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Maintaining Stability And History: The Traditionalist

Predictability and order are the benchmarks of a stable and controlled school environment. This perspective is central to a newly appointed principal's charge as she assumed the leadership position of a small elementary school. How does an inexperienced young principal provide strong leadership that continues a rich tradition? How does she introduce her own style while maintaining the accepted leadership approach of the former administrator? How does she gradually introduce change? What types of relationships must be developed that acknowledge past practices while introducing new ideas and approaches? These are some of the central issues identified in this interview with her.

Themes addressed in this chapter:

- Overcoming the leadership learning curve
- Starting up a school
- Keeping perspective
- Developing administrative support groups
- Accepting limited success

Profile of the Traditionalist

Principal: female

Age: 40+

Ethnicity: Asian

Experience: 1st-year principal; 1-year as intern assistant principal; 3 years related administrative experience; teacher, mentor

School: elementary; student population: 200

. . . I brought a certain kind of vision that attracted them, which was consistent with the principal who served before me. She had been here for a long time and had built up this school. She was here from the 2nd year it was built and the school is 19 years old. I believe the reason I was selected was because my vision was very similar to what she believed. So, in coming into this school, my priority was maintaining that vision, the same culture, the same kind of decision-making process.

I think they were very interested in what my beliefs were . . . my priorities are to remain true to what I had communicated to them in terms of my style and beliefs. I keep hearing that they liked what I said during the interview . . . they were impressed with that. I really want to maintain what is here in the school and also carve my own niche here and continue to move forward. It is a very successful school, in terms of the test scores and general reputation of the school. I want to continue what has been successful, stay true to my vision, and be in line with what came before.

I knew that this was going to be a little scary for me. As a result, most of my time has been trying to navigate to get the school started. I have spent so much time trying to get a secretary in place; even now it hasn't been resolved. How do I interview people, how to get personnel established, how to get teachers in place . . . how to set up the paraprofessionals.

Things like getting the bells to work after summer school was over. Well, we couldn't get them working again. I came to school the 1st day after a principal's meeting and the phones were dead. I had to go to another site to call to find out how to requisition for repairs. I spent so much time finding out what to do . . . and then doing it and following up on it to make sure it got done. The way central office appeared, from my perspective, seemed that everything was up in the air and a mess. You couldn't count on what one person told you because someone else would tell you something different. That's how I spent most of my time during the first 2 or 3 weeks I'd been here.

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School Context

Assuming a leadership position successfully must be approached by having a clear understanding of the complex needs of the school and community. This newly hired principal was mentored by the principal who was about to retire. It was a school that sought a leader who would continue the school traditions and exercise a leadership style similar to the previous principal. While it is important to establish one's individual decision-making strategies, it is also necessary to move at a pace and style sensitive to school needs and expectations. It takes time to first recognize and appreciate tradition and then deliberately and thoughtfully to initiate more individual goals for the future.

The principal in this small elementary school entered the position with limited administrative experience. She had a fairly clear sense of what her charge was and how she was going to achieve her goals, based upon her apprenticeship with the departing school principal. The school was extremely well-structured, predictable, had high student success, and was well supported by the community.

School Characteristics

The school consisted largely of Asian second-language learners: 65% Asian, 35% White. It was considered an alternative school, which required that parents apply to the school through a lottery system. There were approximately 250 students. It had a history of few disciplinary problems. Faculty and administration had a cooperative working relationship.

School Climate

The previous administrator involved the faculty in decision making but in a limited way. She had been the principal at the school for many years and had a very definitive approach and leadership style that was well-accepted by the faculty and community. She had strong connections with downtown.

School Organization

The school had one principal and no additional administrative support because of the limited number of students enrolled.

Interview

The following interview was conducted during her 1st week as principal.

Dubin:

Could you tell me about your educational background and administrative experience prior to assuming the principalship?

Principal:

I spent over 15 years as a classroom teacher in this and a neighboring district. After becoming involved in many district leadership positions and community activities, I decided to take a sabbatical and go back to graduate school to earn my preliminary administrative services credential and master's degree. Mind you, this was after 20 years that I decided to return to school and get my master's degree in educational administration. Before that, what got me interested in leadership and administration was my work with the mentor teachers program. Because I had been mentored by many teachers, I decided to get involved in the mentor teacher program and the BTSA program, a beginning teacher support association. I started to support new teachers and got involved in teacher-training activities. I was really interested in doing more of that, which is why I went into the leadership aspect of education.

