10 steps to success

By Harold Brewer

Nothing fails like success. To become better leaders, we can’t rely simply on what’s been successful in the past. Applying past solutions to current problems leads to failure. Instead, we must open ourselves to the possibility that we may have to change based on new research, new knowledge, or a deeper understanding. We must question why we believe what we believe.

A successful principal is alert to current realities, getting the questions right, being open to solutions that match the circumstances, and involving as many stakeholders as is reasonable in the process of defining the appropriate solution.

Consider these suggestions on the pathway to success:

1. **Focus on instruction.** Management concerns and the logistics of budgets, schedules, meetings, extracurricular activities, and all the things that consist of “doing school” can be distracting. Unless a principal is careful, these things represent what he or she becomes as a principal. The principal may pass off to a talented assistant principal the essentials of the instructional process and tell that person to “keep me posted.” In delegating this task, the principal has just handed over the key influence of the school to a subordinate and set upon a path that leads away from the school’s true mission. A focus on instruction is a focus that puts children first. It is a focus on teaching and learning. It is a focus on climate and culture. Yes, the logistics of school are important, and the principal is evaluated on their effectiveness. The successful principal will have thought through those essentials and will delegate the logistics, wherever possible, to the assistant principal to focus on learners’ needs. For the principal who does not have an assistant, maintain an instructional orientation. Anything less and the principal will be seen as a good manager, someone who tries hard but is not the real leader of the school. Have a say in what this school will become. Stay planted on instructional soil and grow from there. Anything less is not worthy of the principal’s time.

2. **Build a community of learners.** Create a school climate focused on student success. Spend time and energy focusing on those things recognized as having value and which are most likely to create desired outcomes. We must help the community understand the roles and relationships between school and community, and the supports and collaboration necessary to bring children to school ready to learn.

3. **Share decision making.** Allow ideas to be expressed, opinions shared and reflected back to stakeholder groups, and brought back to the decision-making body before decisions...
are made. Involve stakeholders at all levels and guard against having decisions reported to the School Improvement Team as “the way it is going to be” and then passed through stakeholder representatives back to the departments as team decisions. This route clearly demonstrates the real power is not in the leadership team but in the principal. Such behavior alienates staff members and undermines the improvement process. When stakeholders own the process and are committed to a shared vision, the energy and initiative to be successful will be there. Take the time and do the hard work to develop opportunities for meaningful participation.

4. **Sustain the basics.**
Management, budget, discipline, the logistics of schedules, personnel, time, and all the details inherent in these areas are key to the principal’s success. Being able to “do school” and all of the things that implies cannot be overlooked. “Doing school” is paramount to being a good school. Yet within that issue is the question of how to sustain the initiative for change that is so necessary in our quest to be better, not just for some, but for all students.

5. **Leverage time.** Identify essential processes, align those processes, and integrate the language of change and improvement into the school’s daily routines. While everyone cries, “We don’t have time,” the successful principal determines how to make time, take time, and use time.

6. **Support necessary and ongoing professional development for all staff.** Targeted professional development is essential to generate the skills and awareness that will build conditions which support the school’s and community’s desired goals.

7. **Assess and redirect resources necessary to support a multifaceted school plan.** Don’t try to do this alone. Great conversations can build around these issues. Share opportunity and responsibility.

8. **Be a person of integrity.**
Stephen Covey identifies integrity as comprising character and competence. A principal is elevated to a position within the community that requires one to have a strong moral character and to be an example of community values. This is not an optional component of the job. Think and listen to see what this means in your community.

9. **Remain competent.** To become competent requires both a knowledge and mastery of essential skills. To remain competent requires wisdom based on continuous learning and experience. To sustain competence requires an unending commitment.

10. **Develop a climate of inquiry and continuous improvement.** The process of improvement in organizations is as much a function of knowing what questions to ask as it is getting the answer right. Don’t just look for answers. Making the connections is the work of leadership.