Leading Change in Underperforming Schools

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Abstract

Over the past decade, school leadership has changed, and the role of school leaders has been redefined to keep pace with the demands of the many educational reform movements. These reform movements have expanded the repertoire of skills that principals need to function effectively. In light of the expanded repertoire, the program that prepares future school leaders must prepare them to improve the academic achievement of students. They must define clear standards, suggest change strategies and programs, specify effective leadership behaviors, and offer ongoing mentoring support (Alvoid & Black, 2014). The Four Dimensions of Principal Leadership is a discipline-specific leadership framework that addresses the identified principal behaviors (Green, 2010). Green's framework is informed by multiple theories, school leadership standards, and research-based best practices that align with principal initiatives described in contemporary literature. The process for using this framework is described in this article as a framework effective principals are using to bring about changes that lead to school transformation. The purpose of the article is to share with the readers two frameworks used in school transformation and the benefits to be derived from putting them into practice.

Keywords: principal preparation, instructional program change, principal behavior, school leadership, underperforming schools

Robert James, the newly appointed principal of Love Joy Middle School, stood at the podium in the meeting room nervously looking out at a faculty waiting to hear about the new initiative about which word had been circulating. Mary Roberts, Chair of the Language Arts Department, sat in one corner of the room with her overworked team waiting to learn about the additional work her team would have to accomplish. On the other side of the room, Jim Harris, Chair of the Mathematics Department, anxiously awaited the start of the presentation so he could confront this new principal concerning his rumored creative, innovative ideas. The remainder of the faculty sat with great anticipation with the looming knowledge that achievement scores in all subject areas had been flat for the past three years. They expected a change was about to take place within their school, as only one year remained, and the school would potentially face state takeover.

This would be a challenging meeting for Principal James. Standing there, he knew this would potentially be a trial-by-fire as he reflected on the words of the Superintendent when he accepted the assignment. The Superintendent informed him that hostility existed in the school

climate, and there was a lack of collaboration among faculty members. Additionally, the school did not have a vision, mission, core value statements, or uniform instructional goals and objectives. He was warned that trust between the school leadership team and most faculty members had eroded and was almost nonexistent.

What Principal James needs is a viable program plan that works, one that will provide the faculty with a vision, mission, and core values. Furthermore, he will need to present that plan in such a manner that motivates the faculty to achieve common goals and provides them with a sense of purpose. When looking at the challenges presented in this scenario, it can be concluded that turnaround work is not an easy task. However, over the past two decades, my work with principals in many schools offers evidence that with a proven program plan, and creative, innovative, charismatic leadership, the turnaround task becomes achievable.

A transformational leadership framework utilized by principals who have completed our program and achieved success in implementing innovative activities in underperforming schools is presented. It is then followed by a turnaround instructional improvement program plan, both of which Principal James would be well advised to consider.

A Change in School Leadership

Over the past decade, school leadership has changed, and the role of school leaders has been redefined to keep pace with the demands of the many educational reform movements. Traditionally, school leaders were simply expected to effectively manage the school organization. Given the new reform initiatives, they are now being asked to become effective instructional leaders enhancing the academic achievements of all students who enter the schoolhouse (Fink & Resnick, 2001). In the book, *The Four Dimensions of Principal Leadership: A Framework for Leading 21st Century Schools* (Green, 2010), the school leader is characterized as the "chief learning officer." The book targets school leaders as visionaries, individuals who chart the paths of the school and assist all stakeholders in working towards a shared vision. It theorizes that the major focus of the school is teaching and learning, and the behavior of the school leader should foster teacher quality and student achievement.

Schools are complex organizations. They are so complex that no single individual can lead them. Whereas schools may appear to be similar, they are uniquely different, informed by their culture, climate, structure, and the interaction of people. Therefore, the behavior of the leader must be more impactful than ever before. Today, school leaders not only have to distribute leadership throughout the organization, they must also constantly focus on improving teaching and learning. To enhance school effectiveness, they must move beyond basic managerial skills and exhibit positive leadership behaviors that foster a collaborative school culture, a wholesome school climate, and positive interactions among faculty members. They must also select and retain teaching personnel who enhance the academic achievement of all students. In essence, they must be responsible, assertive, and visionary leaders of their schools (Crane & Green, 2013). Their behavior must be of such that teachers who work under their leadership reach a level of satisfaction that motivates them to remain in the school and enhance student achievement. Teachers do not leave schools; they leave the leadership (Corcoran, Peck, & Reitzug, 2013). The question to be addressed by Principal James regarding the turnaround process is: What specific behaviors will he exhibit to influence effectiveness at Love Joy Middle School?

