



# Leadership

*If the first button of one's coat is wrongly buttoned, all the rest will be crooked.*

—Giordano Bruno



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### TIP 1

## Focus on Children

**T**his tip is Number 1 for principals. It is the lens through which all tips, programs, action, and reflection should filter and against which all should be measured. First and last, maintain a focus on children. It's simple, too often overlooked, but critically important. In everything you do, if you consider the impact on and the benefits for children, you won't go wrong.

May a focus on children become your defining force!





## TIP 2

### Be Courageous

If you aren't a brave person, don't consider becoming a principal. If you can't stand the sight of blood or broken bones, forget it! Principals of the twenty-first century must be models of mental and moral strength; capable of venturing into the unknown; persevering; and able to withstand fear, difficulty, danger, and attacks—both physical and emotional. Courage is an essential ingredient of being a school leader, especially a progressive leader.

Ernest Hemingway described courage as “grace under pressure.” Courageous principals maintain their cool under fire. These individuals aren't afraid of angry parents. They make home visits. Keeping kids' best interests in mind, they recognize the political ramifications of decisions they know they must make—and they make them anyway. Courageous principals are those who put others' safety interests before their own.

The world watched the horrific events of September 11, 2001, unfold on television. But what they missed seeing were the untold courageous acts and the quick decisions made by principals, not only in New York City and Washington, DC, but also throughout the nation. Immediately, principals' thoughts focused on the safety of others, particularly students. Those closest to the scenes of the terrorist attacks calmly evacuated schools, making sure children safely made it into the care of parents or guardians. New York City principals

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made sure every child was safe, accounted for, and safely delivered to a responsible adult. Likewise in Washington, DC, and other close areas. Those farther away began helping people cope, understand, and attend to those in need. They aided in preventing widespread panic and retribution against people with Middle Eastern backgrounds. Principals in Washington, DC, Maryland, and Virginia helped students and citizens survive treacherous days in late 2002 as the DC sniper terrorized their communities. These examples are high-profile, emergency situations familiar to most everyone. But there are countless others happening all too often throughout the nation. Through them all, there have been courageous principals modeling calm, reasonable responses and helping children address their fears and anxieties.

Today, like no other time before, principals must be able to assure anxious parents that their children will be safe at school. They must be prepared to respond to and deal with fires, earthquakes, tornadoes, civil unrest, domestic fights, medical emergencies, drug busts, gas leaks, sexual predators, and wild and crazy people in their neighborhoods.

The principalship is not for the faint of heart!





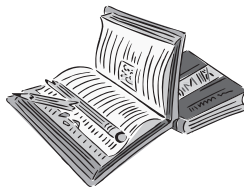
## TIP 3

### Model Learning

“Effective principals lead their schools in a way that places student and adult learning at the center” (NAESP, 2001, *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do*, p. 9). As an instructional leader, the principal is always learning. By this example, students and adults alike are continuously learning. When adults stop learning, so will students.

Enroll in postgraduate classes. Attend workshops, seminars, and inservice meetings. Many opportunities are available online to accommodate busy schedules. Be a regular attendee at state and national professional conferences for principals. Read books. Organize book clubs and study groups at school. Talk about new ideas with friends and colleagues. Show the kind of enthusiasm for learning you would like to see from your students.

Show that learning can be fun. Learn something new each day. The principal sets the tone.



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**TIP 4****Understand the Levels of Leadership**

Despite all the recent attention given instructional leadership, principals frequently find themselves in situations where they simply have to LEAD! The No Child Left Behind Act's "Adequate Yearly Progress" and related requirements have serious accountability consequences for principals. Traditional approaches to working with staffs, parents, and students must be reconsidered for effectiveness. In those schools being labeled as failing according to the NCLB Act, improvement may not begin until attitudes and beliefs about student learning are changed. That improvement will require a leader. Change can be good but often is difficult for insecure and ineffective classroom performers. To realize improvement, the principal must lead, and the activities and process will be far different than managing or instructional leadership.

Author John Maxwell, in his book *Leadership 101*, provides a clear outline of the progressive levels of leadership. He lists five levels of leadership, as follows:

1. Position
2. Permission
3. Production
4. People Development
5. Personhood

When first selected for the principalship, rookies find themselves at the position level. Unfortunately, some never progress farther. They have a title, become complacent, fall into a rut, assume they have “arrived,” and arrogantly fail to do anything with the title. They wonder why they can’t make things happen in their schools.

