Impressions of Leadership

I was early arriving for an appointment with the superintendent at the school where I would begin my first year as an elementary school principal. While I waited, I reflected on my first teaching job, where I had formed my first and most lasting impressions of leadership from the principal. Now it was my turn to be a principal, and I aspired to leave the same impressions with new teachers and others in the school that my first principal had left with me.

Charlie Hollar (2004) describes successful principals as leaders who know the direction they want their schools to take. My first principal, Lena Syltie, certainly knew the direction she wanted her school to take. Moreover, she knew how to involve others in setting goals and developing expectations by consistently projecting confidence, concern for others, high standards, and a strong vision for the school.

When I arrived for my teaching interview many years ago, I recall that the front area of the school was neat and clean, and that the words “The business of this school is to achieve success for students” were printed on the entrance doormat. The school secretary smiled when I entered the office and greeted me by name. As I waited for my interview, I observed the secretary offering similar friendly welcomes to others who stopped by the office.

Mrs. Syltie personally showed me into her office and sat in a chair angled next to mine with no desk between us. Glancing around her office, I noticed bookshelves filled with current textbooks, binders organized by areas of management and instruction, family pictures, and personal items of interest. Framed crayon drawings and clay figures were scattered among the professional materials.

A Conversational Interview

During the next hour and 15 minutes, we talked about many things. Mrs. Syltie asked me about my student teaching experience and college preparation. We discussed lesson planning, instructional materials and techniques, methods for meeting the individual needs of students, and procedures for evaluating the progress of learners. As she assessed my teaching skills and abilities, she shared humorous teaching experiences of her own.

She gave me time to ask questions and patiently answered my inquiries about benefits, extracurricular responsibilities, and teacher evaluations. During the interview, there were no interruptions and the time passed quickly. I later learned that the secretary had been instructed to take messages for all but emergency calls.

A Personally Conducted Tour

I hadn’t expected to visit a classroom, but Mrs. Syltie took time to show me different areas of the school, which were as uniformly neat and clean as the entrance area. A bulletin board left in place from the past school year featured students’ artwork framed by outstanding math papers. A sign read “Our Students Are the Best and Perform the Best.” It was obvious that the school environment was one in which learning was valued.

During the tour, we met two school custodians. Mrs. Syltie introduced them to me, asked about their families, and mentioned some of their special efforts on behalf of the school. I was impressed that she treated the custodians with the same level of respect she offered her office personnel and me. It was obvious that she valued all staff members for their contributions to the school.

When the interview ended, Mrs. Syltie encouraged me to call if I thought of any additional questions. She explained that she and I had the two other interviews to conduct that week and that I would be informed about the status of my candidacy the following Monday. I left the school knowing that I had met with a principal who was honest and fair, and who considered students’ best interests her primary responsibility. I felt that I would be fortunate to teach in this school with such a strong instructional leader. Three days later, I learned that I had been recommended for the position.

A Time to Reciprocate

As the superintendent pulled into a parking space next to my car, I realized that it was now my turn to serve as a principal and to re-create for my new school the warm and productive learning environment that I had first experienced years before with Mrs. Syltie. From that very first interview, I was aware that it is this type of environment that leaves lasting impressions of school leadership.

Reference

Hollar, C. “The Principal as CEO.” Principal (September/October 2004): 42–44.

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