The Six Ins and Outs of

Educational Leadership:

Qualities of an
Effective Leader

About the RTI Center for Education Services

The RTI Center for Education Services partners with educators to promote thriving learning environments that facilitate success for all students. From the classroom to the boardroom, our work focuses on four areas that we believe are levers for change in education: strengthening instruction, developing leaders, improving organizational operations, and facilitating collaborative networks.

Education has a monumental and compounding impact throughout a person's life by opening doors and broadening opportunities. At the societal level, education affects the economic vitality of communities, states, and nations. We partner with educators who understand and act on the trends and practices that create possibilities for learners at all levels.

We're partnering with K–12 educators to challenge the status quo by providing job-embedded support tailored to meet the needs of these educators. We apply a passionate, professional, and no-nonsense approach to drive meaningful solutions that are both actionable and sustainable. Technical assistance is always customized to best meet the unique needs of each context.

Our staff members endeavor to turn knowledge into practice through rigorous research and hands-on implementation support. Every education project benefits from an integrated approach that offers access to the breadth of content expertise, staff experience, and research insight that differentiates us from our competitors.

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Introduction

Educational leadership is an enormous responsibility that is often defined in a multitude of ways. RTI has identified knowing self, supporting others, and facilitating change as effective leadership requirements. These processes overlap to ensure that leaders know all the leadership qualities and skills that are necessary for success. Each process is comprised of servant, cultural, managerial, and instructional leadership attributes and consists of skills that support the multiple types of leadership qualities needed.

Members of RTI International's Center for Education Services have identified six qualities of educational leaders:

- Establish a Vision (Cultural Leader)
- Build Community (Managerial Leader)
- Communicate Effectively (Servant Leader)
- Implement Data-driven Decisions (Instructional Leader)
- Recruit and Retain Quality Staff (Managerial Leader)
- Commit to Lifelong Learning (Instructional Leader)

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Establish a Vision (Cultural Leader)

Educational leadership usually involves supporting fellow educators in their efforts to improve learning outcomes for students and adult learners. Leaders must possess the vision and knowledge to support educators effectively. Neck and Manz (1998) define leadership as the exercise of influence that facilitates, enables, and empowers others to contribute their unique capabilities and knowledge constructively to the team. Among the team leadership approaches they describe, "visionary hero" focuses on the leader's ability to create highly motivating and absorbing visions (Neck & Manz, 1998). The goal is for team members to respond to the leadership because they can identify with the leader's vision, and they have confidence in the leader to move the team toward that vision.

In leadership, it has been said that not much happens without a dream, but the dream must exist first. To get teammates on board with a vision, the leader must first have one. Vision should be rooted in best practices and strategies, be believed in by the leader, and be clearly articulated. A vision points the way to a preferred future, which can inspire a board and staff to greater educational achievements. Vision statements describe people and organizations not as they are, but as they desire to become (Calder, 2006). In any educational institution, it is crucial that everyone shares the vision of the educational leader, and this is usually achieved if everyone is involved in creating the vision. A vision must be shared by the organization, and the organization members must personally believe in the power of the vision as a force for creative, continuous improvement that can give personal meaning to their lives (Senge, 1990). Educational leaders must take the necessary steps to ensure they first are (1) clear on the vision they have for the organization, (2) work collaboratively with organization members to create shared vision statements, and (3) work collectively to move toward the vision.

Build Community
(Managerial Leader)

The African proverb, "it takes a village to raise a child" holds true. It is crucial that a strong sense of community exists within and outside of the educational leader's organization. Specifically, school-community partnerships have captured the attention of policy-makers, educators, and community leaders as a way to strengthen families, schools, and neighborhoods (Valli, Stefanski, & Jacobson, 2014). Educational leaders have the dual responsibility of building community with parents of their students and with outside organizations that might support their learning institution. A strong parent-school partnership is a valuable resource (Robbins & Alvy, 2009). Effective educational leaders should take the time to prepare their staff for opportunities to engage with parents and families consistently. Events such as open houses, quarterly parent-teacher conferences, awards day, "Coffee with the Principal" forums, and student-led conferences can encourage ongoing partnerships with parents and families.

According to American University School of Education (2020), school and community partnerships can look very different, depending on several factors. The partnerships that elementary schools form with community and business leaders differ from collaborations between the community and high schools or colleges. Nevertheless, meaningful, valuable partnership opportunities are available to schools of all levels and community organizations such as businesses, nonprofits, and government offices. The following are examples of possible partnership opportunities (American University School of Education, 2020):

1. **Service Learning.** Students engage in service learning when they go into the surrounding community and work to improve the local environment or community members' lives.

2. **Student-Business Partnerships.** High schools and colleges can work with local businesses or larger corporations to find ways for students to participate in mutually beneficial partnerships. These partnerships can introduce students to various career paths.

3. **Youth Development Programs.** Many institutions, especially government organizations and nonprofits, provide services for younger children. These programs often promote engagement, personal growth, and development on both sides of the partnership.

