

# Sharpening On

MARVIN FAIRMAN AND CONNIE LUCAS RENNE

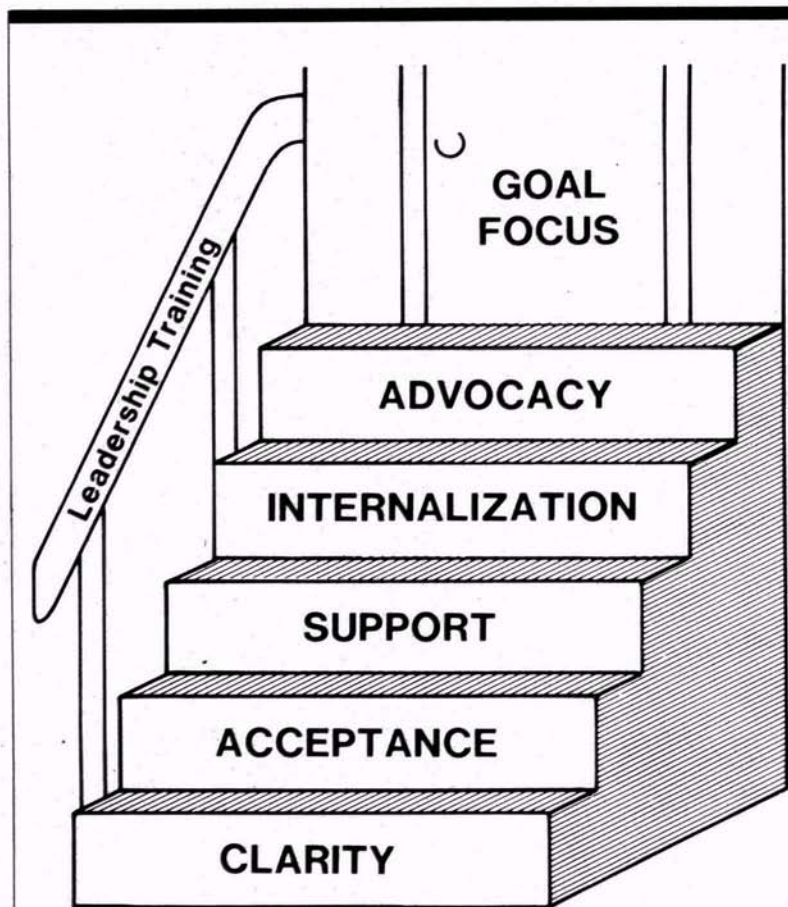


Figure 1. Sequential Steps for Improving Goal Focus.

The need for schools to sharpen their focus on educational goals and objectives has highlighted calls for assertive leadership. The effectiveness of an organization relies on members' understanding and commitment to organizational goals. Thus, leaders who want to make significant improvements must not only concentrate on well-defined objectives, but on motivating staff members to feel committed to them.

How can leaders increase commitment to organizational goals? It is logical to start by "sharpening the focus on goal focus." Goal focus, one of the ten dimensions of organizational health defined by the Organizational Health Instrument, has been positively correlated with leadership effectiveness.<sup>1</sup> Based on our research over the last five years, we see the components of goal focus as a series of hierarchical levels ranging from goal clarity to goal advocacy.

As depicted in Figure 1, there are five sequential levels of goal focus. As each level is achieved, organizational productivity increases. If staff members clearly understand organizational goals—level one—then they can strive to fulfill specified expectations. The second level requires that individuals not only *understand* goals, but that they also *accept* their importance. Level three requires that staff members actively *sup-*

Marvin Fairman is Professor, Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville; and Connie Lucas Renne is Principal, Longfellow Elementary School, Kansas City, Missouri.

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## Goal FOCUS

port the goals. Internalization, the fourth level, goes beyond support. An individual who has *internalized* specified goals "owns" those goals rather than perceiving them as belonging to the administration. The ultimate objective, then, is to have individuals who *advocate* organizational goals. Not only have they internalized the goals, but they are actively helping others achieve the same level of goal focus.

