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# 1 You've Got the Job

*There are many ways to be a principal, but you have to find the way that best suits you.*

—A beginning middle school principal

Congratulations and welcome to the principalship! You are about to embark on an exciting, challenging, and rewarding career. By now the thrill of your appointment has undoubtedly been replaced by a touch of anxiety—possibly sheer terror at the enormity of the responsibilities ahead. Progressing from the position of classroom teacher to the position of leader of an entire school is daunting. Most beginning principals experience a mix of emotions. A middle school principal explained, “I was nervous, anxious, scared, and overwhelmed, but also excited and enthusiastic.”

You may be having doubts about your ability to handle the new job. One principal acknowledged, “knowing that any mistake I make would affect so many people was unnerving.” Remember, you did not become principal by accident. You spent years studying and preparing for the position. Someone believed you were qualified. Someone has confidence in your ability to lead. Trust in yourself.

This chapter guides you through the concerns and issues that beginning principals experience, such as job anxiety, role change, leadership style, personal change, and relationship changes.

## EMBRACE THE ROLE

The principal’s role may have looked easy when you were a teacher or assistant principal. Now you find yourself awed at the magnitude of the job and

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wondering, “Where do I begin? One principal recalled, “It was the first day of school and I knew that the principal should visit classrooms to provide a calming, reassuring presence. But the thought that my presence—I, who felt unsure of myself—commanded such power was unnerving.”

As a teacher or assistant principal, you knew exactly how to behave, but your role has changed now. Those comfortable behaviors that served you well in your previous role need to be modified or replaced. Your new role involves developing and leading adults, although from time to time modeling classroom teaching skills will be important. One elementary principal explained, “It felt strange not being responsible for teaching kids. I was in such a different role—smiling and greeting rather than orienting kids in school procedures for the year.” An assistant principal recalled, “I was accustomed to following the principal’s lead. Now I had all the responsibilities. For the first time I understood what the principal meant by ‘the big picture.’”

### **Clarify Roles, Expectations, and Responsibilities**

Before you begin, be certain that you have a clear understanding of what is expected of you. The responsibilities of a principal tend to mushroom in number and ambiguity. One elementary principal lamented, “I was surprised to find that my role included examining students for head lice, planning for asbestos removal, and searching trash cans for lost retainers.” Another said, “According to the first graders, my job is to ‘talk on the phone, dispense birthday treats, open milk cartons, and put lost teeth in envelopes to take home for the tooth fairy.’”

Although sometimes humorous, role conflict and ambiguity become major causes of stress and burnout for principals. It is imperative for beginning principals to clarify the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of their position. Following are measures you should take:

1. Read your job description and contract carefully.
2. Clarify specific responsibilities with your supervisor.
3. Identify the processes and criteria for your evaluation.
4. Establish two-way communication with your supervisor.
5. Determine how your role supports the goals of the school district.
6. Identify the expectations of constituent groups of the school: staff, parents, students, and community.
7. Identify conflicting expectations held by (a) your supervisor, (b) staff, (c) parents, (d) students, and (e) the community.
8. Search for compatible solutions to role conflicts.

## WHAT KIND OF LEADER WILL YOU BE?

You may find it helpful to review the following leadership behaviors that you learned in your preparation program. They may take on new meaning now that you will be using them in a real principalship.

- Find a leadership model
- Look like a leader
- Make good decisions
- Interact with people
- Share information
- Know who you are
- Lead with your strengths
- Know what you stand for
- Act with deliberation
- Be a visionary leader
- Assume a calm, confident demeanor
- Be proactive
- Remain focused
- Get out of your office
- Act with integrity, ethics, and fairness
- Clarify roles and responsibilities

### Find a Leadership Model

Begin by deciding what kind of leader you would like to become and by practicing those behaviors. One beginning principal suggested finding “a leadership style that’s based on your strengths.” You probably worked for and learned from principals whose behavior you admired and worked for other principals whose behavior you did not admire. Make a list of the traits and behaviors that you want to emulate and a second list of those traits and behaviors that you want to avoid. At the end of the year, examine these lists and evaluate behavior.

As you develop your list of desirable behaviors, keep in mind that leaders are:

- Honest
- Consistent
- Competent
- Dependable
- Fair
- Attentive
- Supportive
- Goal Oriented
- Trustworthy
- Energetic
- Visionary
- Innovative
- Communicators
- Organized
- Decision Makers

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### **Look Like a Leader**

An important step in gaining respect as a leader is looking like one. There are those who argue that it is not what is on the outside, but what is on the inside that counts. Whether you like it or not, people respond to appearances.

Presenting a professional image as a leader includes the following: a professional wardrobe, impeccable grooming, good posture, proper manners, and good conversational skills. Professional appearance as a teacher is different from professional appearance as a principal. One elementary principal said, “I hope my clothes look professional. The culture of my building is to look professional and dress attractively. Getting used to wearing suits has been difficult.”

