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## What Do You Want to Be to Leadership?

*The first test is knowing what you want, knowing your abilities and capacities, and recognizing the difference between the two.*

Warren Bennis

### WHAT IF YOU COULD BE THE KIND OF PRINCIPAL YOU WANT TO BE?

When I was a young teacher pursuing my master's degree in educational psychology, the principal where I taught advised that I should change majors and pursue a degree in school administration. Being young and the first in my family to go to college and become a teacher, a principalship seemed way beyond my future aspirations. "I never want to be a principal," was my polite, yet short, reply.

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In my limited experience as a teacher, I believed that principals were like Darth Vader in *Star Wars* and even heard that going into administration was like going to the dark side. Principals did all of the discipline, were the ones good students avoided, held difficult parent meetings, and forced teachers to do things against their will. Pretty extreme thinking and very naive on my part.

Fortunately for me, I used to talk to Joe and Tony, two guys from the local gym in Poughkeepsie, New York, who were retired teachers, and their response when I told them about my principal's suggestion was, "What if you could be the kind of principal you want to be?" Although not at the time, those words changed my perspective in the years to come because they never left the back of my mind. Something about those words stuck with me. I still believe to this day that the principalship has a great deal of potential, and sadly, some leaders never truly tap into all of it. It's one of those positions that we can look back on when we are old and gray and be proud of the fact that we were a principal.

Later on, after pursuing an advanced degree in administration, I did get the opportunity to take that administration job that I never thought I wanted. The teachers on the seventeen-member interview panel told me that their decision to choose me was based on the fact that I had a great deal of teaching experience. However, even with all of that teaching experience, when Jo Moccia, my superintendent at the time, formally offered me the job, I was a bit nervous and insecure.

I was hired to replace the current principal, Sharon Lawrence, who had been hired as the new assistant superintendent. During the three-month transition period before Sharon and I would start our new jobs, she was very supportive and introduced me to all of the key stakeholders in the school and community. If Sharon hadn't been so open and welcomed me into the school, it would not have been a successful venture. We worked as a team and it turned out to be one of the smartest things we ever did.

## **MOTIVATING PEOPLE TO BE THEIR BEST EVERY DAY**

Even though I knew everyone by July 1, I still knew that was only a small part of the journey into the principalship. The first faculty meeting, which I was very anxious about, was supposed to last one hour and went on for three. I made mistakes, but my staff supported me because I was open to hearing their feedback. I spent the first year of my principalship watching how people interacted with one another. Meeting people where they were was important because I wanted to help them reach another level. Truth be told, I wanted to reach another level and wasn't always sure how to do it. Every morning, I welcomed students off the bus and went to every classroom to say good morning.

The instructional side of leadership and the need to collaborate with staff was a bit more difficult. I entered classrooms, only after I told teachers that I was doing it to get to know students and not to evaluate their every move. Over time, I began transitioning into being more of a collaborative leader. I honestly did it because I missed being in the classroom, had a profound respect for education, and wanted to motivate people to improve and be the best they could be every day. I wanted to model positive relationships but also learn from those teachers, parents, and students around me. During my years as a teacher, I have learned a great deal from my students. My students taught me a lot about overcoming obstacles and have helped inspire me to wonder why we do what we do.