In order to translate this conceptual view to pragmatic aspects of everyday organizational life, we have identified a set of responses that depicts the different levels of goal focus. The following scenario provides a common frame of reference for these responses.

The assistant superintendent of District X called a meeting of five building principals who were serving on a districtwide administrative staff development committee. The committee had been holding a series of meetings to consider new procedures for providing administrative staff development.

The agenda, specific alternatives, and support materials were in the hands of the committee members at least a week before the meeting. Everything progressed smoothly and the committee ended up unanimously endorsing a set of creative and controversial recommendations to be presented to the administrative cabinet the following week.

Now imagine a group of principals who were not on the committee discussing and questioning these recommendations with the committee members. Each committee member's response to the other principals illustrates his or her level of goal focus. Remember, the committee's decision was unanimous.

### Principal #1 → Goal Clarity

*Sure, I voted for it! However, I really didn't care which alternative was selected. My main concern was that we just reach a decision so everyone knows what is expected.*

### Principal #2 → Goal Acceptance

*Sure, I voted for it! However, I want you to know that the downtown office really pushed for that decision and they finally convinced me that it was the best one.*

### Principal #3 → Goal Support

*Let me assure you that the decision was not dictated from downtown. We worked as a group for several weeks and, as a committee, we explored several alternatives and then reached a unanimous decision.*

Eight weeks later:

### Principal #3 → Goal Internalization

*Sure, our committee's recommendation has made an important contribution to our system. The decision-making process was interesting because, at the time, I strongly supported the decision at the intellectual level. Recently, however, I've come to feel just as strongly that we were right.*

### Principals #4 and #5 → Advocacy

*We are going to have to do something to assist some of our colleagues in improving their commitment to our decision. We need their support. Why don't we . . .*

### Strategies for Improving Goal Focus

1. *Diagnose the current level of goal focus.* To determine at what levels your staff members are operating, first write your organization's highest priority goal

at the top of a plain sheet of paper. Then, section the paper into the five different levels: clarity, acceptance, support, internalization, and advocacy. Next, write each subordinate's name in the column representing the level at which you believe he or she is operating in relation to the goal.

In a small school, this could be done for each faculty member; however, in a large secondary school, you may want to concentrate on department heads and assistant principals. During the next few days you should create opportunities for learning the degree to which these staff members support the goal.

2. *Summarize the level of goal focus for your organization.* How accurate was your first diagnosis? Were you surprised that some members were operating at a higher level than you thought? Were you disappointed that some were not operating at that level? Since your faculty's distribution has important implications for the next step, you should total and record the number of members at each of the five levels.

3. *Re-examine the compatibility of your leadership style and make appropriate adjustments.* As the leader of the organization, you have either a direct or indirect influence on the goal focus of your staff members. Has your style of leadership been a facilitating or inhibiting force? Have you deliberately treated individuals differently or tried to treat them all alike?

We have found that individual faculty members have very different sets of needs and expectations within the goal-setting process. Regardless of their level, it is important for you to use the appro-

**Figure 2. Maturity Level of Followers and Compatible Leadership Style: Implications for Goal Focus.**

**Maturity Level of Followers**

**M-1** These individuals need structure and guidance. They prefer the security of having the leaders determine the organizational priorities.

**M-2** These individuals do not want to participate in goal-setting decisions but can be convinced that the goals are appropriate.

**M-3** These individuals are moderately mature and want to be involved in the decision-making/goal-setting process.

**M-4** These individuals are very mature and are capable of accepting and carrying out organizational responsibilities.

**Compatible Leadership Style**

According to Hersey and Blanchard the appropriate leadership style would be a "telling" style. Since they need structure and direction, the leader should provide it.

These individuals respond best to leaders that emphasize both task accomplishment and relationships. Thus, the appropriate style is a "selling" one. The leader will sell or try to convince these individuals that the goal is important.