4. **Adult Education Courses.** When the regular school day is over, institutions from elementary schools to colleges host evening adult education courses. These programs are designed for community members who want to learn a new skill or expand their intellectual horizons in a relaxed academic atmosphere.

These and other opportunities for school and community partnerships can provide benefits to the educational institution and the surrounding communities, such as community betterment, economic support, and a decrease in competition for resources.

Communicate Effectively (Servant Leader)

Educational leaders have many responsibilities, and one of the biggest is leading a group of people. In addition to establishing a clear vision for the future, educational leaders must communicate that vision effectively so that people will follow. According to Bennis (2009), people may follow for two reasons: (1) they believe in the person they are following, or (2) they believe that following is the best thing to do at the time. When garnering the support of a team, effective leaders must clearly articulate their thoughts, anticipate questions that may arise, and be prepared to communicate "the why" of any action. Other authors identify the following key skills required to be a better communicator and leader: they must be assertive, be an active listener, delegate responsibilities effectively and without ambiguity, and manage several points of view (Bell & Bodie, 2012; Store, 2019).

A major responsibility of an educational leader is to build the professional capacity of teachers and leaders who serve under them. Therefore, the role of the educational leader is very much the role of a coach and the teacher the coachee. This coaching relationship should incorporate specific communication approaches that enhance and provoke thinking that leads to empowerment. Allison (2011) provides The Coaching Conversation Process Tool as a dynamic process that adapts and readapts as a coach and coachee traverse the ground between not knowing what to do and knowing what to do:

Step 1: Greetings and Accountability

Greetings and Accountability provides space for coaches and coachees to greet each other and welcome each other to the conversation. This reignites the rapport between them, which grows and deepens with each new interaction.

Step 2: Focus the Conversation

Acknowledges the events that took place in the life of coachees between coaching sessions, and identifies the goal(s) of the current situation.

Step 3: Listen

After expressing the desired goal of the current coaching conversation, coaches invite the coachees to talk. Listening is the primary tool of a coach and an effective listener.

Step 4: Deepen Understanding

Coaches ask clarifying and detailed questions about what the coachees have brought up so far and offer summaries and paraphrases of what seem to be the most important aspects and essence of the story the coachees told in Step 3.

Step 5: Interact Through Questions

Through the skillful application of open-ended mediating questions that engage various thinking and emotional processes, coaches help coachees to expand and shift their perspective.

Step 6: Reflect and Brainstorm

Coaches invite brainstorming and possibility by asking coachees to think aloud about what they see that they could do.

Step 7: Commit to Action

By this point in the coaching conversation, if coaches have skillfully and mindfully activated the tools along the way, coachees usually have clarity about the next actions to take that will move their project forward.

This process is one of many examples of how educational leaders can be effective communicators in their day-to-day tasks. Regardless of the tool that an educational leader employs to ensure effective communication, it must be one they are comfortable with and that achieves their desired outcome.

Implement Data-driven Decisions (Instructional Leader)

Decisions are a part of educational leaders' everyday life. To make well-informed decisions, whether simple or complex, school leaders require data. Before a quality decision can be made, a leader must first be able to recognize the types of data used during decision-making: demographic, perception, student learning, and school processes (Bernhardt, 1998).

Demographic data describe the school and include attendance, race, ethnicity, gender, grade level, and enrollment to name a few. Traditional public schools have open enrollment policies that provide access to all students regardless of their demographics. Demographic data are often used to disaggregate other data sets (Bernhardt, 1998). *Perception dat*a reveal the thoughts and perceptions of constituents of the school. They tell us what students, staff, parents, and the community think and feel about the school.

Perception data give educational leaders insights into the thoughts and perceptions of constituents of the school. Obtained through interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and observation, perception data tell us what students, staff, parents, and the community think and feel about the school. *Student learning data* (i.e., achievement data) are where most leaders find themselves deploying data literacy strategies. Summative data delivered at the end of the course or grade level and formative assessment data used to determine student understanding and next steps are both critical during data analysis. Student learning data are typically used to determine mastery of grade level or course content. *School process data* are the application data that define what teachers do that positively or negatively impacts results. Processes such as academic programs, research-based instructional strategies, and behavior strategies should be analyzed to determine impact and shared with others to support better outcomes for others (Bernhardt, 1998). Understanding the various types of data is necessary when implementing the following six practices of data-informed leaders:

1. Inquire

The first step to making data-informed decisions is to know the question leaders you are attempting to answer. Clarifying the question will help you determine the type of data you seek and whether they have been collected or need to be collected (Rudel et al., 2021).

2. Locate

Data-informed leaders know how to look at data and locate the relevant information needed to apply to their question of inquiry. Locating data within complex tables and graphs is a skill they employ while sifting through multiple data sets (Means et al., 2011).
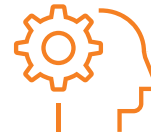
3. Comprehend

Data-informed leaders make sense of the data. This skill may require leaders to look at various data points to answer the question, "What do the data say?" Comprehending involves observing data in charts and graphs (Means et al., 2011).

