

Principals as Leaders of High-Performing Systems

A. LORRI MANASSE

The past few years have seen a tremendous resurgence of public concern about the effectiveness of schools and renewed appreciation of the importance of principals. This attention has been matched by research on principals' behavior and school effectiveness, and work outside of education on leadership and excellent organizations.

What sense can we make of all this interest and information? What have we learned and how can we use it? When we sift through the theories, studies, and personal experiences, what can we extract that might make a difference?

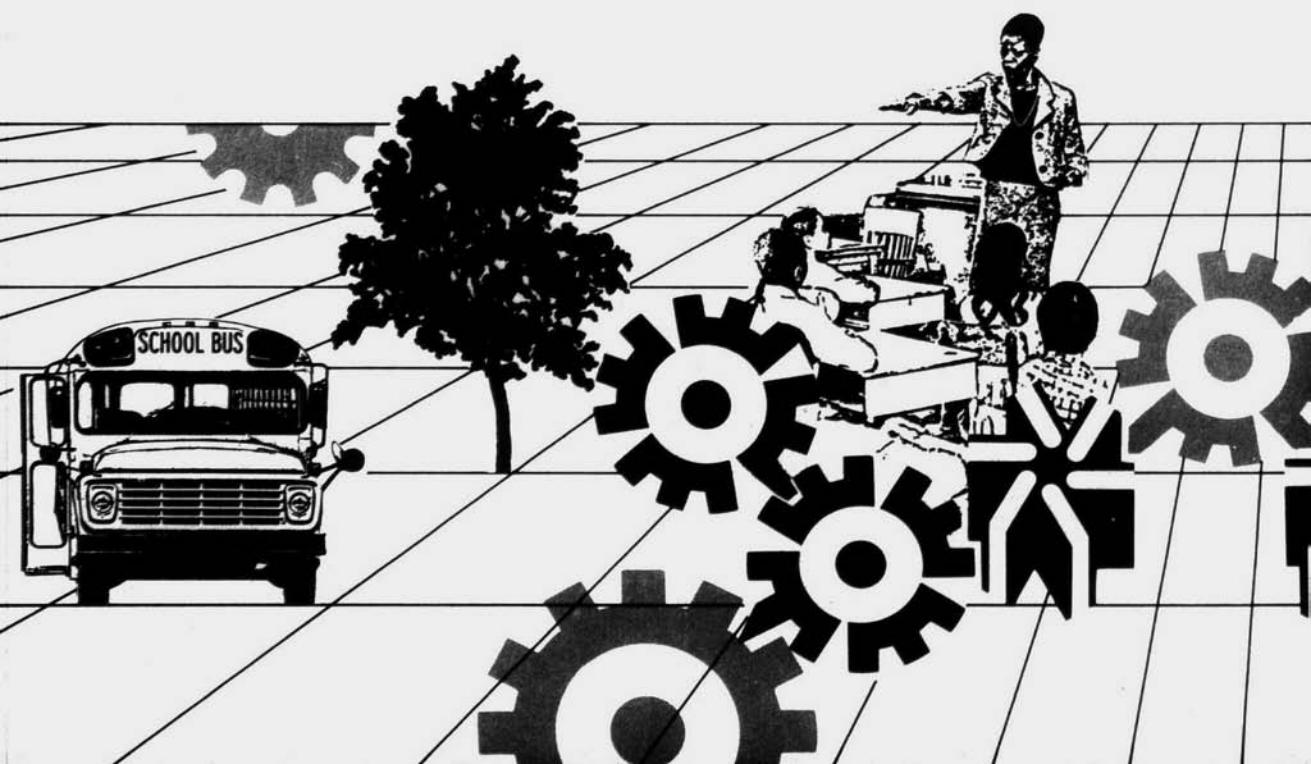
High-Performing Systems

First, we can identify some characteristics that appear to be common across high-performing systems of various types. Excellent organizations have well-defined basic purposes on which they focus their organizational energy and resources. Their leadership is strong and focused, directed toward creating commitment to purpose. Their leaders are aware of the value of symbolic actions and the influence of culture on productive organizational climates.