These individuals want and expect to be involved in the decision-making process; therefore, a *participatory* style would be appropriate.

These individuals will respond best to leaders that capitalize on their professional maturity. A *delegation* style is the most appropriate style when working with these individuals.

**Implications for Goal Focus**

The administrator's primary function would be to provide for *goal* clarity. Having these individuals involved in the goal-setting process for any length of time would be dysfunctional for the individuals and for the group.

Individuals at this maturity level would logically be expected to have more than goal clarity. They should also have gained an acceptance of the goals.

If these individuals were involved in the process that led to this goal, they will automatically be at level three—*support*.

If leaders involved members at this level as committee chairpersons or in some important leadership role in the development and refinement of goals, it is reasonable to assume that the individuals will *internalize* the goals. Depending upon the strength of their commitment, some will also become *advocates* for the goals.

appropriate leadership style to assist them in moving to a higher level of goal focus. Figure 2 suggests leadership styles that are compatible with varying follower needs. These concepts build on Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Theory.<sup>2</sup> Briefly stated, your leadership style should vary depending on the situation and the maturity level of your staff members. As their maturity level increases, a correspondingly higher level of administrative style is required.

As illustrated in Figure 2, there are four maturity levels ranging from M-1 to M-4 in the first column. The second column describes compatible leadership styles, and column three identifies important implications for improving goal focus.

What implications does Figure 2 have for your organization? As you consider the following questions, you may wish to re-examine the number and names of individuals who were at each of the five levels of goal focus.

● Did you have some M-3 and M-4 faculty members at only levels 1 and 2? If so, you probably have not capitalized on their professional desire to participate in goal setting.

● Did you find that most individuals were operating at a lower level of goal focus than expected? If so, you should try using a higher level leadership style as you work with them in the future.

● Did you find that a majority of your faculty was operating at or below the

acceptance level? If so, you either have a very immature faculty, or you have failed to capitalize on their maturity levels.

● Did you find that you had individuals at each of the five levels of goal focus? If so, you have probably intuitively or systematically provided for individual differences within your faculty. Continue to build on this diversity and encourage faculty members to assist others in moving to higher levels of goal focus.

Since you have already established your organization's top priority goal, the guide in Figure 2 will be most helpful as you develop new goals. However, if you have members at M-1 and M-2 levels, concentrated effort could prove beneficial for gaining clarity and acceptance of your current goals. Reprocessing the goal statements to involve the M-3 and M-4 members at the appropriate levels may be perceived as a game unless you are willing to revise or reprioritize your goal.

4. *Involve followers according to maturity levels in developing future goal statements.* Most leaders have some followers who have the desire and potential for functioning at the M-3 and M-4 levels. Therefore, they should be involved in problem identification and analysis before goals are identified. Other members may want and expect the leader to provide the structure and goals for them. Still others may be willing to accept the responsibility but need to be

sold on the merits of the goals. These different levels of maturity have important implications for committee functions and structure. It is important to allow more mature members to fulfill leadership roles, where they can serve as role models for less mature faculty members and thus enhance the probability that all members will move to their highest potential level of goal focus.

**Summary**

Awareness of the different levels of goal focus can help leaders gain insights into their followers' commitment to organizational goals. In some cases increased knowledge and sensitivity are sufficient to improve the compatibility between leader behavior and maturity levels of followers. In other cases, specific skill development sessions for leaders are needed to improve the level of goal focus within an organization. The more leaders know about goal focus and the more sensitive they are to their followers' different levels, the more they can enhance their organizations' effectiveness.

<sup>1</sup>M. Fairman, M. Holmes, J. Hardage, and C. Lucas, "Manual for the Organizational Health Instrument" (Fayetteville, Ark.: Diagnostic and Development Corporation, 1981).

<sup>2</sup>P. Hersey and K. Blanchard, *Management of Organizational Behavior* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1981).

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