel comfortable assessing both the strengths and weaknesses of your leadership skills, reflecting on these attributes, and planning to make adjustments as needed. A healthy mentoring relationship is a prime example of adults engaging in a learning endeavor together, where responsibilities are mutually defined and shared (Zachary, 2000). When you and a veteran principal meet together in a mentoring experience, the potential for meaningful growth for both you and your mentor is present. But since this article is about you, the protégé, how can you maximize your growth potential?
Tip #7: Demonstrate Relational Savvy

What is relational savvy? It is the ability to build relationships with others. You have good people skills and take opportunities to network. You are sensitive to others in social situations. You are 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. 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 Personable

Keep a positive outlook and demonstrate to your mentor that you welcome your mentoring sessions – in fact, you really look forward to them! Show appreciation to your mentor through words and tokens of gratitude.

But What If...... I Am Not Assigned to a Good Mentor?

It is not uncommon to hear a new principal say, “They assigned me a mentor and we met once, but it was just not a good fit, and so I never followed through with the meetings,” or “I really wanted to have regular meetings with my mentor, because I thought she was an awesome principal, but she was always very busy and ended up cancelling on me a lot.” You may also be matched up with a veteran principal whom you do not respect because of outdated leadership behaviors you have observed in the mentor. Every mentoring match is not made in heaven. Mismatches do occur. However, this does not dissipate your need for a mentor and you can do something about that. You can 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. I very seldom hear of a situation in which a mentor declines to be of service when approached to be a mentor. Most principals are extremely honored to be asked, and want to help. If a mentor does turn you down, it is usually because he/she truly does not have the time to squeeze out of an already hectic schedule, or might worry about failure 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

Gail Connelly, Executive Director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, has stated 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” (NAESP, 2003, p. 17). 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 far too long. Giving you 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 Certification Program, designed to create a cadre of mentors who can support first year or newly assigned principals. If so, that is great! We certainly want trained mentors doing this work.

However, it is my assessment that little has been done to inform you, a potential new principal protégé, about the knowledge, skills, and dispositions you need to bring to the relationship in order 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. It is my hope that the research conducted and shared in this article has resulted in practical advice for you, on how to demonstrate a mentoring mindset and reap the maximum benefits of working with a mentor. 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.

References


Mentoring Conversations with New School Principals

Best Advice by NAESP Nationally Certified Principal Mentors

Carol A. Riley, Director, NAESP Mentor Program

Prepare, prepare, prepare. In any situation, preparation can make the difference for success. This message is echoed throughout the lives and careers as school principals.

Over the years, the National Association of Elementary School Principals has worked with over one thousand mentors in the NAESP National Mentor Training and Certification Program, and their collective feedback has clarified some big ideas on preparation and the principalship that has research implications for mentoring conversations. Through discussions of the depth and complexity of preparation programs of new school administrators these contextual reflections are the starting point for critical conversations.

The mentor trainings bring principals and other school administrators together from around the country to discuss what their years of collective education experience and knowledge of working with new principals has taught them. They identified several issues that can be critical tipping points to success in school leaders’ early years on the job.

One of these is the gap between preparation and practice. Being a new administrator brings challenges that are complex, multifaceted, and sometimes unexpected. The best way for a new principal to face them is to listen to those who have walked in their shoes and paved the way—their mentors! Here’s what eight years of research indicates that veteran principals had to say to new principals about filling in the gaps in preparation. Mentoring programs for novice school administrators benefit by focusing on these gaps to ensure a great start in their roles as new school leaders!

Manage Your Time
New administrators contend with many demands on their time, from management responsibilities to instructional improvements to “on the spot” requests. A principal’s work is comprised of tasks that are short in duration and rapid in pace; one study indicated that 85 percent of a principal’s time is spent on tasks lasting less than nine minutes.

Accountability begins immediately upon receiving a new position, and effectively managing your time can make the difference in accomplishing your goals. Find sanity in your packed schedule by identifying the issues that require attention on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis. Discover what to drop off your plate, and pay attention to the details of the important issues.

Also, protect your personal time to keep work tasks from overtaking your life. Keeping equilibrium between home and work is an important strategy to function effectively and efficiently. Identify your personal needs. A balance of emotional, intellectual, and physical development creates a comfortable synergy that will bring out your best thinking and performance.

Create Your Vision
New principals often take on too much at one time, missing the overall perspective on the critical issues that will achieve the results they want. Ron Krause, an NAESP Coach, refers to this tendency to take on too much at once as the “Tasmanian Devil” approach to leadership: spinning uncontrollably without seeing the big picture.

Creating a personal vision, sharing it, and living it each moment will focus a new principal’s efforts. When a new principal can intentionally take the time to reflect and center themselves on what is important, the vision becomes action.

Manage Your Interactions, Maximize Your Team
Leading adults to common ground on issues takes skill and experience. Knowing how to involve everyone in decision-making and bringing about consensus are skills that develop over time in leaders. But new principals who come into the position with good problem-solving skills will be in a position of control and will be able to positively manage interactions.

