

February 6, 2012

Dear Sir,

Please find accompanying this cover letter a manuscript that I am submitting for publication with ERIC. The manuscript is entitled, *So You Think You Can Lead: Advice for Those who Aspire to Be Principal* and has *not* been published in any other professional journal. I realize that editorial changes can be made at the editors discretion.

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Bio-line

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Abstract

21<sup>st</sup> century school leadership is not for the faint of heart and as with any organization a school is only as successful as their leadership. The acknowledgment that a “different” reality exists for school principals is of utmost importance when identifying the conditions, situations, and roles that one will engage in. In this article Dr. East explains some of the many complex circumstances and unique challenges that confront school principals, as well the sacrifices that are required, thus making it not “business as usual” but not usual business.

## So You Think You Can Lead: Advice for Those who Aspire to Be Principal

Upon the sudden death of President Franklin Roosevelt, then Vice President Harry Truman inquired of Eleanor Roosevelt, “Mrs. Roosevelt is there anything I can do for you.” Mrs. Roosevelt replied, “Is there any thing I can do for YOU, YOU are the one in trouble now.” The same might be said for an Assistant Principal who becomes Principal. The challenges, demands, and pressures of being a secondary school principal are not getting any easier; they are become more complex, and more daunting. If the mantle of leadership weighs heavily upon the shoulders of modern secondary school Principals it does so doubly on first time Principals.

As Assistant Principal one deals with what is referred to euphemistically as the 3B’s (books, buses, and bad behaviors) however as Principal one handles “the Big 3”. Even though the headaches and challenges in Detroit do not appear to be all that dissimilar as to what one faces in the education realm, this “Big 3” refers to the responsibility factor that comes with being “the Man” or “the Woman”. As principal one must be prepared to make the “big” decisions, devote large amounts of time to the job, and to endure the “big” criticism when things go awry. Like it or not, the principal serves as the lightning rod for any and all issues and concerns within the school.

The perspective principal must realize that the privileges and perks of the position are greatly overshadowed by the responsibilities and requirements of the job. If an increase in salary is the number one reason as to why one is pursuing a principal position, then you are never going to have any fun with the job or salary. Consequently, if one aspires to lead a school then one must go into the position of principal well informed and well prepared for the “different reality” that exist, so to avoid certain missteps that can severely hamper one's ability to lead efficiently and effectively.

**Relative “Powerlessness”**

Can you think of any other organizational design in which the leader is responsible for a multi-million dollar structure, a million dollar payroll, supervising a highly educated and skilled workforce yet has only limited control over either? Can you think of any organizational structure where the leader assumes as great a level of responsibility and liability for the care and well being of so many individuals yet has only limited autonomy over the circumstances?

Consider for a moment, the principal cannot hire teachers or dismiss teachers; the principal can only make recommendations for employment or for termination. The principal is limited in the means in which they can motivate teachers and staff, the principal cannot give raises and cannot give them time off. The principal does not get to decide what student does and does not come to their school. Yet the academic performance of students on state and standardized test determines, to a degree, whether or not one remains principal.

### **Role of and Importance of Vision**

There is an old saying that there is a thin line between genius and madness, which may also apply to vision.

There is a thin line between vision and hallucination. In both cases, the outcome, the end product, pretty much determines whether one is viewed as a genius or a fool, or as a visionary or a lunatic.

But as the leader of the organization one must formulate and communicate a vision as to where they want their school to be in coming years. By virtue of positional power, the Principal can articulate and does direct where attention goes, and where attention goes, energy flows

### **Supervising Former Peers**

Change can be intimidating and as the new principal one would have to expect some apprehension and even resistance from faculty and staff. However, if handled properly by channel the energy and passion in a positive direction, conflict can be constructive, thus untimely breed creativity and growth.

Upon becoming principal I was returning to a high school where, not only I was a former teacher but also a former assistant football coach. As a result now I was supervising the same football coach and athletic director that had hired me 10 years earlier. Consequently, we had to cope with new and provocative professional and social realities. I was now, not only there supervisor but also their performance evaluator, who was going to determine their worth and value as an employee. Seek camaraderie and consoling outside of the school that you lead, faculty and staff are labor and the Principal is management

### **Can You Stand the Heat?**

How important is it to you to have people like you? Situations will present themselves when you have to do things that will be particularly distasteful or that you disagree with, either personally and professionally. None the less, as Principal, the responsibility to execute and action falls to you either because of board policy, state or federal mandate, or a directive from the Superintendent.

A principal friend of mine once said, "I figure if you treat teachers and others with kindness they will go out of their way to help you, unfortunately some of the people on my staff view my being nice as a weakness and try to capitalize on it." Another principal friend intimated to me, "I did not get to where I am by being nice to people." Individually, you must decide which approach works best for you.

Sometimes what school leaders do is adversarial in nature, it comes with the territory. As Principal you have a job to do. Staff, parents, and students often strike out at the Principal because they don't know what else to do

and many times they are striking out in fear. President Truman once said that his decisions would be discussed and cussed. Your decisions as the leader of the school will also be cussed and discussed, too. Don't take it personally;

### **“Informal” Power Structure**

By their very nature schools are socio-political entities and to discount the existence of “school” politics and the influence of the informal power structure, one does so at their own peril. As principal, one must seek to build coalitions among the various constituent groups within the organization as it is a must that they work together harmoniously. Seek to build power bases through loyalty, information, and creditability.

### **Commitment of time**

We all have the same amount of time in the day and there never seems to enough of it to get everything done that we want to. Possibly one thought to bear in mind that might save you some time is to be aware that how you approach situations and how you deal with people. In many cases your demeanor and attitude will determine how much an encounter is going to cost you in time. In some cases you can spend 15 or 20 minutes hearing people out and empathizing with their concern whereas putting them off might cost you a half day doing damage control when they appeal to the superintendent or their school board representative.

### **Decision Making**

Bear in mind, that as the leader of the school you can escape *responsibility*, but you can never escape *accountability*. You might delegate responsibility to an Assistant Principal, lead teacher, or a committee but you are still going to be held accountable for what transpires or what doesn't transpire. For example, you might have a committee make a decision and they stand behind the principal but when things go awry the

superintendent is not going to the committee for answers but rather is going to go the principal and ask why you allowed this to happen. Your reply might be, “Well, it wasn’t my decision it was the committee’s decision”, and the superintendent’s response will be, “Ok, you had a committee, so why did you allow the committee to make such a bone head decision.”

## **A Sense of Balance**

Careers, like life, are a series of Paradigm shifts. As human beings our perceptions, attitudes, and dispositions change based upon the “real world” encounters we experience. It is important to maintain a sense of balance, the ying and the yang, in your career. You are not going to win every battle that you fight.

The Principalship is like sweet, brewed, southern iced tea. Both hold the propensity to be a delectable, refreshing, pleasing bit of life but only after having been immersed in boiling water, steeped, wrung out, and given some time to chill.