

The Principal and the School: What Do Principals Do?

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ABSTRACT

Although functions vary by locality and school size, the principal is primarily responsible for administering all aspects of a school's operations. In this article, I discuss what principal's actually do on a day-to-day basis. I examine the principal's job from the following perspectives: leadership functions, administrative roles, management skills, task dimensions, human resource activities, and behavioral profiles of effective versus successful administrators.

Typically, each school has a single administrative officer, a principal, who is responsible for the operation of the school. In very small schools, the person may teach part-time as well. In large schools, there may be one or more assistant principals. The administrative hierarchy may consist also of a number of department chairpersons, school counselors, a social worker, school psychologist, diagnostician, and so on.

Although functions vary by location and size, the principal is primarily responsible for administering all aspects of a school's operations. What then do principals actually do on a day-to-day basis? One way to analyze what principals do is to examine their job from a number of perspectives: (a) leadership functions, (b) administrative roles, (c) management skills, (d) task dimensions, (e) human resource activities, and (f) behavioral profiles of effective versus successful administrators. Each one will be discussed in turn.

Leadership Functions

Principals combine and coordinate various kinds of resources by carrying out four basic leadership functions: planning, organizing, leading, and monitoring. The relationships among these functions are shown in Figure 1.

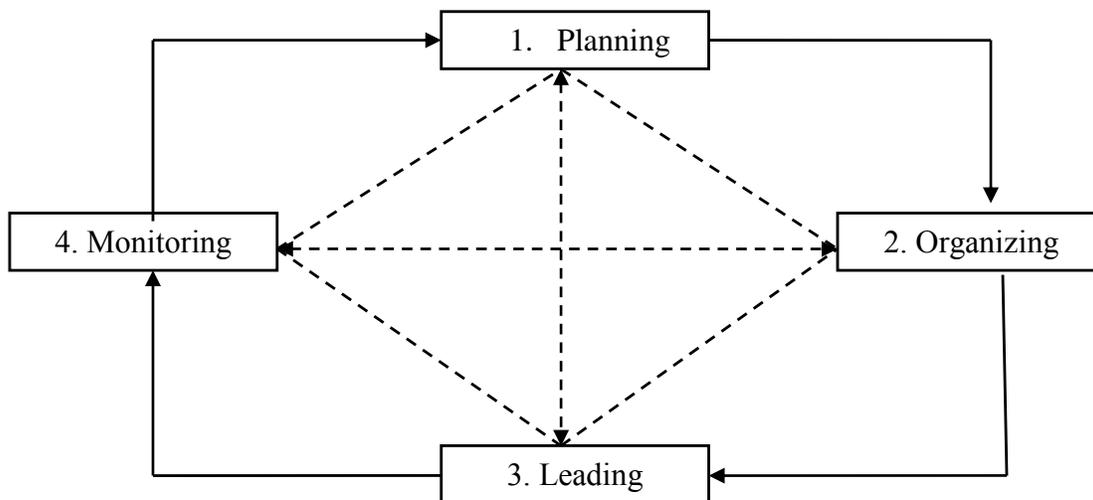


Figure 1. Four functions of administration.

Planning

Generally, *planning* defines where the school wants to be in the future and how to get there (Parker, 2011). Plans and the goals on which they are based give purpose and direction to the school, its subunits, and contributing staff. For example, suppose the principal in a large, urban school district decides that the school should attempt to increase the number of students reading at grade level by 20 percent by the year 2012. This goal and the methods needed to attain it would then serve as the planning framework for the school (Gardiner, 2011). School counselors, social workers, school psychologists, library media specialists, department heads, and teachers would set and synchronize individual objectives with those of the building principal.

Planning is important because it provides staff with a sense of purpose and direction, outlines the kinds of tasks they will be performing, and explains how their activities are related to the overall goals of the school (Oosterlynck, 2011). Without this information, staff would not know precisely how to use their time and energies efficiently and effectively. Subsequently, they would respond to their job responsibilities randomly, wasting valuable human resources.