After I received my master's, I entered an administrative internship program that the district had just established when I returned from my sabbatical. At that point I was at the end of my master's program and ready to do an internship and so I applied with the school district. They were establishing these positions to support elementary schools that had a student population of over 500. In lieu of the district giving them assistant principals, they wanted to establish an internship program in order to give the school more support. I spent last year at one of the elementary schools in the district, as an administrative intern.

In that capacity I had a great deal of opportunity to work with parents and more students, in general, outside the classroom. I also did a lot of school-wide programs, that is, student council, conflict manager programs, and was more involved in that way. I was able to work with teachers, getting more experience with student success teams and IEPs (individual education plans). I was learning more about those kinds of processes.

My internship gave me a great deal of insight as to how a school runs and the dynamics involved. After that ended, I was actually ready to go back into the classroom because I wasn't sure if I wanted to continue in administration. I had to make some tough decisions. As it turned out, I was requested by the school district to interview for a principalship, and I did. Ultimately, I was chosen by the principal selection committee at the school, and that's where I am now. I was selected and offered the position.

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I decided to go ahead and pursue it, even though it wasn't my original intention. It's a good school, nice and small. It's got a good community and teachers. It was something I decided that I would try out to see if administration was something I wanted to continue. I'm a new administrator in this school.

Dubin:

Yes. Would you say that your year in the internship was well spent as a quasi assistant principal?

Principal:

Oh yes. It was definitely worthwhile. I really liked the fact that I was able to work with a principal who was nurturing and supportive. I didn't feel as isolated as you might feel if you were to go right into a principalship on your own. That allowed me to ease into that role a lot better. I was able to work and get advice from her. She was right there. She helped me tap into resources and people that I could talk to and learn from. In that way, it really helped me in the transition in moving into this role. Incidentally, I was actually called the assistant principal, and we worked really well as a partnership. She dealt with the bureaucratic aspects of running a school, while I was more able to work hands-on in the school program. It made it a good partnership. We supported each other. We each had our own different areas where we were involved. We also had different strengths. That gave me a good taste of working with many different communities and trying to pull them together and move the school forward.

As an intern, I was able to learn a lot about the nuts and bolts of administration. I was able to learn a good deal about the community at large and be able to multitask, that is, get involved in many areas, different kinds of activities at the same time. In a way, it was very hard, but I think it was a real learning experience for me and quite gratifying.

Dubin:

It sounds like an excellent opportunity to really get exposed to administration where you did make decisions in many respects but also had the safety net of someone who really had the ultimate responsibility.

Principal:

Yes. That's right. There was always somebody you could always look to, to take the lead. You don't always have the same perspective or you may not have the same opinion. But in many ways it is important to see how other

people react in certain situations and be able to step back and observe. You don't always have the opportunity or luxury to do that if you're in a school, running it by yourself. So in that way it was very good, and, as you pointed out, it was a safety net. Again, it was a partnership, and she was the final authority. She was the person who had the final approval, so you could always defer to her because she had the experience and knew how to react in a given situation. She had the knowledge and a certain kind of wisdom. You can use that experience and grow from that.

Dubin:

The opportunity for prospective administrators to have that extensive training experience as you've had is quite limited. This is something everyone would recommend to candidates considering administration.

Principal:

Unfortunately, there aren't as many opportunities.

Dubin:

Tell me a little about this school.

Principal:

Well, this is an alternative school. In other words, we don't necessarily draw from the neighborhood although many of our students live nearby. You need to apply and be selected in order to be enrolled in the school. During the enrollment period, they choose to come to the school. It's a very small school population relative to other urban schools. It's only about 250 students. It's not as diverse: 65% Asian, about 30 to 35% White, and the remaining number are a mixture of other ethnicities. We're very heavy in the Asian population. We don't have any bilingual programs; most of the classes are general education, although we have a high population of English language learners. We have 14 classrooms. We usually have two classes per grade level from K-3 grades. Then we have fourth and fifth grades. We have two special day classes, K-2 and K-3 and Grades 3 to 5. We have special day classes of severely impaired students, mostly two to six students, so it's a very specialized program for our special education children.

Dubin:

Is there an active parent group?

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Principal:

There's a very strong parent community here. There's a parent-teacher organization (PTO) rather than a PTA, so they don't have to pay national dues, although they pretty much operate autonomously. There is a core group of parents that run that organization. They're dedicated to the school and do a great deal of fund-raising. The money they raise goes to the enrichment programs for the school, so even though we're a small school, we have a lot of outside resources that come in, for example, consultants.