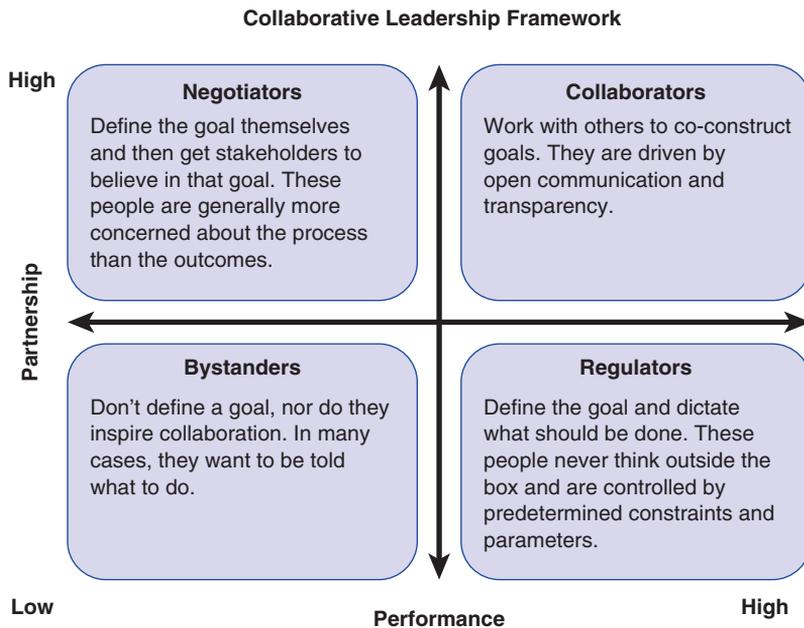
Part of that wondering led me to realize that my style of leadership differed from a straightforward instructional leader. Instead, my style was much more collaborative in that our staff, students, and parents learned from me and I learned from them.

## **WHAT IS COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP?**

Collaborative leadership includes the purposeful actions we take as leaders to enhance the instruction of teachers,

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build deep relationships with all stakeholders, and deepen our learning together. It includes the managerial side, as well as instructional and transformational leadership, and is the greater whole of all of those parts. Collaborative leaders co-construct classroom and building-level goals with staff around the teacher observation process and faculty meeting agendas, we include parents in the conversation about the way their children learn and, when appropriate, we include students in the decision-making as well. Collaborative leadership is about working in collaboration with all stakeholders, and not manipulating people to agree with the goals we have already chosen. We bring our own expertise and learn together.



For leaders to have a positive impact on relationships and learning, we need to establish a positive school climate and include all of the adults in the school in that collective endeavor.

There are four different ways to describe leadership styles with regard to collaboration proficiency:

1. **Bystanders**—These leaders don't define any positive goals and they don't inspire stakeholders to collaborate. They have low growth performance and low partnership qualities. Teachers work in silos and the principals remain in their office more than they make attempts to be visible.
2. **Regulators**—These leaders define the goals for the teachers and the school. Although they have high performance, they control the whole environment. These leaders know what idea they want to walk out of a meeting with well before they ever walk into the meeting. Unfortunately, they do not inspire true partnerships around the school as much as they promote compliance, which ultimately creates a hostile school climate where teachers wait to be told what to do.
3. **Negotiators**—Negotiators seem as though they are inspiring collaboration, but what they do is define the goal behind closed doors. Then they slowly make their way around the school or district and get people on board with their ideas. They create coalitions. This works just as long as stakeholders believe in the goal, rather than feel they have to achieve it because it's coming from the top.
4. **Collaborators**—These leaders find the perfect balance between inspiring stakeholders to collaborate and co-constructing building- and classroom-level goals. They believe in a high level of transparency and honesty and have a high level of performance because stakeholders feel as though they have a voice in the process. Collaborative leaders use social media as one way to communicate with parents, and they utilize technology in ways that will maximize impact.

The Collaborative Leader finds the perfect balance between inspiring stakeholders and co-constructing goals

Hearing the words *collaborative leadership* should conjure up images of principals entering into classrooms, talking with

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students in the hallway, reaching out to parents to deliver positive messages about their children, and much, much more. Everything leaders do should be about having an impact, which means they have to work collaboratively with all stakeholders.

Having an impact means that we research, reflect, and have discussions around influences that matter. Influences refer to

These influences were chosen based on how they work to collaboratively bring stakeholders together to foster growth through maximizing strengths and contributions.

the tools and methods we use, as well as the actions we take in classrooms and school buildings that have a positive impact on learning. John Hattie, someone I will focus on a lot throughout the book, found over 150 influences on learning. Hattie's influences all have an effect size of over .40, which means

that they offer more than a year's growth for a year's input, something I will further explain in the coming chapters.

