

# The Principal as Staff Development Leader

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*Several characteristics help the principal in providing growth opportunities for staff members as they work with young people.*

With increasing demands from patrons, teacher organizations, boards of education, and students, it is easy for the principal to find reasons not to attempt change and to become very discouraged with his/her role. During the past three years, however, I have been most fortunate to see many schools where the principals *are* making a significant difference, and in almost every case these principals are "staff development leaders." Further, if schools are going to do the job required and expected of them, not only today but in the years to come, the principal can and must play a large role in the area of staff development. My observation of principals who are effective staff development leaders helped me to identify a number of common factors that these principals possess despite the fact that their personal operational styles are quite different.

These principals accept the fact that change is inevitable and that it is the principals' responsibility to manage change to whatever degree possible. Also, they believe that meaningful change takes place in individual human beings. Therefore, they devote their staff development efforts to the goal of assisting each individual in his or her own growth process.

## How Principals Assist Growth

The productivity of a school is seen as the sum total of the productive efforts of the people who serve in that building (this includes all personnel: teachers, secretaries, custodians, cafeteria

workers, teacher aides, and volunteers). Each individual is viewed as a unique human being who has a different set of strengths and weaknesses. Recognizing this, it is imperative that staff development activities be based on the needs of the staff and be as individualized as we expect the educational experiences to be for the young people we are serving. To facilitate this growth, principals who are effective staff development leaders exhibit the following characteristics:

1. Each principal knows each staff member very well. He/she knows their strengths, their weaknesses, and organizes the school around these factors. Some principals in very large schools have devised systems to ensure that they have personal contact with each staff member. One such system involves a simple card file containing a card for each staff member. This card includes at least one goal that the staff member is working on. Every time the principal has contact with the staff member, he/she writes the date on that person's card. Then each Friday, the principal goes through the cards to determine which people have not been seen for a period of time and arranges to see them for just a few minutes in their territory (classroom, halls, teachers' lounge).

2. All of these principals invest considerable time in assisting teachers in setting job targets not only in relation to the goals of the school but in areas of individual *strengths*. If most of the job targets are set in areas where that teacher is strong and agreement is reached in advance regarding what evidences of success will

be gathered, the teacher's chances of experiencing success are increased. These success experiences can serve as a reward system for that teacher as well as turn that teacher on to the target setting experiences.

3. These principals also recognize that change is not an easy process and that each human being has a different rate of change. Words from Sidney J. Harris have helped remind me of this truth at times when I become frustrated with the slow growth of an individual. Harris indicates that if you are right-handed, some day try to do everything that you ordinarily do right-handed, left-handed. The frustration that results is the same as the frustration that results in any change process. If this is not recognized, the frustration resulting can cause both principal and teacher to give up before a goal that is in fact achievable, is achieved.

### Principals As "Climate Leaders"

These principals function as "climate leaders." There is much evidence to indicate that if staff development efforts are to pay off there first needs to be developed an organizational climate which is conducive to growth on the part of every individual in that organization.

Robert S. Fox and others<sup>1</sup> isolated eight factors common to a school climate that will facilitate growth. While these factors are not surprising, they are, indeed, areas that a principal can affect and should continually assess. The factors which the group isolated were: (a) trust; (b) respect; (c) caring; (d) opportunities for input; (e) continuous economic and social growth; (f) school renewal; (g) cohesiveness; and (h) high morale.

The appraisal or evaluation process used by these principals ties directly into the staff development activities in the building. In most appraisal processes some fear exists that the principal will use the appraisal process as a means of "getting rid of teachers." This fear has been greatly reduced by many principals stating in writing at the beginning of each appraisal that the purpose of the appraisal process is growth. If at any point, one of the alternatives being considered is nonrenewal or termination of contract, the principal explains that the teacher will

have a conference with the principal at that time.

