

# LEADERSHIP PLATFORM

Leadership Platform Reflection

Hans Schmitz

California State University San Marcos

Leadership in Education is a complex topic that demands a great deal from leaders. They must be visionaries, innovative, managers, instructional leaders, community experts, and much more. Education is an endeavor that involves a great deal of stake holders as well: students, teachers, classified staff, elected officials, publishers and other vendors, and the community at large. Having held leadership positions in the past that related to education I was aware of this complexity, but during my tenure in the Masters of Arts in Educational Administration program at California State University San Marcos, I have become far more aware of the diversity of skill that is needed to be a leader in this space. Clearly no one person can be all things to all people but there are a few key qualities that one can poses in order to be more successful as an educational leader. In order to take on this difficult role an excellent educational leader must be committed to building relationships, maximizing their community's strengths and being a lifelong learner themselves to carry the heavy load that comes with educating our youth.

### **Building Relationships**

As our staff gathered in the cafeteria on the first day of the work year in 2017. I remember being excited to meet the staff and get to know them better since it was my first official day at my new school. As the day began, our principal got up to recognize some outstanding achievements by teachers. As he began, he made a few jokes about how much he talks and as he was about to launch into recognitions, he noted how much he appreciated everyone and that if he had the time, he could tell a story about literally everyone in the room. From the fact that his daughter had been the flower girls at a teachers wedding many years ago to the story that when he met me, he was surprised to find out that we had another staff

member that was a part of the “parents of twins club” at school. I had only had a few conversations with him prior to that, most of which were interviews, but he had taken the time to remember something about me. While he spoke about this, I looked around the room and could see in everyone’s faces that he was genuine in his claim that he could tell a story about all who were in the room. The power of relationships cannot be stressed enough when discussing leadership.

Kouzes and Posner (2012) discuss the importance of relationships in their book *The Leadership Challenge*. They put it most candidly when they simply state “people are more willing to follow someone with whom they have a relationship” (Kouzes and Posner, 2012, p. 290). They go on to explain that when a leader takes the risk of being vulnerable enough to build a relationship with their team, they encourage others to take that risk as well which increases the bond among the team. In her book *The Art of Coaching Teams*, Elena Aguilar (2016) notes that by forming healthy relationships it allows one to “collaborate, offer feedback and guidance, and to motivate and inspire others” (p. 17). By creating these strong bonds with your community, it allows a leader to stay aligned with their community in not only the good times but also in those of uncertainty as well (Marzan et al., 2005, p. 59).

As I have mentioned, the work of educators and educational leaders is hard. We live in a fast-paced world that is constantly changing. As leaders we must adapt to these changes and make sure our staff feels supported as we do it. When close relationships are built, it allows us to draw on our team’s bond to get through them. Clearly it is not the only thing we can rely on, but it is the glue that binds. Throughout my time in this program I have seen this demonstrated by not only author after author but also by the leaders I have observed and studied. Our

campus has been experiencing curriculum changes that are hard for our staff to digest and our administrative team has been masterful at using the strong relationships they have spent years cultivating in order to draw on the strengths of the staff to pull through this. And, in juxtaposition to the struggle of these transitions, they shine a constant light on the success of our staff and students in order to highlight all of the amazing things that happen on a regular basis. This balance has been key has been a great exemplification of the theory of practice we have studied in our program.

### **Maximizing the Community's Strengths**

By knowing your staff and building those strong relationships, it allows a leader to understand and leverage the strengths of their team in order to ensure that we serve students in the best way possible. One great teacher almost never looks like the next great teacher. Each person brings their own philosophy and style which may vary but be just as effective. Likewise, what makes one great administrator does not always make another great administrator. As humans, we have our strengths and our areas that we need to improve on. An exceptional leader will recognize those strengths in their community and leverage them in order to keep their staff motivated, inspired, and working together optimally.

Rath and Conchie (2008) note that “effective leaders are always investing in strengths...[by] investing in their employees’ strengths, the odds of each person being engaged goes up eightfold” (p.2). When people feel as though their strengths are being utilized, they feel as though they are contributing to the larger group and are more invested and engaged in their work (Rath and Conchie, 2008). Marzano et al. (2005) build on this by noting that when a

leader invests in their staff's development it builds on their strengths and in turn creates an investment by those staff members in their role and in the school community.

