

Strategies for Effective School Leadership

Issues regarding leadership have been investigated from time to time and a number of theories and models have been put forward on the topic. I submit that effective leadership cannot evolve only by reading the numerous publications on the topic or simply attending seminars or workshops in an emotionally charged auditorium. The principles and concepts gained from external stimuli have to be internalized and placed into action by the respective leaders operating in their specific environment. Leaders are not endowed with a magic wand on the day of their appointment. There is no instant fix where leadership is concerned and leaders have to be willing to set aside their pride and haughty attitudes, and recognize that leadership is more than being a 'big boss' or arrogant commander in chief. Leadership is principally a 'facilitatory' function. It is the act of motivating and empowering the team as you go through the trenches with them.

In my experience over the last thirty years I have found that the best run schools were schools in which leaders assumed the role as facilitators and embraced all staff, professional and ancillary, as partners in achieving a common goal. Charlette Danielson in her book *Teacher Leadership That Strengthens Professional Practice*, indicates that the essential focus of the teacher leader is student learning and leaders should never lose focus of their purpose. Every effort should be made to create an environment free of unnecessary tension, and there is freedom to provide enriching learning experiences for students. I have observed that schools where administrators take the lead in focusing energies on assisting staff and students to develop to their full potential, there is air of expectancy and success. In this type of environment absenteeism is low for both students and teachers.

Every school or organization will experience challenges from time to time and each leader should have the resilience necessary to take the team through the storm. Jerry L. Patterson and Paul Kelleher writing in the book *Resilient School Leaders*, define resilience as using one's energy productively to emerge from adversity stronger than before. Patterson and Kelleher relate resilience to the 'realistic optimist' - one who is not surprised easily as he/she has already come to terms with the reality that disruptions will happen. Effective leaders in schools prepare the staff and students for possible surprises or challenges. This is especially difficult when the particular event is not known but I support Patterson and Kelleher that leaders should build in expectations of surprises, and use whatever events that occur as opportunities for learning and growth.

In order to build an effective school the leader has to exhibit some degree of optimism and enthusiasm. The bottom line should be that any situation could improve. Kelleher believes that effective teacher leaders are able to look on the bright side of things. As a former classroom teacher I support the view that teacher leaders should take an optimistic view of life and develop the ability to steer events into positive directions. Kelleher sees it as attributing positive motives when interpreting the actions of others. We both share a common opinion that being naïve can be a danger but being cynical is worst in a leader especially if it means always doubting the motives of his/her staff.

As a leader I constantly try to determine before hand what can become an irritant for members of staff and seek to defuse any possible negative situation. Recently we called in contractors to place a security gate at the entrance to our printing area. Officers located in that area were informed but on realizing that the unfinished construction was not working effectively I contacted the officer who would be most affected by the malfunction. I alerted her about the problem before she turned up for work. This would have prepared her to face the situation when she returned to work. Some leaders will see this as a non- issue but it is amazing how most situations that have led to disharmony in schools and the general work force had its genesis in what seemed to be non-issues or simple matters.

John C. Maxwell, an esteemed writer and conference presenter on leadership matters, wrote on the importance of trust in leadership. In his book, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, Maxwell (1998) states:

Trust is the foundation of leadership. To build trust, a leader must exemplify these qualities: competence, connection, and character. People will forgive occasional mistakes based on ability; especially if they see that you're still growing as a leader. But they won't trust someone who has slips in character. In that area, even occasional lapses are lethal. (p 58)

I am sure many school administrators can identify with this proclamation. To have an effective school, teachers need to know that they can trust administration. Leadership must not only make eloquent speeches on fairness, transparency and confidentiality but the staff must see it exhibited by the leader. It is a case where the actions speak much louder than the words.

Leaders that are not trusted have much more work to do to win their staff. It is not done by traditional tactics of embarrassing the staff publicly or 'pulling rank'. This only exacerbates the situation. This condescending behavior results in tension, which usually has a negative ripple effect on students. This type of environment retards maximum efficiency and inevitably impacts learning. John Maxwell (1998) wrote, "Your people know when you make mistakes. The real question is whether you're going to 'fess up. If you do, you can often quickly regain their trust."

In my years as a teacher and administrator I have found that an important component of effective and successful leadership is *sacrifice*. Leaders have to be prepared to give up time and sometimes even finance in order to reap the success that is desired in the school. John Maxwell (1998) indicated that "successful leaders have to maintain an attitude of sacrifice in order to turn around an organization. They have to be willing to do what it takes to go to the next level". (p 186)

Sometimes in order to build an effective school administrators have to be a change agent. Some of our schools have been operating with principles and traditions that have been there for a number of years. When questioned on certain practices administrators in several cases can only say that they inherited the procedures and just continued to use

them. In this age of innovation and technology integration, leaders have to be willing to take the risk of taking their schools 'out of the box' into new levels of teaching and learning. Robert Marzano (2005), writing in the book *School Leadership That Works*, states:

It is not uncommon for a school to keep certain practices in place and unchallenged for years and even decades simply because of their historical status. In contrast, the responsibility of change agent refers to the leader's disposition to change the status quo. (p 44)

I must caution that leaders should ensure that any innovations they want to implement are well thought out and presented to the relevant school board and the staff. Leaders therefore should not only be innovative but they have to develop the skill of selling the idea or innovation.

In order for leaders to prepare fertile ground for their innovations to spring forth they have to stimulate their staff intellectually. Morzano (2005) stated that "Intellectual stimulation refers to the extent to which the school leader ensures that faculty and staff is aware of the most current theories and practices regarding effective schooling."

Leadership in an effective school environment will not be complete without special emphasis on aspects of classroom management, which is the foundation of effective teaching. I have also realized that it is not only vital to have appropriate curriculum design but the leadership must monitor the implementation process. Leadership has to develop or secure the criteria and lead the process with zest and enthusiasm.

Any effective leader needs an effective team to work with. Leadership is not a 'lone ranger' process. Marzano (2005) believes that a strong leadership team is the natural outgrowth of a purposeful community. I support this view and would add that effective leadership must have some influence. In spite of the excellent résumé with all the degrees and no influence a leader would not excel. Maxwell (1998) promotes the thought of Stanley Huffy states "It's not the position that makes the leader; it's the leader that makes the position." A leader who can influence his team positively is well on the way to creating the change necessary in a technology enriched environment.

Obviously the key to any growth in any organization is leadership. In the school setting when momentum is developed the school can achieve success after success. I have seen schools transformed in just a year after the change of leadership. In one case a school that was considered of no significance, with poor student attendance and low test scores was transformed in a few months. The new leader inspired confidence; she was open to new ideas. Most of all she included all staff (including non-academic) in the process of trying to influence change. The management team then inspired students to believe in themselves.

Gradually the change in teacher and student behavior became evident to all. It took several months but the new principal understood that change could not be rushed. This principal understood what Maxwell called the *law of influence* and utilized it to the max

with resounding success. Our students deserve the best that we can offer them. Building an effective school starts with effective leadership. We are duty bound to.