Green (2010) asserts that four leadership dimensions address the type of principal behaviors that have a positive influence on school effectiveness. Several studies have shown that while using these four dimensions, principals have transformed underperforming schools into schools of excellence. The four leadership dimensions include understanding self and others, understanding the complexity of organizational life, building bridges through relationships, and engaging in leadership best practices. In the following section, a brief description of each of the four dimensions is presented.

The Four Dimensions of Principal Leadership

Dimension 1: Understanding Self and Others

Before leaders can effectively lead a school, they must understand themselves and the people with whom they work and serve (Bennis, 1984). For the purpose of our work, understanding self is defined as the knowledge individuals possess relative to their personal beliefs and thought processes and how they might behave in a given situation or react to issues. They know their skills and strengths and how to effectively utilize them. When school leaders are aware of themselves, they understand their limitations, as well as areas that need strengthening (Bennis, 1984).

With self-knowledge, Principal James can create a strong self-awareness. This awareness will help him understand how his "strengths, beliefs, values, and other personal qualities" impact the behavior of others, specifically members of the faculty. It will also provide him a foundation from which to lead with confidence while assisting all stakeholders in developing their skills. Emotional factors, such as motivation, empathy towards others, and social skills required for managing relationships, need to be emphasized (Goleman, 1995). When school leaders have an understanding of self, there are four possible outcomes: (1) receptivity to feedback as a mechanism of personal and professional growth: (2) inquiry becoming an exploratory tool for self-efficacy: (3) persistence in achieving an established vision by controlling one's own responses when faced with perplexing external forces: and (4) insight into the realization of the uniqueness of one's self as an individual (Green, 2010).

Self-understanding is a life-long, yet an important process that influences a leader's behavior, and consequently, it influences the actions of others (Goleman, 1995). Dr. Tonya Cooper, former principal of Chimneyrock Elementary School and now a central office administer in the Shelby County Tennessee School District, explains:

> Knowing my values, beliefs, strengths and other personal aspects, such as disposition and style of communication, helped me develop an understanding of myself, my faculty, and other stakeholders. Without a clear understanding of one's self-values, beliefs, and strengths, it is difficult to successfully lead any group or organization.

In addition to acquiring a deep understanding of self, Principal James must acquire a deep understanding of the individuals with whom he works and serves. Individuals who work in a school and individuals the school serves have their own values, desires and goals which impact the school as an organization and the achievement of its goals. In order to win the trust of followers, leaders need to understand them. Therefore, it is important for Principal James to understand and align the personal goals of stakeholders with the goals of the organization. With an understanding of faculty members, he can identify their strengths and interests. Once this

occurs, he can create a balance between his skills and attributes and those of his followers. Leading with an understanding of his faculty, Principal James can ensure compatibility, and the outcome of compatibility is faculty commitment to the achievement of common goals.

Dimension 2: Understanding the Complexity of Organizational Life

Schools are social systems, and the interdependency between components, such as culture, climate, structure, and the interaction between and among people, plays a big role in the working relationships within schools. Positive interpersonal relationships and a trust-based internal culture in organizations lead to effective fulfillment of members' responsibilities (Ciancutti & Steding, 2001). Similarly, the external culture has an influence on the complexity of organizational life inside of the schoolhouse.

The climate of the school is also important. Individuals who work in schools have varying interests and must come together to achieve their individual goals, as well as a set of common school goals. The leader's behavior must foster a positive school climate, one that influences the way teachers and other individuals interpret their work situation and their effectiveness (Fredrickson, 2003; Klinger & Wade-Woolley, 2012). Therefore, Principal James would be well advised to concern himself with the establishment of a collaborative school climate that places a focus on a safe and orderly school environment. Other points of consideration include: (1) the interaction of faculty members with one another: (2) the assignment of tasks in an equitable manner: (3) grouping individuals to complete work assignments: (4) establishing lines of communication: and (5) the enactment of rules and regulations that govern the behavior of individuals. These leader behaviors create a teaching and learning environment that brings satisfaction to teachers and influences them to remain in the school and become productive (DuFour, 2004).

