Contents

With the Leader's Brain in Mind

1

Did you know that . . .

1. awareness of your personal strengths prepares you to become a more effective leader?

2. four different leadership styles have been identified by research?

3. brain plasticity allows a leader to change and grow?

4. mirror neurons allow us to learn leadership strategies through observation?

It was a hot day, pretty typical for that time of year on the upper East Coast. Al, the high school principal, sat shaking his head; his day was deteriorating by the minute. His immediate focus was on a social network e-mail avowing that vampires were going to inhabit his school and no one was safe from their bite (someone had been watching too much of the *Twilight* series). That's when the phones started ringing.

That afternoon, Al had a scheduled meeting with a group of disgruntled math teachers. The new math curriculum was causing an uproar. Most were not a fan of the new and improved; instead, the consensus was that the previous curriculum rose head and shoulders above it. The mandate for change had come as a top-down decision from the district office, handed on what seemed like a silver platter filled with new materials.

> In addition, Al was well aware that new initiatives like RTI (Response to Intervention) were weighing heavily on teachers, not to mention arguments over the academic calendar, AYP (Annual Yearly Progress) goals, and countless other challenges that face a low-income district. Al knew that his staff's good humor had been stretched and frustration was growing.

Sound a little too familiar? If you're a school administrator, you can fully relate. Besides the day-to-day struggles, you're underfunded and overcrowded, and there's a revolving door of teachers arriving and departing (even the last superintendent didn't stay long). To add salt to the wound, instead of being cheered on by the public for your challenging work, you're making the nightly news for not achieving AYP goals and for high drop-out rates. Despite what seem like efforts to bludgeon you to greatness, you battle onward.

Welcome to the world of leadership. It's complex, vigorous, highly rewarding, and at times equally perplexing and exhausting. By combining a strengths based prototype of leadership with brain based insights and strategies, educational leaders are in a position to revolutionize and reform schools. Essentially, this model involves extracting and synthesizing the best from the business world's strengths based model, combining it with cutting-edge research on the brain, and then uniting the two with educational best practice and research. Add to this a healthy dose of common sense, and a solid and innovative model for leadership is generated. Now is the perfect time to approach leadership in this comprehensive manner.

STRENGTHS BASED LEADERSHIP

Strengths based leadership (Rath & Conchie, 2008) was first conceived when ground-breaking research was conducted by Gallup. This data-driven group identified various strengths that leaders possess and provided a multifaceted, systematic approach to ascertaining a leader's unique assets. The result of the research was the creation of an assessment and intervention plan that has been a crucial guide to leaders in the business world (they've been quick to own it), the political world (the vote was affirmative), and now the school world (in attendance).

A basic premise of the strengths based leadership philosophy is that when individuals become aware of their own strengths, they can put those strengths to work for them. Instead of spreading assets thinly, trying to be everything to everyone, this model suggests that leaders first determine their strong suit and then play to it. In the words of Donald Clifton

(Rath & Conchie, 2008), educational psychologist and the team leader for Gallup's StrengthsFinder online assessment, "A leader needs to know his strengths as a carpenter knows his tools, or as a physician knows the instruments at her disposal. What great leaders have in common is that each truly knows his or her strengths—and can call on the right strength at the right time. This explains why there is no definitive list of characteristics that describes all leaders" (p. 13). Consequently, by focusing on a personal best style of leadership, an individual becomes proficient and excellent rather than a patchwork quilt of underperforming, erratic, and irregular leadership.

Once strengths are identified (for example, Executer strengths with themes in Discipline and Achievement) the school leader focuses on responsibilities and situations that play to those strengths. The result is a more confident and self-assured leader. It only makes sense that excelling, instead of struggling, increases feelings of well-being. In fact, Gallup conducted a longitudinal study and found that higher job satisfaction and income levels were correlated with people who concentrated on their strengths (Rath & Conchie, 2008). Powerful stuff.

Strengths based leadership offers structure in the form of four leadership styles with 34 themes:

Executer

    a. Achievement—industrious, hard worker

    b. Arrangement—organized, assembles the pieces

    c. Belief—personal values define purpose in life

    d. Consistency—equitable and fair in relationships

    e. Deliberation—carefully processes all decisions

    f. Discipline—orderly, seeks routine and structure

    g. Focus—determines priorities and then stays attentive to them

    h. Responsibility—dependable and conscientious

    i. Restoration—fixes problems when they arise, good under pressure

Relationship Builder

    a. Adaptability—flexible, accommodates change

    b. Connectedness—interconnected with the world, believes things happen for a reason

    c. Development—nurtures the potential in people

   d. Empathy—sympathetic, walks in others' shoes

   e. Harmony—consensus builder

   f. Inclusiveness—involves everyone

   g. Individualization—looks for the individual gifts each person possesses

   h. Positivity—invigorates with an optimistic perspective

   i. Relatability—connects with others

Influencer

   a. Action—doer, achieves and accomplishes

   b. Command—in charge, comfortable taking control

   c. Communication—excels at presenting, speaking, and explaining

   d. Competition—loves the contest, winning is a bonus

   e. Maximization—focuses on strengths, strives for excellence

   f. Self-Assurance—confident in self and own decisions

   g. Significance—achieves and then desires acknowledgment in return

   h. Persuasiveness (Woo)*—charismatic, influential

Strategic Thinker

   a. Analysis—deductively and inductively processes information

   b. Contextuality—brings a historical perspective to present situations

   c. Futuristic Outlook—visionary, forward thinking

   d. Information Gathering (combined themes of Input and Ideation)*—collects ideas, constantly creates new schemas

   e. Intellect—thinker, introspective, the scholar

   f. Study—learner, craves knowledge

   g. Strategy—planner, directs and guides ideas forward

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*A few strengths based themes were put into friendlier language for universal understanding; the strengths based term follows in parenthesis.

