

# THE LEARNING Principal

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF SCHOOL LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

## The teacher's principal

*Collegiality instead of control is one thing  
teachers appreciate in a leader*

BY JO AND JOSEPH BLASÉ

**W**hat does effective instructional leadership look like? How can a principal improve teaching? How do teachers' views of leaders affect what they do in the classroom?

There has been little research into what teachers think makes an effective leader. And there have been few practical guides for leaders to become more effective. This article describes the everyday strategies of principals practicing exemplary instructional leadership and how these principals influenced teachers.

In our study of 809 teachers from public elementary, middle, and high schools in diverse



regions of the United States, teachers used open-ended questionnaires to describe the characteristics of their principals (strategies, behaviors, attitudes, and goals) that influence their classroom instruction. Teachers also described their thoughts, behaviors, and feelings. All retained their anonymity.

In our study, teachers defined the characteristics of effective leaders, paving the way for professional development to help leaders become more effective. They said that effective leaders:

- Avoid restrictive and intimidating approaches to teachers, as well as approaches that elicit “dog and pony shows” based on narrow definitions of teaching.

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**CONSIDER:**

Two or three situations in which you believe the practice of committed listening will make the most significant difference.

Consciously apply this skill in those situations, reflect on your success, and identify ways in which you could continue to develop committed listening in future situations.

► See Page 5 for a tool to aid you in learning to listen more fully.

## Practice the discipline of committed listening

**“One of the greatest gifts you can give another is the purity of your attention, not your advice.”**

— Susan Scott

Few things would improve the quality of school leadership more, I believe, than leaders spending more of their time truly listening in a purely receptive way to those with whom they work. Few leadership actions hold a similar level of promise to promote change in leaders themselves, to influence others, and to dramatically improve relationships in schools. And few things are more challenging for leaders than the discipline of careful, attentive listening because of the fast pace and fragmentation of their workdays.

Stephen Covey uses the phrase “seek first to understand” as a way of emphasizing the importance of listening as an initial and critically important step in human interaction. “To truly listen,” Covey (2004) writes, “means to transcend your own autobiography, to get out of your frame of reference, out of your own value system, out of your own history and judging tendencies, and to get deeply into the frame of reference or viewpoint of another person” (p. 192).

Covey (2004) offers Ralph Roughton’s view of committed listening: “When I ask you to listen and you start giving advice, you have not done what I have asked. When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn’t feel that way, you are trampling on my feelings. When I ask you to listen and you feel you have to do something to solve my problem, you have failed me, strange as it may seem. . .” (p. 193).

Over the years, I have collected quotations that underscore the central importance of high-quality listening in human relationships. Here are a few:

*“What the human heart really wants is not to be fixed, but to be heard and received.”*

— Parker Palmer

*“[I]f you are willing to enter his private world and see the way life appears to him, without any attempt to make evaluative judgments, you run the risk of being changed yourself. You might see it his way, you might find yourself influenced in your attitudes or personality. This risk of being changed is one of the most frightening prospects most of us can face.”*

— Carl Rogers

*“Creative leaders find ways of stepping into the shoes of other people and asking, ‘How would I feel and what would I want if I were this person?’”*

— Gay Hendricks and Kate Ludeman

*“Most leaders die with their mouths open. Leaders must know how to listen — and the art of listening is more subtle than most people think it is.”*

— Ronald Heifetz

Exquisite, careful listening can change the lives of both those who offer it and those who receive it. Such listening begins with a commitment to a new way of being with people based on the belief that others can set the direction for their own speaking and action without questions, guidance, or advice from us, no matter how well intended we may be. It continues as we develop new habits founded on the disciplined practice of this nuanced and continuously refinable skill.

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Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003)

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- More references for this column appear in the online version.**

## A new role: Cultural architect

Some people might expect an article about the learning leader to focus on the skills and knowledge of a single individual, namely the principal. But, in the context of the NSDC Standards for Staff Development, a leader is someone who **promotes a school culture that supports ongoing team learning and improvement.** That means leadership *influences* educators to work toward a common goal of high levels of student learning by developing a school culture that expects and supports professional learning.

Historically, the individual has been the focus of school improvement (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). The thinking goes if we can only improve the content or instructional knowledge of the individual teacher, then the whole school will benefit. Yet, for the past few decades, many researchers have investigated and calculated the role of school's structural and cultural impact on individual effectiveness. This powerful work has revealed organizational norms, structures, and policies that lead to enhanced performance of educators as well as their students. There is a growing consensus that how educators act and interact with each other impacts student learning.