The structure of a school is also important. School leaders experience diverse situations that need their attention daily, and they are expected to lead their schools in a manner that brings satisfaction to individuals with whom they work and serve. In doing so, their primary purpose must be to structure the school for effective teaching and learning (Green, 2017). After structuring their schools with the major focus being teaching and learning, implementing a trust-based culture, building a collaborative school climate, and giving consideration to the interaction of people in their schools, it is important to note that the results of school-climate surveys of several graduates of our program yielded positive results. This has been evidenced by upward trends in many of the indicators associated with the surveys. Whereas all of the principles mentioned regarding turnaround work are important, collaboration is imperative. Brewster & Railsback (2003) believe that "trust and collaboration are mutually reinforcing, the more parties work together, the greater opportunity they have to get to know one another and build trust."

Dimension 3: Building Bridges Through Relationships

In order to effectively administer a school, it is important for school leaders to build positive relationships with all stakeholders inside and outside of the schoolhouse (Green, 2010). All relationships are important. However, we found that some relationships have a major effect on school transformation. In the school community, relationships with parents, central office administrators, business leaders, and political elements have a major effect on school transformation. Inside of the schoolhouse, principal/teacher, teacher/teacher, and teacher/student relationships are valuable, as they affect the culture and climate of the school. According to

Barth (1990), the most important relationships inside the schoolhouse are the ones that exist between the principal and members of the faculty.

The process of building strong relationships starts by selecting faculty and staff whose values and beliefs align with the school's vision, mission, goals, and objectives. When school leaders select the right faculty, build relationships with them, and encourage them to build bonds between one another, the work ethic among them is strengthened, as well as the overall effectiveness of the school. We have learned from our program participants who are leading schools that this important bonding connection provides support, not only for each individual, but also for the establishment of unity of purpose and the development of shared goals for everyone. This leads to positive outcomes for students and the community at large.

Our work with program graduates also revealed that the linchpin in building positive relationships is communication, both verbal and non-verbal. Verbal communication, active listening, and refraining from making judgmental statements tended to lead to effectiveness. Some of the principals completing our program reported they assisted faculty members in understanding important messages with the use of metaphors, similes, and analogies. Using these concepts allows the receiver of the message to effectively convey the message and meaning intended by the principal. Regarding non-verbal communication, we found that making eye contact and refraining from making gestures that could be perceived as negative lead to effectiveness.

Ethan Randal, principal of Elmore Park Middle School in Bartlett, Tennessee and a graduate of our program, offers that "Teachers interested in staying at their current school seek to engage in collegial relationships with both their principal and colleagues. Collegiality is characterized by trust, clearly communicated expectations, collaboration, and a focus on learning for both educators and students."

Dimension 4: Engaging in Leadership Best Practices

The fourth dimension of effective principal leadership emphasizes the utilization of best practices for educational renewal. School leaders need to be able to skillfully identify and utilize best instructional practices, including programs, activities, and behaviors that have been proven by research to generate specific outcomes in a variety of settings (Marzono, 2003). During our research, we found that leaders who master techniques in the areas of change, conflict management, decision making, and communication can effectively engage in the utilization of best practices for educational renewal with tremendous success.

First, they set a standard of excellence, assess the current conditions of their school, and then identify the discrepancies that exist between current conditions and the standard of excellence. Having completed this three-phase process, they identify program strategies that, when effectively implemented, will remove the identified discrepancies. Finally, they implement the identified programs and strategies utilizing craft knowledge in the area of change, decision-making, conflict management, and communication. Thus, essential to Principal James' success at Love Joy Middle School will be his ability to: (1) effectively engage in identifying leadership best practices that enable his faculty to understand and accept current conditions at Love Joy Middle School; (2) set a standard of excellence; and (3) identify and remove any discrepancies that exist between the standard of excellence and current conditions.

