

Leadership in Times of Turbulence

By Steven W. Edwards Ph.D.

Even during the best of times, the role of a school administrator comes with its own set of challenges. Successful school leadership requires personal fortitude, the ability to establish a strong connection with staff and students, and deep reserves of individual resourcefulness. The attitude cultivated by a school's leader becomes the heartbeat of the entire staff and student body; add to that the fact that a strong leader must be able to integrate ever-changing educational mandates into an academic atmosphere that is already constantly in flux, and finding the right combination for creating an organization in which staff and students can thrive seems like a moving target.

All this holds true even under the most optimal conditions. Today's educational leaders, however, are constantly presented with new sets of administrative and pedagogical challenges. These difficult conditions require leaders to mine their own creative resources to implement new and improved ways of running their schools—a Herculean task, rife with

pitfalls. There are, however, lessons from leaders past that we can draw upon to guide our solutions.

From a historical perspective, we can see that the best leaders are those who are able to deftly combine their strategic savvy with their interpersonal skills to create an environment of trust and openness, with a focus on a shared, positive goal. By breaking down the strategies and taking a closer look at what made these individuals great leaders, we can emulate the positive impact they had on their teams and recreate their successes within our own organizations.

In order to do so, we rely on a set of skills that transcend any paradigm shifts—many of which may be inherent in our best leaders, but all of which can be cultivated. Combining personal strengths like trust, emotional intelligence, and a positive attitude with key abilities such as creating transparency, developing a clear focus, and initiating an action plan has been proven a winning formula time and time again.

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Wisconsin Educator Effectiveness Design Team Formed

Jim Lynch and Kelly Meyers will represent AWSA members in development of effectiveness criteria

Wisconsin is among more than 30 states working with the State Consortium on Educator Effectiveness, led by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). That group's efforts will link Common Core State Standards for students with standards-driven changes to policies for teaching and leading, which include training, staff development, and evaluation. This national-level work will guide the state's newly formed Educator Effectiveness Design Team. AWSA is pleased to participate in this process to represent the perspective of principals and school administrators.

Specific work for the team will be to develop criteria for evaluation that are clearly articulated and use multiple indicators, including student academic growth data. The group will look at model state performance assessments for the initial, professional, and master licenses; career ladder evaluations; and the rigorous performance assessments used for National Board certification. The team will develop:

- definitions of key guiding principles of a high-quality

educator effectiveness program;

- model performance-based evaluation systems for teachers and principals;
- a regulatory framework for implementation that includes how student achievement data will be used in context; and,
- recommendations for methods to support improvement and incentives for performance.

Design Team members are Julie Underwood of UW Madison, Kathy Lake of Alverno College, John Ashley of WASB, Mary Bell of WEAC, Miles Turner of WASDA, Bryan Kennedy of AFT Wisconsin, Jim Lynch of AWSA, music teacher Lisa Benz, and Mike Thompson of the DPI.

Work Group members identified are Julie Brill, Kathleen Lyngaas, Jeff Pertl, and Bev Cann, of the DPI, Jim Lynch and Kelly Meyers of AWSA, Miles Turner of WASDA, Deb Gurke of WASB, Ron Jetty of WEAC, and Lisa Johnson of Great Lakes West, who will serve as the group's facilitator. ■

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Trust

Remember the time on your staff retreat when you had to stand atop a picnic table and fall backward into the arms of your coworkers? Or, maybe you went rock climbing and took turns belaying each other down the face of a cliff. Why does every group-bonding exercise include an activity that requires members of the group to put their personal safety in the hands of the other members of the group? Because without trust, the dynamics of a group have no foundation. Schools are no exception: In schools where faculty and staff don't trust the administration, a toxic culture develops where individuals are unwilling to share ideas, question decisions or discuss practices that could potentially benefit their peers, the school and the students.

Particularly during times of turbulence, faculty and staff look to the school's leader to embody the integrity that instills confidence. In the book *The Leadership Challenge* (2008), Kouzes and Posner suggest that honesty is the most admired quality of a leader. Honesty and trust go hand in hand; leaders who are not perceived to be honest are surely not viewed as trustworthy. Dennis and Michelle Reina, founders of the Reina Trust Building Institute, qualify trust as an exchange between two or more individuals: trust must be given in order to get trust in return. They posit that trust must be practiced every day in order to cultivate the basis of trust necessary to survive and excel during even the most difficult of times.