The influences I chose for this book are based not only on their effect size but on how they work to collaboratively bring stakeholders together to foster growth through maximizing their strengths and contributions. These influences are

- Instructional Leadership (.42)—Being an instructional leader is specifically about putting a focus on learning; collaborative leaders bring stakeholders together in order to keep that focus.
- Collective Teacher Efficacy (1.57)—Each stakeholder in a school has a strength. This influence is about bringing those individuals together to maximize that strength with a goal of fostering a stronger focus on learning. Collaborative leaders foster collaborative expertise.
- Assessment-capable learning (1.44)—Hattie tells us it is important for all students to know where they are, how they got there, and where they should go to next. Collaborative leadership is needed to help build relationships with students, meet them where they are, and bring them to a new level.

- Professional development (.51)—Professional development is beneficial when it is ongoing and focuses on student learning, the goals of teachers, and the school community. Collaborative leaders foster and inspire professional learning and use their venues such as faculty meetings in order to do it.
- Feedback (.75)—Collaborative leaders foster growth in stakeholders and themselves, and feedback is what will help get them there.
- Family engagement (.49)—In order to have parental support, parents need to know what changes are happening in the school, and they need to feel as if they have a voice in some of the process. Collaborative leaders bring diverse parents together in order to meet this goal.

These are the influences that most leaders and school communities gravitate to when we provide Visible Learning trainings. Chapters 2 through 7 are each based on one of these influences. Take a moment to reflect on what helps you make an impact. Do you already use these influences? What kind of evidence do you have to prove that what you do works? How do you know you are having an impact? Which one of the influences that you haven't tried yet will be the one that helps you make a stronger impact?

Both you and the teachers at your school should be collecting evidence to understand your impact on student learning (collectively and individually). Your job as a collaborative leader is to figure out ways to help teachers understand what evidence to collect as well as how to find resources to help them improve their practices. If we are reflecting without evidence, then we are just remembering it the way we think it happened as opposed to how it may really have happened. Collaborative leadership is about bringing teachers together to discuss the evidence they have and figuring out ways to make a stronger impact on student learning so that students can become assessment-capable learners.

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### Collaborative leaders

- use evidence when reflecting,
- work proactively by fostering a positive school climate,
- take a breath before being reactive,
- listen more than they talk,
- bring people together through finding common bonds, and
- know why they chose to get into leadership and understand why they stay there.

### MEET, MODEL, & MOTIVATE

A collaborative leader is someone who uses evidence and research to **meet** stakeholders where they are, **models** how to do it and **motivates** them to improve (see Figure 1). What makes collaborators different from negotiators is that while

**Figure 1** Meet, Model, & Motivate



collaborators may bring their own ideas, they are open to changing these ideas based on the feedback of the stakeholders they are working with. Additionally, the reason why this framework needs to be highlighted is because I do not believe that a majority of leaders meet stakeholders where they are, but actually meet stakeholders where they, as leaders, think those stakeholders should be. Additionally, leaders do not motivate stakeholders as much as they use data to force those stakeholders into compliance. And they rarely model as much as they act as though stakeholders should “Do as I say and not as I do.”

We need to ask ourselves who we are as leaders. What does leadership mean to us as individuals? What are we willing to learn? Are we in front of our staff or working side by side—or both? We are living and working during extraordinary times in education, which brings accountability in a magnitude that has not been present before. Many critical issues are facing us as leaders, and although some of them have been around for a few years, we still don’t understand how to best deal with them. They are not going away any time soon, and we have to know what they are as well as how to address them. We need to work in collaboration with stakeholders to find the best way to address these large issues at the same time we work on the small ones.

