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Weighing Options

Prin cipals can become overwhelmed by mounting pressures; limited time and resources; competing demands; the needs of students, parents, and staff; and an expectation that dozens of critical decisions be made on a daily basis. Often principals feel compelled to make decisions without sufficient data, reflection, advice, or careful analysis. Making even one poor decision can cause a loss of respect and support from staff, supervisors, and parents; a series of bad decisions can trigger the voluntary or involuntary end of the principalship. Teachers and parents can be very unforgiving of bad decisions. That does not mean that principals should lead walking on eggshells, but proceeding with caution is strongly advised. Decisions, unless tied to a crisis, should be made after a period of thoughtful consideration. In this chapter, we take a look at how principals describe their own key problem-solving processes and explore two case studies in which major decisions were made, with very different results.

CASE STUDY #1

It All Started So Well—How Poorly Made Decisions Can Sabotage a Principalship

Dr. Iona was the district's top choice for principal of Coventry Oxford School. She had a master's from a top Ivy League school and a doctorate

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from a nationally ranked school of education. She had 6 years of experience as a school administrator and 10 years of experience as a classroom teacher. Though most of her experience was at the high school level, she had experience as a K–12 director. Dr. Iona eagerly started her new position at Coventry Oxford School. She was warmly embraced by the faculty who had not supported her predecessor.

Within a couple of months of being at Coventry Oxford, a welcome celebration was held and teachers gave speeches about how happy they were to have Dr. Iona at their school. Dr. Iona's first priority was getting to know her teachers and being responsive to their concerns. When Dr. Iona learned that a group of teachers needed additional tutors, she scheduled a volunteer to work with students. Dr. Iona was told that communication was an issue, so she implemented several strategies to improve communication. She generated weekly **Connect Ed**, electronic mass notification messages to parents and staff, quarterly parent website messages, frequent data updates, and weekly newsletters to her staff. Dr. Iona also worked closely with her School Improvement Team and established a Leadership Team that included teachers.

Dr. Iona had an open-door policy for teachers and parents. She was responsive to parents but not intimidated by them. Even before she started her position officially, a parent sent her an e-mail requesting to change her child's teacher. Dr. Iona listened to the parent's concerns but stated both to the parent and publically to her faculty that she would not support changing teachers. The student was not moved, but the parent's concerns were addressed. Dr. Iona also did a lot of research before making decisions and followed up with teachers when parent concerns were brought to her attention. When she discovered an additional \$22,000 in the budget for instructional supplies, Dr. Iona invited her teachers to give their input on how to spend the dollars. Dr. Iona was visible in classrooms and handled discipline consistently. When it became apparent that limited technology was an issue, Dr. Iona worked with the technology facilitator to obtain low-cost refurbished computers and turned a vacant classroom into an additional computer lab. Notes and requests left in Dr. Iona's mailbox were removed and addressed in a timely manner. Dr. Iona was frank and scrupulous in her dealings and sought feedback from her staff on her performance as a principal. Dr. Iona couldn't imagine working anywhere else.

Dr. Iona's second year, however, was beset with one problem after another. Though she consulted the Leadership Team and teachers about a master schedule change, the schedule she adopted created several stressors: some students ate lunch at 10:40 a.m., lunch lines were excessively long

because of no breaks in the schedule, and teachers complained of being tired at the end of day because of the changes. Dr. Iona forged ahead, mistakenly thinking that the issues could be resolved given the positive gain of 75 minutes of common planning time.

Rather than inform Dr. Iona of their concerns, teachers complained to parents. Dr. Iona had developed good communication with some staff members, but she had not developed the level of trust needed to weather the storm. By the third week of school after a meeting with an influential parent and some teacher leaders, Dr. Iona realized that the scheduling concerns could not be rectified, so a move was made to return to the previous schedule with some minor changes.

In an effort to provide sufficient dollars for an intervention position, classes were scheduled at the maximum class sizes. The state changed the class size maximums, but the district did not notify principals so several classes were overcrowded at the start of the school year. A new teacher was hired to offset the overcrowding, but that resulted in students changing classes after school started.