Planning is also a prerequisite to other leadership functions (Goodstein, 2011). In particular, it becomes the basis for monitoring and evaluating actual performance (McDonnell, 2011). That is, plans made during the first step become benchmarks or criteria against which to measure actual performance in the monitoring step. Unless plans are formulated and mutually agreed on, there is relatively little value or basis for measuring the effectiveness of the school outcomes (Lunenburg & Irby, 2006; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008). In addition, comparing planned and actual results provides the principal with a sound basis on which to make necessary adjustments in the school's plan of action.

Since the 1970s, criticisms of traditional planning models have resulted in the development of the strategic planning approach (Boschee, 2009). New ideas have arisen about the nature of educational organizations. Schools have been described as “loosely-coupled systems” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Rowan, 1990; Weick, 1976) and “organized anarchies” (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972). The challenges facing schools have changed significantly as new demands have been placed on them. Their environment has become uncertain and even hostile.

Strategic planning, a subset of the public policy process, could be an ideal technology for shaping the future of education (Boschee, 2009). Given the contextual constraints on educational policy (social, economic, and political), the challenge for educational strategic planners is to understand the internal and external boundaries and to use this understanding to design policies that could facilitate change in student achievement and the very structure of schools (Marzano & Waters, 2010).

Organizing

Once principals have developed workable plans and the methods for attaining them, they must design an organization that will successfully implement the plans. *Organizing* involves three essential elements (Argyris, 2011): developing the structure of the organization, acquiring and developing human resources, and establishing common patterns and networks.

In a very basic sense, designing the structure of the organization involves creating the organizational chart for a school (Jones, 2010). The principal establishes policies and procedures for authority relationships, reporting patterns, the chain of command, departmentalization, and various administrative and subordinate responsibilities. Then the principal takes steps to hire competent personnel. When necessary, the principal establishes programs for training new personnel in the skills necessary to carry out their task assignments. Finally, the principal builds formal communication and information networks, including the types of information to be communicated, direction of communication flows, and reductions in barriers to effective communication.

Organizing at the upper levels of an organization usually includes designing the overall framework for the school district (Grant, 2011). At the building level, however, organizing is usually more specific and may involve the following specific activities (Burton, 2007): developing methods to help people understand what portion of the job is their responsibility; coordinating individual efforts through work schedules to avoid unnecessary delay in task accomplishment; designing an efficient system for making day-to-day work assignments should these be necessary; and cross-training personnel or providing for substitute personnel to avoid disruptions in the flow of work caused by absenteeism.

Leading

Once plans are formulated and activities are organized, the next step is leading staff members to achieve the school's goals. Although planning tells principals *what* to do and organizing tells principals *how* to do it, *leading* tells principals *why* the staff member

should want to do it. Recently, the leading function is also called *facilitating, collaborating, or actuating*. No matter what it is called, leading entails guiding and influencing people (Northouse, 2010).

The principal's role can be defined as getting things done by working with all school stakeholders in a professional learning community (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Principals cannot do all of the work in schools alone. They must, therefore, influence the behavior of other people in a certain direction. To influence others, the principal needs to understand something about leadership, motivation, communication, and group dynamics. Leading means communicating goals to staff members, and infusing them with the desire to perform at a high level (English, 2008). Because schools are composed largely of groups, leading involves motivating entire departments or teams as well as individuals toward the attainment of goals.

Monitoring

When principals compare expected results with actual results, and take the necessary corrective action, they are performing the *monitoring* function. Deviations from past plans should be considered when formulating new plans. As shown in Figure 1, monitoring completes the cycle of leadership functions.

Monitoring is the responsibility of every principal. It may simply consist of walking around the building to see how things are going, talking to students, visiting classrooms, talking to faculty, or it may involve designing sophisticated information systems to check on the quality of performance, but it must be done if the principal is to be successful (Blankstein, Houston, & Cole, 2010).

The success with which principals carry out these functions determines how effectively the school operates. A school is created to perform a set of tasks and achieve a number of stated goals, the most important of which is student learning (Blankstein, 2010). It is the principal's job to attain goals by working with all school stakeholders in an atmosphere of a professional learning community (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010). This involves planning, organizing, leading, and monitoring.