Maxwell points out that leaders must progress naturally through the five levels, warning not to skip a level. That is the mistake I made!

Like those who thought they had arrived, when being selected for a principalship, I failed to gain permission from my staff to become their leader. I began expecting results, a third-level outcome—skipping level 2. My efforts were ineffective and my frustration intense until I learned the importance of building relationships with those who wanted a leader. I am indebted to my mentors for their redirection.

Once a person has been accepted and solidified permission to become the principal and to lead, much like a husband and wife must establish their close interpersonal relationship, the principal can eventually move up to the third level, production. Couples start families at this level, and principals and their staffs begin to realize the fruits of their work together. Progress is made, results are data driven, and improvement is continuous. Fear, if it exists, is at minimal levels. People grow together. Teachers teach and students learn. The principal fulfills the role of instructional leadership.

Moving higher, effective principals strive to build a strong team. They empower others and delegate effectively. They focus on developing people and surround themselves with superstars. They invest time in helping others become effective leaders. They fully realize their influence, reach out, and help others fulfill their dreams. They maintain high expectations and consistently achieve results.

The special few reach the fifth level of leadership, personhood. They understand that sustaining their work can best be accomplished by grooming a successor. Succession planning becomes a focus of their work. These are the principals who

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are held in such high regard that people assume they cannot be replaced. People are surprised when the successor, who was being quietly trained by an expert leader, makes a smooth transition. Principals who reach the personhood level of leadership sometimes have the school named after them when they retire.

As Maxwell warns, don't try to skip a level. Also, never neglect the components of the lower levels. Furthermore, you must always pick an appropriate level to interact with subordinates and always know what level each employee has attained.

Leadership is all about influence—nothing more, nothing less. To lead our schools to higher levels, principals must first know themselves; work to gain influence; and understand the process, pitfalls, path, and levels of leadership. Learning and gaining influence never stops.

Always work to become a better leader.







## TIP 5

### Foster Good Relations With the Support Staff

I value the opportunities to talk with my custodians, cooks, and secretary. They help ground me and provide valuable insights about the school and the community. When empowered to do their jobs, they can assume innumerable managerial responsibilities, freeing me as principal to focus on instruction and student learning.

My first superintendent told me that classified employees could make or break me as a beginning principal. It was sage advice. These great workers shared their experience and expertise and enabled me to learn the infrastructure of the school. I deliberately worked to build a close, positive, working relationship with each of them. Together, we grew to value one another and became a team. The superintendent's advice was good, heard, and heeded. I've made it a priority to develop good relationships wherever I've worked.

I've observed and interacted with classified employees who felt they were second-class citizens. When they feel this way, their work production sags and morale suffers. Some even sabotage the leadership efforts of the principal. They talk. Negative stories start spreading through the community. A downward spiral occurs in the relationship with the principal that is sometimes impossible to reverse.

Pay forward. Build relationships with the support staff. When they like you, but more important, respect you, they will be there for you in a time of need.





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### TIP 6

## Delegate

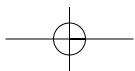
**P**rincipals try to be superhuman. They try to do it all. It's impossible.

Learn to empower your staff, classified as well as certified, to make decisions at the most appropriate level of the organization. Allow people to chair committees, make decisions, and complete tasks that can be done without your direct involvement. When people realize that they are being asked to complete tasks or assignments that you would otherwise do yourself, they will help. However, if they perceive that they are being given the dirty jobs, they will of course resist.

Certain responsibilities can be delegated to volunteers. Make sure you explain clearly the objective of the task and how you would like to see things done and provide a time clarification. Volunteers can be an invaluable asset to a principal. Show them your appreciation.

Delegation must be balanced: Too much, and people will think you are trying to get out of work; not enough, and you'll eventually burn out. Approach people like a dictator and they'll sabotage the work.

Learn to delegate. Clearly explain your position and what you envision happening in the school. Use your best people skills, build a team, and create a high-performing school with everyone contributing to the effort.





## TIP 7

### Never Underestimate the Importance of a Managerial Task

**A**s principal, you are held accountable for everything that happens in your school. Don't delegate away managerial tasks to the point that you have no idea what is happening there.

Understand the infrastructure, procedures, how things work, and what it takes to get things done. If the managing custodian was unable to be at work suddenly, would you know how to open the school? Could you complete a purchase order if your secretary was not available? Could you turn off the gas in the kitchen if you suddenly smelled a leak? Do you know what is involved with stripping floor wax and thoroughly cleaning a restroom? Would you allow students to stand in extreme morning cold if those empowered to bring them inside were slow to act?

