

The roar of complexity

A principal's day is built on fragments of tasks and decisions

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Principals have played a key role in leading reform over the last decade, and they are central to a school's success and student learning. But in the last decade, their responsibilities and roles have increased.

While they take care of a myriad of problems, dilemmas, and daily tasks that keep the school functioning, the organizational culture vibrant, and school reform moving forward, principals now also are responsible for shared decision making, decentralized budgeting, collaborative planning, and increased accountability. Meanwhile, almost none of the daily expectations and challenges have been reduced or transferred to other staff.

Any effort to support principals' learning and development should take into consideration key challenges (Deal and Peterson, 1994a). In their daily work, principals face managerial challenges, dealing with regular problems and demands, and symbolic challenges, focusing on aspects of the school culture. By routinely facing and addressing these issues, principals gain managerial skills and leadership abilities.

Managerial challenges

Principals deal with literally hundreds of brief tasks each day, sometimes 50 to 60 separate interactions in an hour (Peterson, 1982). Their workday starts and ends with many tasks that may last only a few minutes (Peterson, 1982; 1998). These short tasks are often immediate problems or difficulties that need to be addressed. During one morning hour, for example, there could be an uncovered classroom, a broken arm, a scuffle, a request from the central office for data, and a myriad of requests for information from parents, students, and teachers. Short tasks require different skills and knowledge than longer ones. The principal must analyze, assess, and develop solutions or strategies quickly with little time to consider alternatives. Rapid problem identification and solving is the norm.

Changing gears

New and experienced principals need to develop the ability to engage a wide range of individuals and groups to effectively deal with many sequential tasks, and to change gears quickly.

Staff development focused on developing skills to deal with the reality of the work can help. Principals can develop rapid problem finding and problem solving skills by practicing identifying core problems and solving them. Problem solving can be enhanced by designing sessions in which new and experienced principals jointly address various types of problems and analyze their approaches.

Making a map

The variety of tasks and situations principals face is enormous, ranging from social and emotional to cognitive issues. School's very nature means principals work with a greater variety of people of different age ranges, ethnic backgrounds, and social attributes than is typical for managers and leaders in other organizations.

One minute the principal is talking to a six-year-old who lost his lunch money, the next to a teacher whose spouse has cancer. One moment the principal is asked a simple memory question, "Did you order the bus for the field trip?" and the next minute a teacher has a complex request for help in developing an authentic assessment process for the causes of the French Revolution. Variety adds spice to the work, but it can cause indigestion at times. And the variety, combined with the briefness of many tasks, makes the principal's work particularly hard to learn.

Learning to live with complexity and variety is not simple, but carefully designed programs can help. Principals should learn to map the variety of their work and chart the diversity in their schools (for example, identifying all the ethnic and language groups in the school and learning their unique educational norms, values, and traditions) to help prepare them better for their working conditions.

Finding tools

Principals face constant interruptions. Almost nothing is completed before it is interrupted once or even several times. Problems can back up outside the office and in the hallways like lemmings rushing to the sea. Principals can't say, "Come back later; I am reflecting on our school's strategic plan." Sometimes they must buffer the school, sometimes solve the problem, sometimes delegate, defer, or divert it until later. Professional development should help with problem finding tools, problem solving strategies, and developing the ability to quickly change gears.

Learning to live with fragmentation means learning to deal with interruption. Preparation programs or sessions for first-year principals should include role playing simulations in which participants can practice being interrupted by problems, issues, and questions.

Symbolic challenges

As principals try to shape a professional culture, they face several symbolic challenges as well. If these challenges are not addressed, the school culture may turn toxic. Given how important school culture is to reform and innovation, principals must successfully face these challenges (Deal and Peterson, 1998).

Principals must address the "hidden history" challenge. Each school culture has its own special history developed through past innovation wars, implementation battles, and occasional social brawls. One school has a history of collaboration, planning, and change, while another has produced a toxic culture with bad memories of past efforts and the lack of cooperation. Leading schools requires uncovering and understanding the school's history of change. Principals need to understand the history of instruction in order to change it.

Principals can develop their skills in analyzing a school's history in many ways. They can practice by doing a history of their own family, the history of a club or group of which they are a member, or a history of a school where they taught. They can become better "historians" by understanding how past events shape current attitudes and behavior.

Becoming analysts

Principals often deal with the Rashomon riddle — like the classic Japanese movie, everyone has his or her own interpretation of a set of events. Teachers see a fight one way, students another, the community still another. Principals need to identify, unlock, and figure out the varied interpretations and the deeper beliefs and expectations that members have about schools, teachers, and learning. The more multicultural and diverse the school, the more varied the interpretations. Understanding these interpretations makes it possible to build more successful schools.

Helping principals become good social analysts enhances their ability to unlock the Rashomon riddle. Principals who learn how ethnicity, religion, and social background shape how we interpret events will understand how differing interpretations develop.

Coming together

Sometimes principals cope with the "Balkanization separation" challenge. Though principals and teachers may work together to develop shared values, there are often divisions among grade levels, competition among departments, or schisms between old and new staff.

To make learning a reality, principals have to bring these factions together. This is not easy. They may have to learn the history of the conflict. Getting staff to talk about what happened years ago is a beginning. Next, the principal and staff need to address the differences directly, looking for ways to heal the wound and find some common ground. Finally, the school must bury the conflict in a new peace accord around shared values.

Principals can learn to resolve discord through staff development that develops skills in conflict resolution, coping with confrontation, and self-reflection under stress.

Refining communication

Principals also may have to cope with the Tower of Babel cacophony. Over time, educators have been exposed to a wide variety of programs, terms, and educational jargon. As different groups worked on projects, new programs, or special instructional techniques, they developed their own terms, mental models, and cognitive maps of what teaching and learning are about. Teachers may remember and use the terminology from their experience in Total Quality Management (TQM), school-based management (SBM), outcomes-based education (OBE), and other programs, then wonder why new language and new models are being adopted. Principals must develop shared languages and consistent mental maps about teaching and learning. Helping teachers transfer old language to new programs is hard, but necessary.

Leadership development should help administrators refine verbal and non-verbal communication. Programs focused on leadership and school improvement should develop principals' skills in analyzing mental models, assessing educational terminology and jargon, and effectively using technical language.

Expanding challenges

Principals' daily work is beset with managerial and symbolic challenges. Research suggests these challenges are not going away, but instead are expanding. All these challenges are part of the fabric of leading and managing schools. Since principals are key to school reform and success, helping them learn to use and enjoy their daily realities can increase their cache of energy as well as making them more focused, effective leaders.

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