Creating a Support System
Finding a Solution for the Tension Between the Managerial and Instructional Leader

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The Principalship

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It has become clear that no effective principal can be simply a manger or only an instructional leader. While arguments on each side insist upon the priority of their tasks and the requisite skills necessary to accomplish them, clearly both types of leadership are important in carrying out the daily routine of a principal as it presently exists. I argued in a previous work that moral or cultural leadership is the ideal role that any principal should play. While I still believe that this is the ideal role that principals should aspire to, it does not negate the fact that the managerial and instructional tasks still persist and must be attended to. However, to reach this ideal, the very structure of schools and the opinions formed about them need to be change. Until this happens, the argument between managerial leadership and instructional leadership will persist, with no clear winner emerging any time soon. Yet, despite the practical constraints that require principals to be both manager and instructional leader, hopefully a majority of their time will be focused on instruction.

In observing Norm Colb, Head of Menlo School, it became immediately clear that the role he played as moral leader, was made possible by a tremendously talented support staff that took care of the managerial and some of the instructional needs. Whether it was the Dean of Students who dealt with infractions of school policy or the Academic Deans who scheduled and supported the teachers, most of the daily tasks typically associated with the principalship were handled by others. This was not to say that Norm was a disconnected loafer, on the contrary. He was fully aware of all the issues, involved in nearly every decision and symbolically and morally in charge of the school. By having a vast network of people to help him manage the school, he was freed from the mundane
tasks to focus exclusively on the primary objective of the school, how to provide the best educational environment for students and teachers.

To this end, Norm’s typical day included greeting everyone as they arrived, touring the classrooms to chat with teachers and students, meeting with students, faculty, staff and parents, listening to them and making decisions to encourage and support the teaching and learning. All of this seemed to embody both a high degree of symbolism and enlightened leadership. This concept of enlightened leadership suggests that the principal sees education as a higher calling and makes decisions that support and maintain this. In the case of Menlo School and Norm Colb, this model works not only to create an effective learning environment, but additionally, an equally supportive teaching space. It is important to remember however that Norm would have extreme difficulty carrying out this role were it not for the cast of supporting players. As he mentioned numerous times, “I could not do this job without the highly talented people who run this school.”

While Menlo School with it’s emphasis on creating a structure that allows the principal to be the moral or enlightened leader may be ideal, unfortunately, it is not the reality for every school. Most principals do not have the luxury of student and academic deans, budget directors or other highly effective support personnel. In most situations, the principals must manage all of these details and somehow find time to be the coveted “instructional leader” that they read about in every journal or publication. Given this tension, principals wonder how they have the time to fulfill all these jobs and still attempt to “lead” the school.
Clearly, daily tasks are necessary, yet principals must have teaching and learning as the primary focus of their job. This means that principals must understand and help organize the entirety of the curriculum. As possibly the only person in a position to see the whole scope of learning, he or she must be actively involved in ensuring consistent and logical connections between grades and subject. Additionally, the principal needs to be the lead mentor teacher. Teachers need to know and trust that principals understand them and can assist them in becoming better at their work. To this end, principals must encourage and support all manners of professional development and life-long learning. They must also understand that schools function best when they are true learning communities and principals must therefore work diligently to foster a collegial spirit and allow for as much collaboration and communication as possible. In short, principals need to spend their days focused on creating the best possible learning environments for both student and teacher.

Critics will immediately argue that principals have no time to attend to these goals and rather are inundated with daily fires that need extinguishing or directives from above that need implementation. While a typical principal with little support staff would surely face this situation, the reality is that this can no longer be the case. Schools need strong instructional leaders to support and foster the best teaching and learning possible, but they also need equally capable people to manage all the details. Therefore, principals need a strong, capable support staff. At the very least, they need either an assistant or vice principal who is an exceptional manager of people and resources. This person or persons would take on the daily managerial tasks and ensure that the school runs smoothly. In the corporate analogy, these people are often the unsung Executive
Assistants who take care of all the daily tasks, which in turn allow the execs the time to focus on the larger mission of the company. Therefore, principals need highly capable and trustworthy executive assistants who can manage the day-to-day events of the school. In the case of Menlo it was clear that Norm’s assistant, more than any other individual, handled many of the daily tasks of the school.

Clearly the managerial tasks of school cannot be overlooked or brushed aside, Guthrie and March both argue to their necessity, yet it is not the best use of the principal’s time and energy to be the one concentrating on them. If we are to achieve highly effective schools, as indicated by great attention to the needs of teachers and learners, principals must, at the very least, be in a position to provide strong instructional support and equally great moral support. Despite indications to the contrary, the pressing political rhetoric to improve schools and ensure better learning, would seem grounded in the notion of principal as instructional and moral leader. Unfortunately, the reality that most principals do not have capable assistance and therefore left with the brunt of the daily operations, provides them little time or resources to become the enlightened instructional leaders that are so badly needed. The seemingly cost effective solution to reform schools by simply testing kids more and demanding that they get better is completely counter to the reality of what will actually improve schools. If more resources were devoted to preparing principals and supporting them in their job, they could in turn concentrate on the issues that would ensure that effective teaching and learning were occurring in the school.

Enlightened instructional leadership that is permitted by a highly capable support staff is the ideal and should be the reality for all schools. While the typical conception of
instructional leadership would seem to be enough for most schools, the addition of the cultural or moral elements are equally as important to sustain the school in achieving it’s mission. Therefore, in the same manner that principals need a support staff to help with many of the managerial tasks, so too do they need talented individuals to assist them in the providing a highly successful instructional environment. Ideally, the organizational structure of many small liberal arts colleges would be an ideal model for many schools. Most of this institutions have at the very least, a highly visible moral leader in their President, a Dean of the College who is the instructional leader, focusing on teacher and learning, a Dean of Students, who oversees all aspects of student life and various business and development personnel who ensure the viability of the school. While these are private institutions and therefore may have more resources to achieve this structure, if the opinions and subsequently the funding of secondary schools were adjusted, they too could build such a successful structure. Therefore, to realize the ideal situation of for principals, that of an enlightened leader, the structure and foundation of schools must be rethought and cast in an image of educational institutions that function well are esteemed in the public’s eye.