The students have a lot of opportunity to get involved and do things outside of the classroom. We have a music consultant who comes in and works with our kindergarten and up to our third-grade classes. We have members of the ballet who work with our third, fourth, and fifth grades. We do a lot of theater and dance. We have instrumental music. Now we're exploring the idea of bringing in consultants to support the PE program. We do have a lot of things happening in the school. We also have an art consultant who works with all the classes and provides them with studio art and various activities. So there's actually quite a lot that's going on in the school. Juggling all the people that come in and use the resources has been a challenge.

Dubin:

Yes, I'm sure. You said earlier on that the PTO generated a good deal of revenue through fund-raisers. Could you tell me a little more about that?

Principal:

Yes. The parent organization usually takes responsibility for the fund-raisers, as far as I know. They don't have a membership, that is, they don't charge membership dues, so everything they do, all their activities, all the money that they generate is through their fund-raising. The first thing they're doing right now and are planning to do is a direct appeal where they send out flyers to all families throughout the school, requesting that parents make direct donations. That's one way they raise money. They also have candy sales. Another big event that they have is a carnival, which I believe they will do in the fall this year. That carnival sets up games and attempts to enlist people in the community and neighborhood. In the spring they have a silent auction. They get donations from the community, and parents are involved in that as well, trying to get donations. I don't have a good feel yet as to how that works, but that's another way they raise money.

Dubin:

Well, I'm sure with time you will. This is a very unique time for you in your career. You're beginning as a principal and you're now concluding

your 2nd week. What would you say your priorities are for your school for this school year?

Principal:

My priorities. Well, I think that because I was selected by the school I brought a certain kind of vision that attracted them, which was consistent with the principal before me. She had been here for a long time and had built up this school. She was here from the 2nd year it was built, and the school is 19 years old. I believe the reason I was selected was because my vision was very similar to what she believed. So in coming into this school, my priority was maintaining that vision, the same culture, the same kind of decision-making process.

I think they were very interested in what my beliefs were. I think that my priorities are to remain true to what I had communicated to them in terms of my style and beliefs. I keep hearing that they liked what I said during the interview . . . they were impressed with that. I really want to maintain what is here in the school and also carve my own niche here and continue to move forward. It is a very successful school in terms of the test scores and the general reputation of the school. I want to continue what has been successful, stay true to my vision, and be in line with what came before.

Dubin:

So, in order words, continuity is one of the key priorities for you, to maintain what has been a highly functional, healthy, successful, and well-supported school. Over time, you would like to begin to identify areas that you could be more active; as you say, carve your own niche.

Principal:

Right.

Dubin:

How would you say you spend most of your time? Would it be report writing, or the management of the plant, or with personnel, budget and so forth? Where would you say you are devoting most of your time?

Principal:

Well, I would say that I am devoting most of my time trying to navigate through the bureaucracy in the school district. I had felt this when I came into the school; that is, the principal had retired and was unavailable and the secretary, who was the backbone of the school, transferred to another place.

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Dubin:

That makes it much more difficult.

Principal:

Yes. So I knew that this was going to be a little scary for me. As a result, most of my time has been trying to navigate to get the school started. I have spent so much time trying to get a secretary in place; even now it hasn't been resolved. How do I interview people, how to get personnel established, how to get teachers in place . . . how to set up the paraprofessionals. You see, last year the district began a new procedure called [the] weighted student formula so the schools could be more autonomous with their budgeting. The school would get more money directly and more decision making as to how to spend their money. With regard to the paraprofessionals, for example, trying to establish more positions and extend ours within the limitations of the budget was something I was unfamiliar with. When I came into this school, those were some of the things I really had to work on to make sure that those things were in place when school began. That's where I say I spend so much time, so I'm familiar with those kinds of processes. I needed to spend time on the phone, calling people, finding out who I'm supposed to talk to, what I'm supposed to do, what I'm supposed to submit and try to follow-up on. I did not anticipate that it would take me as long as it did.

Dubin:

That can be very frustrating, not being familiar with these new processes.