Principals use the Four Dimensions Model to identify the desired characteristics of effective school leaders. The power of the dimensions is in the simultaneous, implementation of

all four. Implementation of a single dimension has the power of a finger. Implemented simultaneously, they have the power of a fist.

Implementing Plans to Transform an Underperforming School

After completing the comprehensive leadership preparation program, mastering leadership skills, acquiring the attributes mentioned in the previous sections, and accepting assignments to lead underperforming schools, individuals are fully prepared to implement a plan to transform an underperforming school into a school of excellence. The recommended design they follow consists of ten (10) steps.

Step 1: Defining the Standard of Excellence

The first step in the process is defining a standard of excellence. During the developmental program, participants are taught processes and procedures for use in developing a strategic plan. These processes and procedures include, but are not limited to, an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) of the school organization. Additionally, they are taught how to conduct a Root Cause Analysis (RCA) which seeks to identify the origin of underachievement. Using these techniques, principals can develop a deep understanding of the organization's needs and create a shared vision, mission, core values, and strategic goals and objectives.

Step 2: Assessing Current Conditions

The second step in the process is assessing current conditions. During this step, the principal shares data with the faculty that enables them to acquire an in-depth understanding of the void that exists in student achievement. This process is different from the traditional needs assessment as the school's climate, culture, and structure are assessed. Levels of faculty and staff satisfaction and motivation are also assessed, as well as other aspects of the school that affects student achievement. Often school improvement teams consisting of teachers are developed to assess current conditions. Using teacher teams, principals can distribute leadership responsibilities and enhance the faculty's understanding of the need for change. When teachers clearly understand current conditions of the school and its programs, their commitment to change is often greater.

Step 3: Identifying the Discrepancy

During the third step, often called a discrepancy analysis, school leaders assess the difference between current conditions and the vision or stated goal. They dig deeply into school data to determine the true areas of underachievement. Data is analyzed by student, by grade, by subject, and by teacher so that ineffective programs and/or teaching strategies can be identified. As data is disaggregated and analyzed, several areas of need that form the discrepancy may surface. Priorities must be established because all areas cannot be addressed at once.. Once again teacher teams become an important part of the process as the knowledge and skills of teachers can assist in accurately identifying the discrepancy.

Step 4: Assessing the Cause(s) of the Discrepancy

It is not enough just to identify the discrepancy. If appropriate programs and strategies are to be applied with the intent of eliminating the discrepancy, its cause(s) must be identified. Principals assess the cause(s) of the discrepancy by conducting program evaluations and pupil evaluations. They also examine levels of teacher effectiveness, levels of student attendance, levels of faculty attendance, and student discipline data. This is a critical process because the more accurate the identification of the cause of the discrepancy, the more likely the principal and his/her faculty will be able to identify strategies and programs that will eliminate the discrepancy. During this step, a Root Cause Analysis is of great assistance as recommendations from that process reveal the root cause of underachievement, placing its benefits far above a basic needs assessment or a traditional walk-through process.

Step 5: Identifying the Needed Change and/or Modification

Once the discrepancy and its causes have been successfully identified, the leadership and the entire faculty are positioned to identify the needed changes or modifications. Under the direction of the principal, the faculty meets and discusses processes and procedures for removing the discrepancy. In essence, they conduct an inquiry into best practices and identify proven practices and strategies that can be implemented to address and remove the discrepancy. Using a transformational leadership style, principals build a professional learning community, set instructional goals, create a culture of learning and mutual dependency, and create a collegial setting that fosters collaboration among teachers. It is during this phase of the process that school leaders work with their faculty to establish an accountability system to monitor student learning. The Delphi-Technique is a very effective tool to use during this step.

Step 6: Assessing the Capacity for Change and/or Modification

Before attempting to implement any change initiative, it is imperative that a determination be made as to whether the school has the capacity for change. Thus, at the onset, principals are well advised to assess the school's capacity for change. There must be assurance that: (1) financial resources are sufficient to fund the change; (2) the faculty has content and process knowledge of the program(s) and strategies that will be employed; (3) the faculty is committed to the change initiative; and (4) the faculty is willing to collaborate to achieve the goals that lead to academic achievement for all students. We teach our program participants how to use a Force Field Analysis and recommend it as a great approach to use in this process.

