



Self-assessments can help you better understand how you model your leadership skills.

Top Model: Self-Auditing Your Leadership Skills

By Gene Spanneut, Ed.D.

Have you ever wanted to be a professional model? Maybe not, but that is exactly what central-office leaders are. Every day, you model your professional leadership skills.

And like every top model, you should take a good look at yourself. How do your leadership skills affect your job performance, the outside world's perception of you, and, by default, the public's perception of your district?

Self-assessments can help you better understand how you model your leadership skills. By reflecting on the information you gather during your self-assessment, you can determine the skills you may need to enhance your job performance.

Growing Your Own Assessment

Commercial instruments are readily available to help you perform your self-assessment. Many include open-ended statements or questions with a graduated scale on which to record numerically weighted answers. Conversion tables categorize and interpret the sums of the responses.

For example, several prepared professional skills assessments are available on ASBO International's Website (www.asbointl.org). These formalized appraisals involve collecting the results from a self-review of defined skill areas and from a parallel review by one or more colleagues. By comparing the results using a separate analysis instrument, school business leaders can identify areas for possible professional development activities.

In addition to using prepared assessments, school business officials can use less formal methods to assess their leadership skills. They can design and use self-audits on a stand-alone basis, or as a follow-up to a formalized process, to examine in detail

the application of specific leadership skills necessary for a particular part of a job responsibility.

Self-audits need not be sophisticated, but they should have enough structure to provide consistency for seeking, recording, considering, and then using the information. Consistency is important because the results can be applicable for a cross-sectional snapshot of a single event or activity or for longitudinal comparisons over several weeks or months.

Designing a Self-Audit

The process of preparing and conducting a self-audit is not complicated.

To begin, write down what you consider the three or four major leadership responsibilities of your position. Depending on the size and configuration of your school system, this list might include areas such as fiscal management, supervision of the directors of support services, personnel negotiations, and fixed-assets management. Although these areas may be included in formal job descriptions, do not overlook charges given by supervisors under the "other duties as assigned" clauses in those job descriptions.

Now, select one responsibility that demands a considerable amount of your attention and energy, or one that may be particularly conspicuous. A variety of factors may influence your choice, such as the time of year; district initiatives, such as a capital project; a new superintendent; or requirements imposed by new state laws or regulations.

Next, break the responsibility into several more distinct tasks and, from among them, select one to examine in detail. Those tasks may relate to decision making, problem solving, and communication.

Depending on the specific nature of the task, however, you will regard one of those areas as more essential than the others and it will become the focus of your self-audit.

Now, answer the following general questions and, from them, sub-questions pertaining to the skill area of interest:

1. Within the skill area, what are the most important skill sets I want to use to accomplish the task I have identified?
2. What specific positive outcomes do I want to achieve?
3. With respect to those outcomes, what strategies will I need to maintain or strengthen the particular skill I am examining?
4. What specific negative outcomes do I want to avoid?
5. What strategies will I use to decrease or eliminate those negative outcomes?

The questions and answers need not be worded in formal terms. Rather, they should be expressed

in ways that are meaningful to you and appropriate for the purposes you have identified.

For example, Jan, a school business leader, selected fiscal management as her major responsibility. After dividing it into several smaller, more defined tasks, she identified her presentation of the monthly capital project financial reports to the board of education as the most significant responsibility at this time. After considering her choice, Jan decided to focus her self-audit on her communication skills.

She developed and then answered a series of questions in preparation for a detailed examination of the specific types of communication skills she believes are necessary as she presents the reports during board meetings. Here are some examples of her questions and answers:

1. **What specific presentation skills are particularly important for me as I give my first monthly report?**

Speak clearly, use the microphone, use proper grammar, maintain eye contact with board members but do not ignore others in attendance, avoid speaking too rapidly, avoid repetition, watch the body language of the board members as one way to check whether they understand what I am presenting, and do not make annoying utterances like “uh,” “um,” and so forth.

