

WHAT TRAITS DO TEACHERS APPRECIATE MOST IN THEIR PRINCIPALS?



by Gary Hopkins

Principals say they try to cultivate traits that improve communication, demonstrate respect, and inspire vision. They say the key to whether those traits take hold school-wide lies in their modeling of them.

Most school principals were teachers at one time. That means they probably have some ideas about the qualities and skills of their "ideal principal." So now that they are in leadership positions and working hard to develop relationships with their staffs -- and push them to be the best they can be -- have their "ideals" changed?

MODEL THE BEHAVIORS YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE

When we questioned school leaders about the qualities, approaches, or abilities they work hard to cultivate -- and that teachers seem to respond to best -- they shared a wide variety of responses. But one common thread was woven among all those responses: a belief in the importance of "modeling the behaviors you expect."

"I strive to model for my teachers how to build relationships with children," said Tracey N. Roberts, principal at Casimir Pulaski Elementary School in Wilmington, Delaware. "I do that by listening and learning more about my students' interests and needs. Just as I take time to listen and respond to them and model those same behaviors with parents and guardians, I have seen some teachers take more time to listen and show they care before responding to difficult pupils, parents, or situations."

Making the effort to model listening and respect has had a real impact on the climate at Pulaski, Roberts added.

Principal Kim Cavanaugh agrees that listening is a key quality to a principal's success. "It is very important for me to make everyone -- staff, students, and families -- realize they are valued," Cavanaugh shared. "The answers to my questions and issues that affect our school lie within the people I work with on a daily basis, and it is vital that we have a relationship that allows them to feel as though they can come to me with ideas, solutions, feedback, and concerns. And that I can go to them as well."

LISTENING AND R-E-S-P-E-C-T ARE KEY



"I am constantly working on my listening skills," added Cavanaugh, who is principal at Mentone (California) Elementary School, "because we administrators can often multitask and make people feel like they are interrupting our work. The ability to stop and listen is an important part of my job because it can result in a happier, more positive environment."

Luanne Watson was a teacher for 20 years before she became an administrator. "The most important thing I can give to my teachers is respect for what they do each day," said Watson, who is principal at St. Jude School in New Lenox, Illinois. "I respect that they are dedicated professionals who know what needs to be done, so I try to provide what they need to do their jobs well."

Even the newest and least experienced teachers blossom when they know they have the respect of their principal, said Watson. "It encourages people to continue to work hard and give 110 percent because they want to live up to the expectations of someone who understands and admires their work."

"Mutual respect fosters an excellent working relationship. When the time comes that there is a difference of opinion, it is not taken personally, and progress can be made."

Watson often tells her teachers that she became an administrator because teaching is the hardest job in the world and she could no longer do what they do every day. "Although being a principal has its challenges, it is different and not as constantly demanding as teaching young children," she added. "I promote an atmosphere where we all do what we do best -- they do their jobs, I do mine, the secretary does hers... No one's position is more important than another's. Working together is the key to running a successful school."

At Cumberland County (Kentucky) Elementary School, Principal Rodney Schwartz tries to model behaviors that result in a collegial and caring school environment. "If I can be successful at that, we can accomplish whatever we want to accomplish," he said.

Schwartz tries to model a positive environment by being calm, professional, and courteous at all times. "I keep an 'open door' so I can listen to issues that arise and support the positive people on my staff as much as humanly possible," said Schwartz.

In addition, Schwartz tries to empower people with leadership positions on committees and initiatives. "Delegating in this way not only helps me out, it puts trust in them," he added. "People appreciate that if they are not overloaded."

DEVELOPING AN ATMOSPHERE OF 'CALM EXCITEMENT'

Turina Parker is principal of a school where the population largely comprises students with behavioral difficulties. "The work is demanding, and at times it can be overwhelming for teachers," said Parker. "For that reason, I make every effort to remain positive and calm at all times, especially as I respond to potential crisis situations. The teachers -- and students -- seem to appreciate that and respond to that approach."

Parker also shared that her mantra -- "Make it a great day!" -- has had an impact on the climate in the special and alternative programs she leads in Hudson Falls, New York. She even writes that phrase on her weekly staff memos and closes morning announcements with that charge.

"I truly believe that no matter what challenges are placed in our paths, we have the power, through positive thinking, to transform negative energy and thoughts," explained Parker.

She shared another expression she frequently uses -- "That's exciting!" -- that seems to have caught on too. "Even problems are 'exciting'," Parker added, "because they give us an opportunity to think creatively and to learn something new about our abilities to make it successfully through tough times.

"I smile as much as possible. My students notice it, and my teachers have commented how, on a rough day, a smile or a positive pep talk was 'just what they needed.'

"It's unbelievable how great the power of intention is. I intentionally set out to be positive each day, and it works!"

HAVING A 'VISION' IS KEY TO CONNECTING WITH TEACHERS

Many principals feel that creating a vision, or focus, and having the ability to rally the entire staff around that vision, is an important quality that teachers and others want their leaders to possess.

"A principal who has a vision and can influence her staff to 'catch' that vision has created a winning combination," says Marguerite McNeely, principal at the Slocum Learning Center in Pineville, Louisiana.

And how does a leader know when she or he has managed to successfully communicate their vision to an entire staff? "I know I have managed to accomplish that goal when we are speaking about the future of our students and I can see their eyes dance as we discuss ways they are challenging students and improving learning," added McNeely.

At Clay Hill Elementary School in Jacksonville, Florida, Principal Larry Davis strives every day to communicate his vision of a school where high expectations are the rule. He says that setting high standards brings out the best in principals, students, and staff and creates a sense of accomplishment on the part of everyone involved. Setting high expectations might make some teachers uncomfortable at first, but teachers come aboard as successes are celebrated.