While cleaning up this mess, Dr. Iona began to be pressured by her area superintendent to implement significant midyear changes. The required submission of professional learning community (PLC) minutes had already been introduced at the beginning of the year. Now the central office was requiring that Coventry Oxford School adopt new midyear district assessments and teachers were required to have lesson plans visible and available in classrooms during classroom walkthroughs. Teachers posted veiled concerns on a website and complained vehemently to parents about low morale. Dr. Iona felt compelled to offer teachers and parents the opportunity to share concerns in a survey that central office developed and disseminated. The results were not surprising, and the School Improvement Team and area superintendent continued to be supportive of Dr. Iona. Dr. Iona proactively anticipated the concerns and shared a plan to address concerns with parents and faculty. She also provided opportunities at Leadership Team meetings, a PTA meeting, and at faculty meetings to discuss and address concerns. Though Dr. Iona was weathering the storm, it soon became evident that it was time to consider other professional options. She was offered and accepted another administrative post, which she announced to her faculty before the end of her second year as principal.

Throughout the spring, Dr. Iona remained upbeat and responsive. She continued to work arduously and maintained several strong initiatives that she introduced during her opening-of-school faculty meeting. Dr. Iona was fortunate to leave Coventry Oxford School with her reputation intact. She proudly left her school with a significant gain on the overall composite on the state's standardized test scores.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Summarize what you know about the decisions that Dr. Iona made. What else would you like to know?

1. By all visible measures, Dr. Iona had a very successful first year. What are some of the strategies that Dr. Iona utilized that led to a successful first year?
2. What type of feedback mechanisms should Dr. Iona have put in place when she implemented the school-wide change to the master schedule?
3. What decisions should principals make about which students are allowed to change classes? How can changes to a new teacher's class be made equitably?
4. What critical errors in decision making did Dr. Iona make that eroded the trust of her faculty? What could you have done to successfully move your faculty toward the change mandated by the district?

Turn to the Resources in the back of the book for a summary of how Dr. Iona might have handled the events of her second year differently.

Key Problem-Solving Processes of Expert Principals

Expert and typical principals differ in how they would respond if faced with Dr. Iona's situation. Brenninkmeyer and Spillane (2008) distinguished between expert and typical problem-solving processes by stating that expert principals followed a plan and typical principals developed disparate solutions that were not indicative of prior planning. Expert principals, they found, utilize key problem-solving processes when faced with difficult and complex decisions. In contrast, typical principals rely on retelling negative experiences, prioritize staff needs over student needs, resort to making assumptions, focus on parent satisfaction, and emphasize outward affects, personal victories, and defeats. Experts were also described as confronting conflict, whereas typical principals eschewed conflict when dealing with problems. Findings from five studies that outlined key problem-solving processes of expert school principals are collated in Table 1.1. The

problem-solving processes, though distinct, seem to fall naturally into three loosely related groups:

1. **Data Focus:** gathers data, analyzes the scenario, recounts relevant anecdotes, identifies and overcomes constraints, and plans approach.
2. **Improvement Focus:** faces conflict, considers long-term outlook, and stresses follow-up.
3. **Stakeholder Focus:** emphasizes student program quality, delegates, and keeps parents informed.

Table 1.1 Expert Principal Problem-Solving Processes

<i>Data Focus</i>	
Gathers data	Collects pertinent information as a resolution is being sought
Analyzes the scenario	Considers multiple ways problems can be framed, questions all premises and common understandings
Recounts relevant anecdotes	Makes connections to related experiences
Identifies, overcomes constraints	Develops ways of managing obstacles
Plans approach	Evidence of organized, well-planned decision making
<i>Improvement Focus</i>	
Faces conflicts	Sees what can be learned from conflict
Considers long-term outlook	Lasting impact of the decision on the future is an integral part of decision making
Stresses follow-up	Monitors the effect of initiatives and decisions
<i>Stakeholder Focus</i>	
Emphasizes student program quality	Considers the impact on student growth and learning
Delegates	Embraces shared decision making, utilizes distributed leadership style, relies on others to assist with completing tasks
Keeps parents informed	Prioritizes communicating with parents

Sources: Bullock, James, & Jamieson (1995); Chi, Glaser, & Farr (1988) as cited in Brenninkmeyer & Spillane (2008); Copland (2003); Leithwood (1995); Leithwood & Stager (1989).

In the sections that follow, each of the three broad categories of problem-solving styles is illustrated with an example drawn from my experiences as an administrator or my conversations with principals.

Data Focus

Gathering data refers to collecting pertinent information in the process of seeking a resolution. Analyzing the scenario includes considering multiple ways of framing a problem and questioning all premises and common understandings. Identifying and overcoming constraints consists of making connections to related experiences. Expert principals who plan their approach with this focus demonstrate evidence of well-planned decision making.

Ms. Edmonds: Focused on Data

Ms. Edmonds was an expert principal who made complex decisions that appeared to be made effortlessly. She invested a considerable amount of time thoughtfully contemplating her options, gathering data, and listening intently to her staff, students, and parents. In her first year as a principal at Kingston Ridge, a prestigious high school, Ms. Edmonds was confronted with a cheating scandal that rocked her community.