Leaders who command great trust from their teams embody three elements of trust: contractual trust, communication trust and competence trust (Ambler, 2008). Contractual trust refers to the expectations and boundaries that are established within the organization. This occurs when there is a mutual understanding that parties will follow through and do what they say they will do. Communication trust refers to the content and the context of information exchange—do I believe what this person is telling me? Do I trust that he knows what he's talking about? Can we speak to each other freely and honestly? Competence trust is the belief among a team that its leaders have the skills and ability to lead the organization to achieving its vision. In turn, leaders who exhibit high levels of competence trust engage their stakeholders in the decision-making process, and also have the confidence (and trust) in the talents of team members to make good decisions and to handle increasing levels of responsibility and leadership. Competence trust provides opportunities

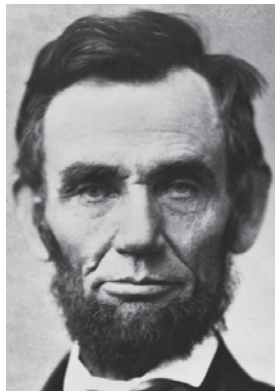
for individuals and groups to develop professionally. In turbulent times, trust becomes the single most critical factor to allow an educational leader to navigate his team successfully.

Emotional Intelligence

As leaders, we strive for a combination of these three elements in order for trust to flourish in our organizations, but it's also essential for a strong leader to possess the emotional intelligence to relate effectively to his team. While the idea of "emotional intelligence" has been quantified in different ways throughout recent years, we use the term here in reference to the capacity to understand and control one's own emotions, as well as the ability to recognize and respond to the emotions of others.

When we understand our emotions, we can manage interpersonal relationships more effectively and in turn elevate our staff members to their highest potentials. A nice by-product of successfully managing our emotions is that it instills confidence in our teams and, in turn, builds trust. For example, in the book *Team of Rivals* by Doris Kearns Goodwin, the author addresses how Abraham Lincoln masterfully managed his own emotions as well as the emotions of his cabinet members, several of whom he appointed to his cabinet after they had lost to him in the election. While many initially regarded this decision as foolish, Lincoln was able to recognize and harness the strengths of his opponents in a way that served the nation well during a time of tremendous upheaval. Lincoln employed what Goodwin identifies as empathy, humor, magnanimity, generosity of spirit, perspective, self-control and sense of balance in order to master his own emotions and the emotions of his administration to create a team working toward a common goal.

In present-day research, Daniel Goleman identifies many of the same elements Lincoln possessed nearly 150 years ago as being crucial in the development of emotional intelligence, including self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. The skills exhibited by Lincoln directly overlap with the elements of emotional intelligence identified by Goleman in 2005. Effective employment of these traits have stood the test of time and can be relied upon by any school administrator who wants to fortify his organization while navigating the ups and downs of education reform.





Transparency

Just as a trusted leader whose emotions are in check is a valuable asset to any team, it is particularly important to foster transparency within an organization, especially during turbulent times, when information can become muddled with shades of fear and doubt. What happens in times of strife when people receive only the bare minimum of information? It becomes all too tempting to fill in the blanks with worst-case scenarios of their own creation. Transparency in this context refers to the leader's ability to keep stakeholders fully informed at all times.

Even if the information is painful or unpopular—or when there's no information to share—transparency is critical, as it contributes to building trust and keeps lines of communication open. In his book *Leadership*, former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani emphasizes the importance of transparent communication during challenging times. After the September 11 terrorist attacks, Giuliani immediately worked to convey all relevant information to the citizens of New York City as well as the rest of the world, quelling any opportunities for fear and uncertainty to turn into further panic. His skills at communicating and the level of transparency he exhibited defined his leadership and unified his city.

Focus

A culture of transparency is also essential for establishing and communicating a focus, or a vision, for your organization. A strong leader needs to have a clear picture of where his organization is heading.

How can we, as administrators, establish our focus? We need to take an inventory of our core beliefs—taking into account purpose, ethics, and community-wide benefits—and align them with our priorities. Once we've cemented this focus, it's essential to be able to communicate the vision to all members of our team so that it can become their focus, too. Having an agreed-upon set of core beliefs and a well defined shared vision will help the school stay on-track during difficult times, when it can be tempting to

look for a quick fix that ultimately may not serve our goals.