The principal, then, becomes a *cultural architect* who cultivates an organization that focuses on and encourages learning in service to students (Deal & Peterson, 1999). The learning principal **builds a plan, with the faculty, to support ongoing team learning and improvement.** The principal understands that learning teams are the infrastructure for faculty learning. The principal builds a clear set of expectations for learning teams, provides resources and

support, and enables teams to meet during the workday.

The learning principal **recognizes the value of team learning and improvement and discusses improvement activities in staff meetings.** While the learning team is fundamental to professional learning, the principal must also continue to bring the whole school together to focus on common goals. If this is not done, small groups can become estranged from each

other and competing for resources, recognition, and time (Kruse & Louis, 1997).

The learning principal **recognizes and rewards the accomplishments of teams and improvement efforts.** Our reward system needs to be amended so that team accomplishments receive praise, recognition, and reward.

Finally, the learning principal **conducts conversations, dialogues, and discussions within the school community until team learning and improvement become a shared goal.** A change of focus on team — rather than individuals — will not be accepted readily by all educators. The principal will have to hold countless conversations with staff on the purpose, structures, and outcomes of learning teams and their impact on student learning. Effective learning teams cannot be mandated; team meaning and purpose must become a strongly held faculty belief if they are to truly improve student learning. Beliefs are difficult to change. One way that beliefs change is through continued examination of underlying assumptions. Dialogue is a powerful strategy for these kinds of conversations about how the school staff will move together to improve student learning.

#### LEADERSHIP

Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement.



## POWERFUL WORDS

“When the Titanic  
sinks, you cannot  
say, ‘I was traveling  
in first class.’  
We all are our  
future’s guardians,  
and our future is  
our children.”  
— Vartan Gregorian

## Work with a lovable fool or a competent jerk?

**W**hen looking for help with a task at work, people turn to those best able to do the job. Right? Wrong. New research shows that work partners tend to be chosen not for ability but for likability.

Drawing from their study encompassing 10,000 work relationships in five organizations, Tiziana Casciaro and Miguel Sousa Lobo have classified work partners into four archetypes: the competent jerk who knows a lot but is unpleasant; the lovable fool who doesn’t know much but is a delight; the lovable star who’s both smart and likable; and the incompetent jerk who ... well, as the authors say, “that’s self-explanatory.”

Everybody, of course, wants to work with the lovable star — and nobody wants to work with the incompetent jerk. More interesting is that people prefer to work with the lovable fool over the competent jerk. That has big implications for every organization, as both types often represent missed opportunities.

Because they are liked by a disproportionate number of people, lovable fools can bridge gaps between diverse groups that might not otherwise interact. But their

networking skills are often developed at the expense of job performance, which can make these employees underappreciated. To get the most out of them, the researchers recommend protecting them and putting them in positions that don’t waste their bridge-building talents.

As for the competent jerks, too often their expertise goes untapped because people just can’t put up with them. But many competent jerks can be socialized through coaching or by being made accountable for bad behavior. Others may need to display their competence in more isolated settings.

The authors also suggest that managers can create situations in which people are more apt to get to know one another and potentially like one another since familiarity often breeds greater likability. Their research seems to suggest that placing teachers on teams may be one of the steps that could have that impact in schools.

**Source:** “Competent jerks, lovable fools, and the formation of social networks,” by Tiziana Casciaro and Miguel Sousa Lobo, *Harvard Business Review*, June 2005.



## Grow yourself as a leader

**“M**any teachers who become principals do so specifically for the opportunity to serve as instructional leaders — to make a difference in the lives of students and teachers beyond their own classroom. But, because of the on-the-job demands that principals face each day, visiting classrooms to celebrate student learning and supporting teachers in improving their practice are often the first responsibilities that new principals forsake. The good news is that there are many possible activities through which principals can promote teaching and learning: meeting with

teachers to set goals; coordinating mentoring programs for new teachers; celebrating the contributions of veteran staff; serving with teachers on curriculum mapping teams to align standards and assessment practices; facilitating book studies or article sharing among teachers; and encouraging collaborative activities, such as critical friends groups, lesson study teams, and action research projects.”

**Source:** “Growing into leadership,” by Harvey Alvy and Pam Robbins, *Educational Leadership*, May 2005.

# Listen fully

**Purpose:** This exercise helps individuals practice how to slow down and listen. In this exercise, participants will experience what it means to listen fully to another person and to be listened to fully.

