



# Starting a New Job

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What have you learned in ten years as a principal which would lead you to begin your new job differently from the way you began this one?

What will you do first, second, third . . . ?

Why will you proceed in that order?

Will your initial activities build on one another? How? Toward what end?

These questions about how I planned to enter my new job as Assistant Superintendent for Instruction in Bedford, New York, were asked by the consultant I used to help me examine my work as Principal of Scarsdale Junior High School, Scarsdale, New York.\* The questions sobered me. I had been flying high on the excitement of being chosen, and the questions made me think about how to begin my new job when previously I had thought only about how to get the job. Unfortunately, I've found this one-sided emphasis on getting the job, rather than beginning it, to be quite common. As a result of not planning entry into a new job, many of us contribute to our own common ailments: we take on too much, try to do it in too short a time, lose focus, and undermine our own

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*Setting priorities and sticking to them can help a newly appointed leader avoid some common pitfalls.*

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intent to bring clarity and direction to the work in our new area of responsibility.

With an eye to avoiding these pitfalls, the consultant and I divided my entry into four parts: 1. Making the decision to apply for the new job and interviewing; 2. Setting priorities (the first two months on the job); 3. Attending to priorities (the next six months on the job); 4. Ending work on priorities (the following two months on the job). Given the limits of this article and the initial concerns of most readers entering a new job, we will talk exclusively about part 2 of my entry: Setting priorities.

## Setting Priorities—The First Two Months

The consultant and I identified three goals for this part of my entry plan and a set of six activities to reach these goals. The first

goal, obvious but not often acted upon, was to get to know the people in the district and allow them to get to know my philosophy, concerns, and approach to leadership.

My second goal was to establish my priorities for curriculum work in the coming year. I wanted people from each part of the system to be involved in developing these priorities on the assumption that broadbased participation would contribute to increased clarity if not ownership of the priorities; clarity and ownership would contribute to commitment and quality results.

Third, my ten years in the principalship had taught me that arriving at priorities, while very important, is but half of what is necessary. The other half is implementation. I knew I could achieve this third goal of successful implementation *only* if I took time at the outset to get to know "the ways" of the school system—who does what in relation to whom,

\* This article, though written in the first person about Stephen Fisher's particular experience, is based on the general experiences of the three authors who collaborated in writing it. Barry Jentz served as the consultant to Fisher as Fisher started his new job.



Photo: NEA, Joe DiDio

*Getting the job is just the beginning*

when, where, and why to get tasks accomplished? In other words, I had to discover the history, the norms, the informal as well as the formal modes of operation in the district.

My entry activities, designed to help me reach these goals, were:

1. Planning the entry model
2. Review and acceptance of model by the Superintendent and the Board of Education
3. Public disclosure of entry activities
4. Interviews with administrators, staff, and members of the community
5. Planned school visitations
6. Monthly meetings with a key group.

1. *Planning the Model.* With my consultant, I clarified the goals and activities stated earlier. This took several days of rigorous work over a period of three months.

2. *Review and Acceptance by the Superintendent and the Board of Education.* With an outline in writing, I met with my Superintendent to present the entry plan for his review and sanction. I presented the three goals and six activities within a time-frame of two months and asked for his help in

improving the plan. After all, he had more information about the district than I did and that information could influence his judgment about the feasibility of parts of the plan. I told him I would need his backup when I put certain areas of decision making on hold for a year. This would be necessary to give me time to do the activities planned in entry. For example, some people wanted me to assume immediate responsibility for chairing the curriculum committees in the district, committees currently chaired by building principals. I wanted to put off that decision until a time when I would be better informed about how the current arrangement worked. Finally, I asked for the Superintendent's ideas about whom I should meet with in the community, when, where, and why.

The Superintendent was very helpful in suggesting additional people I should interview, giving sanction to the plan, and proposing how to present it to the Board. He took the lead in presenting the plan to the Board, emphasizing the importance of my getting to know what and whom I was working with before I began to give direction. The Board gave its approval to my six activities, and to a

seventh—a report to the Board at the end of two months about what I had learned during my entry.

3. *Public Disclosure of Activities.* One week prior to the opening of school in September, I circulated a memo to the entire district outlining my planned activities. I listed the dates I would be in each building, the individuals I was interviewing, and the monthly meetings I would be holding during those first two months.

I hoped that by publicly disclosing my schedule I would lessen the amount of rumors circulating and the number of those wondering, "What's he really up to?" As well, I hoped to mitigate the natural tendency for different individuals and groups to compete for early access to and influence on me.

4. *Interviews with Administrators, Staff, and Members of the Community*<sup>1</sup>:

*What I Did.* The first major activity I undertook was to interview individuals in leadership positions throughout the district. This included building principals, central office staff, and community members. Each individual received a list of interview questions prior to the interview. Some of the questions were:

Could you provide me with the history of the district? When did you come here? What's it like to work here? What's the makeup of this community? What's important to the people who live in Bedford?

<sup>1</sup> In this article we make no attempt to discuss the interpersonal skills necessary for giving and getting good information. Our set of six entry activities is a structure or skeleton, the muscle of which is interpersonal skills in giving and getting good information. For a picture and discussion of these interpersonal skills, see *Leadership and Learning: Personal Change in a Professional Setting*, by Barry C. Jentz and Joan W. Wofford, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1979.

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What are the students like in Bedford?

Could you review for me the curriculum in Bedford?

How do you see curriculum decisions made in this district in the past? How are these decisions made in your buildings? What format for decision making would you recommend?

What curriculum problems need attention in this district?

What do you expect the person in this new position of Assistant Superintendent for Instruction to do?

What are you most proud of in the Bedford Schools?