Principal:

Yes. Things like getting the bells to work after summer school was over. Well, we couldn't get them working again. I came to school the first day after a principal's meeting and the phones were dead. I had to go to another site to call to find out how to requisition for repairs. I spent so much time finding out what to do . . . and then doing it and following up on it to make sure it got done. The way central office appeared, from my perspective, it seemed that everything was up in the air and a mess. You couldn't count on what one person told you because someone else would tell you something different. That's how I spent most of my time during the first 2 or 3 weeks I'd been here.

Now that school's begun, much of that has been resolved. Of course, now there are other challenges which started coming in. Initially, most of the time was getting the school started, that is, getting people in place so that the school was ready. Personnel issues are a little bit more resolved, although I still don't have a secretary.

Dubin:

What is happening now?

Principal:

Now I have many more parents coming to me and talking about their needs and what happened in the past . . . what needs to be done to continue to move forward. The dynamics are starting to change now that school has opened. It was pretty intense before school started. I really wanted to quit the 1st day of school. The 1st days were so frustrating because I spent hours feeling so unproductive. There were many moments like that.

Dubin:

Obviously, this is a very rich time in your career to stop and reflect upon what is happening as you begin your administration. What would you say to a new administrator facing those things you've identified in your initial experiences?

Principal:

Well. Someone first assuming this position could be very frustrated unless you come into it with a state of mind that you will get through it a little at a time. You also have to keep your sense of humor. You have to have the fortitude and the will; you have to have both. If you don't come into it knowing that you need both, it can really get to you very, very quickly.

I think that that's what got me through it in the beginning. I came into it with a certain mindset; that whatever was going to happen I was going to get through it and keep moving. I wasn't going to let one thing or a group of things get me down. I don't know if this is advice that someone can take; it's more willful determination to be able to overcome these obstacles. I'm not sure that you can tell anyone that. I think it has to be a mindset. To put into words, to communicate verbally to someone else this need for a mindset seems trite or doesn't seem appropriate. It seems that it needs to come from within.

Dubin:

That is very important to each individual to explore whether or not they possess those inner feelings and strengths that you've described. Each prospective administrator must explore those insights before they are in that position.

Principal:

Even if you have the fortitude, you need to have the will to do it. You have to go into it knowing that this is something you want to do, or you're

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determined to do, or at least try. I don't know if that can be taught to anyone.

Dubin:

As you've suggested, these inner strengths are realized in a different way from person to person, but listening to you reflect is a very powerful message that everyone can get something out of. . . .

On a different note, do you think that the principalship is a political position, and if so, in what ways?

Principal:

I think it is. I can look at it in two ways: politics is one thing, as opposed to having to be a politician where you have to be able to talk to a lot of different people and take in what they say . . . to make some kind of determination, decision. It is political because you need to balance all the different needs and wants and desires of everyone who comes into the school. I think that's the big responsibility. I don't know if you can call it a political position or not.

I'm more of a forthright person. I say what I feel, but in this position I can't always do that, and in that respect you have to put on a politician's face. You do have to listen to people and take all of that in but not always give up too much information until everything has been processed. In that way it is political.

It is political with respect to advocacy. Oftentimes, if you're an advocate for students or for teachers, you do have to get involved politically. This is not always an easy thing to do in the school district. While you are told to represent the school district, you also have your own feelings about how things are run and done. You need to put on a certain face for the public or to parents.

I'm not certain I'm responding to the question, but when you say politics, sometimes I think of making a balance of everything around you, having to put out that message to people because you represent some higher being. You're not here on your own. You can't always say what you feel or what you think.

Dubin:

That's a very good answer. You're saying that you must be sensitive to the many needs and forces that present themselves, that is, district, community, being an advocate for the kids as well as having a particular feeling that you have yourself, of a particular point of view. That is political

posturing . . . and sorting out your own ethical balance in all of it. Being able to balance everything so everyone is served reasonably, equitably, fairly, ethically. That's the art of it.

One other note, has there been a particular issue that you've faced, in your administrative career this year or prior experiences, that is, district, parent, student . . . a tough career decision?

Principal:

Well, because I haven't been the leader of a school for very long, I think I can refer to my experience last year as an intern. There was a situation where I had a lot of internal conflict. My prior school had an excellent reputation, highly desirable, parents were quite active, and students were very successful. The new principal with whom I worked followed a previous principal who had been there for many years and had built up its reputation. When I entered that situation, the dynamics in the school had already been changing. The student population was beginning to change. The teachers at that school were engrained in the culture of the past and it was difficult for them to make changes.

