

Don't Tap the Keg and Eight Other Essential Rules of Early Career Principals

An Editorial

Carolyn L. Carlson

Washburn University

Scott P. Myers

Kansas State Department of Education

Abstract

Principals that are early in their careers have unique challenges to face in order to become successful in their administrative positions. Early career principals, future principals, and those who educate future principals in education administration programs at colleges and universities should be aware of these potential obstacles. This list of nine “essential rules” seeks to challenge new and future principals, as well as those who educate them, to consider some of the unique challenges faced as well as offer insight to effectively overcome them.

Introduction

Principals that are successful in their careers have a strong set of beliefs, a vision for the school that they lead, and effective reflective practices to ensure that their actions are supporting both their vision for the school and their own beliefs. Principals that are early in their career have unique challenges to face in order to become successful in their administrative positions. These early career principals, future principals, and those who educate future principals at colleges and universities should be aware of these potential obstacles. By considering these challenges, they may be more prepared to effectively overcome them.

1. Don't Tap the Keg; Don't Drain the Keg. Establishing respectful collegial relationships is essential for a successful principal. This is imperative as it establishes the primary function of school being focused on the students and their achievement. This only occurs through ongoing dialogue. However, the sheer frequency of communication, while beneficial to the culture, can tip to the negative and actually be counterproductive. A great deal of the first year or two of serving as a principal is dedicated to establishing positive relationships with the staff. The key is to know the proper balance with these relationships. In order to deepen the relationship with the staff, it is necessary to spend time away from the

schoolhouse with the staff members. But, it is counterproductive if too much time is spent. For instance, it is essential for the principal to attend social gatherings; however, it is unwise for the principal to be the first one to arrive and the last one to leave as it is possible for the principal to end up being too familiar with the staff, making it difficult to remain objective while assessing the needs of the school.

2. **Embrace the Silence.** The principal who is doing an effective job will make decisions that are not popular with some of the staff. When this occurs, it is common for the principal to feel the fallout from those decisions. Staff members will congregate, allowing them the opportunity to air their issues with the latest decisions made. Eventually, there will come a time when the principal, in her normal rounds, will come upon this gathering. When this occurs, it is human nature for the staff members to stop talking and for silence to take the place of the conversation. The fact that this halt in talking occurs simply means the principal is doing her job. As the shepherd of the building, the principal must make decisions, and sometimes those decisions are not popular. As long as the principal is making the decisions from a place of personal belief and principle based on student achievement, the principal can feel assured that this is perfectly normal and will occur.
3. **Provide Truthful Feedback.** In order for any organization to move forward in meeting its goals, the leader must be willing to engage in difficult conversations. Toward that end, while doing his job visiting classrooms and assessing the effectiveness of the teachers, it will occur that the principal will see some action, strategy, or technique being utilized that can be improved. It is incumbent upon the principal to remember the focus of the building (student achievement) and to provide honest and truthful feedback to the teacher about what was observed. This is not always easy. A principal early in his career may lose sight of this fact, getting too caught up in the relationship with his teachers and not focusing on the importance of the mission. If unchecked, the principal might ignore the areas of weakness, creating a missed opportunity for growth for the teacher.
4. **Student Needs Trump Teacher Needs.** All too often decisions made in the school are finalized with the concerns of the teachers in mind more than those of the students. This stems from the desire to meet the needs of the professional staff to make the running of the school an easier task. While this understandable, it runs counter to the goal of providing the students with the best educational opportunities that can be had. If it is possible to meet the needs of all parties in the building with every decision, that is optimal, but that doesn't occur very often as the needs of the adults and the students are sometimes at cross purposes. Faced with this difficult situation, it is important for the principal to remember that his primary duty

is to foster and maintain a fervor toward serving the clientele of the building: the students. With this thought in mind, the principal will face decisions that make the adults in the building unhappy. This can be seen in day-to-day decisions and in more long-term programmatic decisions. Although this can be unpleasant for the principal, a true leader does not shy away from taking the correct action. In the end, it is the principal's job to see to the best interests of the students, even if that means that the teachers are displeased about how a given situation is resolved.

