

REFLECT: Lessons Learned for New and Experienced Principals from the First Year in the Principal's Chair

By Dr. Susan M. Sibert and Dr. Miles O'Shea



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Whether you are a new or newer principal or an experienced leader new to a school or school district, taking time to reflect on leadership during a finite period of time is valuable to future leadership goals. This article shares insights from the first year in the principal's chair from a current middle school principal and a former elementary school principal. And despite attempting to follow the common leadership rule of not making any major changes that first year, in reflecting, we found that seven main lessons were learned, some easier than others. Reflecting on the lessons we learned could help new principals, but also experienced principals might appreciate revisiting some of our realizations.

R – Relationships

The first and most important task is to form relationships with stakeholders – like students, educators, parents and community members – in an attempt to learn about the varied expectations and values. Trust is the ultimate goal of building these interpersonal relationships with constituents. Strong, trusting relationships are only built over an extended period of time, so patience and consistency are imperative during the process.

Relationships are critical to the success of a school (Fullan, 2002; Seashore Louis & Murphy, 2017). Make building relationships with constituents the primary focus that first year while recognizing that it takes time to build trust. We found the practice of building positive, trusting relationships with constituents to be rewarding and time well-spent. As trusting relationships are established and strengthened, the principal becomes part of the school community. When the principal is trusted and accepted, difficult decisions can be made within a climate of trust, which Covey (2006) believes is the single most important factor influential leaders need to form relationships.

E – Experiential Learning

Embrace experiential learning. This concept might be tough to accept as a leader of a school who is faced with making a multitude of decisions, sometimes quickly. During the first year leading a school, there are many things that must be learned through daily work and living the experiences. This is particularly true in the first months of being in a new position and gaining understanding of schedules, names and calendars. If you are a list maker, planner or scheduler, experiential learning may be hard to take. Accept the fact that mistakes will be made, and from those errors, learning and growth will result. Furthermore, professional learning communities can combat the feelings of loneliness and isolation that may come those first years in the principal's seat. Seek mentors both inside and outside



your school system, as well as professional development, where you can ask questions and share experiences.

F – Faith

Have faith in yourself. Be confident while you are going through first year trials and know you will be challenged. Leadership expert Rosabeth Moss Kanter (2004) calls confidence, “A sweet spot between arrogance and despair.” She believes “Arrogance involves the failure to see any flaws or weaknesses, despair the failure to acknowledge any strengths” (p. 8). New principals have reached their positions for good reason and should remember that others have shown confidence in them. Principals, even newer ones, must then display that confidence to the constituents they serve.

Remember that there will be hard times and better times. Some days will be downright impossible, and others will remind you of why you became an educator in the first place. Know that you will question the decision to move into the principalship, asking yourself if you should have stayed in your previous position. But stay the course, be steadfast in your decisions and remain focused on your mission and goals. Allow your mission to serve as a beacon, keeping you on course despite adversity.

L – Listen and Learn

Learn as much as you can as fast as you can. Be a sponge and take in everything, everyone, and the big picture as well as details of the school and the position. Effective principals are good listeners (Brezicha, Ikoma, Park & LeTendre, 2019; Sezgin & Er, 2016; Wang & Degol, 2016). In order to determine the needs of the school community, as well as the larger community that the school serves, ask: What is important to the people in this community? What is the culture and vision of the community? What is valued? Before making decisions, principals should know the answers to these questions.

As new principals listen, they are learning about the values and needs of everyone. When the time comes, this learning will be invaluable during the change process which will eventually come.

E - Expect the unexpected

There is no way to be prepared for everything, so accept that you will be learning along the way and know situations are going to come your way that you cannot control. When the unexpected happens, rely on your network of trusted advisors and mentors who helped you on your journey to the principalship and who can now offer advice when you encounter new or uncomfortable situations. As experience within your new position increases, so will your network of advisors who you can turn to during unexpected events that are sure to come your way.

Know that as you work through the calendar, you will come to learn what to expect each month and be able to better plan your time against the demands of the position. The second year will seem more familiar and the third year you can settle into an expected routine. “That feeling of efficacy, of being in charge of circumstances, is the essence of confidence” (Kantar, p. 61).

C – Change

Despite the old adage of not making too many changes too fast that first year, some new principals may not have that luxury, particularly if you were hired to transform a school. If you do have time prior to enacting changes, take advantage of the time by gathering facts and making judgements about where change is most needed. In order to gain buy-in, a shared vision must be enacted (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Kerney & Herrington, 2010). It is certainly wise not change too much too fast, but new administrators must also have the ability to address structures that are unjust or detrimental to the culture of the school. The ability to assess and adapt will demonstrate leadership and courage, as school leaders do what is best for the students who they serve. Focus on listening and learning before making changes. If you must make changes, attempt to make smaller changes first that may lead to bigger changes later.

T – Traditions

Traditions of the school are important to stakeholders. Take time to learn about and understand the school and district traditions. What seems unfamiliar and time-consuming to a new principal, or principal new to a school, might be long-held traditions close to the heart of generations of students, parents and grandparents. School traditions that have meaning for students and staff are best served by understanding and honoring traditions, often imbedded within the community.

Embarking on the first year of a principalship is not easy. The literature and principal certification programs serve as guides that can assist new principals through that first school year. However, reflection, both in the short-term and long-term, is also essential for school leaders as they enter the principal's chair with the goal of effectively leading school communities. While reflecting on the lessons learned from the first year of being a principal, it is apparent that the position is as challenging as it is rewarding. We have found that new principals should embrace the change, stay true to their mission, and learn as much as they can while they reflect on their daily, monthly, and year-long experiences.

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Hiring Process

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the district and provides an opportunity for the candidate to fully understand the organization they are potentially participating in for their teaching career.

As a result of making changes to our hiring process, the elementary principals felt that we recommended the best candidates for the available teaching positions in our schools. By adding dispositional interviewing techniques, pre-screener surveys, pre-screening interviews, conducting traditionally structured interviews, demonstration lessons with students and final interviews with district administra-

tors, we could hire high-quality educators. Lastly, it is a blessing to be able to work in a district that provides opportunities to evaluate an existing process that has been effective and to try a different approach to hiring educators. Most administrators know that the hiring process is only the beginning of maintaining a climate and culture of high-performance, student-centered, family-oriented schools.

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