



It's the "Principal" of the thing ...

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The school environment is a major factor in determining not only student success, but also the satisfaction of staff spending their days there.

There are many factors which influence the climate of the school, but possibly the most critical is the role of the principal. The principal's expectations, behaviours and interactions will establish a climate which the staff model and in which all facets of the school function. When trying to influence school improvement, the principal can reflect on many areas of his/her organizational performance and style of interpersonal interactions.

Effective Leadership begins with leading by example for the skills and attitudes desired in the school. Know your own strengths and weaknesses! It may be impossible to master all, but you can surround yourself with a team, who together has the strengths needed for the smooth operation of the school facility and community. Establishing a team of committed and competent colleagues is essential to creating an efficiently run school which achieves its goals.

Important Skills encompass areas such as interpersonal relationships, time and resource management, handling crises, goal and priority setting, clear communications strategies, knowledge development and transmission, task delegation and team or collaborative efforts. Although a staff may share a common set of educational values and believe in the overall goal for the school, the principal's positive, supportive attitude is a key trait to get the best work from the staff. This doesn't mean that you have to possess all skills, but it is necessary to value them and share the management of the school's objectives with teachers who possess the appropriate skills. For example, one way to increase teacher stress and colleague resentment and to decrease school productivity is to place a technically challenged teacher in charge of website design and maintenance! Although this step could be unintentional, it reflects an inefficient use of time and a lack of consideration for the talents and limitations of individuals.

The Power Imbalance between administrators and teachers can create an environment which presents unnecessary tension or anxiety. This can be the case especially for untenured, replacement or short-term contract teachers. The administrator fills a role of authority over the teacher. The principal acts as the intermediary between the employer and the teacher, often between the parent and the teacher, and at times, between the student and the teacher. The principal provides a job recommendation, performance evaluation or personal reference. The principal has the power to select a teacher's duties, course load, representation on committees or classroom location. In this relationship, teachers want to ensure that they present as competent, positive, team-working professionals who share the common vision and goals for the work environment. This is a high standard to consistently maintain and may invite some pressures of its own! Therefore, to function optimally in this environment, the teacher needs to trust the fairness and competence of the principal and feel respected and valued. Given our current workload and interpersonal stressors in the workplace, this can be a daily challenge for everyone. Behaviours can be abrupt or misinterpreted, fatigue can interfere with tolerance or forgiveness and there may not be enough compassion to go around!

A Mutually Satisfying Environment doesn't happen by accident. It requires the deliberate action of all workers. To set the stage for success, it is important for each person to start from the same premise. First, each person must believe in a common vision of the school. Once that is established, all must settle on an acceptable way to make that vision a reality. It is unlikely that each action of this strategy would completely satisfy everyone, but as a whole the plan should be acceptable. To move forward without dissension, individuals must be willing to live with *and* support the components which they personally believe are somewhat less than perfect. To reach this stage in setting the appropriate foundation, requires

collaborative efforts with a certain amount of compromise and understanding. However, the structural components of school functioning are only one facet of the well-functioning teaching and learning workplace. The next and equally important area is that of interpersonal interactions. Although we strive for an atmosphere of harmony and collegiality, sometimes the best we can hope for is a professional working relationship which holds competence, trust and respect as its guiding principles. In a situation where the people you work with are not the ones that you would choose as social companions, there are still many things that can be done to create a positive work environment.

Respect and Trust are essential for any group to feel like they are achieving the best results possible. If these traits don't come easily to a group, they can be created by clearly identifying the expectations and accepting the limitations. Respect should be an automatic part of any professional environment but may not extend to the personal feelings about individuals. Respect means meeting reasonable expectations of following professional standards of behaviour. If those expectations are shown to be inaccurate, respect can be altered dramatically. To rebuild that respect will take significant change, considerable effort and consistent proof. Trust is a personal sense of physical and emotional safety. It exists when a reliable relationship has been developed over time. It also depends on predictability of behaviour. In a well-established, trusting relationship, an amount of inconsistency can be tolerated as long as it is believed that there is not a deliberate attempt to cause harm. When colleagues do not have the luxury of allowing trust to develop over prolonged periods of working together, they can speed up the process by communicating openly and honestly. By sharing information on beliefs and values and by observing behaviours, individuals begin to form relationships and interpretations of how to interact with each other. We learn what to expect and with whom we can work most effectively.

Staff Morale and Collegiality are strengthened by listening and understanding, by offering support, and by occasionally excusing a minor lapse in better judgement! By being encouraging and cooperative, we begin to build an atmosphere of trust and collaboration. We realize that added to the tasks of teaching, principals and teachers alike have personal lives with challenges and demands. We can easily find plenty of opportunities to show compassion or leniency without compromising integrity or quality. Showing empathy can cost very little but reap abundant returns. Rearranging duty to accommodate personal (or professional) needs; allowing the

rare deviation from the routine which requires flexibility with the rules; or building in bonuses, special recognition events or regular treats are all ways to introduce a sensitivity toward, and recognition of, our common humanity. Having a sense that "we are all in this together" and are working together to help each other succeed, creates a community spirit which enables a staff to surmount obstacles. It is important to remember that no matter how we got here, we are all in the same boat and need to work together to keep it afloat and make progress. Support and compassion is a two-way process between the principal and teachers. Each of us appreciates being valued, as a human being and as a qualified professional. Despite the demands of the day, we are willing to continue with our extreme efforts and somehow the load seems a little easier to handle, if we know that we are understood and appreciated.

In a practical way, principals can promote a constructive work environment and confident staff by: encouraging and valuing teacher's opinions; acknowledging efforts and achievements; offering opportunities for shared decision-making; delegating to teachers according to their specific abilities and interests; being cautious in language and tone during communications; understanding unreasonable demands; promoting positive values; holding students accountable for profane or abusive behaviour toward teachers; and realizing that creating a team doesn't require a white hat!

It is the "Principal" that makes the difference! Teachers are willing to run a marathon for a supportive principal and some will quit the profession because of an unsupportive one. We cannot afford the consequences of mistreating others nor continue in an environment where we are being mistreated, disrespected or devalued. In those situations, everyone loses. As teachers or administrators, our behaviour is a reflection of our values and this doesn't mean the framed mission statement on our walls. Instead it is the expression of our day-to-day choices in how we treat others, perform our jobs and value our environment.

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