"High standards are not impossible standards," he added. "Good principals encourage risk taking and accept mistakes as teachers strive toward the expectations."

At Sea Wind Elementary School in Hobe Sound, Florida, Principal Larry Green's focus on data-driven decisions and instruction helps teachers get their arms around benchmarks and goals. "We use a program called Performance Matters to disaggregate the data so teachers know where remediation is needed," said Green. "The key is to get teachers comfortable looking at data and using the technology provided.

"As an administrator, if I am going to talk the talk, I must walk the walk. It is my job to help teachers see and understand the benefits of this technology in guiding instruction."

Engaging staff *and* students in frequent conversations about a school's vision was how Frank Hagen spent his days as principal (retired) of at Saint Michaels High School in Saint Michaels, Maryland.

"I spent the largest portion of my school days out of the office working with staff and students as we lived and moved forward to our shared vision of 'Excellence and Equity'," said Hagen.

Those conversations were conscious efforts to address "our opportunities," said Hagen. "I never used the word *problems* to describe the areas on which we needed to work; I always referred to them as *opportunities*."

Hagen tried to instill in staff members a culture of a school focused on "our" ownership of and responsibility for student success. He remains proud that "there was a spirit of risk taking as we tried new instructional strategies and learned from the process, and as we shared successes and celebrated student achievements.

"We agreed that it was important to stretch ourselves to reach all of our students. Failure was not an option with negative connotations, because any attempt to improve instruction was a positive learning experience."

When it came to making decisions that affected the entire school community, that vision *and* transparency were key, added Hagen. "Information [data] was shared prior to making decisions and the decision-making process was open to all stakeholders. Progress was closely monitored to ensure we kept vision-centered, corrections were made to stay the course, and successes were jointly celebrated."

EVERYONE HAS A SAY

At Oakridge Elementary School in Arlington, Virginia, Principal Lolli Haws has worked hard to create an atmosphere where teachers know and believe that they have tremendous ownership of -- and stake in -- the school and student outcomes.

"I firmly believe that our teachers are capable of making the best decisions for the school and our students," Haws told Education World. "I always say 'we already have so much talent right here in this school that we don't have to depend on outside experts to tell us what to do or how to do most things.'

"Our teachers are in charge of their own and their children's learning, the vision, and the direction of the school -- they don't have to wait for 'the boss' to decide how things should be done, how problems should be solved. As principal, it's my job to facilitate their decisions and locate the resources they need to implement their priorities."

Having that vision, and having it take hold, are two very different things. "It was a difficult and frustrating shift for teachers when I came on as principal," said Haws. "Now, five years later, I wish the teachers could hear themselves and remember how it used to be.

"Now *they own it* -- and the results are astounding!"

At Oakridge, teachers and assistants feel free to suggest changes, raise issues, present ideas, and offer suggestions to problems and situations that arise. "They are very insightful in helping to make decisions around spending priorities, where to make budget cuts, how to group students and assign them to classrooms, and what to include in parent communication," said Haws. "They are also in charge of their professional growth, pursuit of active research, and creation of authentic assessment for the sake of improving teaching."

Haws explained that the school has two leadership teams, with a representative from each grade level/department on each. One is a curriculum and instruction leadership team, which monitors assessment data, implementation of adopted teaching programs, and curriculum. The other team, the Teacher Advisory Committee, decides things that have to do with the daily functioning of the school such as the indoor recess, retention guidelines, common plan time scheduling, and so on. In the month ahead, some of the issues that those teams, grade-level groups, or the entire faculty will be grappling with include the following:

- Teacher groups will meet to discuss ways to improve indoor recess scheduling; ideas for addressing the overcrowded school's space usage for next fall; and how to recognize Earth Day this year.
- Teachers will examine what data they have and need in order to forecast what they expect to be their state assessment results in June and how to intervene in areas where they have concerns as they study that forecast.
- Grade level teams will meet to examine reading progress.
- Teachers will generate ideas and suggestions for ways to ensure that students learn and consistently use the school's "no-excuse commonly misspelled words" list as well as ideas for how they will always hold high expectations for spelling those words correctly.
- In a faculty meeting, the entire staff will look at the school's over-representation of Hispanic students in special education and discuss possible reasons why -- and ways to avoid -- over-referring those students.

"Sometimes I raise the questions, sometimes they do," said Haws. "But the actions, decisions, and reflection are theirs. I implement their decisions and ensure things happen and resources are directed appropriately.

"The staff ownership for outcomes throughout the school is amazing and gratifying. Not to mention that we've just won another annual award from the state for our high level of student achievement!"

When Haws someday leaves Oakridge, she hopes she will leave a legacy with those who can best do the real work that's needed -- the teachers who own the school. "I honestly believe that if a principal can unleash the potential that exists in all teachers, nothing can stand in the way of children's success in that school."

AND IT HELPS TO HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOR

Maleea Brooks believes that a sense of humor is one of the most important characteristics that a principal can have.

"It is important to celebrate successes and find bright spots in your day," explained Brooks. "I have been an administrator since 1989, and if I couldn't find things to celebrate or laugh about I never could have survived."

"I don't think they emphasize the need for a sense of humor enough in administrator or teacher training," she added.

Teaching and leading teachers through the minefields of high expectations are mighty stressful jobs. If it doesn't come naturally, it behooves educators at every level to cultivate a sense of humor, added Larry Davis.

"Principals need to be able to make jokes and accept jokes," he said. "They are not comedians, but they tell entertaining stories, point out silly things, bring joy to difficult situations, and are not afraid of laughter."

"They use humor to connect to their teachers and to create a relaxed and secure environment."