At the outset of each interview I told the person that confidentiality of information was crucial to the exchange of good information. In the interest of confidentiality, I said I would take notes, have the notes typed, and send them to the person so he or she could edit or add thoughts before I felt free to use the information with others. I also scheduled a follow-up meeting with each individual to review the interview.

As I met with individuals, I developed a frequency chart of all of the areas of curriculum mentioned in the interviews. That chart had three categories: those items mentioned most frequently as critical curriculum areas for work; those areas that received moderate attention; and those areas mentioned only once or twice in the interviews. I printed this data on wall charts for use in my first

meetings with the principals as a group.

#### *Why I Proceeded This Way.*

I was comfortable in conducting the interviews because I was not faced with making any "instant decisions." One of my earliest fears in moving to the Assistant Superintendency was that I would be called upon to know the answers and make decisions immediately. The interviews provided a setting for mutual exploration of the problems in curriculum in the district. By definition, we were not looking for answers or solutions. As indicated by my writing up my notes on the first interview and scheduling a second, I was going to pay close attention to what others told me about *their* lives in *their* district.

*Results.* I approached these interviews with concern about how they would go. Would people hold back? Or put me on, in ways I would not know at the time? I was surprised, pleasantly. The interviews ran for an hour and a half, and people shared a great deal of information. In addition to providing information about *what* curricular areas needed attention, they talked openly about *how* decisions were made in curriculum and *how* they were (or were not) implemented.

"Everybody here's a college president; it works from the ground up."

"Everybody has to be involved before implementation of a program and that's a crock!"

"Curriculum committees seem

to go on and on. When do they know their work is finished?"

This kind of information, when repeated enough times to form a pattern, became very useful to me in deciding on what my priorities would be and how to pursue them.

#### *5. Planned School Visitations.*

I asked each building principal to plan for three days when I would visit in his or her building. I visited each building for a single day and then went back for a second day in each building, and then a third day. During these visits I engaged mainly in two kinds of activities: first, I sat in on classes, watched students work, and helped tutor individual students; and second, I met with grade level groups of teachers.

At first, teachers were nervous as I entered their classrooms and talked to students and shared in the activity of the room. By the second day in the building, a couple of weeks later, teachers seemed much more at ease and willing to have me participate. By the completion of my school visitation schedule I had visited every classroom in the district and had personally met each staff member.

The meetings with grade level groups of teachers were designed for teachers to speak to me about their concerns with the school's curriculum, and they did, quite readily. The meetings had a special payoff for me because of their spacing, one every two weeks. As I heard concerns in one building, I could test them in the next and then come back to the group where I first heard the concern. Testing concerns from building to building pointed out the lack of communication between schools. As well, clear and validated curriculum priorities began to emerge as I repeatedly began grade level meetings by saying, "Building X sees this as an area of concern. What's your sense of that? Does it apply

in this building?" For example, each time I mentioned the math program, groans confirmed that most teachers in the district felt this had to be a priority area.

When I had finished this series of visitations to classrooms and grade level meetings, school by school, I was confident I knew what the teaching staff saw as curriculum priorities.

6. *Monthly Meetings with a Key Group.* One of my major responsibilities in the new position was to chair the elementary principals' group. I was quite used to being a member of a principals' group, and I knew what it felt like to sit through endless meetings chaired by a central office staff member. I did not know what it felt like to have responsibility for these meetings, and I was more than a little nervous about my first meeting. The consultant and I designed the following steps for engaging the principals with me in arriving at curriculum priorities:

a. A clarification of how the final decision about curriculum priorities would be made

b. A historical overview of program/curriculum development in the district (since the beginning of the most "senior" administrator's arrival in the system)

c. A historical review of the activity of each ongoing curriculum committee in the district, by the current chairpersons (building principals)

d. An analysis of the "frequency chart" of data I collected during my interviews with individuals

e. A presentation and discussion of curriculum priorities I had which were not present in the data from staff, administrators, and community members

f. A presentation to principals of my final number and ordering of priorities; followed by presentation to the Superintendent and

Board, with a written memo to all staff about the final product, including time-lines for working on the priorities.

I began my first meeting with the principals by reviewing my entry process, showing them how, as a group, I wanted them to engage with me in setting curriculum priorities for the coming year, and clarifying how and when I would make the final decision on the priorities. I emphasized that any viable set of priorities would follow from and build on the past; and that we needed a shared, group picture of what that history was if we were to build into the future from it. With these rationales in mind, I had asked the most "senior" principal to begin the first meeting with an overview of program/curriculum development in the district.

When I had asked the principal to do this, I secretly thought he would laugh at my request and suggest that we ought to begin solving the problems in curriculum rather than spending time on past history. Again, I was pleasantly surprised. He not only was delighted to do the overview, he was pleased that I would ask him to begin the first meeting. His presentation was excellent. It provoked a lively discussion which led to clarification of what had been done, when, why, and what was still in progress. One principal spoke for others about the results and quality of the meeting, "I've

been here for seven years and thought I knew what was going on, but I found out a lot of new information this morning, and changed some of the ideas I came with!"

In the following meetings I had each principal who chaired an ongoing curriculum committee review the activities of that committee. As each person did this, I made wall charts, collecting two kinds of information from each review: work accomplished and work left to be done. This data, along with frequency data from my interviews, staff input from my school visits, and my additional priorities, were examined by the group of principals before I made my final decisions.

## Conclusion

When I presented my priorities to the Board, I did so after reviewing the entry plan which clarified where the data had come from and how I had decided on the priorities. The Board gave its approval of these priorities and that approval aided me in holding to these priorities throughout the year, even in the face of Board member, staff, and administrative concerns expressed later in the year which, had I acted on them, would have led me to take on too much, try to do it in too short a time, lose focus, and undermine my intent to bring clarity and direction to work in curriculum in the district. *ET*



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