



Five Things New Principals Need to Succeed

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Although our training to become principals covered how to handle some of the most challenging and overwhelming scenarios, akin to courses such as “Taking a Drink from a Fire Hose” and “Juggling Flaming Bowling Pins While Walking on Quicksand,” much was still missing from our training. Here are the top five items that we, a former principal and a current principal, think that leaders who are either new to the role or new to a school or district need to succeed.

1. Entry Plan: Just as a teacher knows how important that first day of school is for setting the stage for the rest of the year, new principals must also carefully consider their entry plans. People will inevitably compare a new principal to the person who previously held the position. “You have big shoes to fill,” or “I hope you’re not like . . .” are comments a new principal will most likely hear. Principals will benefit from developing a thoughtful plan for how to present themselves and their vision to the faculty, students, and community. Once the doors open on the first day of school, there is no second chance for reentry. The principal is on the job.

2. Communication Skills: The principal needs to establish a shared vision, communicate it to all constituent groups, and garner buy-in. Different situations require different types of communication, and time is always of the essence. Plus, there are many stakeholders to deal with: students, teachers, parents, district administration, school boards, and outside organizations all want immediate answers from the principal. Therefore, principal training should include guidance on how to effectively communicate with these different groups and should offer opportunities to practice handling different types of scenarios based on real-life situations. For example, principals would benefit from practicing communication strategies for scenarios such as making a case for an idea at a full-faculty meeting, dealing with a parent who brings up an issue that cannot be addressed on the spot, or responding when a school board member makes a request that isn’t simple to grant. And don’t forget about communicating with the media—they’ll find you when the news is negative, so be sure to also get the word out about all of your school’s positive events and accomplishments. The principal must be the school’s best marketing agent and share the good news, which was an essential element of our school’s turnaround.

3. Sense of Priority: The most challenging balancing act a principal faces is fulfilling the managerial and supervisory responsibilities of maintaining a safe, properly functioning school while also serving as an instructional leader and focusing on academic achievement. The best instructional intentions can be diverted by a dreaded call about toilets overflowing or a skunk walking around school grounds. The principal gets called for everything! Although every preparation program stresses the importance of instructional leadership, rarely are enough practical strategies shared for how to do this, and nowhere is there a course on plumbing.

Visiting classrooms, engaging in meaningful discussions with teachers about their practices, and taking every opportunity to lead instruction are ways in which principals ensure effective instructional leadership. Research for Better Teaching provides many resources for strong instructional leadership, particularly Jon Saphier’s books, *The Skillful Teacher* and *The Skillful Leader*. By establishing a team of instructional leaders who are empowered to create and support professional development that is focused on improving instruction school wide, principals can distribute instructional leadership responsibilities while still maintaining strong, focused leadership.

4. Courage: Although courage may seem like a personal characteristic, preparation for taking on the pressures that a principal will face every day is essential. That course in juggling the flaming bowling pins over quicksand comes in handy here. Whether dealing with politics in the community, union struggles, or parent issues, the principal will be pressured to take a side or make a decision and will often have to maintain the courage to protect the interests of the students and the school. The desire to be the nice guy can also prevent principals from taking on difficult personnel challenges, and this internal struggle can be the most difficult part of the job. Principals, therefore, need to practice having tough conversations so that when the time comes to actually have them, they will have the courage to do what is necessary and right.

Tough conversations with parents are equally difficult because there are times when the principal and the parent will have different values and expectations. Hearing alternate points of view and then communicating in such a way that the parents feel they have been heard is crucial. Often, emotions run high in these difficult meetings, but the principal has to keep emotions in check to ensure a positive outcome. Susan Scott's book, *Fierce Conversations*, helped us plan for and structure these dreaded conversations.

5. Support System: Finally, a new principal—in fact, every principal—needs a trusted colleague, friend, mentor, or confidant who can provide sage advice, listen to occasional venting, offer unwavering support, and, most important, bring laughter to the situation. Some days, you drop the flaming bowling pins on your toe or get drenched while taking that drink of water from the fire hose. All principals need someone supportive they can count on for those difficult days. For that level of support, there is no substitute. We know this firsthand—we have each other.

Susan Szachowicz recently retired after nine years as principal of Brockton High School in Brockton, Mass. She is now a senior fellow for the International Center for Leadership in Education. **Sharon Wolder** served as Szachowicz's associate principal for curriculum and instruction. In June 2014, she completed her first year as principal of Brockton High School.