At such a conference the principal indicates that this teacher is now in "Phase III" (a special process employed when dismissal is being considered). He/she spells out the specific areas where improvement must be made, and establishes a time line indicating when this decision will be made. Any material gathered during the appraisal process prior to that particular conference will not be used as evidence but simply as an indicator of the problem areas that existed. The evidence that will be used will be that which is gathered from that point on. This system has worked in situations where there is a clearly defined evaluation process as part of a tightly negotiated agreement.

The principals who are staff development leaders continually communicate to people within the building what the goals of that particular school are. They provide opportunities for parents and students to be involved in setting the goals. However, once the goals are established, it is the principal who takes the leadership in continuing to "restate the dream" and in defining what the goals mean in terms of the role of each person in that building.

These principals all serve as models in relation to the growth process. This does not mean that each principal is capable of doing everything that he/she wants the staff to do, far from it. The principal is, however, involved in a visible way in his/her own growth process. Most principals who do this effectively share their job targets with the staff as well as involving some staff, if not the total staff, in gathering evidence as to whether or not the principal has reached the stated goals.

Most principals involved in this kind of setting are members of a collegial or support team or both. The collegial team is composed of fellow administrators within or outside the district who assist in assessing needs and setting goals. The support team is composed of faculty members and others within that particular school building who form a growth or appraisal team for the principal.

These principals are good at public relations. Public relations here means:

<sup>1</sup> Robert S. Fox and others. *School Climate Improvement: A Challenge to the School Administrator*. Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa, 1974.

1. The interpretation of school goals and school programs to all who have an interest in that school

2. The ability to support and assist all faculty members within that building as they grow toward achievement of their job targets and as these targets relate to the overall goals of the school

3. The involvement of parents in the public relations aspect of the building. Recently the community advisory committee (whose members provide input for the principal) at East High School in Lincoln, Nebraska, decided to form a "welcome wagon" service for all parents of students new to East. Because these parents were involved in many aspects of the school program they were able to explain it well, while at the same time giving a very personal, caring message to the new parents. This personal contact helped reduce many of the fears that parents and students have regarding a new school. In a number of cases these new parents were also asked by teachers to be a part of their appraisal team.

### Staff Development Leader in Action

In addition to the above-mentioned points, there are a number of other characteristics that are essential to a principal who is an effective staff development leader. These are:

1. He/she is a good time manager. This implies the ability to decide those tasks that are imperative to the successful achievement of the school's staff development goals, distinguishing those that can be done best by the principal. After determining these priorities, those items for which the principal does not have time must be delegated to other members of the staff with an explanation to those affected.

2. The principal must be a good listener. If he/she is to help a staff member achieve a goal, the principal must be able to listen carefully in order to understand completely what hurdles the person needs to overcome. Frequently, these hurdles have little relationship to the task at hand. I personally have spent many hours attempting to solve what I perceived the problem to be simply because I did not listen well enough to know what the real problem was.

3. Principals must laugh a lot, particularly at themselves and with others, laughing at the mistakes that they as a total group are making. Laughter is probably the only natural problem solver.

In conclusion, I hope that I do not leave the impression that being a staff development leader is easy; it is not. However, it is an exciting area where a principal can make a difference. The "invisible" principal can return to a very effective and rewarding role through vigorous leadership that includes a commitment to help each individual in the building to realize his/her potential in achieving the goals of that particular school.

It is not necessary that a great deal of money be invested in order to achieve a good staff development program. Obviously additional funds in personnel help as an incentive in the change process; however, a great deal of growth can take place by reordering the priorities of both time and money. Perhaps the best argument that can be given for entering the staff development arena in a big way is that it can be one of the most rewarding experiences for the principal. Most of us chose the field of education because we enjoyed seeing young people develop. As principals working in staff development, we have an opportunity to see young people grow as a result of the growth that we facilitate in the teaching staff in our building.

A principal who knows his/her staff, recognizes the areas of individual strength, models a growth process on his/her own, assists others in setting job targets that include a built-in recognition and reward system, cares about those with whom he/she is working, and has a sense of humor, can be an effective staff development leader. Such efforts will result in a great deal of achievement and satisfaction for all concerned including that principal. [E]



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