Excellent organizations also have what Peters and Waterman (1982) call simultaneous loose-tight properties.

While they focus on certain basic goals and have clear accountability in these areas, they simultaneously encourage entrepreneurship, autonomy, and a climate conducive to experimentation and continued growth, both for individuals within the system and for the system itself. Staff members feel that their personal goals are well aligned with organizational goals.

Not infrequently, high-performing systems may be seen as "problems" in their environment because they avoid external control, scrounge resources, and live by their own set of standards (Vaill, 1982). Likewise, effective schools



Like high-performing leaders in the private sector, principals of successful schools have a vision of what their schools should be and of their role in achieving it.

may engender resentment or discontent in a school district because they appear to break some of the rules or violate standard procedures, or they may set standards and expectations that are difficult for other schools to meet.



Managerial Behavior and Leadership

Recent findings regarding the nature of managerial work document what principals already know: their work, like that of other managers, is characterized by brevity, fragmentation, and variety. Their daily interactions, often unplanned and reactive, are primarily with subordinates. They have a preference for verbal communication, concrete problems, specific information, and the use of metaphors. They practice "simultaneous task processing" as they move through a hectic, unpredictable, and discontinuous work flow.

This work structure is generally true for both average and high-performing principals, but effective principals are proactive, using their daily interactions to gather information and monitor events, and to gradually move their schools toward their own vision of what the school should be. Effective schools, like other excellent organizations, re-

A. Lorri Manasse is Director of Organizational Consulting, Congruent Systems Development, Stanford Engineering and Management Systems Co., Inc., Arlington, Virginia.

quire a sense of purpose and direction provided by well-developed and clearly articulated goals.

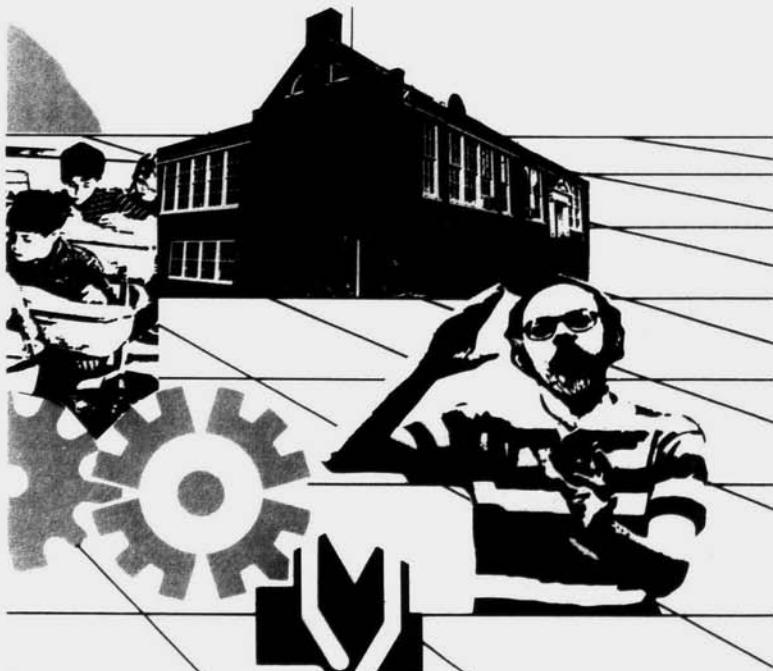
Vision. Effective principals have a vision of their schools and of their role in making that vision a reality. Vaill (1982) incorporates this "vision" in his concept of "purposing": "that continuous stream of actions by an organization's formal leadership that has the effect of inducing clarity, consensus, and commitment regarding the organization's basic purposes." Vaill finds that leaders of high-performing systems have strong feelings about the attainment of the system's purposes, focus on key issues and variables, and put in extraordinary amounts of time to achieve their purposes.

Analytic Skills. To be successful in managing the goal-setting process and achieving consensus and commitment among staff and the larger school community, effective leaders use well-developed analytic and intellectual skills to guide staff in the process of identifying and analyzing problems, and political and managerial skills to resolve conflict and make the planning process work. Indeed, these information sensing and analytic skills are the key differentiators in at least one major study comparing average and high-performing principals (Huff, Lake, and Schaalman, 1982). Both average and high-performing principals demonstrated ability in three skill clusters—purpose and direction, consensus management, and quality enhancement. But only the high performers had the cognitive skills of monitoring, ability to recognize patterns, perceptual objectivity, and analytical ability.