The majority of people have strengths in more than one of the four domains; rarely is a person only an Executer or solely a Relationship Builder. Instead, people possess themes from all areas (for example, Achievement, Adaptability, and Command), with a cluster of strengths

Using Leaders' Strengths to Create and Maintain a Positive School Climate

Did you know that . . .

- a chronically poor school climate creates emotional barriers to learning new information?
- adult brains are ruled far more by logic than by emotion?
- Relationship Builders are quickly attuned to a school's emotional climate?
- school rules tap into the brain's pattern-seeking capabilities?

Rafe had spent the past 5 years as a principal in suburbia when he got the call informing him that he was being transferred. His new school would be Roosevelt Middle School, a tough school whose substandard reputation preceded it. Essentially, his mission was to clean up the mess. The exact words were, "The school's in shambles—fix it."

As Rafe scanned the corridors of his new building, he couldn't help but think, *This is grim; this school is drowning in its own juices*. He found no subtle undercurrents of melancholy in the building; in fact, it was just the opposite. All parties were more than up front about their discontent. The teachers were unhappy, the students were upset, and the parents were just plain mad—clearly not a desirable blend of emotions. The secretary's first words to her new principal were, "I don't do computers, so don't expect me to use one." Her confrontational tone reflected the school's weary and crabby emotional state.

> The past principal had left devastation and rubble in her wake. Somehow, she had turned a pleasant, amicable school into a place where all inhabitants were viewed as potential problems, punishment was the first course of action, and control trumped learning. In her 3-year reign, she had single-handedly squashed hope and collegiality. All this Rafe knew prior to taking the position as principal, but somehow the reality was even more unsettling.
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> Rafe's first order of business was a walk-through of the building; he needed to get the lay of the land. The results were disturbing. What he found was peeling paint (neglect was epidemic), no doors on the bathroom stalls (trust had fled), four classroom doors with holes that had either been punched or kicked in (anger ran rampant), graffiti scattered helter-skelter (disrespect at every corner)—and to top it off, a discipline paddle hanging on the wall of the physical education teacher's office (a clear and present message).
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> Now, Rafe was supposed to be a superhero and fix everything. Expectations were high. People wanted change, and they wanted it yesterday; to wait a week seemed far too long for this crotchety crew. As one might presume, resources were limited, and needs were great. Rafe knew his strengths fell among the themes of the Influencer. He hunkered down and set about designing his plan for a positive school climate, one that engaged everyone, set high expectations, and marked a clear vision for the future.

For school leaders, this dicey state of affairs is too often the current state of affairs. While everyone has responsibility for changing a negative, nonproductive atmosphere, school leaders are in a particularly potent position to make things happen (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). These aren't just buzzwords, something to utter and forget; these are words well grounded in research. The overall culture of the school, the climate in individual classrooms, and the attitudes of teachers, staff, and students are all affected by the leadership in the school. Superintendents, principals, assistant principals, curriculum specialists, and teacher leaders are in a position to make change or maintain the status quo (which may be a good thing; the energy required to preserve the positive should never be underestimated).

In this endeavor, there's no better guide than brain-compatible strategies combined with attributes from each of the strengths based leadership domains (Executing, Relationship Building, Influencing, and Strategic Thinking). In order to sustain a high-quality situation or initiate change for a productive milieu, school leaders need to get their ducks in a row. And those ducks come in the form of valuing the people involved, recognizing the challenges they face, and understanding their own leadership strengths.

Every leadership style brings something different to the table when it comes to creating school climate, and no doubt the best scenarios include players from each group. As you read the following, think about your own leadership style, where your strength lies, and how you can work with colleagues who have strengths in the other domains.

WHAT'S THE POINT?

School climate: We know it when we see it; we contemplate it, lecture on it; but for practical purposes, it's important to conceptualize it. Basically, school climate refers to the atmosphere in which teaching and learning occur. It's the emotional mood, the connections made—with the result being either satisfaction or discontent. Comments such as "We started a teacher study group for middle school math. It's great," "The assistant principal is taking my class for an hour so I can go to my son's kindergarten play," and in regard to the principal, "'No problem' is his mantra; he always starts with the positive" are all reflections of a positive school climate. Overhearing a student say, "Mr. Jamison hates his job. He can't wait for retirement," or "Mrs. Dennisee made Ashley cry again in class. She is so nasty!" means a negative tone has set in, one that has trickled down to students.

Improving school climate is a worthy objective that ranks high on a leader's list of priorities; the benefits are undisputable. Not only does it enhance a teacher's talents to instruct in the classroom, but it increases the ability for students to learn (a negative school climate hinders both). The benefits don't stop with academic gains. Research shows that school climate directly impacts teacher retention, lowers student dropout rates, and decreases the incidence of violence. In fact, it impacts all students' developmental needs: the cognitive, social, and emotional. The lists of positives go on and on, making a sound case for a leader's energy to be directed toward climatic rescue and resuscitation (California State University–Los Angeles, 2008).

THE BRAIN AND SCHOOL CLIMATE

Brain research lends powerful insights into the subject of school climate. Emotion, stress, and negativity (all brain based) play active roles in determining a healthy or an anemic teaching and learning environment.

For some, the spotlight on emotions within the schools can feel a little too touchy-feely, off target, as though it convoluted the job of leadership. If you find yourself in this awkward emotional space, it's time for a para-