### **Make Good Decisions**

An important part of your job is making decisions and choices for the school. For instance, assessing school needs and deciding if, when, and how changes should be made; allocating resources; negotiating conflicting demands; solving problems; and handling school crises are examples of decision-making opportunities (Straub, 2000).

### **Interact With People**

The principalship is a people business. As leader of the school, you need to spend your time communicating, interacting, and collaborating with people, such as peers, parents, staff members, students, community members, supervisors, central office staff, and vendors.

You are also the symbolic figurehead of the school. You will be required to act as the school’s spokesperson at meetings and perform a variety of ceremonial duties. For example, your presence is expected at student performances, athletic events, parent meetings, graduations, and award ceremonies. Plan on being asked to “say a few words” wherever you go.

### **Share Information**

Your office is the hub of school information. You are the collector, keeper, and disseminator of information that emerges from the central office, school constituents, research, legislative updates, reports of best practices as well as grapevine news, gossip, gripes, and rumors.

You decide the importance and accuracy of information and determine which pieces of information should be shared with others. When information needs to be disseminated, you are the official spokesperson for the school.

## Know Who You Are

Strong leadership requires self-knowledge, an educational philosophy, and professional goals. These attributes are identified through self-examination and reflection. Be able to articulate the following: What are my strengths? What are my weaknesses? Where do I want to be in my career ten years from now?

## Lead With Your Strengths

Rely on your strengths, yet continue to improve your weaknesses. If your oral communication skills are limited, use as much written communication as possible until you have strengthened your oral communication skills.

Although personal strengths and weaknesses can be identified, in part, through self-appraisal, a thorough appraisal requires information and opinions from staff members, supervisors, and parents. A checklist to guide self-appraisal may be found in the resources (see Resource A).

## Know What You Stand For

Indecisive individuals are buffeted by every whisper of opinion. As a leader, you must be able to articulate what you believe and what you value. Develop an educational platform, a written statement of your educational values. An educational platform provides a framework and perspective for choices and decisions and strengthens your resolve when confronted with problems. Leaders who know what they stand for are consistent in demonstrating and rewarding behaviors that support their beliefs. They are confident and ready to defend their ethical convictions. Individuals without convictions stand for nothing. Like puppets, their actions are driven by the convictions of others. A written guide for formulating an educational philosophy can be found in Resource B.

## Act With Deliberation

From the beginning, know what kind of leader you want to be and how you want others to view you. Be consistent in demonstrating and rewarding behaviors that support school goals. Make your actions mirror your expectations.

## Be a Visionary Leader

*“Cheshire Puss . . . Would you tell me please, which way I ought to go . . . ?”*

*“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.*

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*“I don’t much care where . . . so long as I get somewhere,” said Alice.  
“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “If you only walk long  
enough.”*

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

Like Alice, some principals react to events rather than having a vision that drives their decisions. They allow daily school activities to consume their time, becoming managers rather than visionary leaders.

Visionary leaders have a personal vision, believe that they can make a difference, and are driven to act on what they believe is possible. In collaboration with the school’s stakeholders—teachers, staff, parents, students, and community members—they formulate a shared vision of what is desirable for the school. Members of the school community understand their role in achieving the collective vision for the school. Goals are formulated and action plans created.

Visionary leaders demonstrate five dominant qualities:

1. Visionary leaders are guided and motivated by personal values.
2. Visionary leaders have a commitment to the achievement of identified organizational goals.
3. Visionary leaders strive to develop a common sense of purpose and direction among all organizational members.
4. Visionary leaders are organizational innovators.
5. Visionary leaders consistently project, model, and attest to a future that represents something better. (Grady, 1990; Grady & LeSourd, 1990)

### **Assume a Calm, Confident Demeanor**

*Someone told me that I look like a principal. When I asked what that looked like, the woman said, “calm and not terribly talkative.”*

—An elementary principal

Successful principals exude auras of confidence and calm control. They listen more and talk less. They maintain their calm appearance even when things are in an uproar. By doing so, they instill confidence in their leadership and bring serenity to the school.

## **Be Proactive**

Leaders plan ahead and anticipate issues that will arise. They forecast problems, anticipate needs and reactions, and consider consequences before taking action. When situations arise, they engage in “what if” thinking:

- What is on the horizon?
- If it happens, how will people react?
- Who will be affected?
- What will the consequences be?
- Should we take action?
- If we act, what should we do?
- What if we ignore the situation?
- Which consequences will occur?

## **Remain Focused**

Leaders have a vision for the school and remain focused on their goals. Countless daily interruptions may be distracting, but they cannot deter leaders from their goals. Some principals keep their long-range goals taped to their desks. Others identify one goal and write it in their daily planners. They work to achieve the goal throughout the day, promptly returning to it after each distraction.

