

# Instructional Leader? Not Me

The requirements of serving as a mentor to less experienced principals and my facilitating educational leadership classes at a local university have resulted in the need to analyze what I do and how I do what I do within my school. My mentees and college-level students, all of whom are teachers seeking to become administrators, have asked about instructional leadership and how to best attain the role of a school's instructional leader. Their inquiries are not surprising since there isn't a piece of educational literature that does not ascend the school principal to the position of instructional leader and there will not be an interview that aspiring principals will have that will not ask them to describe themselves as the instructional leader of a school.

## Never Was, Never Should Have Been

The school I have been honored to lead for the past 27 years as principal has won both state and national honors for excellence, and our standardized assessment scores in English/language arts, math, science, and social studies are extremely high. Having established that as a baseline, I am the first to admit, and proudly, that I am not the instructional leader of the school. I never have been nor will I ever be that person. I am, plain and simply, the instructional manager.

Creating a cadre of outstanding teachers who understand how kids learn best produces, in my opinion and practice, the school's instructional leaders. Extraordinary teachers creating and sharing best practices within an ethos created by the building principal provides those closest to the students with decision-making abilities about curriculum content and sequencing as well as the implementation of best practices. These are the people who advise this instructional manager of necessary instructional changes. I functionally realize that not everyone can be or should be an instructional leader and I, as the instructional manager, recognize and embrace this parameter.

## Managerial Questions

To follow this hypothesis does not mean the abandonment of my role as leader. A leader must be visible in classrooms, observing lessons and how those

lessons engage students—not necessarily just watching teachers teaching. I find myself looking at students and their outcomes first and I am influenced by those outcomes. A leader asks questions using words such as why, when, what, and how. These inquisitive words are foundational to management decisions and serve to probe when they are part of questions such as: Why are we teaching this? When is the best time to teach this? What are the best methodologies to present this information? What should our assessments look like?

The first and foundational component of the principles of instructional management is trust. I want my teachers sharing more than a common coffee pot in the faculty lounge. When teachers know that they drive instruction, there is a mind-set of establishing the important work that needs to be accomplished. And because the work is teacher-derived, child-centered, and outcomes-driven, it makes teachers feel great about what they are accomplishing. The wheel is then perpetually turning under your guidance and management. They trust me to support their needs and I trust them to be on the front lines and to know, develop, and successfully implement what works best.

## My Role

Having the discipline and courage to cull out those teachers who are not performing well prior to granting tenure creates a comfort zone for me and

enthusiastically allows me to hand over the reins of real instructional leadership. Outstanding teachers want other outstanding teachers teaching in their school, on their grade level, in their department, and in the classroom next to them. There is only one reason for a poor quality teacher: a poor quality principal who hired and subsequently maintains that teacher. That is my job and, yes, it is a managerial function. I also know it provides a sense of stability for the faculty. My teachers know I do not insist that we hop onto every trendy, pedagogical bandwagon that heads down the education highway. They know I turn to them, as instructional leaders, for advice, counsel, and direction at those times.

I am in classrooms daily. However, the last time I was in a classroom teaching for an entire school year was more than 28 years ago. How could I possibly be the instructional leader when I have not been in the trenches for 28 years? I have charted our course and manage the day-to-day functioning via the feedback from those who have contact with students every day. When teachers see their principal as recognizing and valuing their skills and input toward the betterment of the students and the school at large, it creates an environment where the management-leadership role becomes secondary to the final result. I have many instructional leaders within the school and only one instructional manager—and it works! 

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## HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT

The author, a veteran principal, purposefully leaves instructional leadership in the hands of his teachers to allow those "in the trenches" to have decision-making abilities about curriculum content. Do you agree with this concept? Share your thoughts on the Principals' Office at <http://naesp.typepad.com> (click on "Speaking Out").

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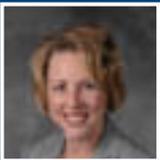
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