

The Skills for Leading Good Schools to Greatness Can Be Learned

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Effectiveness can be learned.

—Peter Drucker (*The Effective Executive*, 1966, p. 1)

2 • Leading Good Schools to Greatness

Students of leadership have long recognized that the best way to learn great leadership skills is to study great leaders. Five centuries ago Machiavelli advised the leaders of his day to consider the virtue and discipline of the finest leaders of the past in order to identify the most worthy character traits. He then admonished them to “imitate the ancients.” In other words, he advised the leaders to observe the unique personal behaviors, characteristics, and leadership techniques of the great leaders of the past, and then practice these behaviors and techniques until they are mastered. Today, our best business leaders have come to realize clearly the essential role of the personal forces of leadership in shaping the destinies of our nation’s business enterprises. Today’s school leaders also recognize these dynamics. This book provides a practical guide for teaching and learning these valuable skills. It is a priceless opportunity for intimate conversations with great principals about how to develop great schools.

We’ve known several truly great school leaders in our many years of experience working in schools, but far too few. Most principals we’ve known have been very intelligent, hard-working professionals. Many of them were creative. The majority were socially adroit and popular with their faculties and communities. They all were intent upon doing things right.

At the same time, we’ve all known special people who can always be relied upon to get the job done, who seem to understand how schools work and what they are supposed to do. They have all the problems the other schools have, but they address them effectively. These are the dynamic principals who lead their schools to success in the face of seemingly impossible barriers.

We are not suggesting that high intelligence, creativity, and hard work are not important. Quite the contrary. These are vital characteristics and should be a central focus of the candidate screening and selection processes. But the very best school executives have more to offer. As Drucker (1966) would say, they not only do things right, they “get the right things done” (p. 1). They possess critical human organization skills to confront the barriers and guide their learning communities to greatness.

APPLYING GOOD TO GREAT RESEARCH TO SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

We were intrigued with the work Collins (2001) reported in his best-selling book, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don't*. He began by identifying “great” companies and asking, “Why?” This approach was similar to what Peters and Waterman (1982/2004) did when they investigated the leadership practices of the top companies

of that day and memorialized them in their famous book, *In Search of Excellence: Lessons From America's Best-Run Companies*. The idea in both cases was to examine great operations and determine what made them great. They concluded that in each case the company's CEO, whom Collins dubbed the "Level Five Executive," made the difference.

We became convinced that we could use the same approach Collins used to gain insight into the characteristics and behaviors of our very best practicing administrators—our most successful principals. Armed with these enormously valuable insights, we would then be better able to design more relevant preparation and professional development programs for our principals by teaching the identified characteristics and behaviors.

What followed was a research project ultimately becoming a book published jointly by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and Corwin (Gray & Streshly, 2008). We used research methodology inspired by Collins' work to analyze a series of intensive conversations with six highly successful principals. Our purpose was to find out more about great principals who make their schools champions.

CONVERSATIONS WITH HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL PRINCIPALS

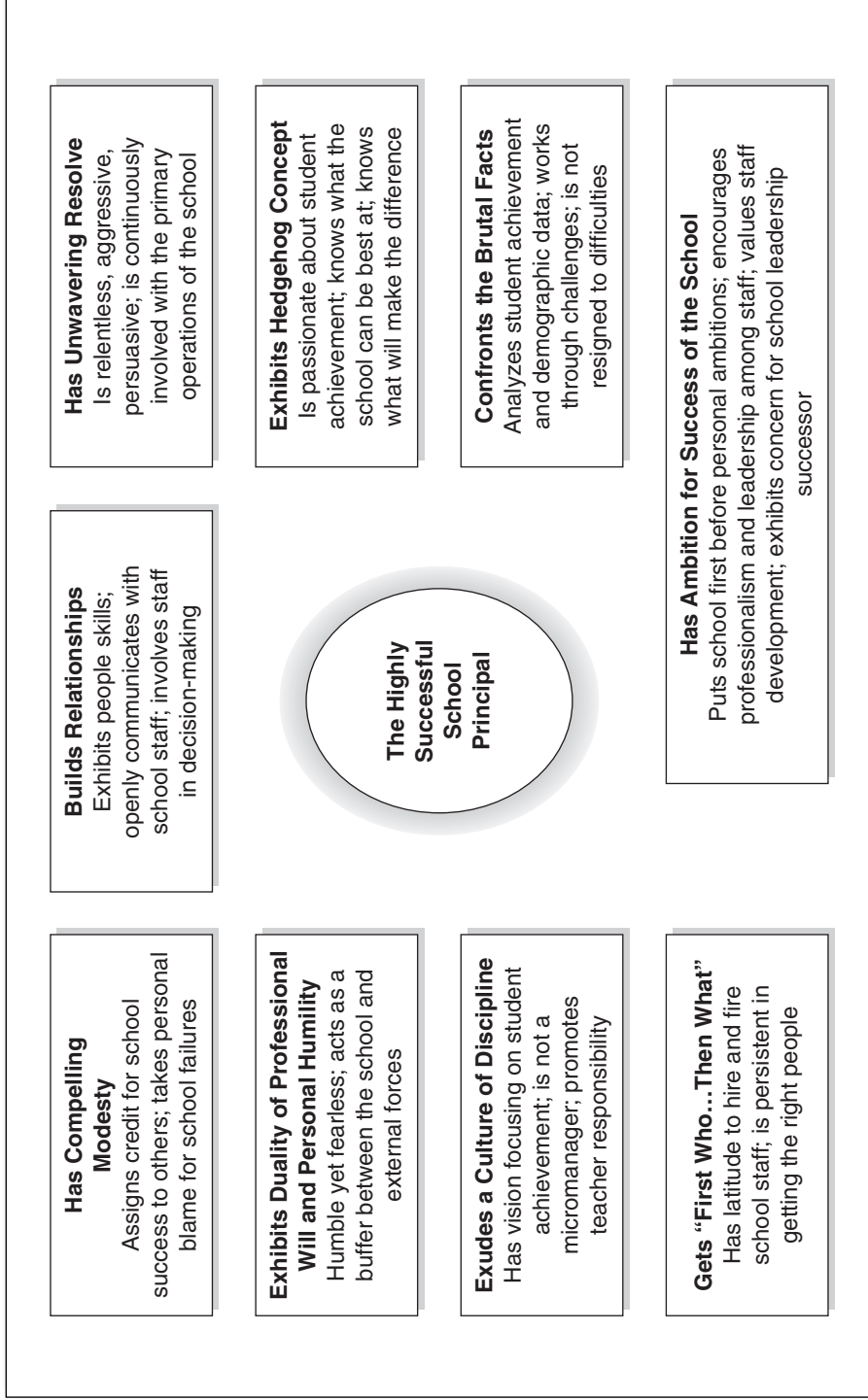
So what did we learn from our conversations with very successful, principals? Since our research was patterned after Collins' work, we found the characteristics and behaviors he identified to be useful in characterizing principals of "great" schools. In our conversations, these highly successful school leaders and others we have studied consistently exhibited most of the same characteristics and behaviors identified among the great CEOs in Collins' research—with the exception of the skills and behaviors related to building relationships (Gray & Streshly, 2008).