## **Get Out of Your Office**

Effective leaders do not lead from behind their desks. They are visible, not only during times of crisis, grief, and celebration, but everyday—in the hallways, classrooms, cafeteria, and school grounds. They spend their time interacting with teachers, students, and parents. They know and are known by everyone; they know firsthand what is happening in the school.

## **Act With Integrity, Fairness, and Ethics**

Leaders always do what is right, never what is simply expedient or easy. Treat everyone with respect. Remember your manners. Let courtesy be your guide.

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**EXPECT PERSONAL CHANGE**

*I lost weight, grew up, and developed thicker skin.*

—A beginning elementary principal

As you grow in leadership during your first year, your view of schools and education may change. Your work and interactions with people will mold and modify your attitudes and beliefs.

Profound leadership changes sometimes occur. Principals who begin their careers with democratic, collegial styles and a people orientation may become more bureaucratic, judgmental, directive, and task oriented. Since research indicates that administrators with democratic styles are more effective, this “transformation from Jekyll to Hyde” should be avoided (Schmidt, Kosmoski, & Pollack, 1998a, p. 12). Unfortunately, principals are often unaware that they have changed. What steps can you take to prevent unwanted change?

- Awareness
- Self-reflection
- Feedback from others
- Purposeful change

Awareness of the potential for change is the first step. Second, keep a journal and use it to reflect on your attitudes, decisions, and behaviors. Third, ask for feedback about your performance from supervisors and members of the school community. Rather than allowing undesirable habits to develop, make conscious choices about your behavior.

**Sadness**

A certain amount of nostalgia and sadness may be involved with change. Leaving the security and comfort of teaching can be difficult. One principal reported keeping boxes full of teaching materials for years—“just in case.” Parting with the materials felt like “discarding part of myself.” Another individual who assumed a principalship in the same school where she had taught said, “In retrospect, it wasn’t a good idea, but I continued teaching one of my classes. I felt uncomfortable in the role of principal, so I clung to the comfortable security of teaching.”

**Loneliness**

Many beginning principals are shocked at the loneliness of the job. Isolation stems from not being able to share information, discuss problems, or obtain feedback. Although staff can collaborate and assist in some decisions, many decisions belong solely to the principal.

Principals who work with assistant principals can create administrative teams within which issues, goals, and problems can be discussed. Other principals may discuss issues with secretaries, administrative assistants, and school counselors. Caution is necessary, however, because the principal supervises and evaluates these school employees. As one principal remarked, "My secretary was the best listener. However, regardless of what I said or suggested, she always replied, "That's a good idea.""

Confidentiality is also an issue. Principals need to be cautious about sharing information; much school information cannot be shared.

Beginning principals are often shocked to discover how much personal information parents, staff members, and students share with them. Often principals would prefer not to receive personal information that is unrelated to school issues. Personal information is confidential. A retired principal reflected, "I was told many secrets over the years, and I still keep them today." If, however, a student is being mistreated, is suicidal, or if any criminal activity is involved, that information must be given to appropriate authorities.

## EXPECT RELATIONSHIPS TO CHANGE

*My relationships changed from being a colleague to being a boss. It was an adjustment that took some time getting used to.*

—A secondary principal

Once you assume a principal's position, relationships change. The emotional and social changes that accompany the role change from teacher or assistant principal to principal are complex. Although you may feel the same, others view you differently. Redefining your role is not a skill taught in graduate school. The process does not occur quickly or easily.

### Loss of Camaraderie

The camaraderie, once enjoyed as a teacher, is absent and missed in the principal's role. Teachers are unaware of the conflicting demands, long hours, and pressures of being a principal. Teachers are not privy to all of the information used in decision making. It is a given that decisions will never please everyone. Unpopular duties must be assigned, and occasionally unfavorable personnel decisions must be made.

The principal is no longer part of the teachers' peer group. A surprised elementary principal who "thought everything would be the same" described teachers' responses as "a bit standoffish." Chilly greetings, complaints, and hushed voices are a harsh reality for beginning principals who once shared in the warmth of faculty camaraderie. Some beginning principals are

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shocked and dismayed when they discover that when they enter the faculty room, conversation stops. One principal remarked, “I was hurt when one of my friends, upon learning of my appointment as a principal, said, ‘You’ve joined the enemy now.’” Even though faculty and staff members are friendly, the principal remains “the boss”—the person who has the power to make decisions that affect their work lives. One elementary principal commented, “It surprised me that people would say things like, ‘It sure will be great working for you.’ I always think of myself as working *with* people. It felt strange when people asked me if they could leave early . . . requests you make of a boss.”