Administrators who delegate away their responsibility, who fail to understand what others are to do, are viewed as incapable by staff and parents when a problem surfaces that eventually is brought to the principal to solve. Empower others to do their jobs, but make sure you know how to do their work if they suddenly can't and you need to do it yourself.



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**TIP 8****Always Be People Oriented**

**E**ffective principals have great people skills. They genuinely like people of all ages. They can walk in a room and command positive attention. They possess communication skills that make others feel they are interested in them. They are fun to be around.

Devote a file to collecting information about people in and around the school community. Use a computer, palm pilot, or any other record-keeping system that fits your needs. Collect information about the people you meet, items of special interest, birthdays, information about children, and so on. Clip items from the newspaper, make copies, and send the original with a note to that person. Use the gathered information regularly when talking with people. Ask questions about what you collected. People will be impressed and know you care. Call people on the phone with good news more often than bad.

Greet visitors in your office as though they are each the most important person you will meet all day. They are! They are your customers. Smile, and engage them in conversations. Make sure they leave your office with what they will consider to have been the ultimate customer experience. The next time they come back, they'll be remembering a positive experience.

Talk to those who work in your school. Acknowledge their work and contribution to the school. Talk to the kids. Ask them

questions about their families, their interests, what they are learning, and make them feel important.

Not all people are comfortable initiating conversations. Work at it. Make it a goal. The more you focus on improving your people skills—making eye contact, engaging people in positive conversations, and smiling—the easier it becomes. Eventually it will become second nature and become part of your persona.

Many people view the principal as an authoritarian figure. Principals often have to say no and deny people what they want. Those who are people oriented develop ways to soften this perception while delivering the same messages. People who might not always be satisfied by what they hear from the principal will still respect the individual because they perceived that he or she liked them and cared.





## TIP 9

### Know People's Names

**M**y school has over 400 students and a mobility rate of nearly twenty-five percent. After thirty years in the business, I'll see people on the street that might have been in one of my marching bands, my fourth-grade classes, or a school where I've served as principal. My strength is in remembering faces, not names.

People love it when you can address them by their names, first as well as last. When they recognize that you also know something about them, it further validates their individuality and strengthens your relationship with them. Students gain your acceptance and feel they belong in "your" school. I have to work at remembering names.

I work at it by memorizing class lists, developing mind association games, looking for cues in classrooms, reviewing each child's grade card, spending time looking at class pictures and seating charts, mentally reviewing names while observing in classrooms, and saying some over and over. Those who visit me frequently in the office, I come to know too well. Unfortunately, the well-behaved students, those who complete their work, follow the rules, and meet expectations, are those whose names I sometimes fail to learn.

People appreciate the effort it requires to know names. Visitors are always amazed by what they observe. I've learned to camouflage my weaknesses. Yet knowing names is always a priority and goal.

I have respect for colleagues in schools much larger than mine who are skilled at mastering so many more names. It is remarkable to observe them walk down a hallway, greet a child by name, ask a question about a sibling or an activity associated with the child or family. Usually, the child beams. It makes their day.

Principals have great influence in their schools. Knowing names of people in the school community is a critical skill in developing that influence.





## TIP 10

### Show Restraint

I've experienced angry, cursing parents, threats, and people who I thought were just plain crazy. Many throw temper tantrums, point their fingers, and eventually cry. When being publicly attacked, never respond. Others will be just as uncomfortable as you. It is better to allow them to counter on your behalf. What the principal says or does is always subject to public scrutiny. Stay calm. Realize that the person who is out of control and attacking you is doing so because he or she is afraid of something or feeling powerless. Many times, people attack the principal because of prior experience and frustration with others in positions of authority.

Don't make idle comments to others when you are in the hot seat. Attackers will assume you are talking about them and get angrier. Those who heard your comments will pass them along the gossip trail. Stay focused on issues. Don't let the attack become personal.

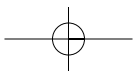
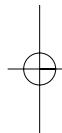
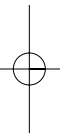
Board of Education meetings are infamous places for public tirades and displays of open hostility. Most of the time, reasonable people who are bystanders become very uncomfortable. Let others lose restraint. Hold your tongue. Be mindful of your body language, facial expressions, and eye contact. You as the principal set the tone and example for professional behavior.





