

ON-DEMAND PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT SERIES



EPISODE 9

Building Capacity in Aspiring Principals



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We know that, of all the factors that contribute to student success, the quality of school leadership (principals and assistant principals) is second only to the quality of teaching (Fink, 2012). From the Wallace Foundation's 2021 Research Report: *How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research*: "An effective principal's impact is stronger and broader than previously thought, making it "difficult to envision" a higher return on investment in K-12 education than the cultivation of high-quality school leadership, according to this research synthesis. (Egalite, A.J., Grissom, J.A., and Lindsay, C.A., 2021)

TEN SKILLSETS FOR TODAY'S ASPIRING CTE PRINCIPALS:

Self-knowledge

The foundational prerequisite for all leadership effectiveness is self-knowledge. It seems that leaders who first take the time to understand themselves are better able to understand others and lead them effectively. Of all the traits that quickly come to mind when one imagines a particularly successful leader... courage, vision, commitment, integrity, service- rarely do we place on the A list the trait of honest self-awareness. The degree to which a leader knows well both self and others is the degree to which the leader can design and act for success- both personal and organizational.

"*Know Thyself*" is an ancient bit of wisdom claimed by many traditions. This famous Greek maxim is attributed to any number of ancient Greek philosophers, including Socrates.



More recently, Daniel Goleman, in his best seller *Emotional Intelligence*, maintains that the first and foundational tenet of emotional intelligence is self-awareness (Goleman, 1995).

In his book, *Frames of Mind*, Howard Gardner identifies intelligence as having multiple measures including both interpersonal and intrapersonal components (Gardner, 1983).

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, in his book *FLOW, The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, shows that people with exceptional personal awareness report being much happier and satisfied with their life and work (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

In their work *Heart, Smarts, Guts, and Luck* (Tjan, Harrington, and Hsieh, 2012) Tjan states "In my experience, and in the research my co-authors and I did for our book, Heart, Smarts, Guts, and Luck — there is one quality that trumps all, evident in virtually every great entrepreneur, manager, and leader. That quality is self-awareness. The best thing leaders can do to improve their effectiveness is to become more aware of what motivates them and their decision-making."

Time & Life Management

School administration is a demanding career. It is also a career where, because of the steep and long learning curve, success and longevity are linked. It is difficult to be a successful school administrator with little experience. And, it's difficult to gain that experience in a job that, because of its demanding nature, fosters short careers (Viadero, 2009).

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A common attribute of the most successful education leaders is the depth and breadth of their success. They have discovered how to extend their professional effectiveness into other important life dimensions as well... the physical, social/emotional, and spiritual domains.

Most popular literature and common-sense advice suggest that busy administrators should seek a balance among the competing demands of life. The conventional wisdom is that there are only 24 hours in each day and one should allocate time and attention to work, self, home, recreation, rest, etc. on a daily or weekly basis. A corollary of this theme is the suggestion that we should keep the various dimensions of life separate as in “don’t bring your work home with you” or “keep your personal issues out of the workplace.”

More successful administrators understand and apply the concepts of balance and separation, but they also understand the underlying issues with greater nuance and insight. Experiences from their own lives and others’ have proven that success is not a zero-sum equation, a finite pie with just so many pieces to go around. Often, they’ve witnessed, the more pie one eats, the more abundant the pie becomes. They see the essential question as one of growth, rather than balance.

Change Agency

Change [cheynj] -verb: To make the form, nature, content, future course, etc. of something different from what it would be if left alone. (Dictionary.com). Navigation (nav-i-gey-shun’)- noun: The art and science of plotting, ascertaining, and directing the course of a vessel toward a chosen destination (Dictionary.com).

A seaworthy leadership metaphor... In nautical terms, the officers and crew of seagoing vessels have the ability to choose a destination for a voyage that is different from where the ship might naturally drift. Then, the officers use all means available- sails, rudder, the stars, maps, GPS satellites... to move toward that chosen destination. This process is called navigation.

Navigation toward a chosen destination must be active. The sea is a changing environment and often unpredictable.



To reach the destination requires timely moves- changes in rudder, sail, and weight distribution keep the vessel on track through changing tides, winds, currents, and weather. Occasionally, when the sea is exceptionally turbulent, or thick with pirates, the best course is to change destinations, if only temporarily, in order to preserve the integrity of the ship and the lives of the crew.