4. Interpret

Proper interpretation generates inferences and adds meaning to the data. Data-informed leaders understand the impact of outliers and generate meaning that is applied to demographic data.

5. Implement

It is not enough to know what the data are saying and to create meaning. Data-informed leaders must create and implement plans.

6. Reflect

Once decisions have been made based on the data, it is time to assess the results of the agreed upon decision. How was the plan implemented? What went well? What could be improved upon to help the team reach its goal?

Data-informed leaders are strategic when working with data. They set a clear focus and identify, comprehend, and interpret the data to establish meaning. They make informed decisions and reflect upon their choice to increase positive student outcomes.

Recruit and Retain Quality Staff (Managerial Leader)

Attrition is the new crisis or what Glazer (2018) calls the silent strike. Many teachers who are not at retirement age have chosen to leave the classroom (Kelchtermans, 2017). Teachers aged 25 to 34 in school districts with low-income schools and a large proportion of students of color are more prone to leave the profession (Bryant et al., 2023). Knowing these alarming statistics, what can school leaders do to attract and retain teachers?

Strategy: Ensure value.

McKinsey & Company surveyed teachers and identified teacher efficacy as the number one reason for teachers remaining in the classroom after the 2020 pandemic. Whether the work demonstrates the value of others or themselves, teachers desire a sense of meaning. The vast majority (93%) of respondents say they believe their work benefits others, whereas 89% say their organization's goals are in line with their own (Bryant et al., 2023). Leaders who show support and value the contribution of teachers, can decrease attrition.

Strategy: Develop a Retention Plan.

Schools have plans for School Improvement, Individualized Education, and Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) MTSS to name a few. However, teacher retention plans can help to ensure that beginning teachers grow and remain and are a great way to address attrition. A good plan has multiple elements; however, selecting the right mentors for beginning teachers to grow is essential. School leaders should select mentors who are experienced, positive about teaching and learning, supportive, and have evidence of academic achievement. A school's retention plan should include the training of mentors, mentor/mentee collaboration time, and frequent program evaluation (Clement, 2016).

Strategy: Build Collective Teacher Efficacy.

Collective teacher efficacy is the belief among teachers in a school that the faculty is capable of carrying out the plans of action required to make a beneficial impact on students. (Goddard,2001). Improving collective teacher efficacy can benefit a school's culture and climate. Collective teacher efficacy can increase student achievement, decrease the negative impact of low socioeconomics, and increase family and school relationships. Educational leaders who are looking for guidance on how to build collective teacher efficacy should consider the following (Brinson, 2007):

- Grow content knowledge and instructional practice through collaborative opportunities among staff.
- Design collaborative opportunities for teachers.
- Contextualize performance results to build confidence.
- Include teachers in school-based decisions.

Building collective teacher efficacy is a process; leaders taking these initial steps will have a positive impact on student learning. Recruiting and retaining teachers requires intentional and deliberate action from school and district leaders. Effort must be made to ensure value, develop a retention plan, and build collective teacher efficacy.

Commit to Lifelong Learning (Instructional Leader)

The titles of educational leader, school executive, and principal are often used interchangeably. The demands for the role have shifted from manager to leader. Principals are expected to lead the change process, decrease the achievement gap, motivate teachers and staff to sustain improvements, and build family and community partnerships (North, 2013). The demands have intensified, with 75% of principals stating that the complexity of their jobs is overwhelming, and 48%stating that they experience high levels of stress multiple days each week (Metlife, 2013). To meet these increasing demands, principals must be lifelong learners. If school executives are to lead transformational change, they must be intentional about their personal growth and development. Malone (2014) designed the acrostic PRACTICED to support individuals desiring to be lifelong learners.

PRIORITY	Reserve time daily to grow knowledge or skill.
REFLECT	Think about learning and how it can be applied to existing situations.
ACTION LEARNING	Put what you have learned into practice. Repetition builds skill.
CURIOSITY	Look for answers to your questions.
TEACH	Reinforce your learning through teaching.
INSIGHT	Gain understanding from multiple perspectives.
CONCENTRATION	Focus.
EXERCISE	Maintain physical and mental fitness.
DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLES	Seek to learn in multiple ways.

The desire to be a lifelong learner is not free from challenges or obstacles. However, no matter how daunting the task may seem, school executives must continue to receive formal and informal education and training with the goal to improve their knowledge and skill and meet student needs (Malone, 2014).

Call to Action

Educational leaders must lead in a diverse environment and be equipped to navigate the dynamics of leadership. Educational leaders must clearly establish and then articulate their vision effectively to obtain buy-in from their team and build community among stakeholders inside and outside of the school. Additionally, data-driven decisions can help to improve student outcomes and recruit and retain quality staff. Finally, educational leaders should find the time to empower themselves by continually building their professional capacity. Although this is not a comprehensive list of the many qualities that educational leaders possess, we are confident the aforementioned qualities would propel any leader on the pathway of success. By adopting the six leadership qualities discussed in this paper, educational leaders will strengthen their managerial, cultural, servant, and instructional leadership.

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