This combination of personal vision, information sensing and analysis skills, and interpersonal skills that generate commitment to a common set of values

seems to distinguish effective leaders in a variety of settings. Kotter (1982) found similar activity patterns for effective general managers. He summarized their two most important challenges as (1) figuring out what to do despite uncertainty, diversity, and a great deal of information; and (2) getting things done through a large and diverse set of people, over most of whom they had little direct control. Successful general managers spend their first six months in a job gathering information and developing networks. Then, using that information, they establish agendas and begin to implement them through their networks.

Underlying this concept of purposing is an implicit assumption that leadership implies change. The research on effective principals involves moving a school toward a vision of what could be rather than maintaining what is. We do not extol the virtues of great leaders whose prime achievements have been maintaining the status quo. Yet there are multiple pressures on principals to emphasize organizational maintenance activities rather than risk change. Research on organizational change suggests that effective principals may, in fact, need two types of vision: a vision of their schools and of their own role in those schools; and a vision of the change



The Purposing Behavior of Effective Principals

- A personal vision of their school as they want it to be at some point in the future.
- The development of an agenda of actions toward the implementation of that vision.
- Management of the goal-setting process to generate commitment to the vision on the part of all participants in the school community.
- Expert information sensing and analysis skills, used to develop agendas, monitor programs and behavior, and provide feedback.
- Timely use of conflict management and problem-solving skills, as dictated by the information sensing activities.

process itself—a framework within which to act on a daily basis and against which to access effects.

This link between leadership and change suggests that if school districts and communities are serious about supporting effective principals, they must be prepared for principals who may be "boat-rockers," not satisfied to keep a low profile and maintain the status quo. Furthermore, to be effective, these principals require a fair measure of building-level autonomy. They must be allowed the opportunity to use their information sensing skills, set appropriate agendas, and develop strategies for their particular circumstances.

Varieties of Style and Context

Once they have developed agendas and generated commitment, effective leaders still face the task of implementing their vision. Research indicates that there is no one best leadership style for all situations. (See Hall and others, 1982, for more on the relationship between leader style and organizational change.) In fact, the situational context is an extremely important factor in selecting implementation strategies. A particular caution is appropriate here in relationship to "effective schools" programs. Much of this work to date has been in elementary schools, particularly those with low-income or minority populations. Some of the leadership characteristics that seem to have been important in these situations may be more strongly associated with the specific na-

ture of the situation rather than with basic or generic leadership characteristics.

A sound knowledge of one's own personal style and personal strengths and weaknesses is essential. A leader must be able to identify supporting individuals to complement his or her own abilities, and to use behaviors that are most likely to be effective. Effective leaders appear to apply, intuitively, theories that see leadership as systems of individuals and resources, and that recognize appropriate substitutes for leadership (Kerr, 1976). Such leadership substitutes may include any characteristics of subordinates or organization that ensure subordinates will clearly understand their roles, know how to do the work, be highly motivated, and be satisfied with the job. When such substitutes exist, organizational leaders may invest their personal resources elsewhere. Thus, organizational leadership clearly involves more than a single individual, although it may be the skill of an individual in marshalling all of the potential resources and orchestrating the strategy that enables the organization to perform well.

Schools as Organizations

There is increasing evidence that schools are more loosely coupled than many other organizations. Systems of control and communication are less formal and less hierarchical, and linkages between and among the levels of the organization are looser. Schools may

lack rules, agreement about the meaning of the rules, systems to monitor compliance, or feedback to improve compliance. On the other hand there is a growing research base indicating that at least at the elementary level, the curriculum and instructional program may be more tightly coupled in effective schools than in less effective ones (Cohen, 1983). This means that school goals, grade level, and classroom instructional objectives, instructional content and activities, and measures of pupil performance are all aligned.