Technically, the work of a leader and a sea captain have little in common. In two important ways, however, they are similar. Both careers are built on the premise that a collective of people can intentionally choose a destination and not merely drift about. And, both careers require the skill of active navigation. Successful change leaders do well to position the need for change as active navigation. Absent the understanding that change is the positive, proactive approach to arriving at one’s destination, it is easy, in fact natural, to view change as negative, external, and corrective. People are drawn to growth, learning, improvement, development, adaptation, and reinvention. These dimensions of change generate engagement and commitment.

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Shared Purpose and Coherent Effort

Almost everything of noteworthy beauty, utility, and performance is designed and built by teams of people, not brilliant individuals. From the beginnings of our species to the modern era, homo sapiens have thrived by skillfully working together. Humans quickly progressed from small hunter-gatherer bands to early agricultural villages, to tribes, to cities, to nation-states, and to multi-national corporations (Harari, 2014). As this is being written, the international space station (ISS) is orbiting approximately 250 miles overhead. The ISS is a scientific collaboration including astronauts and scientists from the US, Canada, Japan, Russia, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. It seems we were created to collaborate. It also seems that when we fail to work together, we can create widespread hardship and suffering through war, racism, prejudice, and corruption. Teams hold the promise for creating both *the best of times and the worst of times* (Inspiration from Charles Dickens, 1859: *A Tale of Two Cities*).



Today's leaders are called on to design and lead collaborative enterprises and to harness the power, creativity, and innovation available from high-performing teams.

Ethical Decision Making

Leaders make hundreds of decisions each day. Some are simple, some are complex, and some are seemingly impossible - all are important. If the sheer number of important decisions to be made were not challenging enough, leader decision making is made more complex by a number of cultural and contextual factors.

As education leaders consider the context of their own schools, it is apparent that communities and the schools that serve them are increasingly more diverse. In addition to demographic distinctions and implications, schools must also address a growing diversity of individual student needs. Expectations for the statistical performance of schools is higher and more visible. And, the political structures that govern and fund schools are increasingly polarized (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Since one of the fundamental purposes of public schooling is to prepare the citizenry to participate in a democratic society, it falls on schools to pattern decision making after democratic principles. School leaders, both students and adults, are not merely making management decisions, they are at the same time expected to model participative, democratic governance (Fullan, 2007). Leaders have, by virtue of their official position, a good deal of power over valuable, and often scarce, resources. Leaders routinely make decisions about things that impact the quality of other's lives - budgets, office assignments, committee responsibilities, supervision duties, etc. With power over resources comes a responsibility to exercise that power in an ethical and moral manner with both integrity and transparency. (Fullan, 2007, Strike, Haller & Soltis, 2005).

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Communication, Influence and Persuasion

“Certainly, a leader needs a clear vision, but a vision is of little value unless it is shared in a way so as to generate enthusiasm and commitment. Leadership and communication are inseparable.” Claude I. Taylor

Many of the most important aspects of an organization’s work require the skill and wisdom of diverse individuals and teams with varied skills and experiences. This type of work design holds at once great promise for high-performance and great probability for misunderstanding, misconception, misdirection, and unneeded conflict. Clear and effective communication is essential.

Culture, Climate, and Community

Each and every organization comes equipped with a strong, existing culture. This invisible, but powerful, force is the primary determiner of success for the organization’s improvement efforts (Fullan, 2007). It is an unfortunate twist that many leaders and managers are selected for their positions based on their abilities to produce tangible, structural results; designing a schedule, supervising employees, or balancing a budget. However, beginning on day one of the job as leader, the primary factor for success is no longer tangible (Cunningham & Cresso, 1993). It is the leader’s ability to understand, assess, and positively shape the intangible, but powerful, force that fuels or freezes an organization’s improvement efforts- organizational culture.

The culture of an organization plays an essential role in improving performance. Positive culture can infuse work with meaning, passion, and purpose (Deal & Peterson, 1999). A positive school culture is associated with more rapid and lasting school improvement, higher teacher motivation, greater teacher collaboration, more application of professional development skills, reduced absenteeism, and higher levels of adult and student learning (Hofsteade, 2005; Fullan, 2007; Deal & Peterson, 2009).

Leadership Transitions & Succession Planning



In the education world spring and summer bring, in addition to showers, flowers, and vacations, an annual churn of leadership positions. Many districts and schools will enter the fall season with new superintendents, principals, and APs. It can be an exciting time of new possibilities and opportunities. All too often, however, the transition of leadership leaves the affected organization in a state of uncertainty and turmoil that negatively affects the work of adults and the outcomes for students. It is sometimes the case that for months prior to, and after a leadership transition, the affected organization is distracted from its core business

and pours much energy into posturing, politicking, and predicting- all to the considerable detriment of teaching and learning. With skillful succession planning and adept transition management, leadership transitions need not result in a period of poor productivity. On the contrary, leadership transitions

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can offer a semi-regular opportunity for a school or district to be reminded of its enduring values, to recommit to its responsibility to evolve and adapt, and to recognize that the purpose of the organization is infinitely more important than the personality of any individual contributor.