As a school leader, there is no greater responsibility for you than to harness and acknowledge the power of teachers’ collective skills. This does not happen accidentally. A new principal’s ability to understand the theory of team building is a significant factor. Develop an “Engagement Inventory” upon receiving your position, and identify the stakeholders who contribute to the school and larger community. Schedule appointments to introduce yourself to each staff member and community leader. A priority timeline and a record of conversations will help to confidently express your belief in an open and welcoming environment.

Also, recognize your strengths as a leader. Knowing what you do well and developing those skills to their optimum will result in confidence and action. The NAESP mentor program uses the Strengthsfinder by Don Rath to explore a personal journey of discovery. When you know what you do well, you can empower the people around you to also use their strengths for the common good.

**Combat Isolation With a Mentor**

Even though new principals are prepared in the technical skills of management and instructional leadership, the reality of the position is that they often do not have the advantage of delaying decisions until they can reflect or discuss them with a trusted confidant. The job is demanding and the principal who is in control of situations and stays calm in the storm demonstrates the attitudes and culture that they are trying to solidify in their school.

A new principal should seek out a mentor to understand the position from a personal and reflective perspective. Private and confidential discussions whenever possible allow you time to clarify the action to be taken. Many of the issues that arise require on-the-spot decisions and many require additional information. Being able to discern the difference and act accordingly is a difficult skill to develop, and one that a mentor can help with.

Carol can be reached at criley919@yahoo.com or criley@naesp.org

*Carol A. Riley, National Association of Elementary School Principals*
*Director, National Mentor Certification Program*

**This article appeared in the NAESP Communicator Publication**
*February 2013, Volume 37, Issue 6*

**This article also appeared in the International Mentor Association Connect Publication**
*August 2013*
Developing a Culture of Change through Mentoring

Carol Riley, Director, NAESP Mentor Program

October 2013, Volume 37, Issue 2

Understanding change theory is critical for principals to develop successful relationships, especially mentoring partnerships.

Change theory refers to a pathway of steps to advance short- or long-term goals. It’s the process of moving an organization to improve through a complex web of activities. It applies to leaders and mentors, who must understand how adults process personal change. But it also applies to staff members and mentees, who must embrace change professionally and personally.

Whether you’re a formal mentor, an informal mentor, or the leader of your staff, take these actions to cultivate a culture of change in your relationships.

Establish a common understanding of change.

All organizations go through periods of small continuous shifts as well as periods of extreme change. With your staff or your mentee, hold an open and free exchange about personal perceptions of change. What does change mean to each member of a team? What beliefs must someone embrace to be open to change? Is there a common language about change that everyone can use?

To introduce a common “change language” to her staff, Tina Acker, principal of Vernon School in Portland Oregon, is going to show a video called “Change Is Good… You Go First: 21 Ways to Inspire Change.” She hopes that developing a clear understanding of the concept of change will help her staff come together.

“I am looking forward to exploring change with my staff. We are currently facing a few changes that will not be easy,” says Acker, who is also a NAESP Mentor Program coach.

Gain collective commitment.

Effectively implementing change in an organization requires stakeholders to learn together and engage in a common goal, says NAESP Mentor Program coach Stephanie Daugherty.

Leaders must have buy-in from all stakeholders to create a culture of shared leadership. Being dedicated to the change process can make the difference between success and mediocrity in instituting improvements.

Wisdom comes from listening, not speaking.

In the change process, what a leader does matters just as much, if not more, than what he or she says. For instance, leaders should demonstrate their commitment to the process through listening well and demonstrating engaged body language, including eye contact. Listening—and then
responding with a positive attitude—helps a leader or mentor encourage direction and focus, develop an open culture for sharing opinions, and maintain optimism.

The ideal climate, says NAESP Mentor Program coach Melissa Patschke, is inclusive and open-minded. Practicing scenarios that require intentional listening and interpretation of interactions among and between team members can help mentees and staff members build leadership.

**Build a deep relationship around the moral purpose.**

Mentors and leaders should clearly identify an organization’s moral purpose, around which each mentee and organization member can commit themselves. What does our organization stand for? Is there a connection between conversations, actions, and the common vision? Is there follow-through on goal-setting and decision-making that clearly ties to the purpose of why each person comes to work each day? Professional relationships that are built on common ground are long lasting, and are key for developing a positive culture that supports change.

**Model the change.**

Leaders and mentors model the characteristics that contribute to the change process. For instance, a mentor can help a mentee model reflection and feedback, share ideas that work well, and encourage collaboration.

Do not forget to celebrate accomplishments, as well.

“Leaders must champion all the gifts the staff brings,” says Kathleen Sciarappa, NAESP Mentor Program coach and mentor program coordinator for the New Hampshire Association of School Principals. “[An] organization grows as all ideas are explored.”

The video mentioned earlier, “Change is Good… You Go First,” explains that either we manage change or it manages us. Sameness is the fast-track to mediocrity. By establishing a strong, positive culture of change, leaders and mentors can deepen their relationships, and help their schools keep making forward progress.

*Carol Riley is director of the NAESP Mentor Program.*

*This also appeared in the International Mentoring Association Connect magazine.*