

The 10 “Don’ts” of Successful School Site Leadership

The Miami-Dade County School System and I had a varied and exciting relationship for forty-one years ending with my recent retirement as a middle school principal. Although I was a teacher and counselor, more than half of my career was spent as a school site administrator in well over a dozen schools, including the year I was selected the county’s Principal of the Year.

As I look back on my role as a school leader, and as I analyze my observations of other administrators as well as feed back from staff and faculty members, I feel that I am in a position to identify those areas which prevent so many administrators from creating truly successful schools.

#1 Low Visibility

This is such a crucial area. If administrators would only realize how important it is to be seen— to be visible to teachers, parents, and students daily, they would be well on their way to running a successful school. Many years ago I came across a book called School Management by Wandering Around by Frase & Hetzel (Technomic, 1990) in which is pointed out that principals spend more time off campus or in their office than they do in classrooms, yet, the most effective administrating is done by “wandering around”. What a wonderful strategy for the school’s administrators to be seen in front of their schools when students are arriving and departing each day. Parents who may be dropping off and picking up their children receive much comfort from this simple act of visibility. In addition, students are easily supervised and become accustomed to knowing that administrators are always near by.

Classroom “walk-throughs” are a most productive procedure as the administrator can see and be seen on a regular basis. All that this entails is setting aside perhaps an hour a day to pass in and out of as many classrooms as possible for just a few minutes each. Much can be learned about the level of learning going on in a given classroom while at the same time letting teachers and students know you care. Often what is viewed by the administrator can be used for follow up conversations with teachers and students. How disheartening it is to hear a teacher say “my principal has never seen what I do” or for a student to say “I never see my principal”.

Visibility in the hallways when there is student movement and visibility in the cafeteria when students are eating provide a wonderful opportunity to observe students in a less controlled situation and to make determinations about student behavior. I always found that my “cafeteria duty” was a great way to “eyeball” all of my students, to interact with them, and to hear their concerns and questions. In addition, teachers always knew they could find me there if they needed a question answered. Remember we are in this business to be a “people person” rather than a “paper pusher”.

#2 Desk/Office Fixation

Closely related to “low visibility” but an issue unto itself is the problem of seemingly being unable to leave your office because of mail to read, phone calls to answer, reports to complete, and conferences to be held. There is no doubt that there are more reasons to be tied to a desk today than there were say a decade ago. Not only does the principal have school mail and postal mail to go through but now has the added burden of email which can come on a continual basis from all levels up and down the stakeholder and bureaucratic ladder.

However important the above issues may be, we must realize that they are not the things that will create a successful school with a positive culture resulting in increased student achievement. Once again may I remind you that this is a people business and our focus must be on teachers and students rather than on paper, the computer screen, and administrivia. Save the desk work for those times when teachers and students are not in the building. Distribute as much of the administrivia among support staff as possible. Be creative in finding ways to handle and delegate those office related issues so that you can be free to be visible where your faculty and students are. And when you are in your office, cultivate an open door policy with open access to your faculty members. Teachers should feel comfortable to visit you in your office without finding a closed door nor the necessity of making an appointment to discuss an issue or idea with you.

#3 Lack of/Too much Delegation

Delegation is very much like walking a tight rope. Too much weight to either side is disastrous. We certainly can not do everything ourselves or we would not need support staff. Attempting to handle every administrative matter alone only leads to becoming overwhelmed and ineffective in the long run. On the other hand, giving it all away leads to a loss of awareness and a failure to have a “handle” on things. Remember to utilize the strengths of your support staff and to focus on their special talents and interests when delegating and assigning tasks. Monitor progress of designee’s assignments but do not micro-manage. Remember we are all professionals in the field of education. One more crucial issue in delegating is that of handling parental concerns. I have seen many principals become burned-out and ineffective due to spending most of the day dealing

with parental issues. Although parents may believe that they need to see the principal in order to resolve an issue, they are more than pleased to be treated professionally by an assistant principal or counselor who in many cases may be closer to the issue at hand.

#4 Programs over People

Curriculum programs are often imposed upon schools by central offices in an attempt to ensure that a broad range of academic and social issues are covered. Schools must often incorporate the current trend in reading, writing, and math, plus various social and cultural programs into their curriculum. We as administrators then become so caught up in the implementation of these mandated programs that we tend to overlook the human aspect of teacher needs and abilities. It is, after all, the teacher who is called upon to implement these programs and who is often looking to the administrator for support, understanding and compassion. There is an excellent guide for administrators entitled If You Don't Feed the Teachers, They Eat the Students by Neila A. Connors (Incentive Publications, 2000) which provides a constant reminder to remember who and what is truly important.