THREE FOUNDATIONAL THOUGHTS THAT SUPPORT HEALTHY LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS:

1. In consistently and sustainably successful organizations, leadership is seen as a function, not a person. Every school's and district's fortunes rise and fall on the function of leadership, not only on the contributions of specific leaders. Just as individual leaders can be developed, the function of leadership can be developed within every organization.
2. Leadership is a set of learnable skills. Mostly, leaders are made, not born. Since leadership is a function of a strong life, school, or district, it is instructive to remember that, as a function, leadership is best understood as a set of skills that can be learned and applied by all.
3. The truest test of a leader's service to the organization is found in the performance of the organization after the leader departs.

Clear and Compelling Direction

Perhaps the first and most important attribute of successful leadership is the establishment, for self and others, of clear and compelling direction. The vocabulary list for this concept is well known...mission statements, vision casting, core values identification, goal setting, coherence of effort, teamwork, and shared commitment to a common future.

Successful leaders often define this task by defining and attacking its enemy... fuzzy purpose. Organizational psychologists suggest that 70% of interpersonal conflict in the workplace is not the result of employees' poor interpersonal skills, but rather of unclear direction. Fuzzy purpose leads to a perpetual low performance state called *psychic entropy* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Entropy is a scientific term that refers to the degree of disorganization or randomness in a system. Psychic entropy, then, is the degree of disorganization of thought and intention in a person or a group.

The effects of fuzzy purpose on individuals and groups are well known:

- Low energy
- Petty, interpersonal conflict
- Poor teamwork
- Lack of persistence and follow-through

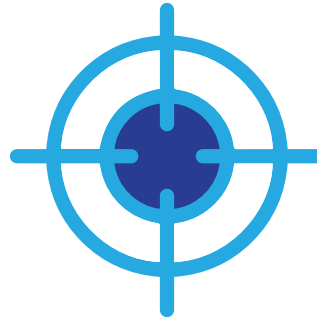
The antidote for fuzzy purpose and its symptoms is clear, compelling direction. Clear direction requires one and/or one's organization to be able to precisely describe a desired future state. "*Heading west*" is a fuzzy future state. "*San Francisco by next Tuesday*" is clearer. Direction must not only be clear, but also compelling. The desired future state should be infused with meaning, importance, and inspiration. "Feeding hungry children" is more compelling than "*selling protein bars*." A chosen direction is more compelling when it touches the heart as well as the mind. "*The foundation of every great team is a direction that energizes, orients, and engages its members.*" (Haas & Mortensen, 2016).

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The effects of clear, compelling direction on individuals and groups are also well known:

- High energy
- Graceful interactions with others
- Teamwork and collaboration
- Focus and persistence



Instructional Leadership:

Stephen Fink in his study *School and District Leaders as Instructional Experts: What We Are Learning* (2012) noted that “The quality of teaching is the most important variable improving their instructional practice.”

An administrator’s first essential step toward improving teaching is her ability to see, notice, and observe; in other words, to recognize excellent teaching. Dictionary.com provides these definitions of recognize: rek-uh g-nahyz (verb)

1. to identify as something or someone previously seen or known
2. to identify from knowledge of appearance or characteristics
3. to perceive as existing or true

When school leaders recognize excellent instruction, they are not seeing it for the first time. Rather, they are identifying episodes of excellent teaching by comparing them to what they have seen, learned, and experienced before. The act of recognizing, then, involves two parts. First the observer must have acquired and organized a knowledge/experience base that can be quickly and accurately accessed. Then, the observer must have the processing ability to interpret, in real time, what is being observed in light of the observer’s knowledge base. That’s Step 1: Acquire and organize a knowledge base about instruction; then Step 2: Use the knowledge base to filter current reality for what’s most important toward improvement.

For CTE administrators, the logic model is solid:

- A. Instructional quality is the prime mover of student achievement.
- B. Skillful administrators can learn to recognize patterns of excellent instruction.
- C. Adult learners can learn, grow, and develop substantially.
- D. Teachers apply new skills best when skillful feedback and coaching is employed.
- E. Administrators can improve their feedback and coaching skills through practice

Access to the entire KACTE/KDE On-demand Principal Leadership Development Series is available at: www.kyacte.org and www.education.ky.gov/CTE

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