## 10 CRITICAL ISSUES FACING EDUCATION

In January of 2014, I posted a blog titled *10 Critical Issues Facing Education*. It has had hundreds of thousands of views and continues to receive over 15,000 views a month, which shows that it still resonates today. These issues are still critical. Leaders are still trying to figure them out, and they will only address the issues, and do their best thinking around them, when they work in collaboration with stakeholders from their school community.

## 10 Critical Issues Facing Education

*by Peter DeWitt*

*January 23, 2014*

*blogs.edweek.org*

During my leadership training at the College of Saint Rose, I took a class with Jim Butterworth (my mentor) called Critical Issues. Jim was a voracious reader, an assistant commissioner for the New York State Education Department, former superintendent, and an amazing professor. All of those combined with a 2 ½ hour class led to some of the best educational discussions I've ever had.

Every week, we were required to read chapters from various books (i.e., Fullan, Senge, Hargreaves, Reeves and Greenleaf), and numerous stories from *Education Week's* print copy. It opened up our world from the classroom we were teaching in, or the school we were leading. The class brought together building leaders, teachers, school psychologists, and social workers from urban, suburban and rural settings who were all trying to finish their degree in leadership.

I took the class over 10 years ago but never forgot about the importance of discussing issues, even if they were difficult and the people in the room held differing opinions. As educators, we should always be able to debate our profession. The problem we have, as does anything that involves politics, is that we cannot seem to move forward together. There are state and national leaders so consumed with being right that they cannot, and will not, budge.

Hopefully, all of that will change this year. After the past few years of increased accountability, budget cuts, arguments, and infighting, 2014 will be a different year for all of us . . . and I hope for the positive. In education, there are some very large issues that we have to contend with, and they are not all about accountability and mandates.

### Top 10 Critical Issues

Critical issues are those issues that are important to education. They are the barriers that get in the way, or the important elements that we need to focus on in order to move forward and offer better opportunities to our students.

**Common Core State Standards**—Forty-six states may have adopted the standards but around a dozen states are backing out or considering backing out of using them. Regardless of how people feel about the Common Core, they have led to many hot debates about education and will continue to do so in 2014.

**Student Learning**—Student learning is everything from different pathways to graduation; encouraging student voice in student learning, and encouraging students to have a place at the table for larger conversations about their education. So often we focus on teaching, but it's learning that matters most.

**Technology**—Even after all of these years, technology is still a hot button issue. Some people love it and use it flawlessly every day, while others hate it and don't see why they need to be forced to use it at all. In addition, what makes it complicated is that some schools seem to have endless resources, while other schools have to use what wealthier schools disregarded as old. Whether its MOOCs, iPads, gaming, or BYOD, technology will still be a critical issue to discuss in 2014.

**Social Media**—Twitter has exploded over the past few years. More and more educators are joining and finding members to their professional learning network (PLN). What's even better is that they are sharing resources to use in their classrooms, buildings, and districts, and they are also using social media to connect for professional development (e.g., Twitter chats, EdCamps, etc.). Social media will be, and should be, part of a huge discussion in 2014.

**Politics**—Politicians have long mentioned education in their speeches but the past two years it seemed to have happened more than ever. Many politicians seem to focus on how schools are failing, and their only solution is standardization, accountability, and high stakes testing. Many governors are running for reelection this year and education will no doubt make or break their campaigns. How many politicians, like Cuomo and Christie, have spoken about teachers is deplorable and this is the year when teachers continue to take control over that conversation.

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**High Stakes Testing**—Not sure if you have heard of this before but schools across the country have to give high stakes tests to students. Some start it in kindergarten, while others begin in 3rd grade. In most states, they are tied to teacher/administrator evaluation and that will no doubt continue to be a big debate this year. There need to be different methods used to assess student learning, and none of it should be "high stakes."

**School Leadership**—If you go on Twitter, you will find hundreds of school leaders who consider themselves "Lead Learners." This is very important because they see the important part they play in the lives of their students, teachers, and staff. In addition, school leaders understand that they can have a positive or negative impact on their school climate, and too many still have a negative impact.