Much of the goal-setting and information sensing behavior of effective principals can be viewed as movement

"School districts must be prepared for the principals who may be 'boat-rockers,' not satisfied to keep a low profile and maintain the status quo."



toward tighter coupling in the school organization. In order to tie these loosely coupled systems together, effective principals make full use of symbol management (Weick, 1982). They centralize the system on key values and decentralize everything else. They pay close attention to the issues on which people agree, and use rituals, symbols, slogans, and selective centralization to hold the system together. To manage symbols effectively, they spend a lot of time one-on-one, constantly reminding people of the central vision, monitoring its application, and teaching people to interpret what they are doing in a common language.

This approach to leadership is consistent with recent work (Bossert and others, 1982) that uses an indirect rather

than a direct model of instructional management. It involves a distinction between stimulating the goals and monitoring the outcomes of the instructional program, and dictating the means by which the goals will be accomplished. The distinction is similar to a more general one between technical leadership and organizational leadership. There may be other individuals, both within the school or in the larger system, with expertise on curriculum, instruction, and the technical work of schooling. In fact, the principal cannot be expected to be an expert in all these matters, particularly at the secondary level. However, there is no individual with a better overall knowledge of the school, the staff, the students, the available resources, the needs, the expecta-

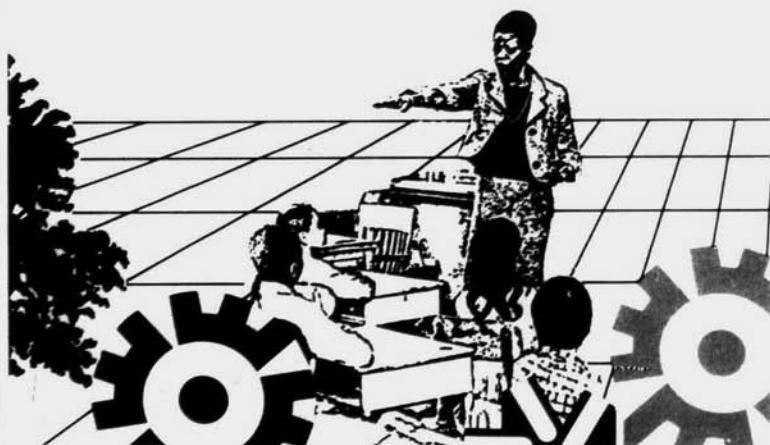
tions, and the intersections among all the above and the district and larger community.

It is this organizational vision that is essential for effective leadership. The effective leader understands growth and change in the system, has a vision of a better future, and has the skills necessary to bring all the individuals and subsystems into congruence so that all work toward a common goal. □

References

- Bossert, S.; Dwyer, D.; Rowan, B.; and Lee, G. "The Instructional Management Role of the Principal." *Education Administration Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1982): 34-64.
- Cohen, M. "Instructional, Management and Social Conditions in Effective Schools." In *School Finance and School Improvement: Linkages in the 1980's*. Fourth Annual Yearbook of the American Education Finance Association. Edited by Allan Odden and L. Dean Webb. Cambridge: Ballinger Publishing Co., 1983.
- Hall, G.; Rutherford, W.; Hord, S.; and Huling, L. "The Principal as Facilitator of School Improvement: Findings from Recent Research," 1982.
- Huff, S.; Lake, D.; and Schaalman, M. *Principal Differences: Excellence in School Leadership and Management*. Boston: McBer and Company, 1982.
- Kerr, S. M. "Substitutes for Leadership: Their Meaning and Measurement." In *American Institute of Decision Sciences Proceedings*. Edited by H. E. Schneider, 1976.
- Kotter, J. "What Effective General Managers Really Do." *Harvard Business Review* 60 (November-December 1982): 156-167.
- Peters, T. and Waterman, R., Jr. *In Search of Excellence*. New York: Harper and Row, 1982.
- Vaill, P. "The Purposing of High Performing Systems." *Organizational Dynamics* II (Autumn 1982).
- Weick, K. "Administering Education in Loosely Coupled Schools." *Phi Delta Kappan* (June 1982): 673-676.

"The effective leader has the skills necessary to bring all the individuals and subsystems into congruence so that all work toward a common goal."



Copyright © 1984 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.