In his article "Leadership Techniques," Ed Sykes defines vision as the ability to see your team not only for what they can do now, but also for what they can become, and then to paint the picture for them. A strong leader, Sykes suggests, will consistently remind his team of this vision, using that focus as a touchstone as he coaches team members toward that goal. Lincoln envisioned a country without slavery; Martin Luther King envisioned a nation of equality, achieved through peace; Giuliani envisioned a safe New York City. Close your eyes: What do you envision for your school? Now, how do you get there?

A Plan of Action

Once our focus is cemented, it's essential to formulate a definite but flexible plan of action to achieve that end. Keep that focus, as a tandem point to each step of your plan and you won't lose sight of the big picture. Include strategies for both optimal and sub-optimal conditions—preferably formulated before that difficult time is upon you. The plan needs to link to the organization's core beliefs and shared vision while it clearly negotiates the challenges the organization is facing. Dealing in reality is essential; identifying both current and potential conditions will allow the leader to work with his faculty and staff to develop a plan to move forward.

Organizational consultant Warren Bennis suggests that during difficult times, your first step should be to conduct an environmental scan to assess what parts of your plan are working and what are not. This will reveal where energy and resources need to be prioritized and what can be abandoned. Consider conducting a "SWOT" analysis: assess your school's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. And leaders need not make these assessments alone. Conducting a SWOT analysis with the faculty and staff accomplishes several things: First and foremost, it engages multiple stakeholders in assessing the current situation and taking ownership in drawing up and achieving a solution. Individuals and groups of stakeholders become part of the process, and in turn rise to greater levels of commitment. While completing this analysis, it is important to examine relevant data as well. Overlaying the data with the results of the SWOT analysis will provide a more complete picture and allow teams to make better-informed decisions.

In his book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey describes how we might also use his "Circles of Influence" in order to further build on our action plan. He creates a diagram comprising three elements: conditions and factors that are within the

organization's control, those within the organization's influence, and those that are beyond the control of the organization. He maintains that the greatest bang-for-buck can be found in addressing those factors within the organization's control, and points out that often during challenging times, organizations will waste a considerable amount of time trying to resolve issues that are beyond their control. Although it is important to identify these factors, dwelling on them is of little value.

Once a plan has been developed, the next critical step is to enact the plan. Taking action is sometimes the most difficult step. Author Michael Fullan identifies something he calls the "implementation dip": When a plan is executed, sometimes conditions get worse before they get better. If outcomes have been clearly established before enacting the plan, it will be easier to benchmark progress, and by setting specific benchmark goals, it becomes possible to make adjustments in the plan as new information and data is available.

In times of crisis, failure to come up with a plan will result in becoming part of somebody else's plan. Being proactive, understanding the current reality, involving key stakeholders in designing a plan, enacting the plan, and benchmarking progress will go a long way toward stabilizing an organization during difficult times.

A Positive Attitude

Now you have your brilliant plan, your whole staff is on board, and everyone's feeling ownership of a unified vision in an environment of mutual trust and respect. But without a positive attitude—especially while slogging through times of adversity—it becomes all too easy to quit.

In *Leadership*, Rudy Giuliani describes the importance of attitude, even in the darkest of hours. Giuliani suggests that optimism is one of the essential principles of leadership, and that all successful leaders embrace an attitude of hope for a better future or more positive condition. This attitude is inevitably reflected in the spirit of the organization's members. Schools are prime examples of this; principals play a crucial role in setting the culture, climate and tone of the school. A school leader who practices a positive attitude can significantly and positively influence the teachers, students and parents. Modeling behavior that you would like to see the members of your organization practice is essential: During challenging times, individuals look to the leader to see how he responds. An optimistic attitude combined with the other elements already discussed will go a long way in helping an organization get through difficult times.

Establishing this positive attitude is not your task

alone—rely on your staff and those around you to disseminate the optimism and to push forth with a confident eye on achieving the unified vision that you've all created as a team. You need not go it alone—not only is it overtaxing and isolating to take on that kind of assignment, but it also deprives your trusted staff members and faculty of the opportunity to shine and further your organization's goal.

Conclusion

What people value from their leaders in turbulent times really does not differ much from what they value during times of stability. The difference is that if the leader has established a solid foundation built on the elements discussed in this article, an organization can weather almost any storm. In times of turbulence, people look to a leader to be decisive, positive, realistic, transparent, and honest. Educational leaders are in charge of people's children; there is little to be rational about as a parent. In times of crises, an educational leader must understand that his reaction to a difficult situation is judged immediately and often, irrevocably, by those whom he serves. ■

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