Ms. Edmonds had faced previous cheating issues on a much smaller scale as an administrator in a former school, but this situation was different. Ms. Edmonds spent countless hours meeting with students, teachers, parents, and her assistant principals before determining her course of action. While conducting an investigation of a student who had used a cell phone to take pictures of a test answer sheet, Ms. Edmonds uncovered another cheating issue. In the separate cheating incident, at least two students were caught on camera entering the building using an improperly secured master key. The students admitted to making copies of tests and distributing them to other students. As the investigation continued, it became apparent that 11 students were involved. Most of the students were seniors so once area colleges learned of the scandal, they asked for the names of the students who were being disciplined. Ms. Edmonds decided not to press criminal charges, but instead assigned students a zero on the tests and issued out-of-school suspensions. The consequences were in line with consequences listed in the student handbook. In her estimation, the remorse expressed by the implicated students, the rescinded college acceptances, and the peer ostracism they faced were severe enough consequences.

As the scandal unfolded, Ms. Edmonds prioritized communicating with staff electronically and she held a meeting with the entire faculty. Ms. Edmonds also sent a letter to parents and spoke candidly to the media about the incidents. Ms. Edmonds was methodical in her investigation. She gathered all the available information before moving toward a decision. She analyzed the scandal from many stakeholders' viewpoints—parents, students, faculty, central office, and outside constituents—and framed the problem in multiple ways. She treated parents and students as she would have wanted to be treated if her own child had been involved in a scandal of this magnitude. Her care for students, parents, and her faculty was evident in how she handled the situation. She carefully weighed the possible consequences of student criminal charges, the impact of student academic consequences, the need to secure the building given the distribution of the master keys, teacher sentiments, parental responses, media attention, and the reputation and culture of the school. Ms. Edmonds faced the conflict and used a well-planned approach that allowed her school to frame the scandal as a learning experience. In short, Ms. Edmonds focused on data in her decision making.

Improvement Focus

Facing conflict consists of seeing what can be learned from conflict. Considering the long-term outlook includes examining the lasting impact of the decision on the future. Focusing on following up refers to monitoring the effect of initiatives and decisions.

Ms. Steadman: Focused on Improvement

Ms. Steadman, the principal of Morant Surrey High School, had 7 years' experience supervising and evaluating teachers. During that time, she had hired, supervised, and recommended underperforming teachers for nonrenewal. Ms. Wilmington was a nontenured French teacher who had been working at Morant Surrey High School for 2 years when Ms. Steadman arrived. Ms. Wilmington seemed to have a good command of the spoken and written language. Initial observations revealed that Ms. Wilmington was prepared for class and that her students were engaged and on task. She introduced grammar games and humor and connected with her student athletes.

While conducting classroom walkthroughs and observations, several concerns became evident. Ms. Steadman decided to increase her monitoring of Ms. Wilmington's performance and required Ms. Wilmington to submit district-mandated curriculum guides

for all courses she was teaching, a detailed syllabus, an assessment calendar, and a plan for improving the performance of French students. Ms. Steadman documented in a midyear evaluation that Ms. Wilmington did not provide any of the requested information. Ms. Steadman also noted that a male student in Ms. Wilmington's class was wearing headphones during the introduction of a new grammar concept. Ms. Wilmington was encouraged to interrupt such behavior if it were to occur again. While Ms. Wilmington may have needed to teach some grammatical concepts in English, she was advised to use more of the target language for instruction. Ms. Wilmington was also told to attend a school-funded Advanced Placement (AP) French workshop, but she failed to attend.

During Ms. Wilmington's initial tenure at Morant Surrey High School, she gave all appearances of being a dedicated French language teacher but soon her attendance began to slip, marital issues with her spouse developed, and complaints from students and parents began to surface. A French parent contacted the principal and expressed concerns about Ms. Wilmington's ability to adequately prepare students for the AP French exam. Students also complained that Ms. Wilmington talked incessantly with them about her marital problems. It soon became evident that Ms. Wilmington was not meeting expectations and Ms. Steadman needed to make a decision. On midyear and end-of-year teacher performance reviews, several recommendations were listed. Ms. Wilmington's attendance became a concern. During the first 3 months of the school year, Ms. Wilmington had already missed 10 days. When she was absent, lesson plans were inadequate or nonexistent. For one absence, Ms. Wilmington left an English video with French subtitles, which students said they had already watched multiple times. Though a native speaker was available as a substitute, Ms. Wilmington refused to contact the sub citing concerns about the sub's adherence to her lesson plans.