Administrative Roles

Certain roles are required of all principals, whether they operate elementary, middle, or high schools. A principal does certain things, fulfills certain needs in the school district, has certain responsibilities, and is expected to behave in certain ways.

Principal Activities

Thus far we have described how principals perform four basic functions that help ensure that school resources are used to attain high levels of performance. What do principals actually do to plan, organize, lead, and monitor on an hour-to-hour, day-to-day basis? A number of studies have been conducted in an attempt to describe what principals actually do on the job. Several researchers have followed principals around for long

periods of time and recorded all of their activities (Drake & Roe, 2003; Ubben, Hughes, & Norris, 2011; Lunenburg & Irby, 2006; Sergiovanni, 2009; Tareilo, 2010). They developed a description of the work of principals that can be divided into three general characteristics.

1. *Heavy Workload at a Fast Pace.* Principals' work is hectic and taxing. On the average, elementary school principals work fifty-one hours a week, from seven to nine hours a day. High school principals average about fifty-three hours a week, dividing forty-two hours during the day and eleven hours on school-related activities in the evening. The principals observed processed over twenty pieces of mail a day, attended numerous meetings, and took a tour of their buildings daily. Unexpected disturbances erupted frequently requiring immediate action and unscheduled meetings. Free time was scarce, and even when time pressure was temporarily relieved there were previously postponed activities that needed to be completed.

2. *Variety, Fragmentation, and Brevity.* Research on principal behavior is consistent in identifying the demands on the administrator as fragmented, rapid fire, voluminous, allowing little time for quiet reflection. The principals engaged in at least 149 different activities per day, half of which took less than five minutes each. This is in sharp contrast to many professional jobs, like engineering or law, which are characterized by long periods of concentration. Principals shift gears rapidly. There is no continuous pattern in their work. Significant crises are interspersed with trivial events in no predictable sequence. Each issue must be decided as quickly as possible.

3. *Oral Communication.* Principals spend 70 to 80% of their time in interpersonal communication. Personal contacts include colleagues in other schools, senior administrators, staff experts, teachers, and other personnel throughout the school. Effective principals also establish personal contacts outside the school, including principals in other school districts, legislators, state department of education personnel, parents, and people in the community. Most communication is face to face and by telephone rather than written. E-mail has added another dimension to the principal's communication patterns. Oral communication is fast and action oriented, and written communication is slow and time-consuming. In addition, principals depend heavily on gossip and hearsay because of its timeliness, which travels quickly through oral communication. Finally, oral communication tends to be more personal and satisfies people's needs for social interaction.

An analysis of the roles principals perform gives a clearer picture of what principals actually do on their jobs than does an analysis of management functions. Because it identifies a specific set of observable principal behaviors, the roles perspective brings realism to the analysis of what principals do. Principals are the ones who make things happen in the school by doing the planning, organizing, leading, and monitoring that are required for the school to function. What skills are required of principals in order for them to function effectively?

Management Skills

Another approach to examining what principals do is in terms of the types of skills required to perform the job. The necessary skills for planning, organizing, leading, and monitoring have been placed in three categories that are especially important if principals are to perform their functions and roles adequately: conceptual, human, and technical (Katz, 1974). All school administrators must have these skills to be effective, but the amounts differ by hierarchical level (see Figure 2).

