



Synergy and Straight Talk

Tools to build an honest, interdependent relationship that maximizes the capabilities of principals and superintendents.

**By Brian Bullis, John Filippi,
and Michael Lubelfeld**

The importance of a positive superintendent-principal relationship cannot be overstated. That is in part because the impact of a principal on K-12 student performance is second only to the impact of the classroom teacher. In most systems, the superintendent is the direct supervisor of the principal and holds the key to maximizing his or her potential. Similarly, the performance of the principal can be a significant factor in the ability of the superintendent to carry out a vision and maximize impact and effectiveness in the district.

Interdependence of principals and superintendents speaks to the leadership concept of “managing up.” Managing up is two-way—it is about the interdependence that is foundational to effective superintendent/principal relationships. Such an approach helps to maximize the effectiveness of both parties, helping to identify strengths to be emphasized and opportunities for growth to be seized.

In our Deerfield Public School District 109 (Illinois), there is synergy between the superintendent and the principals. This runs counter to how many superintendent-principal relationships unfold, as a relationship based







relationship begins with a norm of transparency. Principals and the superintendent must be willing to share their successes and failures openly, and both must view success and failure through a lens of joint ownership. Our experience begins with lifting the shroud on performance data. Each survey, assessment, and other performance metric—whether unique to an individual administrator, school, or the district—is shared publicly with one another. We see performance clearly, we own the good and the bad, and we encourage each other to learn from others' success and failure.

In our experiences and leadership journeys, we are discovering that this type of open sharing is not typical of school organizations. The majority of administrators arrived in their positions via roles in the classroom or from leadership in district committees. While we hope the experience for teachers around the nation is beginning to change, our experiences were defined by a lack of opportunity to provide and receive critical feedback from peers.

Make no mistake—building such a culture between principals and the superintendent can at times feel quite vulnerable. Engaging in such sharing requires courage. But the honest review of feedback leads to a truth that benefits all parties.

One way we established this culture was through formal exercises with a third party who facilitated the Leadership Practices

Inventory (modeled from James Kouzes' and Barry Z. Posner's seminal work, *The Leadership Challenge*).

The Leadership Practices Inventory offered an opportunity for 360-degree feedback for principals and the superintendent. At a leadership retreat, the principals and superintendent shared with one another their perceived strengths, weaknesses, areas for improvement, and individual reactions to this data. This open and honest sharing built the foundation of trust needed to continue on a path of interdependence.

Behavior 2: "Vision" Together. A second behavior that promotes mutual dependence is developing a vision together. Vision, in short, defines where the organization wants to go, in both the short and long term. Not surprisingly, when the

on the organizational model of command and control. Conventional wisdom may hold that the superintendent is the "boss" or the "chief," and that his or her word supersedes all others. However, in our experience, an interdependent relationship between the principal and the superintendent is a superior approach. In short, our relationship has encouraged two-way dialogue and opportunities for principals to "manage up" to maximize organizational performance.

Your boss needs your help and cooperation to do his or her job effectively, and you need your boss' support and guidance in doing your job effectively.

Three Key Behaviors

The University of California, Berkeley, career development website explains that managing up is important "because you and your boss are *mutually dependent* on one another. Your boss needs your help and cooperation to do his or her job effectively, and you need your boss' support and guidance in doing your job effectively." We submit that three behaviors define a successful "managing up" interdependence. The behaviors include being vulnerable with one another, developing a vision together, and collaboratively managing time.

Behavior 1: Be Vulnerable With One Another. An interdependent superintendent-principal



REFLECT ON THIS

"If each of us hires people who are smaller than we are, we shall become a company of dwarfs. But if each of us hires people who are bigger than we are, we shall become a company of giants."
—David Ogilvy

superintendent and principal share different visions for their leadership, a tension is created that diminishes the effectiveness of both parties. Rather, superintendents and principals should strive to achieve synergy in their vision for leadership. Achieving such synergy is less complicated than one might think. It involves something simple: straight talk.

To us, “straight talk” means that we react honestly to each other’s direction, leadership, and behavior. In a straight talk relationship, the superintendent receives a critical response from his or her principals. For example, if the superintendent thinks an idea, product, or method is fantastic and is all jazzed up returning from a conference, the principals share honest reactions—not just “Yes” or “Sounds great.” In such relationships, “parking lot talk” or the “meeting after the meeting” is avoided. Through honest and respectful dialogue, all parties are able to leverage their strengths and complement each other’s leadership.

A straight talk relationship also assumes that the organization functions without micromanagement. The superintendent must empower principals to have a high level of autonomy in making a range of leadership decisions, including budgetary, instructional, and personnel matters. However, the superintendent and principal should have open dialogue about critical decision-making. When the superintendent and principals make difficult decisions, both sides should approach the issue from a place of mutual support and dialogue. When principals and superintendents make decisions based on feedback from one another, the chance for district success is maximized.

Behavior 3: Manage Time Collaboratively.

A final behavior that supports an interdependent superintendent-principal relationship is collective time management. The demands placed on the time of superintendents and principals are significant. Taking steps to understand how the superintendent and principal prefer to manage their time is a critical step toward an interdependent relationship. Principals and the superintendent must understand one another’s work patterns, and they must work to honor those work patterns. Respecting the ad hoc engagement between both superintendent and

The superintendent must empower principals to have a high level of autonomy in making a range of leadership decisions, including budgetary, instructional, and personnel matters.


principal serves to maximize leaders’ time at school and away from the office.

However, understanding the work patterns of leadership peers is not enough. Principals and superintendents also must work to establish structured engagement to advance their performance. Both sides work to schedule collaboration through meetings focused on various critical areas, such as curriculum development, budgeting, and

community relations, which serves to maximize their time on critical tasks. Also, planning structured performance coaching conversations helps to ensure the superintendent-principal relationship advances in a focused and meaningful way.

A Return on Investment

Great schools require well-prepared and well-supported principals. In Deerfield Public Schools District 109, the leadership focus on principal support using high-leverage tools such as coaching, training, shared leadership, and family focus is paying off. All metrics, including student achievement, staff culture, student engagement, and stakeholder climate point “north.” The focus on leadership at the school level is giving the community a strong return on its investment.

The demands placed on superintendents and principals continue to intensify as the era of accountability in schools transforms with the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act. While these demands might press many superintendents to double down on a “command and control” style of leadership, we suggest superintendents and principals strive to achieve synergy. Practicing vulnerability, visioning together, and managing time collaboratively will serve to maximize collective efficacy. 

Brian Bullis is principal of Charles J. Caruso Middle School in Deerfield, Illinois.

John Filippi is principal of Alan B. Shepard Middle School in Deerfield, Illinois.

Michael Lubelfeld is superintendent of schools in Deerfield Public Schools District 109.



REFLECT ON THIS

“Managing is like holding a dove in your hand. Squeeze too hard and you kill it, not hard enough and it flies away.”
— Tommy Lasorda