You Can’t Do It All!
A Sensible Way to Distribute School Leadership Roles

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Use personality type to discover and enhance your leadership style.

Which sounds like more fun to you: spending an afternoon reviewing student assessment data to inform instruction or meeting with student groups to hear their ideas about improving school climate? What about finalizing procedures for teacher observations versus completing a multiyear plan for professional development? Although you are able to do all of these tasks, some probably come more naturally to you—and fit better with your natural strengths.

As the demands on school leaders expand, it’s becoming more and more important to lead from your strengths. Our review of literature on essential school leadership responsibilities led us to write Differentiated School Leadership: Effective Collaboration, Communication and Change Through Personality Type, which revealed 26 separate roles for school principals that have an impact on student achievement. If you try to fill all 26 roles by yourself, you: are headed straight for burnout, will probably struggle with some roles that simply do not suit you, and will rob others of the chance to add their strengths and ideas to school leadership.

In The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results, Douglas B. Reeves summarizes: “Great leaders are not mythological composites of every dimension of leadership. Instead they have self-confidence, and without hubris they acknowledge their deficiencies and fill their subordinate ranks not with lackeys but with exceptional leaders who bring complementary strengths to the organization.”

But how do you distribute leadership responsibly when you are ultimately responsible for what happens in your building? For decades, people have used personality type theory to make the most of their natural style and build effective teams. This theory can help you move from the old Lone Ranger mentality to sharing leadership in an effective, efficient way. The theory also helps to explain why literature on school leadership emphasizes some critical roles over others. As we’ll describe below, people with certain personality preferences are more likely to seek leadership positions and this colors what is seen as the way to lead. Those whose personalities are different may feel like outsiders at best, inadequate at worst.

Personality Type 101

Type theory comes from the work of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung and American Katherine Briggs, who independently charted the same framework of human development and interactions. Briggs and her daughter, Isabel Myers, created the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to help people make constructive use of natural, normal differences. The theory describes how people:
Gain energy, through action and interaction (extraversion) or through reflection and time alone (introversion);

Take in information, through reality and experiences (sensing) or through hunches and connections (intuition);

Make decisions, through logic and objectivity (thinking) or through values and considering the impact on people (feeling); and

Approach life, through planning and coming to closure (judging) or through flexibility and staying open (perceiving).

All of these indicators influence how we lead, how we teach, and how we learn.

Most people find that they perform at their best when tasks fit their personalities. School leaders can learn to perform all 26 of the essential principal roles, but some are energizing while others are of limited interest. In the opening example, reviewing assessment data fits the strengths of the thinking function—making decisions based on logic and objective criteria. In contrast, building relationships with students fits the strengths of the feeling function—making decisions by stepping into the shoes of those who will be affected and considering community values. Given that the Center for Applications of Psychological Type’s Atlas of Type Tables reveals that 80 percent of school principals—and an even higher percentage of superintendents—prefer thinking, is it any wonder that one reads more about using assessment data than qualitative data to guide decisions in books and research on school leadership?

Beth, a principal, prefers feeling and considering impact on people—and knows that working with assessment data isn’t her strength. She shared responsibility for this role in several ways. She scheduled data retreats for grade-level teams. She asked district personnel to lead the retreats, knowing that they could help teachers look at data in ways that would motivate, inform, and
assist them in their work. She also asked the assistant principal and Jane, an education consultant, to join her at the meetings to help the teachers set goals based on the data. Because the staff now understand personality type, they don’t expect Beth to be a master at every role. They know they’ll need to dig into the data themselves.

Further, the personality type framework can help principals understand what isn’t being addressed at their schools. In working with leadership teams at other schools, we often make a poster of all 26 leadership roles. Each team member is given five green stickers to place by the five roles that they would prefer to spend the majority of their time pursuing and five red stickers for the five roles that appeal the least to them. In every building, the roles covered in red stickers simply aren’t being done. In one school, the exercise explained why on any given day, 50 percent to 60 percent of students weren’t following the school uniform policy—no one was taking on the essential roles of establishing procedures and managing administrative processes, and the students knew it!

As you read the more detailed descriptions of the type preferences and the principal roles that fit each preference, think about what you prefer to do. How, by asking others to take on other roles, could you be a more effective leader? If you don’t yet have a leadership team, consider who might bring complementary strengths to such a group.

Interactive and Reflective Leadership Roles

Think about the paradoxical nature of what you’re called to do as a principal—be visible, advocate for the school, and gather input from multiple sources. If you prefer extraversion, you probably thrive on what we termed the interactive leader roles. You enjoy being out and about in your building, thinking best when you can interact with others. Too much time on paperwork can be draining for extraverted principals.