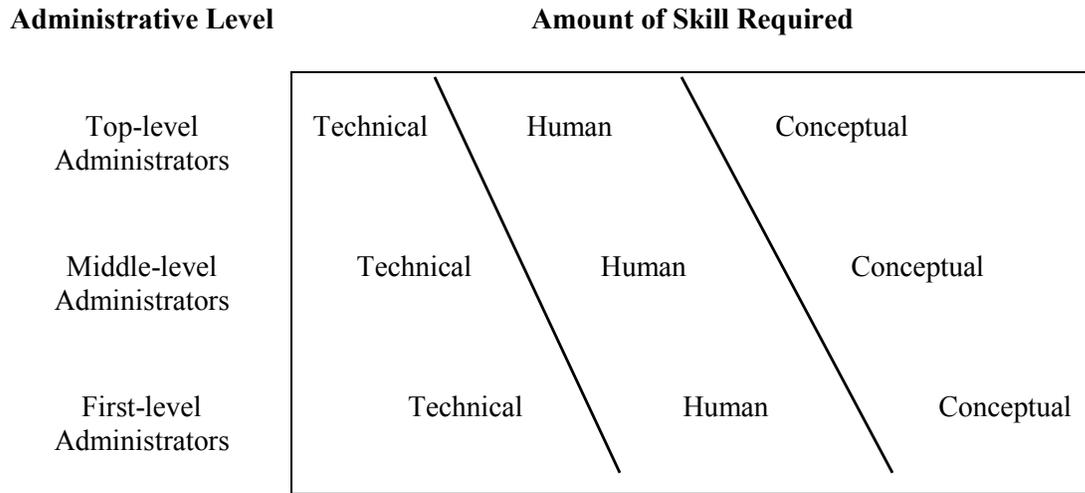


Figure 2. Relationship of skills to administrative levels.

Conceptual Skills

All good school leaders have the ability to view the organization as a whole and solve problems to the benefit of everyone concerned. This is a *conceptual skill* that draws on one's mental abilities to acquire, analyze, and interpret information received from various sources and to make complex decisions that achieve the school's goals. In essence, it concerns the ability to see how the different parts of the school fit together and depend on each other, and how a change in any given part can cause a change in another part.

Conceptual skills are needed by all school leaders, but they are especially important for those at the top of the organization such as school superintendents (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Kowalski, 2005). They must perceive the significant elements in a situation and make decisions relevant to broad, conceptual patterns. Because top-level administrators devote a large portion of their time to planning, they draw on conceptual skills to think in terms of relative tendencies, probabilities, patterns, and associations. Conceptual skills provide upper-level administrators with the ability to anticipate changes or to estimate the value of school district strategies. Many of the responsibilities of superintendents, such as decision making, resource allocation, and change, require a

broad perspective.

In an era of school-based management, principals need to further develop their conceptual skills, to think "strategically" — to take a broad, long-term view (Patrinos, 2010). This will enable principals to see what goes on in their work environment and help them to react appropriately and reflectively to situations as they arise (Sergiovanni, 2009). Principals must consider environmental forces, resource flows, staff and administrative talent, board of education policies, reform mandates, parent complaints, and organizational change as significant inputs into the internal environment of the school.

Human Skills

Principals spend considerable time interacting with people. Recall the researchers' descriptions of how principals spend their time: scheduled and unscheduled meetings, telephone calls, hallway/classroom tours, and other face-to-face contacts. All these activities involve other people. For obvious reasons, the principal needs *human skills*: the ability to motivate, facilitate, coordinate, lead, communicate, manage conflict, and get along with others (Arnett, 2010).

Human skills are important to school leaders at all levels. Upper-level administrators (superintendents) must use these skills to deal effectively with school boards, with groups outside of the school district, and with subordinate administrators. Middle-level administrators (principals) need human skills to manage individuals from a wide variety of departments or subject matter areas, other technical experts (such as counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and department heads), and to interact productively with upper-level administrators. First-level supervisors (department heads, team leaders) must use human skills to challenge, to motivate, and to coordinate the work of teachers who are responsible for the education of the school district's clients - the students.

In recent years, the awareness of human skills has increased. The phenomenal appeal of such best-selling books as *In Search of Excellence* (Peters & Waterman, 2006), *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge, 2006), *Reframing Organizations* (Bolman & Deal, 2008), and *Theory Z* (Ouchi, 1993) attest to that fact. All stress the need for school administrators at all levels to take care of the human side of the enterprise. Excellent schools and excellent leaders provide warm, nurturing, caring, trusting, and challenging environments. In this view, effective principals are cheerleaders, facilitators, coaches, and nurturers of champions. They build their organizations through people. Effective human skills enable principals to unleash the energy within staff members and help them grow, ultimately resulting in maximum performance and goal attainment.