At the conclusion of the second year of closely supervising Ms. Wilmington, Ms. Steadman made the decision not to recommend Ms. Wilmington for continued employment as a teacher at Morant Surrey High School. Though Ms. Steadman spent an inordinate amount of time conducting observations, meeting with Ms. Wilmington, and writing evaluations, it was worth it to ensure that her students received quality instruction. Ms. Steadman decided to face the conflict introduced by an underperforming teacher, consider the long-term impact of taking the steps necessary to remove the teacher, and follow up repeatedly on her recommendations with written feedback. Ms. Steadman made decisions that illustrated her focus on improving instruction.

Stakeholder Focus

Focusing on student program quality includes considering the impact on student growth and learning. Delegating includes utilizing shared decision making and distributed leadership. Keeping parents informed includes prioritizing regular communication with parents.

Principal Lee: Focused on Stakeholders

Principal Lee considered the decisions that she would need to make to improve the performance of rising ninth graders on the End of Course (EOC) tests at Manchester Key High School. Manchester Key had a rising ninth-grade class of 350 students. Of the 17 ninth-grade students who did not pass the EOC, eight were English Language Learners (ELLs), nine were African American, and only one was White. Ms. Lee reviewed the students' transcripts and found that only half the students were enrolled in Reading and their eighth-grade End of Grade (EOG) test scores ranged from 44% to 39%. She shared her assessment with the English department chair, Ms. Ogden. Ms. Lee concluded that they needed to create targeted English as a Second Language (ESL) support and a well-developed program to prepare students for ninth-grade English, enroll students who earned 1s and 2s (failing marks) on the EOGs in a ninth-grade Reading class, and avoid the predictability of race: that is, of having African American and Latino students constitute the majority of students failing to pass the English I EOC (all except three were Asian). Ms. Lee talked with the department chair, Ms. Ogden, about how the English department, ESL department, Reading teacher, and school administration could work together to help ESL students and African American students with 1s or 2s on the eighth-grade Reading EOG be successful in ninth-grade English.

The vacant ESL coordinator position was filled by Dr. Garvey. After inheriting a department that was ill-functioning at best, Dr. Garvey reinvigorated relationships with faculty and articulated strategies for collaboration with teachers to serve the needs of ELLs. Dr. Garvey became well versed in the curriculum of the classes her students were taking. During scheduled study sessions, Dr. Garvey used scaffolding to reteach difficult concepts and to ensure her students' success. She defined academic vocabulary, highlighted nuances in the English language, and prepared study guides. Dr. Garvey was available to students during lunch and after school and assisted students with navigating local outside agencies. Principal Lee and Ms. Ogden also

concluded that another strategy would be to require all entering ninth graders to take Reading. One obstacle they encountered was that high school students were embarrassed to have Reading listed on their schedule or transcript. Principal Lee consulted with the assistant superintendent, Reading teachers in other schools, and other principals about renaming the course. After several e-mails and meetings, the course was renamed EOC Preparation.

After consulting with the middle school, a letter was sent to all rising ninth graders in the summer who failed the eighth-grade Reading EOG. The letter informed parents that their child would be required to be enrolled in a reading class—EOC Preparation. Principal Lee and the department chair consistently supported the decision that no students would be allowed to drop the course. The Reading teacher helped develop the language for the letter and followed up personally with all the families. The letter stated that students would be screened and placed in the appropriate level using the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI). The goal was to improve reading skills and for students to practice reading texts that were of high interest and matched their reading levels. At the end of the first semester, those students reading on grade level would be allowed to drop the class. The communication with parents emphasized the expectation that all students show significant growth and successfully pass their EOCs. Ms. Lee made critical decisions that resulted in a successful instructional effort to improve the achievement of her lowest performing students. She collaborated with teachers and coordinators in her building and administrators across the district and maintained communication with parents regarding her efforts. In short, Ms. Lee focused on the stakeholders at her school.

