

Introduction

The qualities used to describe an excellent leader are akin to those of a near-perfect human being. The human and intellectual characteristics desired in a search for candidates to fill a principal's position would serve as the prerequisites for an ideal administrator of a business enterprise, a governmental chief executive, or even a religious leader. When asked to describe the attributes they would like their principal to possess, superintendents, teachers, parents, and community leaders are often able to mention qualities that are quite similar to those recommended by educational researchers. There is a strong emphasis on sensitivity and humane characteristics. The input invariably urges the employment of a leader and not a boss.

The following poem captures these initial sentiments and serves as an exploration of the requirement for a principal to be compassionate, collaborative, and sensitive. As the title of the poem suggests, there is a divergent set of characteristics that must also be considered.

The Leader and the Boss

The boss drives the staff: The leader coaches them.
The boss depends upon authority: The leader on good will.
The boss inspires fear: The leader inspires enthusiasm.
The boss says "I": The leader says "We."
The boss assigns the tasks: The leader sets the pace.
The boss says, "Get here on time!": The leader gets there ahead of time.
The boss fixes the blame for the breakdown: The leader fixes the breakdown.
The boss knows how it is done: The leader shows how it is done.
The boss makes work drudgery: The leader makes it a game.
The boss says, "Go": The leader says, "Let's go."
The world needs leaders: Nobody wants a boss!

—Harry Gordon Selfridge

2 • Mastering the Balance of the Principalsip

There was a time when this poem fully expressed my sentiments, and I concurred with the accepted model for a principal's leadership style. If the principal treated personnel as people, they would feel appreciated and would maximize their efforts. If they observed how the principal cared about children and staff, those attributes would set a positive tone for the entire school. I'd have to acknowledge that developing and enhancing this warm and caring climate was initially very successful for me as a middle school principal. However, as the reader will discover, there are times when being one who exclusively "cares and shares" simply won't get the job done.

In no way am I suggesting the abandonment of these positive attributes. Hopefully every aspiring principal will value these inspirational and caring qualities. However, experience has made it clear that there are times when the school principal must handle certain behaviors of students, staff, and parents in a firm, nonnegotiable manner. Further, even in this era of shared decision making, certain actions by the principal must be taken unilaterally. The reader will find that President Harry S. Truman was correct when he said, "The buck stops here." Over 35 years of service as a school administrator have helped to formulate the definition of a principal as a leader who must be both compassionate and decisive.

When I deliver a keynote address, "The Leader and the Boss" poem generally gets a warm, enthusiastic response from most audiences. It is a superior tone setter and can be counted on to capture the hearts of staff members. The experienced administrator should be aware that it is difficult to maintain this aura when asked to address the problems associated with granting tenure, renewing the contracts of staff members who have seemingly burned out, and confronting teachers whose reaction to children has become harsh, insensitive, and hurtful.

Confronting unprofessional behavior is as important as praising every extraordinary effort of staff members. The school principal should possess the skills to do both. However, the truly courageous leader must recognize that at times, the position requires a tough taskmaster—a person who cannot afford to worry about winning the congeniality award. It would be foolhardy at such times to be concerned about one's popularity. The primary task is to focus one's energy on doing what's best for children, the staff, and the school. In this incredible balancing act, the weight must tip to the side of the children. The primary objective is to be respected, not simply viewed as a wonderful, caring human being.

The reader should note that striking the balance is sometimes an unreachable goal. This book will delineate both leadership styles through the discussion of actual supervisory challenges. Hopefully, unilateral decisiveness will be viewed as a positive, essential ingredient in a supervisor's

array of techniques. For those who concentrate solely on humanistic qualities, this tenet may become difficult to utilize in a host of situations. To reach for excellence in all they aspire to achieve, leaders must, at times, make unpopular decisions.

Perhaps an actual incident, which occurred during the first month of my employment as a middle school principal, will validate this thesis. I was in the nurse's office when a young man came in to request first aid for a rather swollen bruise he had on his leg. After applying an ice pack, the nurse began filling out the required accident form. The student said he was sitting in class and had his foot in the aisle between two rows of seats. When the teacher came by, she deliberately kicked him and told the lad to keep his feet under the desk and out of the aisle. The nurse shook her head and mentioned that this was not a singular incident.

The teacher involved was one of the most feared and respected staff members on the faculty. She had been teaching for over 35 years and was hardworking and demanding, and she handled her own disciplinary problems. She prided herself on never needing the assistance of the school's administrators and on being capable of teaching both slow and gifted learners. It was, however, common knowledge that she used physical force in dealing with students when she deemed it necessary.

It would have been easy to let the incident go unchallenged, but for me as a principal attempting to create a caring and safe educational environment, it would have been a betrayal of both my own philosophy and the professional standards I wanted to impart to my staff. I asked the teacher to see me after school on the day of the incident.

She made no effort to deny the description in the accident report that was presented to her. In fact, she evidenced a degree of pride when she exclaimed, "No kid is going to put his feet in the aisles in my classroom! If he does, I'll kick him as hard as I kicked the other kid." I was aware that my response would reverberate around the building. I said in a calm voice that her physical abuse of children would not be tolerated. The incident would be reported to the superintendent of schools, and if it recurred, I would recommend that disciplinary action be instituted against her.

She left the room without another word being said. The unilateral decision had a host of positive ripple effects throughout the building. Several staff members mentioned that it was about time that someone confronted her. A new teacher who was formerly intimidated by this colleague put up a sign above her door that said, "Abuse Not Practiced Here." Most important of all was the fact that the entire faculty became convinced that a giant step had been taken toward the establishment of a more caring academic atmosphere.

4 • Mastering the Balance of the Principalship

The teacher involved did not talk to me, unless it was absolutely necessary, for the remainder of the school year. However, she never abused another child in her class or in our school. In the process, she also lost a degree of status as one of the faculty leaders. Her hostile comments and reactions that formerly went unchallenged were now openly debated by staff members. She remained a demanding teacher, but abuse was no longer a part of her professional repertoire.

The courage to care does not come easily, nor does the belief that sometimes the principal has to act decisively and without the support of a shared decision-making committee. As the reader will learn, many of my mistakes in judgment ultimately helped me to grow professionally and to better balance caring with unilateral decisiveness.