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Why Look at Great?

We often hear that we can learn from anyone. From effective people, we learn what to do; from ineffective people, we learn what *not* to do. Though this advice contains a grain of truth, think about it: How much can we really learn from our ineffective colleagues about being an effective teacher or principal? We already know plenty about what *not* to do. Good teachers already know not to use sarcasm, not to yell at kids, not to argue with teens in front of their friends. Most principals already know that sitting in the office does little to improve instruction in the classroom or student behavior in the hallways. We don't need to visit an ineffective principal's school to learn this. But we can always reap good ideas from successful educators.

Look at it another way: If school leadership were a true/false test, we could raise our scores by looking over the shoulder of an unsuccessful principal and choosing the opposite answer to each question. However, working with people is never as simple as yes-or-no, bad-or-good, true-or-false. Leadership is more like an open-ended essay exam. It won't help much to copy from the least-prepared student; we already know that doodling in the margins or writing "Vicky-4-Ever" won't earn points. On the other hand, although we might not agree with everything in the best student's essay, we could still learn from it. At the very least, we would probably see some new ideas that we could build on. As school leaders, we face a myriad of choices; eliminating the inappropriate options doesn't move us forward.

Here's one more example: Imagine that you have decided to build a rocket and fly to the moon. Now imagine that you have two choices about learning how to do this: You can go to NASA, or you can come by my house on a Sunday afternoon. Well, if you choose the second option, even the most diligent observation is unlikely to advance your lunar mission. Take all the notes you want: Leaning back in the recliner doesn't inspire engine design; none of the buttons on the TV remote leads to liftoff; lemonade in the shade is not rocket fuel. (Does any of this come as a surprise?)

On the other hand, if you decide to visit NASA, how will that help? You might observe that the rockets they build are bigger than your garage. Their budget looks enormous; they have more engineers. Nevertheless, you can probably learn a good deal about the processes and technology that go into a successful launch.

These examples are simplistic, but the lesson is clear. Educators who want to promote good leadership find value in examining what effective principals do that other school leaders do not.

Studying Effective Principals

I have had the good fortune to conduct or participate in five different studies examining effective principals (Whitaker 1993, Whitaker 1997, Fiore 1999, Roeschlein 2002, Turner 2002). In each study, researchers visited two different groups of schools: schools with outstanding principals and schools with less-than-stellar leaders. Though these studies yielded many insights, their greatest contribution to this book was to focus on the question, "What do the most effective principals do that is *different*?" Without visiting less effective sites, we may not have been able to determine the variables that distinguished the effective principals.

For example, if four outstanding principals hang the same banner in the cafeteria—"All students can learn!"—I might conclude that one key to effective leadership is an inspiring banner in the lunchroom. However, if two of the less effective leaders display the same banner, I would reconsider my conclusion. The banner alone does not

It's People, Not Programs

Outstanding principals know that if they have great teachers, they have a great school; without great teachers, they do not have a great school. More importantly, all of their audiences take the same view. If my third-grade daughter has a great teacher, I think highly of her school. If her teacher is not great, I see her school as less than stellar—no matter how many awards she wins, no matter how many students earn high test scores, no matter how many plaques adorn the main office. Students share this perspective; if a high-school sophomore has four great teachers each day (out of four!), then believe me, that sophomore will think the school is great. As the quality of teachers drops, so does a student's opinion of the school. All the way from kindergarten through college, the quality of the teachers determines our perceptions of the quality of the school.

Two Ways to Improve Our Schools

School improvement is actually a very simple concept. However, like many other simple concepts, it is not easy to accomplish. There are really two ways to improve a school significantly:

1. Get better teachers.
2. Improve the teachers you have.

We can spend a great deal of time and energy looking for programs that will solve our problems. Too often, these programs do not bring the improvement or growth we seek. Instead, we must focus on what really matters. It is never about programs; it is always about people. This does not mean that no program can encourage or support improvement of people within our school; however, no program inherently leads to that improvement. Believe me, if there were such a program, it would already be in place in every one of our schools.

Each of us can think of many innovations that were touted as *the* answer in education. Too often, we expect them to solve all our woes. When they do not, we see them as the problem. However, we must keep in mind that *programs are never the solution, and they are never the problem*. If we cling to the belief that programs are the solution or the problem, we will continually lose sight of what really makes a difference. Back to basics—whole language—direct instruction—assertive discipline—open classrooms—the Baldrige model—state standards—mission statements—goal setting—site-based management: There is nothing inherently right or wrong with any of these ideas. We may have a fondness for one that has met with success, or deep-seated resentment because another has been forced down people's throats. If we take a closer look at some examples, however, we might see what effective principals never forget: It is people, not programs, that determine the quality of a school.

How Open Classrooms Got Started

Some of you may know the true history of the open classroom movement. I do not claim any expertise about this topic—but for what it's worth, I'll share my vision of how the concept took off.

The scene is an elementary school in Anywhere, USA. At the faculty meeting just before the start of school, the principal announces that he has good news and bad news. The good news: Enrollment is higher than anticipated. The