### Changed Friendships

Friendships with former friends may be altered; some may disappear. Teachers who were once peers are now subordinates. Although most principals socialize and enjoy friendly interactions and relationships with their teachers, principals are not members of faculty social networks. Old friends may distance themselves.

A teacher who became principal in the school where she taught said, “I was shocked and hurt at how my former colleagues treated me. I expected their support. Instead, they responded with jealousy and distrust. I gained a new position and lost my friends.” Another principal was told, “You joined the other side.” An elementary principal was warned, “We expect you to be our voice. Don’t ever forget where you came from.” Although it is possible for principals and teachers to maintain their friendships, the friendships may have a greater likelihood of survival when the new principal is in a different school.

If you have assumed leadership of a school where you previously taught, your relations with former colleagues will be different. You are now the boss, the person who makes decisions, supervises, and evaluates. One principal explained, “Because I had previously taught at the school, a staff member told me that he worried my former teammates would receive more favorable treatment.” Another said, “Building new relationships with the teachers was a challenge. People see you differently and treat you differently when you’re the boss, even though you don’t feel different.” Some friendships will disappear. Those that survive will be altered by the new work relationship.

### Finding Support

*My best friends are fellow principals. I’m part of a group that meets regularly to discuss mutual challenges, celebrate successes, and socialize. Sometimes we meet for dinner and include our spouses*

—A veteran principal

Friendship and support can be found with your new peer group of principals. Meet them and organize study or social groups; join professional organizations; build a support community.

Your secretary can also become a member of your support group. Cultivating a close relationship with your secretary is essential. A loyal secretary is the protector of your privacy and time, a source of information, and a cheerleader when you are discouraged. A disloyal secretary, or one who inappropriately shares confidential information, is a dangerous and destructive foe who should be replaced.

One principal explained about her secretary,

She knew everybody in the community. I always sought information from her before meeting with parents. Her pivotal position in the school put her in touch with teachers and parents, providing opportunities to hear their levels of satisfaction—things they liked and didn't like. She was a good sounding board for how the people might respond. Whenever I was discouraged and started bemoaning a project that failed, my secretary began her litany of my accomplishments in the school. She provided a wider perspective on a temporary setback and lifted my spirits. I treasured her loyalty and support.

Some principals confide in school counselors. Faculty members and parents may speak more candidly with the school counselor than with the principal. Counselors can provide alternative perspectives on a range of issues (Brock & Ponec, 1998; Ponec & Brock, 2000). One principal remarked, "I often used my school counselor as a sounding board before I presented a change to the faculty. She had a good sense of how the teachers would respond and often advised me of alternative methods of presenting ideas and change to them." Another said, "When I am having difficulty dealing with an individual, I often seek out ideas from the counselor" (Brock & Ponec, 1998).

Remember, however, that whether it is a secretary or a school counselor, you, as principal, are responsible for evaluating these individuals. Although secretaries and counselors can provide information and suggestions from alternate perspectives, a better choice for sharing administrative problems is another principal or a former professor with recent experience as a building principal.

## **HANG ON!**

Do not give up at the first crisis. When the first school crisis occurs, many new principals yearn to be back in the classrooms. Some eventually give up

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and return to teaching. Others pursue central office positions or college teaching, erroneously thinking that these positions are less stressful.

Retreating in the first year or two is not the best choice. Discomfort in a new situation is normal. Feeling comfortable and confident in a new job takes about three years. Although you may be quaking inside, assume an air of confidence. One principal shared the advice her father gave her, “Look ‘em in the eye and act like you know what you’re doing. By the time they figure it out, you’ll be an expert.”

### THE PRINCIPAL’S KEY

The first days and weeks can be overwhelming. According to a middle school principal, “I was really surprised at the number of hours that I needed to work in order to feel competent and on top of things. When I was a teacher I could plan my day and do what I planned. When you are an administrator, your time is not your own. It belongs to everyone else.” An elementary principal reported being “shocked by the amount of energy required to perform the job.”

Additionally, your carefully planned decisions are bound to disappoint someone. The principalship, however, is not a popularity contest, and a placid environment may signal a stagnant environment. According to one veteran principal, “As long as people debate what you’re doing, you know you’ve got them thinking.”

Many beginning principals long for the security of their classrooms where they felt confident and capable. One beginning principal reported, “I went home every night and cried, frustrated and furious at myself for leaving teaching. “ Added to the frustration is the loneliness for friends and the camaraderie experienced as a teacher.

Frustrated and lonely, many beginning principals are tempted to quit during their first year. A better choice is to take adequate time to adjust to the newness of the role as well as the setting. Similar to beginning teachers, beginning principals require time to become acclimated to their new role.

*My first year as principal was similar to being a first-year teacher. Everything was new and somewhat confusing. But by the second year, I loved being a principal. There’s nothing like the thrill of seeing the school improve and students succeed because of your ideas and initiative.*

—A third-year principal