#5 Dictatorial/Egotistical Style

_____ Many administrators have thought that leadership means "I'm the leader, you're the follower" or "It's my way or the highway" or "if you don't like how things are run here - find another school". Hopefully we have all learned that successful schools, just like successful businesses, reach greater heights when they follow the principles of inclusion, empowerment, and teamwork. Once again we need to be reminded that we are all professionals in this business of education who have completed four or more years of college education and have chosen to become educators. We all want to be included and

involved and to have a say in what is happening. The successful school can only exist in an environment where everyone feels important and vital, and by everyone I mean faculty, staff, parents, and of course students, too.

#6 Lack of Praise and Recognition

We all appreciate and thrive on praise and recognition yet we so often neglect to hand it out when we have the opportunity. It is easy, in our busy worlds, to forget to give a compliment when it is deserved, to fail to recognize efforts of others when they have gone beyond what is required, or to lack appreciation for all the little things that people do to help things run smoothly.

High faculty morale coupled with a proud student body are key ingredients in increasing student achievement. Celebrating successes as a school family through acknowledging and recognizing positive aspects of the daily life is a sure road to a winning culture. An excellent book on this topic is Bringing Out the Best in Teachers by Blase & Kirby (Corwin Press, 2000).

#7 Criticizing and Discouraging

As has been said previously, staff morale, student pride, and an overall positive school culture are the necessary ingredients in creating the type of school which results in increased student achievement. Often, in our haste to accomplish all that is required of us as administrators, we find that we are inadvertently doing more criticizing and discouraging which will lead to a negative school climate. Finding fault in what others do, rather than merit, is deadly. Negating the ideas of our colleagues rather than trying to find some value in them is discouraging. Finally, “talking down” to teachers and even

students, is demeaning to them and discourages any feelings of inclusion and pride they may have.

The successful administrator must learn to be respectful and appreciative of the ideas of faculty members as well as fellow administrators. Let's face it, if our ideas are often negated we soon learn to refrain from participating or being part of a team. If our opinions are not respected we lose our sense of professionalism and soon become isolated. A school full of non-creative, non-thinking individuals, becomes a toxic culture where forward movement is impossible. It is the administrators job to see that inclusion and shared decision making is the norm. Look for the "can do" and not the "can't do". Be kind and understanding and appreciative.

#8 Focusing on Negatives

Negative thinking principals create negative schools. It is a fact that one's attitude is contagious. As the school leader it is most important to set the tone and to make sure your staff does not "catch" negativity from you as they might "catch a cold". Don't lose sight of the positive, don't get caught up in the what's wrong over what is right, don't fail to see the "bright side" and protect yourself from being caught up in conflicts.

Many times it takes training and re-focusing to look for the good in things. If something is negative try to "sandwich" it between two positives. Very often negatives fade away if the positives are allowed to come to the forefront. Even people who tend to think negatively will come around when in a group of enthusiastic and positive thinking individuals. And don't forget compliments. They go a long way in defeating negativity and we all like that "pat on the back" from time to time.

#9 Failure to Control Mood

Once again, as the school's leader, office tantrums, shouting at staff members and students, angry school wide P.A. announcements, and moody behavior will only create fear and confusion in others. A leader needs to be respected and certainly cannot be, if he or she is not in control of emotions. If "counting to ten" works for you then make it a part of your being. We all must practice being even tempered and consistent. People cannot function in an environment where they do not know what to expect from their leader on a day to day basis. Remember to treat everyone equally, no favorites and no special "pets". Everyone is entitled, as professionals, to the same treatment and favors as the next person. Keep in mind, lastly, that humor is a wonderful tool and appreciated by all. A leader with a sense of humor is able to see humor in most things and is usually not a moody, destructive type of person.

#10 Forgetting the Students

The last "don't" is certainly not least because it deals with the heart of what school is all about, and that is the students. Yet if we are caught up in the trap of some of the pitfalls previously mentioned we can easily forget about the students. Are we failing to personally recognize student achievement and accomplishments? Are we lacking the interest to attend student activities? Are we involved with student services issues?

Students, just like teachers, want their principal to recognize them. They want their principal to see them doing something good, whether in the classroom or in extra-curricula activities. A good administrator will make time to know students, to attend student activities, and to be where students are. School pride is built when the administrator recognizes and respects students as individuals.

Successful school leaders must turn the “10 Don’ts” into positive actions practiced on a daily basis. Remember the “don’ts” and avoid them like the plague. It is not an easy task and we fall into these traps often without realizing it. However, the rewards of positive actions on the part of the school leader are rich, meaningful and far-reaching.

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