There was a new administration. It was a big challenge for me to be involved in that kind of situation, coming into a school undergoing real transition with considerable resistance to these changes. There were forces that you could and could not control. There were students that were very challenging, volatile. I don't think the school culture was ready to deal with those kinds of students. That certainly was a challenge. The students had their own needs and, I believe, constituted your first priority, making sure that they got what they needed, that their situations were taken care of, their personal situations were stabilized. As an administrator, you worry about working with the students and their families.

Dubin:

Where was the conflict?

Principal:

On the one hand, you had teachers who were not able or equipped or trained to deal with these students who break out of the mold. We had teachers who came to us for leadership and follow-up to deal with a lot of these things. They wanted students to be suspended or expelled. They wanted students out of the school, but we felt that the focus should have been to help kids adapt to transition, to do well in school. That year was quite a struggle for me to balance the teachers' perspective, yet I was functioning as an administrator. So going from

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that role as a teacher, empathizing and trying to understand their situation, but then as an administrator trying to look at things more globally in terms of the families and what kinds of resources were available.

Dubin:

What do you think the teachers' expectations were?

Principal:

Teachers wanted the situation to be handled immediately. They wanted the kids moved away. So, I certainly think that this was a challenge dealing with the entire climate in the school; change, transition, turmoil . . . for a while.

Dubin:

What strategies did you consider?

Principal:

The way we tried to resolve this was by trying to bring in different programs into the school. We would do more community building and add more structures in the school; processes and procedures were established. Teachers who needed support were able to get support.

Dubin:

That certainly was a challenge . . . school change and how difficult that is. How many years do you think it would take to make that kind of change, that is, the new administration, new demographics factoring in the historical context . . . the need for teachers to make these adjustments or changing some of the faculty? How long would you say it takes, realistically, to develop a sense of equilibrium in a school like that?

Principal:

We started getting things in motion last year after we identified the issues and did some planning. I would think that it would take at least 2 or 3 more years. Actually it might be sooner because by the end of the year when I left, eight teachers had retired. They had been there for a long time. So there are already many changes going on in the school because of the new people coming in. There's an opportunity to build your own school and enact changes and put your own programs in place. It's already in motion right now.

Dubin:

I would agree and, as you've indicated, what might accelerate it is the change of faculty, new blood, new vision, less baggage, and more direct input regarding faculty hiring. This would really develop the nucleus that you're looking for.

Principal:

Yes. In fact, right now they'd gone through some very intensive training before school began and so the processes have begun to start. I'm hoping that after 2 years or so, things will really turn around there.

Dubin:

A new administrator can't do this overnight. It takes time and you have to be realistic. A common problem with new administrators is they want to do things so quickly, and it's just not really feasible.

On yet another note, I wanted to ask you something that has come up with other interviews I've conducted. It deals with isolation. It is a feeling that you're there and somewhat alone. Tell a little bit about that feeling, which is probably a part of what you are experiencing right now.

Principal:

Oh yes. When you walk into a school as a new administrator, or just the fact that it's a new school situation, you feel isolated the minute you walk in. It's because of the role that you are in. You're not a teacher anymore. People see you differently. I think I perceive myself differently although what I want and strive to do is continue to keep the perspective of a teacher. But, you have to deal with things that go beyond the classroom that teachers don't realize. Understandably, they don't realize what it takes to run a school. So, in a way, I feel isolated because I don't have anyone to support me and here I don't even have a secretary. I have a temporary person, and we're trying to get through all of this together. We're trying to learn things together. As I mentioned, we're both new and I try to convey to her that we're partners. She runs the front office.

We try to maintain a learning environment, make it easier for the teachers to deliver instruction. So it is isolating. You're the person who hears about everything and you're the person who needs to make sure that things happen. You can't pass it on to anyone else. There isn't anybody else. By the nature of the position itself, it already isolates you, no matter the personality or what your other perspectives are. You're the boss. You're the person who is going

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to be able to tap into things for teachers. They look to you for those kinds of answers. Sometimes I just don't feel comfortable that I'm the authority. I don't want to be the person they come to for little things or big things, but there's nobody else.

Dubin:

Are there other sources for you to explore for support?

Principal:

If I do feel isolated I call someone. There is a support structure out there that I've established personally. I have friends who are principals and all very good about supporting and giving me advice. If necessary, I try calling the central office and getting through to those people and tell them that I am new. I seek out help. But frankly, there is a sense of isolation. But I felt that when I was in the classroom, even though I worked well with other people.