Ability to Build Relationships

During our research of successful principals, we discovered that all of the highly successful principals also demonstrated a strong ability to build relationships. The literature on successful schools, combined with our own research focusing on highly successful principals, has persuaded us that a critical piece of the successful school puzzle is the presence of a principal with a well-developed ability to build relationships among the members of the school's faculty and staff, as well as the greater school community. This quality, along with the characteristics of the most competent "Level 5 Executive" in Collins' research, comprise our framework for the highly successful school principal. This framework is portrayed in Figure 1.1 below:

Figure 1.1

Framework for the Highly Successful Principal



SOURCE: Gray, S., & Streshly, W. (2008). *From good schools to great schools: What their principals do well* (p. 5). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Although the ability to build relationships was not identified specifically in Collins' research of successful private sector CEOs, it surfaced prominently during the conversations we had with the school principals in our study and is supported in Fullan's (2008) *Six Secrets of Change*. Building relationships is understandably essential in providing an environment that embraces professional learning communities in schools.

The principals we interviewed exhibited to some extent all the characteristics and behaviors of the most capable "Level 5" leader of Collins' research as well as the very important capacity for building relationships. With each principal, certain characteristics were more dominant than others, but all the skills positively associated with facilitating those functions deemed important by research and especially the research on developing professional learning communities were present when looking at the six principals as a group (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005).

Just as the eleven companies of Collins' study rose to be leaders of sustained profitability, great schools are those that make improvement in student achievement and sustain that achievement. Our investigation has supported our suspicion that highly successful principals possess certain characteristics and behave in specific ways that cause their schools to be very successful. However, our research, like the research of Collins in recent years and of Peters and Waterman (1982/2004) twenty-five years before, only provides strong imputation—not irrefutable truth. We studied six elementary school principals and a similar group for control. Collins studied eleven companies and a similar group for control; Peters and Waterman, seventy-five companies. Moreover, we tend to believe in talent (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Few people are endowed with propensities and develop them marvelously without a preparation program. Thus, conclusive "proof" is elusive.

We wondered whether the approach to research on leadership Collins (2001) used in *Good to Great* is applicable to schools and principals. Collins and his associates zeroed in on the connection between institutional greatness and the characteristics and behaviors of institutional leaders. We decided this might be the missing link in many of the standards. Our project represents one small step toward addressing the question of whether Collins' research on great private-sector leadership is applicable to public school administrator preparation. With some noted exceptions, we think it is (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, 2005).

ADMINISTRATOR PREPARATION PROGRAM REFORM

We continue to believe that the traditional knowledge bases for educational leadership programs have merit, but we think it is more important that the focus of a principal preparation program be on developing leadership behaviors and characteristics that are typical of exemplary principals and that impact the success of schools. In other words, the program should concentrate on how great school leaders behave and what they do to make a difference. Candidates should take heed when selecting an administrative preparation program. More about what they should look for is included in Chapter 8.

REFLECTION

1. List the knowledge, experience, skills, and personal dispositions you believe to be essential for the highly effective school leader.
2. Identify data that support or debunk your beliefs.
3. Identify a biography of the leader of a great institution. After reading it, describe his or her prime attributes.

All of the special personal attributes of our highly successful principals help these very leaders accomplish their missions competently in one way or another. Of all the modifications of administrator preparation suggested by our research, however, the focus on developing skill in building human relationships stands out as a prime requisite for great success in the principalship. The conversations with highly successful principals have convinced us of the vital importance of this critical proficiency.

The next chapters will discuss how aspiring and practicing school administrators can use our findings to become more effective leaders. Most chapters will present real-life case studies in which we describe actual school dynamics and challenges for leadership. Names and references that identify any person or place have been removed or changed. Strategies principals must employ to utilize each of the characteristics and behaviors are examined through individual reflection, analysis, and discussion activities centered on these scenarios, as well as real investigations at the school site. Since none of the original nine characteristics and behaviors identified in Figure 1.1 exists in isolation, several have been combined with others to facilitate discussion. We begin in Chapter 2 with building relationships.