**Preservice Teaching Programs**—How can we get the best teachers into our classrooms when so many politicians and policymakers cry that schools are failing? Under those circumstances, who would want to go into the profession? Additionally, preservice programs need to improve because many of the graduates do not seem prepared for the profession. The real question for 2014 is how can K–12 schools work with these programs to build a community of learners who are prepared for the profession? A little less accountability tied to testing would go a long way to improve this issue.

**School Climate**—A few days ago Secretary Duncan and Attorney General Eric Holder announced new guidelines to stop the school to prison pipeline and improve school climate. This critical issue is not just about bullying, but about creating an inclusive school climate where all students can achieve their maximum potential.

**Poverty**—We know around 22 percent of our students are living in poverty. We also know that many children who live in poverty come to kindergarten hearing one-eighth of the language (vocabulary) that their wealthier peers experienced. Many of the schools that try to educate these students lack the proper resources, and the communities where children in poverty live often lack the same resources that wealthier towns have. Poverty is an issue that is one of the most critical issues of our time, in and out of schools.

These are very tough issues, but also very exciting at the same time, and we need collaborative leaders who have a depth of knowledge about each one. Collaborative leaders are the ones who don't ignore the issues, but look at them as challenges. Our lives are always followed by question marks because we don't know what will happen, but part of the excitement is figuring out how to react to those question marks. Collaborative leaders rally their stakeholders to move forward in a way that will bring out the best thinking that can help alleviate the pain some of the issues may cause, something I will better address throughout this book.

### **The Importance of Reflection**

I'm forever grateful for my time as a school leader. Reflection has been a vital element for my career, and I still think a great deal of growth lies before me. Hopefully you feel the same way about your own leadership practices. I hope this book inspires you and provides you with the tools you need to reflect with evidence in your own practice.

Jill Berkowicz, a former teacher who writes the *Leadership 360* blog (Education Week) with Ann Myers, posed these questions that I will leave for you to answer as you begin to read this book:

- Who are you?
- Who do you want to be to the educational field?
- What do you know and can teach that is different from the masses?
- How will your voice speak to a need in the field?
- What will you do if you have hesitations about standing out as yourself?
- How will you know you are ready?

Answering these questions will undoubtedly help you lead your classroom, school, or district. In order to lead effectively and positively impact our school communities, we need to find our voices and stand out as leaders who invite collaboration rather than compliance

In order for things to change for the better, school stakeholders need strong collaborative leaders who will encourage them to have a voice in their school community. Are you an empowering leader?

Collaborative leadership is far from easy because it involves bringing different mind-sets together under one common mission and takes a great deal of experience, patience, and a bit of foresight. In administration classes, prospective leaders are told to be visible, and I believe we need more than that. Leaders need to go deeper every day. They need to meet, model, and motivate. That doesn't happen overnight and takes time to evolve.



### **School Story—Many Hands Make Light Work**

***by Peter DeWitt, Principal of  
Poestenkill Elementary School***

*Albany, NY*

As the principal of Poestenkill Elementary School in the Averill Park Central School District outside of Albany, New York, I worked hard to collaborate with parents, students, and staff. Although there will be school stories throughout this book, I wanted to start with mine because it has elements that were both highly successful and very challenging.

Most days involved me taking students off the bus, checking in with the students who needed some sensitive adult intervention, and going from one classroom to the next to say good morning to all of the students as they started their day. School climate was important to me and the staff, and we wanted to try our best to start each day off right. Sometimes that meant working through an issue with a parent, listening to the concerns of teachers and staff, or getting feedback from students.

As a school community, we collaborated by designing and building a playground together. Dozens and dozens of parents, as well as teachers and students, came together over multiple weekends to build a playground for the school community. This was a big deal because the small town didn't really have

any other large areas where children could play, so the school played a central role in the town. One of the parents kept rallying our energy by stating, “Many hands make light work.” It was a really great time for our school climate and school community. Staff, students, and parents always felt comfortable sharing concerns and celebrating successes, but the playground construction really helped us strengthen our foundation. Those first few years were important for what was to come.