CASE STUDY #2

Effectively Addressing an Egregious Error

Ms. Steadman, the principal of Morant Surrey High School, a college preparatory high school, customarily spent the days at the close of the school year reviewing reports on the number of students who had earned Ds and Fs as final grades. This year, she decided to take a closer look. In addition to tallying percentages and noting familiar names, she decided to look at some of the transcripts of students with two or more Fs. After reviewing the transcripts, she made a shocking discovery. She found

dozens of glaring errors. Students were not enrolled in the correct sequence of courses needed for graduation, students were reenrolled in courses that they had already passed, and students who had failed a prerequisite course were then enrolled in an Honors course. Roberto, a male Latino student in his fifth year of high school, had taken Algebra I 4 years in a row. Another Latino male student, Juan Jose, in his sixth year in high school, took World History as a ninth grader, got an A, repeated tenth grade, enrolled in World History again, earned a D, then took World History a third time and earned a C. Beatriz, a Latina female student, took English I, earned an F for the year, and then she was enrolled in Honors English I. An African American male student, Marvin, was a third-year ninth grader who was not enrolled in any math classes. Although math is a 4-year requirement, Marvin did not have math at all his second year in high school. Marvin was enrolled in U.S. History (eleventh-grade course) before Civics and Economics (tenth-grade course) and English IV before passing English III.

Ms. Steadman carefully analyzed her findings then developed a plan to share the data with the counseling department. She initially shared the data with two of the counselors whose students had errors on their transcripts and met with the Guidance department chair. They were appalled and also embarrassed by the errors. At the Guidance meeting with the other counselors, Ms. Steadman began by telling counselors that she believed that they had an effective counseling team that was working hard to support students. She expressed concerns that the students who were receiving most of their attention were the students applying to Ivy League schools and other highly selective schools. Because of the volume of parent e-mail, meetings, and phone calls, and the parents' diligence in following their children's courses, it would be highly unlikely that the children of their most affluent parents would have errors on their transcripts. Given this, Ms. Steadman indicated that she wanted to make sure that adequate time was spent reviewing the transcripts of their most fragile students.

Before presenting specific errors, Ms. Steadman acknowledged that at the request of counselors, there had been significant structural changes in the counseling department. The changes included adjustments in the grade levels assigned to counselors and a switch in the groups of students assigned alphabetically, for which counselors were responsible. Ms. Steadman also mentioned that there had been a lot of transition in the ESL department as well so some of the scheduling and transcript concerns might otherwise have been caught. In the next portion of the meeting, Ms. Steadman presented her discovery to counselors and introduced a plan to immediately address the flagrant errors. Ms. Steadman also solicited feedback on how to ensure that the errors did not reoccur.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Develop a summary of what you know about what happened. What else would you like to know?

1. Ms. Steadman outlined the process that she followed to communicate with individual counselors, the department chair, and the counseling team. How would you present the transcript errors to the counseling team?
2. How would you counter the assertion that counselors had insufficient time to carefully review all student transcripts in their caseload?
3. Would consequences be assigned to counselors who were responsible for the errors? Why or why not?
4. Given that the majority of transcript errors involved minority students, English Language Learners, and other fragile learners, what systems would you put in place to ensure that these transcript errors did not resurface?
5. What type of communication with parents and students would you initiate?

Turn to the Resources in the back of the book for a summary of how Ms. Steadman managed this situation.

Summary

There were clear warning signs that Dr. Iona overlooked that signaled that she was headed for trouble. Dr. Iona missed an opportunity to build on the success of her first year and instead spent her second year rebuilding her school community and salvaging her career.

Although Dr. Iona gathered data, attempted to analyze the scenarios, and faced the conflicts, she did not have a repertoire of experiences that would have allowed her to recount relevant anecdotes. Many of the decisions she faced were new to her so she just muddled her way through each situation. She used faulty reasoning to identify the constraints so the long-term outlook was therefore inaccurate. She did not utilize district resources and supports that could have helped her successfully manage her decisions. She focused on student program quality, but her analysis and the solutions developed were

flawed (Brenninkmeyer & Spillane, 2008). Dr. Iona could have avoided potential pitfalls by learning from the experiences of expert principals and developing a schema for making effective decisions.

On the other hand, Ms. Steadman used the problem-solving processes of an expert principal. Her schema for effective decision making included making the achievement of her most fragile students her priority. She gathered data and, after analyzing the scenario, made a decision to confront her counselors when egregious errors were detected. Ms. Steadman also recognized that blaming or embarrassing her counselors would be counterproductive. It was more important to acknowledge the errors, make a plan of improvement, and ensure she followed up. Ms. Steadman focused on program quality, dealt directly with the problem, and worked with counselors to develop a well-planned approach to the problem they faced.

In the following chapters, we see how 21 expert principals describe engaging in the key problem-solving practices outlined above when confronted with difficult and complex decisions. Additionally, principals relay how their core values, the school's culture, the impact of their decisions on faculty and students, the scope of the decision, and feedback from others affected their decision making.