**Time:** If you're reading an article during this activity, allow at least 45 minutes. Allow each speaker two minutes to speak on each topic. The facilitator may want to limit the experience to one topic or explore several topics and switch speaking and listening partners for each topic.

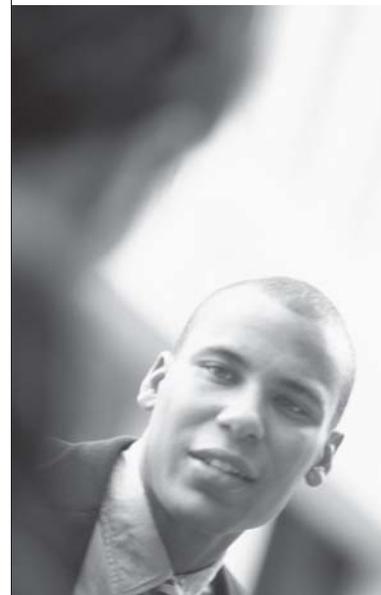
**Materials:** Copies of articles to be read by participants, 3x5 cards, marker.

## Possible topics for this exercise:

- What I like best about myself as a teacher.
- Why I became a teacher.
- Why I continue to teach.
- Why I chose to teach the subject and grade level that I'm teaching today.
- What my students are capable of learning.

## Directions

1. Do a jigsaw reading of Chapter 7 of *Falling Awake* or select another article or book chapter that also describes the qualities of listening completely. (See the Dec/Jan. 2002 issue of *Tools for Schools* for directions on a jigsaw reading.) *Time: 20 minutes.*
2. Invite participants to share the attributes of listening fully that they have gleaned from this article or chapter. *Time: 10 minutes.*
3. Identify the topic for this exercise.
4. Ask participants to select a partner. Distribute 3x5 cards labeled "sender" and "receiver" to each pair.
5. The person with the "sender" card speaks first. While the "sender" speaks, the "receiver" listens completely. The "receiver" does not speak or make any noises in response to what s/he is hearing. *Time: 2 minutes.*
6. Next, have the partners trade cards, switch roles, and continue on the same topic. *Time: 2 minutes.*
7. After completing this exercise, the facilitator invites participants to reflect out loud about the experience. *How did they feel while speaking? How did they feel when listening? What did they learn about themselves as speakers and listeners?*



**Source:** Adapted from *Falling Awake: Creating the Life of Your Dreams*, by Dave Ellis, Breakthrough Enterprises, 1999.

## The teacher's principal: Collegiality instead of control

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Administrative control gives way to collegiality.

- Believe in teacher choice and discretion. Teachers are not criticized or forced to teach in limited ways.

- Integrate collaboration, peer coaching, inquiry, collegial study groups, and reflective discussion to promote professional dialogue.



Effective principals value dialogue that encourages teachers to reflect on their learning and practice.

- Embrace growth and change. These leaders believe change is a journey of learning and risk taking.

- Respect teachers' knowledge and abilities, seeing the teacher as "intellectual rather than teacher as technician" (Little, 1993, p. 129).

- Are committed not only to enacting school improvement and reform, but also to enhancing professional community in schools (Louis & Kruse, 1996).

In addition, instructional leadership is embedded in school culture; it is expected and routinely delivered.

We found that in effective principal-teacher interaction about instruction, the result is inquiry, reflection, exploration, and experimentation. Teachers build repertoires of flexible alternatives rather than rigid teaching procedures and methods.

### THEMES

Principals exhibit two major themes in effective instructional leadership: Talking with teachers to promote reflection and promoting professional growth.

#### *Talking with teachers to promote reflection*

Effective principals value dialogue that encourages teachers to reflect on their learning and practice. The study revealed five primary talking strategies:

1. **Make suggestions.** Do this during post-observation conferences and informally, day to

day. Suggestions must be purposeful, appropriate, and non-threatening. Principals should listen carefully, share their own experiences, use examples and demonstrations, give teachers choices, contradict outdated or destructive policies, encourage risk taking, offer professional literature, recognize teachers' strengths, and focus on improving instruction.

**2. Give feedback.** Effective principals "hold up a mirror," serve as "another set of eyes," and are "critical friends" to teachers. Feedback focuses on observed classroom behavior, is specific, expresses caring and interest, provides praise, is problem solving, responds to concerns about students, and stresses the principal's availability for follow-up talk.

**3. Model.** Demonstrate teaching techniques in classrooms and during conferences. Model positive interactions with students. Teachers viewed these forms of modeling as impressive examples of instructional leadership.