Technical Skills

The ability to use the knowledge, methods, and techniques of a specific discipline or field is referred to as a *technical skill* (Locke, 2010). Department heads and team leaders in schools are examples of people with technical skills — they are recognized as experts in their disciplines and are presumed to have the ability to supervise others. For

the department head or team leader, the nature of technical skills is twofold. First, the supervisor has usually developed some expertise in a discipline or field of study. The department head in a high school, for example, has probably taught the subject he is supervising in an exemplary manner for a number of years. Second, the supervisor uses skills in the work being done. To successfully run an academic department, the chairperson must know how to teach the subject, how to organize the group, how to acquire resources, how to evaluate performance, and the like.

As shown in Figure 2, all school administrators need some knowledge of the technical functions they are supervising, although the amount of time they spend performing technical activities decreases as they move up the organizational hierarchy. The first-line supervisor in a school (department head, team leader) will need greater knowledge of the technical parts of the job than will either the superintendent of schools or the building principal. This is because first-line supervisors are closer to the actual work being performed; they often must train and develop teachers and answer questions about work-related problems. Every school district, school, and job has its special technical skill requirements.

Each approach to examining what a principal does looks at the job from a different perspective. Each has its merits. But in the final analysis, a successful principal must: (a) understand the work that is to be performed (leadership functions), (b) understand the behavior needed to perform the job (administrative roles), and (c) master the skills involved in performing their role (management skills). Thus, these three approaches to analyzing what a principal does are not mutually exclusive; they are complementary perspectives.

Effective Principals

At several points in the discussion thus far, the notion of effective principals has been raised. Exactly what is an effective principal? In this section, I examine the notion of effective principals in terms of task dimensions, human resource activities, and behavioral profiles of successful versus effective school administrators.

Task Dimensions

In analyzing the role of the principal, Marshall Sashkin and Gene Huddle (1986) identified thirteen major task dimensions of the principal's job. They divided these task dimensions into two major categories. One category includes managerial tasks normally associated with the role of the principal — creating and enforcing policies, rules, procedures, and authority relationships. The other category, called "building cultural linkages," includes establishing behavioral norms, using symbols, instituting rituals, and telling stories designed to build the cultural foundations of school excellence.

Effective principals create more effective schools by deliberately designing their actions so that those actions build cultural as well as managerial linkages. Table 1 shows a number of tasks and related skills for effective management of schools.

Table 1

Tasks and Skills for Effective Leadership of Schools

Building Bureaucratic Linkages

- 1. *Task:* *Building Sound Relations With the Central Office*
Skills needed: Liaison skills and negotiating skill
- 2. *Task:* *Monitoring Organizational Information*
Skills needed: Scanning and monitoring information and using information networks
- 3. *Task:* *Coordinating School Activities*
Skills needed: Time management, working with groups, and interpersonal skills
- 4. *Task:* *Managing Financial Resources*
Skills needed: Developing budgets and mathematical skills
- 5. *Task:* *Maintaining the School Building*
Skills needed: Developing maintenance schedules and using general management procedures and practices
- 6. *Task:* *Directing School Support Services*
Skills needed: Designing policies, procedures, and rules and developing and monitoring contracts
- 7. *Task:* *Staffing*
Skills needed: Use of selection methods, assessment and appraisal skills, and coaching and development skills

Building Cultural Linkages

- 8. *Task:* *Establishing an Atmosphere Conducive to Learning*
Skills needed: Organizational communication, interpersonal communication and using symbols
- 9. *Task:* *Setting High Expectations*
Skills needed: Goal setting, interpersonal communication, and interpersonal relationship skills
- 10. *Task:* *Setting School Goals*
Skills needed: Goal setting and organizational communication
- 11. *Task:* *Instructional Leadership*
Skills needed: Working with groups and committees, observational methods for assessment, and coaching skills
- 12. *Task:* *Organizational Communication*
Skills needed: Using teams, committees, and task forces; using internal communication networks; and conflict management skills
- 13. *Task:* *Building Parent and Community Support*
Skills needed: Representing the school to the community, public relations skills, and public communication skills.