In the last four years of my principalship, our school community went through millions of dollars in budget cuts, numerous teacher lay-offs, and a school consolidation based on low enrollment that required us to close a one-classroom-per-grade-level school that had been annexed into the school district in 1992. Poestenkill Elementary School had to absorb the whole student population within about three months, as well as some of the teachers from the school that was being closed.

It was a tumultuous time in our district because second graders were picketing at board meetings, parents from both schools were arguing through Facebook, and a parent from the school that was closing created a hate blog that focused on school administrators and teachers. There were times when the state police had to be at board of education meetings. During the consolidation, we all made mistakes that we had to learn from, which usually centered on communication.

In my first year as the principal, we had established a Principals Advisory Council (PAC) in our school. PAC required one stakeholder from each grade level and special area to voluntarily sit on the committee. Over the time we were together, we began co-constructing goals for faculty meetings and addressed building issues through activities that would draw out where we needed to focus. During the time of the consolidation, we spent a lot of time focusing on how to lessen the stress of all stakeholders.

- We created an open house for the parents of the school we consolidated.
- I visited the students at the school several times before it closed, and a couple of those visits were during the whole school assemblies.

- We developed an ice cream social with our PTA to bring all of our students together before school officially started.
- When the hate blog posted negative comments, we tried to combat it with positive responses around school.

Collaboration is what helped me become a better leader. I learned from the students, teachers, and parents. Being the principal of Poestenkill Elementary will always be one of my proudest accomplishments.

Additionally, I worked with the PTA to create new events that would bring together the students and parents of both communities, and over time, the pain of the consolidation subsided. Parents, students, and teachers came together many times for plays, concerts, athletic events, and

academic events as well. We had open houses that focused on having deep discussions on bullying and new state standards, all of which I will highlight throughout this book.

Collaboration isn't just a good idea for a book. Collaboration is what helped me become a better leader because I learned from the students, teachers, and parents around me. Being the principal of Poestenkill Elementary School will always be one of my proudest accomplishments.

*Peter DeWitt, EdD*

*Principal, Poestenkill Elementary School (2006–2013)*

*Poestenkill, NY*



## MEET, MODEL, & MOTIVATE

### Meet

- Introduce yourself to the school community. Let down any walls you may have and show them that you are honored to be working there. Parents want to know that their child's leader wants to be with them.

- Take time to get to know stakeholders one conversation at a time (students, teachers, etc.) to see where they are and begin thinking about ways you can offer your expertise.
- Listen more than you talk. Don't just spread your message. Learn what their message is as well.

### **Model**

- Use good communication skills. Make sure your school website has the word *learning* on it.
- Try using one-page newsletters to send home instead of five-page newsletters that stakeholders may not read.
- Create a blog for your school so you can write about learning, and even about changes you have made to the school community. A blog will help you find your voice and model collaborative leadership as long as you do not shut down the comment section of the blog.
- Make sure you use positive words when talking about students, teachers, and school. It may sound silly to offer this advice, but we hear one positive statement for every ten negative statements.

### **Motivate**

- Depending on the school community, many people have heard the typical rhetoric about high expectations and a sense of community. How will you offer a deeper narrative?
- Following through with your narrative is the biggest way to prove that you are serious. Leaders do not always follow through with their narrative. Choose the right one so you are more motivated to achieve it.
- Leaders talk about change. Be different and talk about improving. We are asked to change all the time, but improvement is where we should get the biggest bang for our bucks.
- How will you motivate the unmotivated? How do you know who they are? What will you do?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How did you begin your career as an administrator?
- How do you plan on meeting with stakeholders in the school community?
- Who can you go to for support and guidance? Your predecessor? A veteran teacher leader? A community member?
- What lessons from the classroom did you learn that can be used to help guide teachers who may go through the same thing?
- How will you focus on instruction and learning as a leader?