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A PRACTITIONERS BULLETIN

You Matter!

By Jason Leahy, Executive Director, Illinois Principals Association

Introduction

You matter! Though it may not always seem like it, you matter to those you serve everyday. As an educational leader, you have the awesome opportunity to influence children and those that work with children. Few can say they get to do as important and special work as you. Below, I offer what I believe to be some leadership essentials to ensure that you always matter to those you serve.

Hold On Tight To The Master Key

My school experience was unique compared to my classmates. I had the pleasure (or, misfortune depending on the day) of having my Dad as Principal from first through tenth grade. Yes, you read correctly. For ten years, I walked the halls of Griggsville elementary, junior high, and high school with the man I had more carnal knowledge of than my classmates cared to know. Students typically like to live with the illusion that their administrators and teachers are not real people. This was not an option for me.

Though I had to deal with the occasional jab from another student, the as-

sumption that I got my way most of the time, and being sent to the office for fighting in the sixth grade, the advantages of being the Principal's kid far outweighed the negatives. I usually had a ride to and from school, got to know

ing. Remember that I was in elementary. He had what seemed like hundreds of keys of all shapes and sizes to fit their respective doors. Though I was fascinated as a child, I am glad we have wized up today and now have a set-up where one

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the most important people in any school on a first name basis... the secretaries, could lobby for the classes I wanted twenty-four hours a day seven days a week, and influenced high level decision-making. The last one is a bit of a stretch, but you get the point.

I also had the opportunity to view the behind the scenes work necessary to run a school. From building a master schedule to clearing snow off the parking lot to observing the emotional toll of a tough discipline situation, there was not much I didn't see. Vivid memories I have from elementary are when I would walk the school halls with Dad after a Friday night basketball game to make sure all the lights were turned off and doors were locked. I remember thinking how spooky school was at night. Who am I kidding? It still can be! When we walked those dark corridors, I was particularly intrigued by the sheer number of keys Dad had at his disposal to lock down that 1920 model build-

master key can be used to open every door in a school facility. My apologies if you're still using a 1920 model.

Like keys unlocking doors, you possess a range of skills necessary to unlock your leadership potential. Communicating, listening, vision casting, and perseverance are a few. Though these talents are important, I would argue that something else, a “master key,” is essential to your leadership success. The key is character.

Former Secretary of Education William Bennett is quoted as saying, “It is our character that supports the promise of our future.” Character is the key component necessary to give credibility to every area of your leadership. Due to the visible nature of your position as an educational leader, respect that others give for all that you say and do is directly influenced by your character.

I challenge you to take a moment and answer the question made famous by

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Stephen Covey. “What would you like written on your tombstone?” Don’t just think about it. Actually write about how you would want to be remembered.

Did you write about accomplishments you have made or money you have earned? Or, did you write about character traits for which you hope to be remembered? My hunch is that you chose to write about character traits. The reason is that you understand the legacy of your character is truly all you can take to the grave and expect to live beyond your years.

If character is important... if character is all you truly will be remembered for, why are more individuals not willing to pay the price and put in the time, energy, and effort required to maintain their character or even make it flourish? My guess is that the price of time, energy, and effort that must be paid, as well as the ability to delay gratification and put others before ourselves, seems too high. But heed this warning from Steven Berglas, a psychologist at Harvard Medical School and author of The Success Syndrome. He says, “People who achieve great heights but lack the bedrock character to sustain them through the stress are headed for disaster.” I promise that not giving your character proper attention carries a price tag very difficult to pay.

With character being critical to your eternal success and significance, what can you do to ensure that you are an individual of impeccable character?

Be Disciplined – Character is not challenged just in the occasional, life altering decisions. During the minutia of each day, choices about how to treat students and teachers or whether to purchase the one stamp you need to pay a bill will enhance or detract from your character and leadership.

Be Courageous – With constant pressure from board members, superintendents, teachers, parents, and students, doing what is right takes guts. Be encouraged by these words from President Theodore Roosevelt, “There has never yet been a person in our history who led a life of ease whose name is worth remembering.”

