
Memoir of a Team Player

As middle managers in the educational enterprise, principals are pressed by groups whose goals are at odds with their own. The question arises: Is everybody on the same team?

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Once, long ago when I was a teacher trying to get my first principalship, I complained to a friend who was already a central office administrator that the superintendent was blocking me. Despite the superintendent's encouraging words, the door to promotion was closed whenever I knocked to get in. My friend, trying to be helpful as well as kind, suggested that perhaps the superintendent felt I was not a team player and that I should work on changing his perception of me. I was astonished. "Of course I'm a team player," I shot back. But then the light dawned: "It's just that he and I are not on the same team."

Caught in the Middle

This team metaphor has stayed with me throughout my administrative career. Public schools, far from being the unified institutions they ought to be, are by the nature of their financing and governing systems loose assemblages of people with different purposes and different modes of operation. The principal of a school, ironically called a "middle manager" in this educational enterprise, is often pressed by groups whose goals are at odds with her own, and who believe

that by law, divine right, custom, moral virtue, or job status, she should stand with them.

Just as I realized that my former superintendent and I were not on the same team, I've come to understand many times over the years that teachers' unions, school boards, governmental agencies, parents, politicians, and my superiors are not always my teammates either. I claim no moral superiority in this fact, only a closeness to teaching and learning that makes it hard for me to ignore the realities.

Like workers in every field, principals have to do what they believe is right. But they have to do it within a framework of what is legal, authorized, politically and religiously neutral, socially acceptable, amiable, and polite. That is educational ethics. They also have to make all the teams believe they are playing on their side. That is diplomacy. And they have to hang on to their jobs if they are to accomplish anything at all. That is pragmatism.

Three Ethical Dilemmas

I'd like to describe a few situations that illustrate my point. At one time or another these scenarios presented ethical, diplomatic, and pragmatic

problems for me, but they are generic enough that any principal should recognize them. I'm not going to tell how I dealt with each one. What was right for me is not necessarily right for others, and I was not always right. Instead of solutions, I want to emphasize the pressure, uncertainty, and difficulty a principal faces in trying to make ethical decisions in a school setting.

A Child at Stake

Jamie, a 9-year-old special education student, was getting out of hand. Although his disability was primarily physical, it had detrimental effects on his learning and behavior. His inexperienced young teacher's call downtown for help came in the form of the special education coordinator, who wasn't happy about having Jamie disrupt her smoothly running domain. After looking around and asking a few questions, the coordinator called a

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meeting, at which the teacher, Jamie's mother, and I would be present.

I thought we would talk about ways to help Jamie behave and learn better, but the coordinator, who talked very fast and with great certainty, clearly had a different agenda. She intended to place Jamie in a program for emotionally disturbed children, where he would have far less freedom than he did now. Three of us sat silently through this meeting: the teacher, obedient to her superior; the mother, respectful of authority; and I, deferential to the expert.

Afterward I agonized. I wasn't sure that what the coordinator had decreed was bad for Jamie, but she certainly seemed to be acting more for her own convenience than for his benefit. However, I was sure that she hadn't followed the legally prescribed procedures for changing a child's placement. If I confronted her, she would probably dismiss my objections, then correct her paperwork to cover her tracks. From past experience, I could not see her changing her mind. If I went to her superiors, they would back her. If I blew the whistle to state authorities, the district would be disciplined, and I would most certainly be caught in the backlash. Going to the parent was risky, too. She did not appear strong or knowledgeable enough to help her son without my standing behind her and pulling the strings; and I couldn't go that far. Clearly, my responsibility was to the child. But without certainty, without knowledge, without allies, and without power, what could I do to help him? What was an effective and ethical course of action?

How to Teach Science

In the year designated for science adoptions, the state textbook

committee had approved five series for schools to choose from. Our teachers, who had been working all year on revising our science curriculum, were unanimous in not liking any of them. They wanted a teacher's guide to help them develop concepts, a variety of teacher and student reference books to support their units, and materials and equipment for children to do hands-on science. What should we do?

If we bought textbooks, our teachers would use them sometimes, but mostly they would improvise. Without reference books and materials, teaching would be difficult, and science would probably not get the attention or the quality performance it deserved. If we disregarded regulations and bought no textbooks, we could have our program and go undetected for five years until the next round of state monitoring inspections. Then we would be reprimanded and ordered to buy books. But it was likely that before then, the whole textbook adoption process would change in our favor, and we would be able to spend our money on materials that were right for our program.

Our only other option was to file a long, cumbersome "Independent Adoption" form. But a plan without any textbooks was radical enough to be rejected, since the point of having state adoptions is to protect schools from themselves. And having drawn attention to our situation, we could no longer wait out the next five years in peace. Was there any way to make a decision that was educationally sound and ethical, too?

A Teacher's Illness

Dale had been absent frequently from her classroom at another school over the past three years. After a year's

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leave, she was assigned to a 4th grade at our school. What she really wanted was a permanent disability leave, but the district contended that she was not truly ill, just malingering. There was, in fact, little tangible evidence of illness in her appearance or medical records, though her current doctor said she had allergies to substances common in the school environment. A long struggle between the teachers' union and the district began.

In the meantime, I had to apportion 75 children among 3 teachers: Dale and two other, capable, 4th grade teachers. If any children had to be in Dale's class, my feeling was that they should be survivors, children who could learn on their own no matter what the circumstances. A couple of parents who had heard about Dale let me know that they didn't want their children in her class. Based on their past involvement with the school, I knew I would hear from them again if I placed their children in Dale's class. Yet their children were among those who could make it anywhere. What should I do?

As the year progressed, more problems surfaced. Our teachers planned together as grade-level teams, and the other two 4th grade teachers didn't want to plan with Dale, who worked

little and talked about her symptoms a lot. When Dale was present, her teaching was satisfactory, but her program had no continuity. Her attitude toward her students, although pleasant enough, was detached. Phone calls came regularly. Some parents demanded that Dale be fired; others insisted that their children be transferred immediately to another class. Parents wanted explanations. They wanted me to do something.

Eventually, the assistant superintendent phoned me; she also wanted me to do something, but she didn't say what. All of the solutions I came up with involved putting pressure on other people: the superintendent, the

head of the teachers' union, the other 4th grade teachers, parents, or Dale, herself. Would such actions be ethical? I believed that this teacher was truly ill and deserved consideration from the school district, her long-time employer, and me, its agent. Yet, I also believed that the children deserved a healthy teacher, right away. What should I do?

Playing on the Same Team

I can't leave these stories without telling you that they all ended happily. Jamie found a place in a learning disabilities classroom, where he flourished. Our school got the right mate-

rials for our science curriculum. Dale left teaching at the end of the first semester that year with some compensation from the district. And I went on to face more ethical problems.

Searching my memory for ethical dilemmas I have encountered, I was surprised at how hard it was to find

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conflicts caused by students, parents, or teachers, and how easy to find ones caused by my superiors or government agencies. As I suggested earlier, this is not a matter of the good guys versus the bad guys. Selfishness, arrogance, and rigid thinking exist in all of us, but they are less likely to surface when people have to deal with others as thinking, feeling human beings rather than as names on paper.

Given the complexity of individuals and institutions, I don't think we will ever all play on the same team. But those of us in education could work toward flattening the structures of our teams, so that the people making the rules and setting the standards are also the ones on the line playing the game: getting dirty, suffering bruises, feeling fear, and tasting their own blood from time to time.

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