2. **What is one specific positive outcome I want each of the following to experience?**
 - Board members: Having confidence in the accuracy of my report.
 - Superintendent: Having no board members ask him later to clarify something I stated in my presentation.
 - Others attending the meeting: Having printed copies of the salient points in my report for their reference during my presentation.

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A Yes.

B So achievement drops off a bit. That's just called a rebuilding year, right?

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3. With respect to those outcomes, what strategies will I use to maintain or strengthen my presentation skills?

- Rehearse my presentation to avoid reading it at the meeting.
- Avoid using education jargon, acronyms, and abbreviations.
- Have a colleague critique me well before my presentation.
- Arrive at the site early to acquaint myself with the layout of the meeting room (location of tables, chairs); practice operating the computer, projector, and any other equipment I will use in my presentation; practice speaking into the microphone; practice standing in such a way that I will be able to maintain eye contact with the board members and others in attendance.
- Have a contingency plan if the equipment fails to operate.

- Mention at the start that I will welcome questions from board members and the superintendent at any time.
 - Ensure that all board members have a copy of the report before I begin my presentation.
 - Ensure that handouts are available for the audience and that I indicate where they are (or have someone distribute them).
 - Have a prepared press release for the media.
4. What is one specific negative result I do not want each of the following to experience?
- Board members: Failing to understand my answers to any questions about the report.
 - Superintendent: Finding an error in the document I prepared or hearing a verbal error during my presentation.
 - Others attending the meeting: Being unable to hear what I am

saying or being unable to see the information I am presenting visually.

5. What strategies will I use to decrease or eliminate the possibility of the negative results I identified?

- Anticipate questions that may be asked and be ready to answer them directly and confidently.
- With the superintendent, review each part of the report for accuracy before sending it with the board agendas.
- With the superintendent, review for accuracy any other materials I may use during my presentation or that may be provided to other attendees.
- Talk with any reporters after the meeting and provide them with my prepared press release.
- Speak with a few members of the audience after the meeting to see whether they have any questions about my report.

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Jan decided she would conduct her self-audit during the next three board meetings when she presents the monthly capital project financial reports. Since board meetings in her district are recorded for viewing on the local public-access television channel, she can obtain a copy of the video, watch her delivery of the report at her convenience, and critique the presentation skills in which she is most interested.

For her purposes, viewing the video is preferable to keeping track of those skills as she makes her presentations or to asking someone at the meetings to do so for her. The videos give Jan an opportunity to focus on her defined points of interest in her first presentation, to consider if she wants to make changes before the next one, and, if so, to compare the results. Using the videos also gives her an opportunity to examine other aspects of her pre-

sentations in which she might not have been initially interested. Jan can repeat these procedures to track longitudinal changes as she refines her use of the skills she has identified.

Using personally prepared self-audits may lead you to explore more formalized, research-based, and, perhaps, commercially prepared leadership assessments. Because these audits are intended for personal development, it's unnecessary to share the results with others. However, you might consider whether some features might be valuable additions to a formal performance evaluation process.

You Be the Judge

As central-office leaders, we are conspicuous representatives of our school systems. Accordingly, it is important to recognize that we constantly model what we do and the manner in which

we conduct ourselves as leaders. Our leadership is highly visible and many people judge our performance. How they see us and what they perceive about us as leaders may be very different from our own opinions.

How you approach and accomplish the varied requirements of your responsibilities is the result of how well you apply a range of leadership skills. Designing and using self-audits can help you focus on the importance of your leadership skills. Examining the results gleaned from that process can help you perfect your skills and improve the manner in which you fulfill your responsibilities.

Gene Spanneut, Ed.D., is assistant professor of educational administration at the State University of New York College at Brockport. Email: spanneut@verizon.net

www.asbointl.org

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- B I know a guy, whose guy knows someone on a guy's staff who can get us off the hook with all that transparency and accountability stuff.

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