Dubin:

How would you compare the two?

Principal:

When you're in the classroom you actually function alone, and it's up to you to be able to reach out to your colleagues and other teachers and collaborate with them. I am that kind of person who does reach out. Collaboration has been something that has sustained me in my career. So in this principalship, I have to find a new way of reaching out to people because people are not here on site that I can commiserate with and get support from and who are in a similar situation.

Finally, my own personal determination to reach out and network with other people will help me stay less isolated.

Dubin:

Would you say that it would be advisable to have something of a mentorship program, support system that would allow young administrators necessary information or just to convey questions or provide resources? You obviously have taken it upon yourself and developed your own network, which will serve you extremely well. Would you say that there should be a general procedure or policy that a district should initiate?

Principal:

Well, that's what my expectation was when I came on board as a principal. I thought I would get some support. I knew that they had mentors for

principals in the past, that is, retired principals who would come back and work with new principals, and so I was expecting something like that would be in place when I came in. That hasn't happened yet, and I hope that they still plan to do that, but as of yet, they haven't.

Sometimes you just don't want to bother other people about certain things. If the person is there on site you can actually work with, then they could show you things. That would be great. I would have loved a mentor who would have helped me open up the school. I walked into the school not knowing what to do. How do I get class lists? How do I communicate with parents? No one told me any of that. Just the nuts and bolts would really have helped me through all of that. I'm not even talking about the support of having someone to talk to . . . the therapeutic aspect.

Dubin:

In another interview, a weekly breakfast was organized for this support opportunity. How about something as simple like a breakfast once a week? Or a time, some place you could just gather. You do have principal meetings, but that sounds more like business than support.

Principal:

What I have found out about those principal meetings . . . I had attended them last year as an intern. They really tried to establish a network of people. They put you in collegial teams so that when you went there you sat together with the same team all the time. In that way you were supposed to build relationships and share information with the same people. But, for some reason, that didn't work for me. I find that interesting because as a teacher when I went to a workshop or in-service and they did some community-building activity, I really enjoyed doing that, sharing information and collaborating with people. Yet, when I went to these administrator meetings they tried to do the same thing.

Dubin:

Why do you think it didn't work?

Principal:

I believe it didn't work because of the low morale of the people in that room; you could feel it. The district facilitators made you sit and read an article or jigsaw, or sit and reflect on what was happening at your school site. They really made an effort to do that kind of sharing, but because morale I found was so low, people really resented going to those meetings. They resented engaging in those kinds of activities because they had better things to

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do. They had to leave in the middle of the day to go to those meetings. They had to leave their school sites. Your mind was on other things. I don't get as much from those kinds of activities as someone coming out to my site and working with me. I found that last year I sat with the same group of people all year long and yet I actually didn't really get to know them on a personal level.

I think it was the time and atmosphere which was so difficult. You just felt the morale; it was so low. I don't know how effective these meetings can be because it doesn't take away from the burdens of your job, rather it seems to add more, to make people come to a breakfast or make people come to some kind of meeting where you try to get them to build connections and collaborate. I don't enjoy that as much as I thought I would because I always had enjoyed and appreciated it as a teacher.

Dubin:

It is a dilemma. On the one hand, I think everyone would appreciate support and being mentored and having an opportunity to just ventilate. Yet, if it is not done well, people see it as additional stress, artificial, and a waste of time.

Principal:

Well, what they had done at the beginning of the school year at the time I tried to get the school started was to assign a person from central office to all the sites. That person was supposed to be the conduit or the support person to help move things along . . . to identify what you needed . . . to tap into the appropriate resources. So I was very happy when they told me that this person was going to contact me and help support me and get me what I needed. What ultimately happened was that this person faxed me a list and asked if I had my staffing, with a yes/no checklist. Was my building ready? Yes/no. I had to check it off and I had to fax it back to her. So I was kind of disappointed that it was done in that way. She did finally contact me by phone and gave me feedback as to what I was doing and told me that everything I was doing was absolutely appropriate. I would ask her a few questions about whom I should contact and whom I should call. So in a way, even though there was an attempt to try to provide support, it didn't seem to be meaningful or helpful. I don't know how it can be improved, but it was disappointing the way it was done.

Dubin:

What about a retreat for a day or a weekend where you actually meet other principals before you open the school . . . a time when you can actually talk about those items that were faxed to you . . . share ideas in that way?

