

Voices

Are You an Educational Leader



Or an Institution Manager?

by
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SD 51

Have you ever felt more like a manager of your school than the educational leader? The answer can depend on a multitude of elements, many of which are in your control.

Some teachers manage like prison guards, whereas others teach, inspire, and foster learning in their classroom. Administrators can wear the same guise; they can be wardens of their institution or they can be leaders that nurture capacity and academic achievement, and encourage collaboration in all of their stakeholders. As an administrator, I strive to be the latter. I believe most others would feel the same way, as administrators take on this increasingly challenging role to foster positive change in their school. If this is true, why do so many administrators struggle with this transition from warden to leader? It may be because many can learn to manage, but not everyone is willing to learn to lead.

An administrator's role is complex and diverse; being a catalyst of change where you are seen as 'leading' and not simply 'managing' takes dedication, perseverance, and skill. Sullivan and Glanz advocate that, "transforming schools is easily done if superficially, such change, however, is ephemeral".¹ Lasting change takes time: move too fast and you will experience overt – or worse covert – resentment that results in lower buy-in. Move too slowly, and staff may lose focus, and lose sight of the school vision.

There are techniques that can foster a transformational process through which school managers can become school leaders. This transition is no simple task, especially when you factor in the school climate or culture that you are currently working in, or that you may be joining. One of the first things to consider in your transition is communication.

¹ *Supervision That Improves Teaching and Learning* by Susan Sullivan and Jeffery Glanz California 2013 Corwin Press, p. 172

Communication is a skill which needs to be learned, contemplated, and practiced. In my experience, the best form of communication comes through a democratic leadership model where the focus is on reciprocal communication. This means creating a culture in the school where everyone feels they have a voice, and conversations between all staff are acknowledged and actively heard. Having this culture in your school will encourage staff to feel safe and to take risks when trying or proposing new ideas that will improve the learning environment. I have found that this can be accomplished by modeling vulnerability (taking risks by thinking outside the box), seeking out staff opinions, and not being afraid to acknowledge that you are wrong. It's through this process that a collective and collaborative voice can be established, while providing a school leader the opportunity to truly lead rather than informing from a top-down position.

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Linked with the idea that communication is fundamental to leading is the concept of presence.

Presence is key to being a leader. There are too many times that I have seen managers isolate themselves in their office, and you can't lead behind a closed door. To be a leader, you need to be on the front line supporting, problem-solving, and listening to the needs of your staff in a transparent manner. You need to practice what you preach, be present, be proactive, and be available as we implement and model democratic leadership.

Regardless of who you are talking to, in order to attain and maintain consistent buy-in and trust from staff, you need to listen. This is critical to leading staff, rather than managing them. And listening means active listening, not just with

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your ears but through body language and active engagement in two-way relational communication. You need to listen without preconceived notions of what you will hear, and to let the staff member you are speaking with finish before you jump in. Be mindful of your body language, since much of what is said doesn't come from what we say. By being an active participant and making time for dialogue – whether or not you can assist or solve the issue in that moment – you begin or continue to foster a relationship with that individual.

As with students, the key component to working with and leading staff is an authentic relationship. The reality is that you can't lead unless others choose to follow. It's the foundation that distinguishes a leader from a manager. Without a relational partnership, it will be difficult to garner respect, and continued growth in your school will be challenging, if not impossible. Dunklee mirrors this view saying that "effective Principals use careful listening to gain direct access to their followers' most pressing concerns"² and by doing so, it increases the likelihood that your staff will support your desire to lead the school into a stronger future together. Active listening helps to build a relationship that allows you to extend beyond the walls of management, and affect change.

2 *If You Want to Lead, Not Just Manage: A Primer for Principals* by Dennis R. Dunklee California 2000 Corwin Press. p. 73

There is one more component needed to free yourself from the shackles of being a school manager, and moving to become a school leader. Managers transform into leaders when they not only actively listen, but when they take an interest in their staff's teaching methodology. In this way, they can learn more about those people and their skills. This enables teachers to pursue their own passions within the school, creating the capacity for a multitude of school initiatives that may not otherwise have developed. It empowers staff, giving them a sense of ownership and pride in their workplace. It also increases the likelihood for future engagement with initiatives the administrator has in mind. A supportive culture is formed, and the school becomes a place where learning occurs on many levels without any one person burning out. Active listening naturally allows for trust and a shared vision to materialize and flourish. It can also open up team-teaching opportunities, where mutual respect can grow and best practices for students can be achieved.

I hope that these strategies will aid in creating a positive school culture where you are seen as the leader and not just the manager. It's important to note that when you incorporate any of these strategies – or others not mentioned here – that you do so with purpose. Leading with purpose ensures that your daily tasks – walkthroughs, stakeholder conversations, modeling – will have a positive impact. Whether the impact is small or large, purposeful leading will eventually promote your desired outcome. It will build capacity within your staff, and remind them to also be purposeful in their actions.

Becoming the leader of your school is different from being the administrator who manages it. Through communication and active listening – all in a purposeful manner – you will achieve an outcome where all stakeholders will benefit and thrive.