5. **Shed the Teacher Skin.** For the most part, principals have one thing in common: they were teachers. While this is a necessary preparatory step to take to fully understand how the classroom functions, when a teacher decides to make the leap to the principalship, it is necessary for a transition in outlook to occur. An early career principal will face administrative issues she did not face as a teacher, and even though she may have had an extremely successful career as a teacher and completed a highly regarded preparatory program, this is the first time she has faced the issue from the global perspective of the principal. When an issue arises, the principal approaches the situation by pulling on past experiences to find the correct response. However, if the sum total of those experiences has been in the classroom, she is viewing that situation through the filter of being a teacher. When this occurs, it is logical for the administrator to respond in a manner that is not as global as necessary. While this response may seem appropriate from a teacher's perspective, all too often, it is not the correct response from a principal's perspective. The sooner the principal makes the shift from thinking like a teacher to thinking like a principal, the more successful the school and its students will be.
6. **Tear Down the Caste System.** Unfortunately, the classification system of schools lends itself to a caste system created amongst the employees. This is counterproductive to achieving the mission of the school. The primary function of the principal is to ensure that the students are given all of the educational opportunities they deserve. This is more easily achieved through the involvement of the greater educational community in those efforts. All too often, potentially key or pivotal people are excluded from this process merely due to their job title. For instance, the primary duties of classified staff members, although imperative, do not include classroom instruction or efforts toward student achievement. However, a principal who wants to positively impact the school culture creates opportunities to involve all parties within the building in academic activities such as classroom projects or school events. This effort bears fruit in that the entire educational community is now focused on the true purpose of school. Once this occurs, the

detrimental caste system is exposed and dealt with appropriately.

7. **Rage Against the Assessment Machine.** The whole child is important. In efforts to meet the demands of today's high-stakes assessments, it is essential that the principal keeps in mind the needs of the whole child rather than focusing on the successful completion of a given high stakes test. While these tests are important, they are not so important that the emotional, social and cognitive development of our students is neglected. In the modern day schoolhouse, one of the primary responsibilities of the principal is to ensure that the teachers are fully preparing the students to shine on the assessments. In fact, schools are now being acknowledged as being "successful" or "unsuccessful" based wholly on how well the students do on these tests. Given this scenario, it is essential that the principal understands that the students are also children, not just test-taking automatons. It matters that the students are exposed to the arts, to concepts of physical fitness, to social skills and teamwork and even to the "untested" subjects that compose a well-rounded individual. The principal sets the tone for the building, so if she maintains and communicates to her staff about the importance of serving the whole child, then the staff will follow suit. If, however, the principal becomes myopic about the purpose of school being to prepare the students to do well on a set of assessments, then the staff will follow that belief. If that occurs, a whole generation of students will be underserved and misserved.
8. **A Posse Has More Bullets.** The days of the lone gunman walking the streets of Dodge City to face down the bad guys are long gone. Today, the principal has at his disposal the talents and wherewithal of the professional educators who desire a true voice in the development of the educational experience of the students in the building. Now many heads and minds are able to come together to help fashion and implement the strategies, techniques and initiatives that have proven to be beneficial to the students as they matriculate through the system. In order for this to occur, the principal needs to be extremely cognizant of the importance of tapping the resources all around him. This can seem a bit daunting if the principal is fearful that involving others will lead to a certain amount of chaos thus causing upheaval and dysfunction to run rampant. However, once the principal overcomes this fear and involves others in meaningful functions of the school, he will learn that this giving away of the power is actually a means to gaining power with the staff members as they will appreciate the opportunity to feel a true sense of efficacy in their professional lives. Once this occurs, the stage has been set for the school to benefit from the eclectic talents of the staff members. In the end, the school will be much more capable of predicting and then meeting the needs of the students.
9. **Put Out the Fires and Avoid the Icebergs.** It is a simple fact that the responsibilities,

duties, and obligations of a building principal come at her at a torrid pace. There are obligations that need to be taken care of immediately, some that need to be taken care of in the near future, and some that can be addressed in the distant future. Regardless, a public school principal will find herself in the position with the need to multitask or more importantly, the need to prioritize her actions. It is all too easy to be caught up in the day-to-day emergencies, never really addressing the tasks that need to be completed on a long term basis. While the negative fallout might not be noticed immediately, this procrastination will ultimately lead to a dysfunctional building. Some tasks take a certain amount of time and planning to complete appropriately. The only way to ensure success in such an environment is to didactically plan ahead. That way when the inevitable emergency occurs, the long term goal can still be met. If, however, the principal is in survival mode, merely taking care of the emergencies when they occur and never looking forward, ultimately the long term tasks will fall by the wayside, never getting completed.

Summary

Principals are drawn to their profession by their desire to make a difference in the lives of children. In order to be successful at this, principals have to have a firm set of beliefs and a vision for the school. To make that vision a reality, principals must have the knowledge and skills to be an effective manager and leader of the school. Recognizing some of the obstacles that lie ahead allows early career principals to be prepared to overcome them and succeed in their positions. Early career principals, future principals, and those who educate future principals should consider these types of obstacles and how best to approach them so that principals can effectively lead their faculty, students, and staff.

Note:

Carolyn Carlson is an Associate Professor in the Department of Education at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas. carolyn.carlson@washburn.edu

Scott Myers is the Director of Teacher Licensure and Accreditation at the Kansas State Department of Education in Topeka, Kansas. smyers@ksde.org