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There are times in the heat of the moment when the principal's voice must be heard. Focus on facts, take out any emotional tone in your voice, and be very brief. Very often, the best message is to take a ten-minute break.





## TIP 11

### Lead Regular Tours of the School

I enjoy giving visitors a tour of my school. Our superintendent enjoys visiting each classroom several times a year. Board members, community members, and new parents also enjoy the grand tour. There are so many positive things to see and observe, the kids are always special, and we proudly showcase one of the best-equipped and best-maintained facilities in the district.

If I'm unavailable, I delegate the role of tour guide to my secretary, volunteer coordinator, positive staff member, or even the leaders of the student council. Kids love giving tours of their school, and visitors tell me that their insights and comments are better appreciated, and more memorable, than those of adults.

When the superintendent walks with me, I try to give him information about each teacher and arm him with something unique he can say to an employee. There are always smiles and compliments, and people love the recognition that motivates them to do even more. Sometimes the compliments go both ways, making both the boss and me feel good.

For those who want to get ahead, plan these walk-throughs regularly—and don't tell anyone else about them!





## TIP 12

### Give Bonuses

**B**ut you say, “I work in school with negotiated salary schedules where I can’t give monetary bonuses.” Then, think of bonuses in other ways.

Give professional presentations—and take key staff members with you as participants (see Tip 98). Promoting careers and creating opportunities for others is perhaps more beneficial than any monetary reward, and it’s more personal. People will appreciate the recognition of their professional abilities, and the time away at a professional conference can result in talk time, bonding, and reflection more valuable than any amount of money.

Allow flextime at work. Help those single moms or dads meet the schedule changes of babysitters. Enable people to avoid the rush hour traffic jams. Let people have some autonomy over their work. Allow a colleague engaged in graduate study some free time to study and complete pressing work.

Bonuses are not always in the form of money. Be creative. Find ways to reward people’s accomplishments. It will be a bonus to your staff morale and school climate.





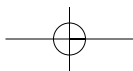
## TIP 13

### Become a Mastermind Thinker

**E**ver notice how some people seem to contemplate complex problems like a master chess player? They seem to visualize all the angles and potential moves? They rarely are blindsided or surprised. Effective principals are the same in their approach to analyzing complex situations. Their skill is particularly valuable in anticipating the human interests or political ramifications of issues facing their schools.

Effective principals add to their repertoire of considerations each time they face challenging decisions. They talk with each other. They share and reflect about how they worked through various considerations. They are not backward or intimidated. Rather, they open up and learn from others. They are constantly honing their thinking and problem-solving skills. They build on their experiences. They possess wide-angle vision but also clearly see how to move forward. They exemplify the old adage, "eyes and ears on all sides of their heads."

Personality and leadership tests identify mastermind thinkers. Skill development can be enhanced by reviewing the personal qualifiers that constitute these evaluations. Aspiring principals can acquire these abilities by closely observing effective mastermind thinkers, talking with them, and confiding with them as they face their own complex decisions.





## TIP 14

### Buy Time

**A**dvocating this tip may pose some confusion or contradiction, especially since my dominant style is to be decisive and focused on task completion. But an effective principal knows when a decision must be made to move things along and when to buy time.

Some might describe those who buy time as procrastinators. But that is not the case. Procrastinators, for a variety of reasons, always tend to delay tasks or avoid making decisions. Effective principals intuitively realize when to move quickly, but they also know when to tread lightly, seek input, gain information, and make a better decision.

Late one Friday afternoon during my first principalship, a mother of an ornery kindergartner called to inform me that “Danny” had stolen her son’s mittens on the bus. Danny was a developmentally delayed student with a history of behavior problems. I’d dealt with him numerous times. I’d also had interactions with the caller and been frustrated with her inability to handle her child.

My mistake was reacting to her complaints before buying time and getting all the facts. Knowing Danny’s history, I called his parents. They questioned Danny, and they too assumed he was lying when he said he knew nothing about the mittens. They punished him during the weekend. I dread thinking what he might have endured.

Early the next Monday morning, the kindergarten teacher appeared at my office door asking if anyone had called about

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a pair of mittens she had found in her restroom. I knew immediately the owner, and I knew Danny was not a culprit.

Had I erred? Yes! Quickly trying to resolve before the week's end what I thought was a simple problem, I mistakenly fell for a parent's assumption, called Danny's parent, and hurt another child. I wish I had bought some time for Danny—and for me.