Be Humble – I believe the three most powerful words one can say are “I Love You,” but the two most important words, in my estimation, are “I’m sorry.” During a lifetime, plenty of mistakes will be made. I know that I’ve made my fair share. Ask my wife. She could go on and on. When mistakes occur, our best practice is to apologize, learn from them, and work to not make the same mistakes again. We keep our credibility as a person of character when we are able to humble ourselves and admit when we are wrong. I believe our leadership is also enhanced when we say, “I’m sorry.” It shows that we are human.

Be Accountable – If you are committed to being a person of character, I challenge you to get someone in your life to see how you are doing from time to time. Whether this person(s) is family

Robert Marzano, Brian McNulty, and Tim Waters’s 2003 working paper and basis for their book Leadership That Works, Balanced Leadership: What 30 years of research tells us about the effect of leadership on student achievement, lists 21 responsibilities Principals have to raise student achievement. Of the 21 responsibilities, I believe that all of them require a relationship component. Fostering a student centered culture, maintaining order and discipline, seeking input, and having situational awareness are a few examples that require educational leaders to have quality relationships with the members of their learning community. Visit www.mcrel.org to find a copy of the *Balanced Leadership* working paper.

Another thought to keep in mind where relationships are concerned is

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or a friend, he or she can be a great encouragement while keeping you on track.

Something I love about our Association is our leaders understood the importance of character for educational leaders and adopted the IPA Code of Ethics almost a decade ago. A copy is inserted in this Bulletin for you to put in a visible location to be a constant, gentle reminder to you.

Invest in Relationships

With character squarely in check, I would argue that investing in quality relationships is the single most important ingredient to your success as an educational leader. Technical knowledge of curriculum and instruction along with the latest leadership theories, though important, will not move an organization forward alone. Trusting relationships built on a foundation of character and integrity is the necessary component for you to be effective. Research has proven this.

that the number one reason people lose their jobs is their inability to get along with others. You do not have to look very far for your own examples. Opposite of this, many people who are incompetent technically do fine because they are masters relationally.

With knowledge that relationships are important and that they do improve student achievement, the obvious question is, “Now what?” I enjoy studying this topic, so when I run into successful leaders, I ask them what they do to foster and sustain quality relationships. Listed are some common responses.

- **Listen** – Nothing is trivial, and be sure to give your full attention.
- **Effective Communication** – Keep dialogue open and honest.
- **Praise** – Give credit where credit is due.
- **Support and Follow-Through** – Say what you will do and do it!
- **Empower Through Autonomy**

and Providing Resources.

- **Compassion** – Recognize people as individuals with individual needs.
- **Write Notes of Encouragement** – Research shows that this is more meaningful than verbal encouragement.
- **Professionalism** – Lead by example.

John Maxwell states that, "He who thinketh he leadeth and hath no one following him is only taking a walk." I encourage you to constantly invest in relationships to ensure you are not just "taking a walk" this school year.

Tame the Clock

In her book [The Overworked American](#), Harvard economist Juliet Schor remarks that over the last twenty years the average American worker has added the equivalent of one month to the work year. Alrie Hochschild, a sociologist at Berkeley, notes that American women now work an average of 41.7 hours per week, while men are working an average of 48.8 hours per week. These are likely light weeks for you considering the demands brought on with increased accountability, new mandates that do not come with the money to hire the people necessary to ensure the mandates are implemented appropriately, and the expectations from your community to be visible at every event possible.

Time, not money, is now the most precious commodity for many Americans. A May 2008 survey by Reuters showed 67% of the 2,400 individuals polled listed finding more free time as their number one priority. Our sleep is also being impacted. In [Take Back Your Time](#), Jan Jasper notes that, "Americans are sleeping an average of six and a half hours per night, one full hour less than they feel they need."

Few would argue that effective time management skills are necessary to be an effective educational leader. But with the ever increasing demands and pressures on our time, how do we "tame the clock?" Bill Allison, Founder and President of Cadre International, offers some suggestions:

Proactively Schedule Your Priorities

– What is most important for you to accomplish as an educational leader? Time with your family? Dates with your spouse or significant other? Exercise? Developing professionally? Classroom visits? Being visible with students? Investing in strategic relationships with teachers, parents, and community leaders? If you value these or a whole host of other possibilities but have not proactively scheduled for them, the question begs whether each is truly important to you.

