A Guide to the Trenches


Autumn Tooms begins with a warning: “Principals are held accountable by everyone to fix everything, even if they can’t.” In The Rookie’s Playbook: Insights and Dirt for New Principals, she lays out a comprehensive overview of the responsibilities, politics, challenges, and rewards of the principal’s job.

What this book offers is a candid slice of the principal’s experience. It presents real-life scenarios and recommendations. Here new principals will find the “dirt” about the loneliness of the principalship, the political pressures, and the constant shortage of time. The stressors that principals routinely encounter are difficult to adequately convey secondhand, but The Rookie’s Playbook is a refreshing and overdue resource for both new and experienced principals.

Because it would be impossible to capture the spirit and specifics of administrative cultures or the nuances of teacher and parent behavior in the thousands of public schools nationwide, there are occasions when the author’s frame of reference will contrast with the reader’s. For example, she recommends that new principals “fit in” by taking up golf or adopting the style of dress favored by central office leaders. But in my experience working with a number of exceptional principals, very often they are the ones whose innovative and sometimes counterintuitive actions shape their breakthrough successes. Elsewhere, Tooms’ characterization of the need for principals to resort to Machiavellian tactics in competing for resources reflects an administrative culture that, thankfully, does not define too many high-performing school systems.

That said, many of Tooms’ suggestions and observations are universal, or nearly so. In every chapter, maxims jump off the page: “Listening is the most important skill in the effective administrator’s repertoire” and “The key to strong, effective leadership rests in the ability to articulate your own beliefs about what, specifically, is ‘good teaching.’”

Tooms concludes on a hopeful note that can seem distant in the throes of the first year or two as a principal: “Relish your job; the opportunity to lead is a true gift.”

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Getting
Everyone on
the Same Page


Being a principal requires you to think on your feet—especially when you’re leading a group discussion. And according to John Eller, being a group facilitator is one of a principal’s most important roles. In his book, Effective Group Facilitation in Education: How to Energize Meetings and Manage Difficult Groups, Eller outlines many concrete, concise methods of moving a group forward. “Not all these strategies will work in your situation,” he says, “but one of them may provide the basis information you will need in order to put together some preliminary plan.”

That, in a nutshell, summarizes what he attempts to do in this book. Principals often have to work with difficult people, and Eller outlines many practical strategies to overcome the obstacles they present. He cites as an example a difficult situation he encountered while trying to facilitate a school staff development plan, recounting how he was able to lead the group through the process despite a negative participant who had tended to dominate the group in the past.

Eller emphasizes the importance of working toward a shared vision and argues that setting the tone of the meeting with well-planned team-building activities will help a principal be a better facilitator.

Although Effective Group Facilitation is a worthwhile book, it is hard to imagine how a busy principal would have time to adopt many of Eller’s complicated templates and suggestions for planning meetings. Consequently, many of his examples lack credibility until Chapter 9, where he uses real-life examples of how to move a group forward.

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