This leadership principal builds on the previous one mentioned in this reflection. When one has a relationship with their staff, it allows them to begin to understand their strengths and what they may find is that there are many hidden talents among their staff. It also allows them to know who can be brought in on special groups, adjunct duties, and who to reach out to in order to help bring reluctant staff members on board with various issues. A great example of this was at the school that I did my shadowing at. The principal needed someone to lead a series of professional development meetings. The staff member selected to do this may not have been the most knowledgeable regarding the content area they would be training in, but they held a great deal of clout among the staff. They are not only well respected but well liked. The principal gave the main responsibility to this person and built a team around them that would help allow them to draw on the many strengths of that team as well as their content knowledge and support. By recognizing strengths and giving people roles based on those strengths, it allowed for a successful professional development series even though the people by themselves may not have been the best for the job, but by combining their strengths and working as a team, they were stronger than any one person could have been.

### **Lifelong Learner**

As education and society changes, so do the needs of staff members and students. As new technologies emerge, new trends come about, and new research emerges, what people expect and need shifts with them. As a leader, you cannot be complacent in your leadership

and must seek to understand and embrace these changes. In doing so, you must commit to being a lifelong learner. You must be active in your desire to take-in, process, and understand what all stakeholders need in order to be successful.

Leaders must be open to learning. Seijts (2014) observes the consequences of not being a learner as a leader when he writes that “some leaders believe that they are at the peak of their learning curves and have little more to learn....[T]his comfort prevents leaders from stretching their limits and improving their performance. Eventually, this leads to underperformance and obsolescence” (p. 365). If we are not learning, we can easily become complacent in what we’ve always done. And, while we settle into our ways, the world and industry around us will leave us behind. This also brings me back to Kouzes and Posner (2012) discussing that leaders much model the way. As leaders we expect our teachers to keep up with curriculum changes, new strategies, changing trends, and more. If that is the case, we must model for them what it looks like to be a constant learner who adapts.

At both my current school, and in my past positions I have seen this in the best leaders I have worked for. A great example of this from my current position is the way my principal drives the admin team to learn and grown. As part of the Friday administration meetings, he asks the team to complete a book study each year. They read books about education and leadership and often discuss how these apply to their position and how they can encourage the teachers and staff members at our school using them. Seeing this, it trickles down to our staff as I have observed teacher teams completing book studies each term as well so that they may improve in their practice. This constant learning will allow a leader to better understand their staff and understand how to best support them achieve their goals at the same time.

## Conclusion

My time at California State University San Marcos has been a refreshing and enlightening experience regarding leadership. I was unsure what to expect from an online program and if I would receive the same level and quality of training that I would from a traditional program. What we have received has been amazing. Through the programs design, I have been able to hear many perspectives on leadership, learned a great deal about leadership principals through our course work, and see them in action via my shadowing and fieldwork. The combination of these tasks has provided a unique lens that has shown the complexities of leading in education. Not only has it shown the complexities, but it has been key in being able to begin to understand who I want to be as a leader within that space.

My fieldwork experience was particularly invigorating. Seeing the administrative team take the care they did to ensure that the staff and students at our school have what they need by building strong relationships, maximizing their staff strengths, and modeling what it means to be lifelong learner has been inspiring. After completing my work, I am more inspired and energized to continue to build on my strengths in order to evolve into the best possible leader I can be. Even after my time at California State University San Marcos, I look forward to continuing to learn, making connections both at my campus and beyond, and helping other to understand their potential and strengths so they can continue their journeys as well.

## References

Aguilar, E. (2016). *The Art of Coaching Teams*. Jossey-Bass.

Kouzes, J.M., Posner, B.Z. (2012), *The Leadership Challenge*. Jossey-Bass.

Marzano, R., Waters, T., McNulty, B.A. *School Leadership that Works*. ASCD. McRel.

Rath, T., Conchie, B. (2008). *Strengths Based Leadership*. Gallup Press.

Seijts, G. (2014). *Good Leaders Learn: lessons from a lifetime of leadership*.