**4. Use inquiry and solicit advice/opinions.** Question teachers and solicit their advice about instruction.

**5. Praise.** Focus on specific and concrete teaching behaviors.

As a result of leaders who used these strategies, teachers reflected more and used a greater variety of teaching strategies, responded to student diversity, planned more carefully, and took more risks. Teachers reported positive effects on their motivation, satisfaction, self-esteem, efficacy, sense of security, and feelings of support.

In addition to the strategies discussed above, principals enhanced teacher reflective behavior by distributing professional literature, encouraging teachers to attend workshops and conferences, and encouraging reflective discussions and collaboration with others.

#### *Promoting professional growth*

Effective instructional leaders use six strategies to promote teachers' professional development:

1. **Emphasize the study of teaching and learning.** Provide staff development opportunities that address emergent needs. Encourage

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## The teacher's principal: Collegiality instead of control

COVER STORY

*Continued from p. 6*

teacher input, allow discretion in attending, and support innovation. Principals who were identified as effective leaders in the study often participated in staff development sessions.

**2. Support collaboration among educators.** Networks are essential for successful teaching and learning. Model teamwork, provide time for collaborative work, and advocate sharing and peer observation. Encourage teachers to visit other teachers, even in other schools, to observe classrooms and programs.

**3. Develop coaching relationships.** Encourage teachers to become peer coaches. Based on two decades of research, Joyce and Showers (1995) concluded training is effective only when it includes peer coaching in the classroom.

**4. Encourage and support program redesign.** Encourage teachers to redesign instructional programs and support diverse approaches to teaching and learning. Be flexible on grouping and strategies. Provide resources to support program redesign when possible.

**5. Apply principles of adult learning, growth, and development to staff development.** Create cultures of collaboration, inquiry, lifelong learning, experimentation, and reflection consistent with the principles of adult learning and an understanding of teachers' life cycles, roles, and motivation (see for example, Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 1998).

**6. Implement action research to inform instructional decision making.** Use action research. Effective principals in the study are working to conduct staff development as a large-scale action research project, although the efforts

The article originally appeared in *Journal of Staff Development*, Winter 2001 (Vol. 22, No. 1). See the original *JSD* article in the members-only area of the NSDC web site for a complete list of references.

are not yet extensive. This is consistent with Calhoun's (1994) thesis that without class and school-based data about learning, teachers cannot determine the effects of what they do in the classroom.

These six strategies resulted in increased teacher innovation/creativity, risk taking, instructional focus, and reflection, as well as positive effects on teachers' motivation, sense of efficacy, and self-esteem.

Overall, our data indicate that each of the instructional leadership strategies enhances teachers' well-being, emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally.

Today's successful schools have increasingly become centers of shared inquiry and decision making. In such schools, instructional leadership is shared with teachers, and in its most progressive forms is being cast as coaching, reflection, collegial investigation, study teams, explorations into uncertain matters, and problem solving (Glanz & Neville, 1997). Discussions of alternatives, not directives or criticism, are the focus, and administrators and teachers are working together as "communities of learners" engaged in professional and moral service to students. By making this happen, principals have a direct effect on teachers and classroom instruction (cf. Sheppard, 1996).

Today's successful schools have increasingly become centers of shared inquiry and decision making.

**"I was not a very astute instructional leader when I first became a principal. But I became a much better one after leaving the classroom. Why? Because I had so many opportunities to observe master teachers in their classrooms."**

— Ted Haynie, director of the department of systems performance for Calvert County Public Schools, Prince Frederick, Md. Haynie is a former member of the NSDC Board of Trustees. As quoted in "When the principal is the new kid at school," by John Franklin, *Education Update*, October 2005.

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# Challenge yourself to think differently

Learn something new about your school by challenging yourself to think differently about some routine situations in your life.

**1. Analyze your vision or mission statement to find the "emotional juice."**

Read it with a yellow highlighter, marking places where success depends on making an emotional connection with parents or teachers. If you can read the whole document without taking the cap off the highlighter pen, you have some real work to do to give the document and your organization some life.

**2. Pick a real workplace problem you are facing, then come up with a list of 10 diverse and famous people.**

Imagine how they would solve your problem. Craft a one-sentence response from each person.

**3. Do a reverse of back-to-school night.** Invite parents to speak at your weekly staff meetings, rather than asking parents to sit and listen to teachers.

**Source:** Adapted from "The art of leadership," by Stan Davis and David McIntosh, *Leader to Leader*, Summer 2005.



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