Human Resource Activities

Earlier we noted that principals are responsible for getting things done by working with all school stakeholders. The principalship is, above all else, a social process. Principals spend a large portion of their time interacting with others, the majority of which is in face-to-face communication. Failure to interact well with others may hamper their careers. A study of twenty effective administrators and twenty-one ineffective ones emphasizes the importance of being able to work effectively with others. In contrast to their effective colleagues, the ineffective administrators were found to have the following shortcomings (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2010).

1. Insensitive to others; abrasive, intimidating, bullying style
2. Cold, aloof, arrogant
3. Betrayal of trust (failure to accomplish stated intentions)
4. Overly ambitious; thinking of the next job, playing politics
5. Over-managing; unable to delegate or build a team
6. Unable to staff effectively
7. Unable to plan and organize work
8. Unable to adapt to a superior with a different style
9. Unable to adjust to new and changing conditions
10. Overdependence on an advocate or mentor

Note that all of these deficiencies are directly related to working effectively with others. People — whether superiors, colleagues, or subordinates — can make or break a principal's career.

Behavioral Profiles of Effective versus Successful Administrators

Fred Luthans (2011) recently extended others' work on administrative roles in two significant ways. First, he observed the behavior of 248 administrators at different hierarchical levels in a number of diverse organizations, including schools and universities. This was a much larger and more diverse sample than others' research. Second, he contrasted the behavior of effective and ineffective administrators and successful and unsuccessful administrators, something not done by the aforementioned researchers who examined activities performed by principals.

The terms effective and successful are typically used interchangeably in the literature; therefore, Luthans made a clear distinction between the two by operationally defining each term. An administrator's *effectiveness* was measured by subordinates' evaluations of their satisfaction, commitment, and unit performance. Administrative *success* was determined by how fast the administrator had been promoted up the administrative hierarchy. Luthans then ranked the administrators in terms of relative effectiveness and relative success. Less than 10 percent of the administrators were labeled as both effective and successful. In fact, effective and successful administrators turned out to be behavioral opposites.

Results of Luthans' study revealed that effective administrators spent most of their time on task-related communication. Human resource management activities were an important part of the effective administrator's day. Successful administrators (those who enjoyed rapid promotions), on the other hand, spent relatively little time on human resource management activities. Instead, they proved to be good at networking (socializing, interacting with outsiders, and politicking). That is, they were politically savvy and knew how to "play the game."

These conflicting findings may not be surprising to those who say, "It's not *what* you know, but *who* you know." However, Luthans notes that his research has broader implications. He suggests that his findings explain some of the performance problems facing American schools today. He argues that the successful administrators, the

politically savvy ones who are being promoted into top-level positions, may not be the effective administrators who have satisfied, committed, and high performing units. To achieve a more balanced administrative force, those who are both effective and successful, Luthans recommends performance-based evaluation and reward systems that place greater emphasis on human resource management activities (communicating, staffing, motivating, managing conflict, and developing staff and students) than on networking and politicking. I believe this is the direction we are headed with greater demands for accountability associated with the *No Child Left Behind* legislation.

Conclusion

Every principal's goal is to ensure high performance of students and faculty in achieving the school's mission. High performance requires the effective use of organizational resources through the leadership functions of planning, organizing, leading, and monitoring. Just examining the principal's four leadership functions provides an incomplete picture of the principal's job. Researchers who observed principals on the job identified three characteristics of a principal's role: principals perform a heavy workload at an unrelenting pace; principals' activities are varied, fragmented, and brief; and principals prefer oral communication.

In order to perform these functions and roles, principals need three skills – conceptual, human, and technical. Conceptual skills are more important at the top of the school district's hierarchy; human skills are important at all levels; and technical skills are more important for first-line supervisors, such as department heads and team leaders. Studies of effective principals reveal that the major reason for principal failure is the inability to deal with people.

Effective principals engage in two categories of tasks dimensions. One category includes managerial tasks normally associated with the role of the principal – creating and enforcing policies, rules, and procedures, and authority relationships. The other category, called “building cultural linkages,” includes establishing behavioral norms, using symbols, instituting rituals, and telling stories designed to build the cultural foundations of school excellence. Excellent principals also have excellent people skills. Differences between effective and successful principals were also examined.

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