However, there are also reflective leader roles—pulling back before making decisions and reflecting to learn from past positive and negative results. If you prefer introversion, the reflective leader roles put you at your best. Ideally, you have the time to step back and ponder information and ideas before sharing your thoughts. Too many interruptions and meetings can be draining for introverted principals.

Which role describes how you are

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energized? That self-knowledge can help you plan your days in ways that keep your demanding job from completely draining you. Then, consider how a leadership team might help you balance the interactive and reflective principal roles. Introverted team members might help an extraverted principal set aside staff time for reflection on progress toward school goals. Extraverted team members might help an introverted principal stay aware of the pulse of the school—what students are saying, what is happening in the hallways, how the community reacts to news about the school, and so on.

What Information Captures Your Attention?

The second pair of preferences, sensing and intuition, describe the information that first draws our attention. Think about all of the day-to-day managerial tasks demanded of you, what we call the administrative leader roles. Those with a preference for sensing first pay attention to information the five senses can gather. They’re good at details, learning from experience, and putting structures into place. Therefore, roles such as maintaining school focus and monitoring strategy implementation play to their strengths.

The visionary leader roles, such as acting as a change agent and optimizer, call on very different strengths. They naturally appeal to intuitive types who prefer to focus on the big picture, the future, and working to change rather than maintain the status quo. Beth prefers intuition. Her staff jokes that she returns from each conference she attends with a dozen new ideas for teachers to implement. She asks other members of her leadership team to take on the sensing role to evaluate whether a new idea fits with the school focus and, if so, help Beth plan the who, what, where, and how of training, implementation, and follow-through.

How Do You Make Decisions?

An individual’s preference for thinking or feeling influences his or her decision-making style. While all principals need to be instructional leaders, thinking principals often naturally gravitate toward gaining extensive knowledge of curriculum and instruction, aligning curriculum and standards, and using data, assessment and testing effectively—the systemic instructional leader roles. Feeling principals are better described as community instructional leaders, emphasizing building teams and community, focusing on qualitative information such as student motivation or engagement, and recognizing accomplishments of both students and staff. Again, with more than 80 percent of principals preferring thinking, the thinking roles seem to be overemphasized in the literature on effective principalship roles.

There is nothing wishy-washy about the feeling approach to instructional...
leadership. Both styles focus on what is needed so that all students can learn. While thinking leaders focus on objective data, feeling leaders focus on the bottom line of whether students are learning—both sets of roles have a direct impact on student achievement.

Further, Jane is often hired by principals whose staffs just “aren’t getting the message,” or so the principal thinks. In nearly every case, the principal’s personality type is opposite the majority of the staff’s. This isn’t surprising because, according to the Atlas of Type Tables, 70 percent of principals prefer thinking and judging, for example, while only 27 percent of teachers do.

If you prefer thinking, your leadership team can help you think through possible courses of action in terms of how individuals on your staff may react. At one school where Jane consulted, the thinking principal missed several primary grade team meetings because she believed the staff was competent enough to work on their own. Most of the team members preferred feeling. When Jane interviewed them, she discovered that the team interpreted the principal’s absence as disinterest. “She doesn’t think it takes talent to teach 6- and 7-year-olds,” they said. The principal quickly increased her visibility and worked to correct the misunderstanding.

How Do You Approach Planning and Implementation?

To what extent do you enjoy planning, whether for short-term or long-term goals? Those who prefer judging approach life through planning, emphasizing closure. Judging principals often thrive on establishing goals and maintaining school focus. The Atlas of Type Tables indicates that more than 85 percent of school principals prefer judging.

As a school leader, you need to engage the planning role to set concrete goals that bring about major change. However, other responsibilities, such as monitoring progress and evaluating data, point to a need to stay open to new information and make midstream corrections no matter what the school improvement plan calls for. The perceiving preference for approaching life spontaneously, emphasizing staying open to more information, adds key flexible leader roles.

Whatever your preference, partnering with your opposite makes it easier to make sure the best of both preferences informs your school. Set the plan and get on with implementing while monitoring to see if student achievement improves; if not, modify.

You can use personality type as a model to pinpoint your strengths and blind spots. All types can be great school leaders. Successful leaders, however, use knowledge of their personality types to continue to grow and develop even as they seek to partner with others who have complementary strengths so that all leadership roles are adequately covered.

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WEB RESOURCES

Personality Pathways offers a variety of articles about personality types and their applications.

www.personalitypathways.com

This Web site about psychological type is based primarily upon the works of Carl G. Jung, pioneer psychologist, and of Isabel Briggs Myers, creator of the Myers-Briggs Type.

www.personalitypage.com