Principal:

That would be a good idea. They are trying to establish a cohort of new principals, and we actually did meet once. But that was after we had been trying to open school. It was a few days before school opened, and we were already at our sites. To develop something like that prior to actually stepping into the school and trying to get into all the nitty-gritty of trying to open the school . . . if it were planned out well, a retreat like that would really be good. If a person could come in and talk about how to get your class list; how to navigate through human resources to get your staffing in place . . . how to get through all of that. Not all the principals have to hear this, but we [new administrators] do. The assumption is that you have to get started, and later on you'll get the support you need to get you through it. But by then, I'm already into my job, and my mind is going to be on a lot of other things. I don't know how engaged I could be.

So what you had mentioned about a retreat is really a great idea. What they did attempt to do, prior to the opening of school, was have a 3-day principal's institute. They had a lot of people come in and talk about leadership and how to get through the new processes that were to be in place. I really appreciated that but I was really worried about how to open school and get a new secretary. At that time I was not interested in being an educational leader because my mind wasn't really on that aspect of the job. I know that they were trying to inspire us and get us off on a positive note. But, for some of us like me, who was new, I wanted to know how to access information about my budget . . . how I needed to get supplies into the school. If they could start that sooner, people would feel a little bit more confident and assured as they went into the school situation.

Dubin:

The practical things of starting a school earlier, before you're actually there, when you can talk with other people and develop that network. Then, what would be equally as important is having that connection, not through e-mail, but a real person on the other side of the phone who could even come out to the site and see how things were progressing . . . follow-up. It seems that trial by fire was the modus operandi.

Principal:

I'm afraid that it is the norm rather than the exception.

Dubin:

Final question, and after this interview I want you to get home to your family.

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Principal:

And not stay over the weekend?

Dubin:

Exactly. That could come but remember it's important to balance all this, as you know. As we conclude this interview, are there any last comments or thoughts you want an aspiring administrator to consider regarding leadership and the principalship?

Principal:

Well, if you're coming from the position of a classroom teacher role, I think that jumping into an administrative role cold is going to be very difficult. I think it's important to engage in a lot of other administrative activities, beyond the classroom, before going into administration. It will give you a more global perspective. I think that that is what happened with me. If I had gone from the classroom into administration directly, I don't think I would have survived. Because I had other experiences and making a transition and exploring other areas, I was able to see other kinds of programs in education. I think that that kind of exposure was very important. Getting involved in district kinds of activities, getting on committees, university programs, community programs, and so on . . . just trying to get into different aspects of the profession beyond the classroom gives you a lot more information and perspective as you move into educational leadership. Again, that's very important.

At times, when I work with new teachers, they've commented that they want to be a principal. They might be teaching for only 2 or 3 years and yet they say they want to go into administration. On the one hand, I really admire that. But, on the other hand, I believe that they need experience and also a kind of wisdom in working in education and working on different levels and arenas. I think that it gives you an advantage, building that kind of knowledge base. I think that people considering educational leadership should try to engage in other kinds of activities beyond their school site to see if that's really what they're interested in.

Dubin:

Thank you very much. Obviously this is a journey that is not for everyone. Of course, ultimately, they are the final authority on that decision, but the more exposure they have on the myriad of administrative tasks, the more realistic they will be in matching their skills and interests to the demands of the job.

Analysis

This young and inexperienced principal was responsible for maintaining and perpetuating the climate of a small, well-performing elementary school. She understood her mandate and planned to focus on program continuity before determining what, if any, changes were necessary regarding the direction of the school. She also wanted to continue the effective decision-making process already in place at the school.

She had to build trust in her staff and provide her own legitimacy to the role, since she was assuming the principalship in the wake of a seasoned and well-tested principal. She also had to acclimate herself to the school, since she had only just begun. While she had experience at that school site, the role would be different and dramatically impact the previous relationships she had enjoyed with her parents, faculty, and students. She also had to become familiar with the district and the important decision makers downtown. During the interview, she addressed many of the general leadership areas involved in administration, for example, school goals and priorities, personnel, budgetary decisions, participatory management strategies, politics, ethics, personal goals, as well as a host of other leadership considerations specific to her educational philosophy.

In any leadership environment, understanding who you are, the community of constituents with whom you need to work, and the organizational needs are paramount. As this principal began to unravel these elements of her school, she was in the discovery phase of applying an appropriate leadership style suitable to the situation and her school members. What type of leadership style was appropriate as she assumed the principal role in the beginning of the school year could be quite different from the one she demonstrated as the year progressed. This would be dependent upon the needs of the school as it evolved and the appropriateness to the people with whom she worked. This is generally a rather fluid situation and requires considerable insight and adaptability.