Step 7: Building the Capacity If It Does Not Exist

If the capacity for change as described in Step 6 does not exist prior to starting the implementation process, principals must build that capacity. The change elements mentioned in Step 6 must be put in place if the change is to be implemented with minimum conflict.

If it is necessary to build the school's capacity for change, the principal will have to be the driving force in building that capacity. In our program, we propose that participants use transformational leadership skills to acquire the necessary approvals, secure the necessary funding, promote shared decision making, and establish a culture that fosters faculty collaboration.

Step 8: Implementing the Change

Using instructional leadership qualities developed during the preparation program, principals implement the change initiative. During the implementation phase, they make frequent classroom visits, assist teachers in identifying and using appropriate instructional strategies, and provide meaningful feedback that is addressed through a focused professional development program for teachers. Focused professional development is central to the successful implementation of the change initiative.

Step 9: Conducting a Formative Evaluation

During the change process, formative evaluations are very important as they inform the principal and the faculty if changes or modifications are needed. These evaluations are conducted during each step of the process, as well as during the selection of program initiatives and strategies. Additionally, assessments are made throughout the teaching and learning process. Throughout the implementation phase, results of formative evaluations provide assurance to the faculty and other stakeholders that the implementation process is being monitored and that the principal is committed to the change initiative.

Data from formative assessments can also be used to provide feedback to teachers regarding progress being made relative to student achievement. The collecting of this data will allow teachers to modify their teaching activities if needed. Equally important, it provides accountability data and informs the content of a professional development program for teachers. All phases of the implementation process must be assessed to determine if expectations are being met (Marzano, 2003).

Step 10: Conducting a Summative Evaluation

The summative evaluation, conducted at a pre-determined time period, is designed to assess the academic progress of students. Summative assessments should answer two basic questions: (1) Was the program implemented in the manner prescribed? (2) Did the program generate the student results that it was implemented to achieve? Generally, it should be conducted at the end of a project, unit, course, semester, program, or school year. Using this step, we want our program graduates to be able to determine if the standard of excellence was met, as meeting the standard of excellence is the "why" behind the faculty members' engagement in the transformation process.

Dr. Leviticus Pointer, a graduate of the program, has used these ten steps to transform two different middle schools. He is a strong advocate of the process and has addressed several groups sharing his success with its use. Dr. Tiaa Turner, a Middle School Assistant Principal with Shelby County Schools and a recent graduate of our program, offers that:

> Implementation of the *Ten-Steps for Improving Instruction* will guide instructional leaders in determining the step-by-step plan with input and feedback from faculty. The model emphasizes a solid foundation, a standard of excellence, and helps leaders build teacher capacity. When using the model, all faculty and staff will be guided by the best interest of all students, ensuring their academic success.

Conclusion

The preparation of school principals who can transform an underperforming school into a school of excellence is a challenging endeavor. It starts with a deep understanding of self and others, research on leader behavior, and the influence of leader behavior on the behavior of followers. Our research points to purpose, process, and outcome.

Purpose

The principal must have a purpose, and that purpose must be to exhibit principles of transformational leadership in practice. Current research advances that principals who are successful in transforming schools are instructional leaders who use a transformational leadership style (Marzano, 2003). Transformational leaders lead through influence and charisma. They set clear and consistent goals and gain the trust, respect, and appreciation of faculty members because of their knowledge, charisma, integrity, and fairness.

Process

Process is important as individuals engaged in school transformation must understand and accept current conditions of the school, be skilled in elements of change, and be knowledgeable of the contents of the change initiative. Equally important, principals must ensure that the change occurs in a learning community wherein teachers are committed, collaborative, and empowered to engage in innovative initiatives (Barth, 1991; DuFour, 2004).

Outcome

The outcome is student achievement provided by a quality teaching faculty. It is led by a principal who makes frequent classroom visits, provides observation feedback to teachers, and administers focused professional development for the faculty, as well as self.

In transforming an underperforming school, there is no flawless approach. However, the framework presented in this article has been proven to be successful in a number of school situations. Dr. Tiaa Turner offers that:

> It requires visionary leadership. Individuals have to recognize the need for change and implement the needed changes with the utilization of precise and strategic decisions. A clear vision that is shared among all stakeholders has to serve as the focus for change and instructional improvement.

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