

## **Characteristics of an Outstanding School Principal**

Four groups of staff members at a school where the principal had been acknowledged nationally for outstanding leadership were interviewed to give their personal reasons for the principal's achievement. Ten characteristics are commonly listed in articles outlining characteristics of an outstanding school principal. Using the focus group technique, the researcher wanted to discover if these characteristics would be noted in the discussions by staff and if other characteristics of outstanding leadership would emerge.

It was found from the observations of the staff members that the principal displayed the ten common characteristics. As well, six other characteristics were often mentioned. Following is a summary of the ten common characteristics based on comments made by individual members of staff.

### **High Level Communication Skills**

Staff pointed to the skill of being able to communicate effectively to all groups across the school – students, staff and parents. The principal was regarded as articulate and well-presented. In tense situations, especially with parents, the principal was able to remain calm, allowing the other person to 'vent their feelings', listening to their point of view but still able to 'take a stance' when needed. Written communication was always appropriate to the situation, clearly understood, whether it be a memorandum to staff, a plan for future action or a policy to be implemented. The principal communicates especially well with students regardless of their age or background.

### **Vision for the Future of the School**

The excellent communication skills of the principal meant that the direction that the school was to take was clearly understood and that the strategies to be taken were accepted by all.

### **Vision of Academic Success for All Students**

At the time the tenure of the principal commenced, it was apparent that the academic performance of the students was well below their capabilities. Improvement was required and it occurred. Staff willingly accepted the vision of the principal and accepted the 'high expectations for all' (See also later). Staff were fully supported by well-targeted professional development programs and by the employment of additional specialist

teachers to assist students with special needs and to cater for the gifted students.

The principal also aimed for and achieved student success in all curriculum areas with the creative and performing arts often mentioned.

### **Courage**

Courage was needed by the principal to implement some aspects of the vision. The school was expected to follow a certain pedagogical approach but when it seemed that this was not the appropriate path to follow another was chosen after much research, consultation and negotiation. It has been a hallmark of the many successes at the school including more than doubling the school enrolment which was falling quite quickly before the principal commenced at the school. Courage was needed to move from an open-plan structure to one with enclosed teaching rooms accompanied by flexible spaces.

The principal has been prepared to challenge the system decision-makers to obtain benefits for the school and to be a staunch advocate for the school. The staff acknowledge and very much appreciate this.

### **Passion**

In striving to do better in all matters relating to the school, the passion of the principal shines brightly. There is an openness and enthusiasm for new ideas which is infectious. Realistic expectations of students and staff are continually raised with the principal being the model. The principal has a presence and has allowed vibrancy to flourish across the school.

### **Establishes a Collaborative, Responsible and Safe Environment**

The planning to handle the Covid crisis was described as exceptional, with a clarity in instructions and with staff made to feel comfortable and confident in dealing with the challenges they faced. Staff were extremely pleased to have been given a small sum to cover some out-of-pocket expenses. To them, it was the gesture and recognition that were valued.

The principal is inclusive and enables collegiality but, when appropriate, can be authoritative but not authoritarian. Leadership responsibilities are shared and staff are rewarded for any additional workload. Staff reported that they felt they were given agency and were trusted.

## **Encourage Risk-Taking**

The changes to the pedagogy throughout the school and to its physical structure were not only courageous but involved risk. The same applied to the new direction for the unique 'school within the school' for which the principal was also responsible. Significant changes were made to the curriculum, pedagogy and staffing involving risk to everyone involved.

Some described the actions as 'bravery'. Others noted that the principal was prepared to change views. Staff acknowledge that the principal trusts them to 'give it a go' with new ideas and recognize that this can be accompanied by an element of risk.

## **Cultivate Leadership in Others**

The cultivation of leadership among the staff was emphasized often, especially the multi-layers of leadership opportunities available to them. It was often remarked that the principal saw in individuals the skills and personal attributes that they were unaware of. The principal provided individual professional development programs and encouraged further study. Year Co-ordinator roles and Curriculum Co-ordinator positions were created. It was even said by staff members that because they were trusted to fulfil these roles effectively, they 'worked harder'. Staff greatly appreciated the trust placed in them.

## **Utilize Data and Resources**

Staff greatly admired the ability of the principal to obtain funding for professional development, for the additional leadership and curriculum positions and for specialist teachers. The principal has a deep knowledge of the appropriate use of data to enhance the performance of students and her position as an educational leader.

## **Lifelong Learner**

Staff greatly admire the amount of reading and investigation into educational issues and initiatives that the principal does. Some are in awe of it. New programs and pedagogical changes are only introduced after thorough research by the principal who understands the need to constantly upskill.

## **Six Additional Characteristics of an Outstanding School Principal**

From the staff discussions, other characteristics of this outstanding principal were frequently mentioned. They could apply to others who fall into the 'outstanding' category. They follow together with some additional comments.

### **Listening Skills**

The ability to listen attentively is often overlooked when communication skills are considered. It is not uncommon for people to listen to others less well the higher the position they hold in schools. This can distinguish the 'very good' principal from the 'outstanding'. Staff very much appreciated being listened to and for the principal always finding time to do this. They know that they have been heard and parents feel the same way after they have discussed an issue with the principal.

### **Visibility**

The personalities of outstanding principals vary from the flamboyant to the calm presence of this principal that the staff pointed to. The principal is very well-known to students, staff and parents in the school, a model of the behaviour expected by all and ensures that everyone feels welcome. In some schools, principals become invisible to many often assuming that by being in their office busying themselves with managerial tasks they are being effective leaders.

### **Flexibility in Approach**

According to staff members, the principal is able to move from one leadership style to another whether it be transformative, distributive, instructional or strategic. Being open to new ideas suggested by others, the principal is prepared to make the relevant changes and acknowledge the proposals accordingly.

### **High Expectations for All in All Areas**

Because the principal sets personal high expectations, the staff follow this example. A comment was made that 'because we are appreciated, we work harder'. Staff commitment is recognized by the principal in various ways including extra time to undertake programming, free coffee from a local café and the funding for special programs for individual professional development. Students are encouraged to do the best they can whether it

be academically or in the performing and creative arts with staff being given the support needed for the students to do this.

## **Resilience**

In the discussion groups resilience was alluded to by references to difficult parents, to system resistance, to justifiable requests and to confronting unexpected challenges like the Covid lock-down. The constant pressure placed on the principal was recognized and in fact a comment was made that the principal had to ensure that 'down time' was taken.

## **Compassion**

In this context, compassion embraces a concern for the welfare of others in the school community. The principal has a deep understanding of the needs of individual students. By the persistence of the principal, additional funding has been found to employ specialist staff. The principal knows the students. It can be more difficult in very large schools for a principal to know all students, but the principal can ensure that they are in constant contact with staff responsible for student welfare.

The staff stressed that the principal knows each one individually and that there was an emphasis on people looking after themselves, not for selfish reasons but for their wellbeing. The principal protects staff members from unreasonable people, especially parents. When staff members need time away for personal reasons, it is given without question and the principal maintains contact with them offering whatever support the school can give.

## **Some Concluding Comments**

This project was only possible by the co-operation, willingness and openness of the staff members who participated in the group discussions which focussed on the reasons that they believed that principal was acknowledged nationally as being outstanding. The participants knew the project co-ordinator and were confident that confidentiality would be fully maintained. One group commented that they appreciated the opportunity to reflect on their own performance as well as the principal's.

Author: Tony Re  
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