When we explore the many leadership styles and behaviors, there are some basic approaches that can be identified and adapted to accommodate various models. From a sociological point of view, Max Weber speaks of leadership in terms of authoritative, legal, traditional, and legitimate roles. That is to say, a leader, by assumption of the role, has certain presumptive traits bestowed upon him or her by virtue of the position. These traits or characteristics represent the historic perceptions people place on those in decision-making and leadership roles. These translate into the acknowledgment that leaders assume the legal mandate of our system, the legitimacy of history, the parental role of tradition, and the authoritative force of power and control.

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Another, more practical leadership definition speaks to different styles; for example, authoritative, directive, consultative, and laissez-faire leadership behaviors. These are realized in a specific style with the authoritative approach being somewhat autocratic; the directive more of a dialogue but with intent and a clear agenda; consultative or participative with a balanced exchange with all members; and finally, the laissez-faire, which is opened and allows for autonomous decision making.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the key issues this administrator raises in this interview?
2. What is the tone of this interview?
3. Why does she not identify or stress the role of parents in this community?
4. What is her perception of the district's effort to support young administrators and what drives that perception?
5. Could you explain this principal's philosophy regarding mentoring?
6. What was her political view of the principalship?
7. What changes would this administrator recommend that would significantly change the effectiveness of beginning school leaders?
8. Do you find her comments consistent with other schools or districts you've experienced?
9. If you were appointed principal in this school, what would some of your 1st-year objectives be?

Student Activities

1. Write a letter to the superintendent requesting additional administrative support.
2. Write a letter of introduction to the community indicating your philosophy, background, and goals for the upcoming school year.
3. Write a letter of introduction to the staff regarding your philosophy, background, and goals for the upcoming school year.
4. What agenda items would you include for your first faculty meeting at the beginning of the school year?
5. What funding sources would you pursue to support your school program?

Interview Question

What additional interview questions would you direct to this administrator?

Simulations

Role-play a meeting that the principal convenes with her staff in the beginning of the school year. What leadership style would you convey that demonstrates your knowledge of the school and a vision for the upcoming school year?

What leadership style would you initially utilize to your staff? How would this be different from leadership styles you would demonstrate individually, to each faculty member?

In light of the problems that she described when the school was opened at the beginning of the year, how would you approach your staff explaining some of these difficulties? What type of dialogue would you expect to transpire between you and your teachers?

If a parent approached you and was concerned about the communication between the school and the community, particularly at the beginning of the school year, how would you respond? What communication mechanisms would you recommend that could address future issues?

Maintaining Tradition

This young principal stated that she wanted to maintain the climate that had been established by the previous administrator. She also indicated that, in time, she would take the initiative to establish her own leadership philosophy and direction.

1. Do you think this is a good strategy?
2. Would you wait or initiate change more rapidly?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages to either approach?

Principal Leadership Applications

The principal mentioned that the PTO was a very effective and powerful organization in the school. Did you feel she knew enough about the organization? Consider the following:

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- How would you acquaint yourself with the parent group?
- Would you allow the group to work autonomously or would you set the agenda?
- Is it important to establish a greater pool of volunteer parents? Why?
- Why would parents want to maintain the status quo of the PTO?
- What other ways of generating funds for the school would you propose?
- How would you create a support system that would provide important feedback and guidance during your 1st year as a principal?

Questions Related to ISLLC Standards

See Appendix for ISLLC Standards.

1. How did this principal address Standard #1? Based upon the interview, cite at least one example that demonstrated that this standard was met.
2. Did you find that she also responded to other ISLLC standards? If so, which ones would you identify she addressed and please cite specific examples.

Readings and Resources

Dubin, A. E. (1991, Spring). The power of the second in command. *The San Francisco State School of Education Review*, 3, 43–46.

The following article focuses on the power that is vested in the assistant principal position, not necessarily by intent but by placement in the organizational structure. At times this position may be more powerful than the principalship.

Leithwood, K. A. (1992). The move toward transformational leadership. *Educational Leadership*, 49(5), 8–12.

This article focuses on the need to create opportunity for a school to gradually move toward change, reshaping its priorities by exercising an all-inclusive leadership approach.