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Leaders show us where to stretch

If you were to spend a month in my classroom, you'd likely catch my students rolling their eyes a few times, tired of the never-ending life lessons that I slip into conversations. You see, I'm an old-fashioned school teacher, convinced that instruction stretches beyond the curriculum.

One of my favorite lessons is the importance of role models. "Kids," I'll say, "No matter how great you think you are, you can always find someone to look up to who has skills that you don't have. Don't resent those people — learn from them! Careful observation can make you a better person."

To reinforce my message, I start each year telling students about my personal weaknesses — and the people who guide my growth. Driven to be a better school leader, I have made one such role model my previous principal, Matt Wight. Spending time studying Mr. Wight has helped me to learn more about being influential, I tell my students.

So what makes Matt so remarkable?

For starters, he empowers teachers to make critical decisions about teaching and learning. In Matt's schools, there are no decisions that teachers aren't centrally involved in. In today's accountability culture where a school leader's reputation depends on producing results, leaders are greatly tempted make top-down decisions. Control becomes important because the risks of releasing control are great.

Empowering teachers, however, generates results for Matt that centralized decision-making could never produce. His teachers feel a sense of commitment and curiosity that teachers in many other schools don't feel. His teachers are motivat-

ed to identify instructional approaches that work because he expects them to be problem solvers. Matt has unleashed an often-untapped resource in schools — the intellectual energies of his teaching staff.

More importantly, though, Matt demonstrates a sincere commitment to the well-being of others through meaningful interactions every day. His teachers know beyond a doubt that Matt cares for them, because he makes an effort to connect with everyone nearly every day, regardless of the demands of his position. Watching him share conversations with people of such diverse backgrounds and experiences is nothing short of amazing. Not only is he genuinely interested, he is genuinely comfortable and open. This sense



of "service to staff" earns Matt his teachers' undying loyalty.

What I've found so interesting in the years I've known Matt is that formal knowledge and skill are only a small part of his success. While he's clearly competent and well-read — lending essential credibility to his efforts — the real levers that drive change in his schools are these personality traits. His teachers feel valued and respected. School is much more than work to them. Instead, it is a professional adventure shared with likeminded colleagues.

These reflections on Matt's ability to lead have been eye-opening for me primarily because I'm a guy who isn't naturally driven by developing relationships. My influence has always been centered in what I know, rather than who I am. Lesson learned, though. This year will be a year of relationship building for me.

After all, role models matter, right? ♦

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