Plan Your Ideal Day – Considering the immediate, urgent tasks you deal with daily, the thought of planning your ideal day probably seems laughable. Without a target, however, you will never know where to aim.

Say NO to Time Stealers – What are you doing that someone else should be doing even if it requires some training? Delegate and do not feel guilty about it. A task likely needs to be delegated if it does not fit within your priorities.

Say NO to "Good" Things – Each day you have the opportunity to choose at least 100 good things to do but likely only have time to accomplish 3 well. That being the case, you will have to say no to at least 97 good things.

Maximize Nonproductive Windows of Time – Believe it or not, every day presents nonproductive windows of time for you to maximize. For example, your drive to work or while you are checking your mail/e-mail may present you with an opportunity to listen to a book on tape. This can be particularly useful as finding time to physically pick up a book or read the periodicals stacking up on your desk can be difficult. If books on tape are not to your liking, IPA Podcasts provide you with quick, relevant information to enhance your leadership. Podcasts can be found by going to IPA's website at www.ilprincipals.org and clicking on the podcast link on the home page.

To successfully implement these time management techniques, be sure to utilize a simple, user-friendly system for scheduling your appointments and when work is to be completed. If you do not have a system or are in need of bumping

your time management up a notch, the Franklin Covey method for managing your time is a good place to get you started. Go to www.franklincovey.com for more information about planning methodologies and applicable training.

Take Care of You

Dead doctors do not lie. Neither do dead Principals. Please make it a priority this school year to take care of you. Though what you do is for children, the demands from the position are not worth losing your health, your peace of mind, and most importantly, your family. Be sure to... stay balanced, exercise, eat right, get an annual physical (even if you are 30!), get out of the building, take naps, laugh often, do not take yourself too seriously, network with colleagues, get out of the building, manage your time wisely, schedule play time with your kids (even if they are 30!), go on dates with your spouse or significant other, get out of the building, develop professionally, be and stay focused on the positive, have your teeth cleaned every six months, be fiscally responsible with your own finances, never forget that you have the unique opportunity to impact the life of a child for the better, and get out of the building!

Be Eternally Optimistic

A family had twin boys whose only resemblance to each other was their looks. If one felt it was too hot, the other thought it was too cold. If one said the TV was too loud, the other claimed the volume needed to be turned up. Opposite in every way, one was an eternal optimist, the other a doom and gloom pessimist.

Just to see what would happen, on the twins' birthday their father loaded the pessimist's room with every imaginable toy and game. The optimist's room he loaded with horse manure.

That night the father passed by the pessimist's room and found him sitting amid his new gifts crying bitterly.

"Why are you crying?" the father asked.

"Because my friends will be jealous, I'll have to read all these instructions before I can do anything with this stuff,

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"I'll constantly need batteries, and my toys will eventually get broken," answered the pessimist twin.

Passing the optimist twin's room, the father found him dancing for joy in the pile of manure.

"What are you so happy about?" he asked.

To which his optimist twin replied, "Look at all this manure! There's got to be a pony in here somewhere!"

Unfortunately, education can be a tough, cynical business. Lack of funding and resources, new mandates from the General Assembly and Federal Government, a barrage of attacks from the media, a micro-managing school board, unhappy parents, difficult teachers, and unruly kids can make the job of an educational leader as fun as standing in a pile of manure. Being a farm kid, I know the stench can be unbearable at times. To

clarify, I am talking about the manure.

Regardless of the difficult circumstances surrounding education, our profession needs leaders like you who stay optimistic and glean the positive from every situation. We need leaders like you to constantly remind those you influence that educators have the highest of callings. We have the unique opportunity and awesome responsibility to impact the life of a child and thus have an eternal impact on our society. It is a tough job, but if it were easy, everyone would do it. It is the tough that makes the job great.

Conclusion

The saying goes that a person can live 30 days without food, 3 days without water, but no more than 3 seconds without hope. Few pursuits need a constant infusion of hope like education. But this is why you matter. Your leadership matters,

because you are responsible for providing hope to those you influence. Be encouraged to constantly focus on your character, invest in relationships, tame the clock, take care of yourself, and be eternally optimistic in order to stay viable, credible, and always matter to those you serve.

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