When I called the kindergartner's parent, I asked her to apologize to Danny and his parents. She reluctantly did. And we both learned valuable lessons. She was told to wait before calling the school with accusations of others—a mistake made too frequently by many parents. And I learned that a rush to be efficient is not always the most effective practice.

Take your time investigating problems with students, gain information, and learn from experience when to act and when to buy time.





## TIP 15

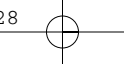
### Have a Security Plan in Place

**C**ourageous principals remain calm and collected during a crisis because they have planned and practiced for emergencies. They've consulted with local emergency relief agencies, reviewed and updated plans and evacuation procedures, and taught people how to react in different situations.

Each school campus has unique considerations that will impact the evacuation and management process. It is best to have consultation and advice from officials who will be assisting in the event of an emergency. Document the meetings with these officials, especially their advice. Invite them to critique your emergency drills. Let the children and staff know who these people are, why they are visiting the school, what they should know and do in an emergency, and what you expect of their response and behavior. This is serious business that principals cannot take lightly. There have been enough incidents that one is foolish to assume a crisis cannot happen to them.

The principal's worst fear is that something will happen while he or she is out of the building. This worry impacts far too many principals' choices not to attend professional development opportunities, further isolating and adding to their stress. Develop back-up plans and don't sit around waiting for something bad to happen. No one benefits when leaders are afraid.





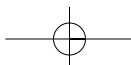
## TIP 16

### Memorize the Negotiated Agreements

The negotiated agreements between the Board of Education and certified and classified employees are your guides. Use them. Memorize them. Know the implications of every single line. Know it better than your subordinates do. From time to time, they may try to bully you and interpret the agreement to gain a particular advantage. Your comprehensive knowledge will help you avoid appearing negligent or weak.

Awareness and insights regarding the fine print and interpretations of the agreements will also keep you out of trouble. This lesson I have learned the hard way! Negotiated agreements are legal and must be followed. There is no excuse for doing otherwise. They provide the direction and spell out the responsibilities for the work of the school staff.

Not every issue can be anticipated and addressed in an agreement, of course, and from time to time people will challenge your decisions. Expect it. Don't react inappropriately. Follow the procedures, consider all points of view, and respond to grievances or questions in a professional manner. The negotiated agreements provide direction and define expectations for both the bargaining unit members and the administration. Know what the agreement expects of you as well as others.







## TIP 17

### Never Try to Conceal Big Problems

**I**t's inevitable. Something will happen. The principal will sometimes be the last to know but will be held responsible. The media will soon be waiting outside the door. Like others who find themselves in tough situations, you may be tempted to "hide the elephant" or "sweep a problem under the rug." Remember Watergate? The Iran-Contra Affair? Monica Lewinsky?

It pays to tell the truth, accept the fallout, and move on. Hiding facts and information, assuming people will not find out, or hoping the problem will go away usually leads to bigger problems later. It is much harder to control rumors and put out fires than it is to tell the truth. It may be more tempting to hide, but in the long run, it is better to be open. Lies or misinformation lead to more lies and misinformation. Frequently, the way a situation is handled creates a bigger problem than the original concern. Turn on a stream of information.

Talk with practicing principals. They'll have their own personal examples of pitfalls and elephants they've wanted to hide. When you suspect you are on a precipice dealing with your own, call your trusted mentor and develop strategies that will enable you to move on, with support, rather than being engulfed in turmoil.





## TIP 18

### Never Shoot the Messenger

I'm fortunate to have people in my life who are critical friends. They tell me all sorts of things, but most important, when my ego or wings spread too far, they aren't afraid to correct me. From them, I hear the good and the bad. Because I love and trust them, I don't get angry when their message is something I don't want to hear.

Most people, however, display anger toward a person who is critical and delivers bad news. I've done it too often. But it is from those messengers that we receive critical information and insights. If we are smart, we'll seize the opportunity to learn and grow. Don't cast blame on them. They are being brave and helpful.

Listen. Show restraint if the message is not pleasant. Others are always watching. People will learn quickly to avoid you and uncomfortable situations if they feel they will be subject to tirades for telling you things you don't want to hear.

Who are the trusted messengers I've shot? There are many: my secretary, managing custodian and cook, union representatives, trusted teachers, colleagues, my wife, and family members.

Take a deep breath. Suck in your pride. Consider the message. Thank the messenger.

