



A Shift in Perspective on the Role of the Principal

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The problem of stress in the principalship is an issue that almost all school leaders are confronting these days. From the first-year, small town, elementary principal, to the urban, high school veteran, school leaders of all kinds are suffering from too much work and not enough time. For many, “stress in the principalship” is a redundancy – the two terms are synonymous.

A casual observer might not catch this by watching principals joyfully interact with students, lead the monthly awards assembly, or fawn over kindergarteners’ artwork. But pull them aside and ask them how things are going and they will invariably tell you, “I’m exhausted. I can’t seem to get caught up.” Or, as one seasoned administrator recently told me, “I’m just not sure how much longer I can do this.” Principals are professionals and they can put on a good game face when all eyes are on them. But at the end of a long day when – yet again – theirs is the last car to pull out of the lot, many wonder if it’s worth it.

Much has been written about the sources of stress in the principalship. Increased mandates, shrinking budgets and staff reductions certainly contribute. However, the greatest source of school leader stress is one that is rarely, if ever, articulated – principals simply don’t know what their actual job is.

The Prevailing Mental Model

Close your eyes and imagine a typical school leader. What do you see? Chances are you envision a busy principal – a very busy principal. You see a man or woman who is constantly on the go. He is the first one to arrive in the morning and the last one to leave at night. He often goes without lunch and always seems to be late to a meeting somewhere. Sometimes he is seen walking at a clip through the hallways, but most of the time he is at his desk signing requisitions, reviewing attendance reports and replying to email. He answers every question, involves himself in every decision, and has his hands on every lever and dial required to run the school. He is the principal who does it all!

Why is this mental model of the overworked principal – the principal who does it all – so easy to conjure up? And why do so many principals fit the bill? One answer is “monkey see – monkey do.” Generations of aspiring administrators have watched their mentors live this way – working seventy hours a week, running from one thing to the next, lugging briefcases full of paper home to complete at night and over weekends. They have witnessed the constant interruption of school leaders in meetings to handle minutia. They have rarely seen a school administrator enjoy a 30-minute sit down lunch. Then, when they become principals themselves, they very naturally continue to do the job the way it’s been modeled for them – and the cycle continues.

Administrator training programs are co-conspirators in perpetuating this vicious cycle. Universities teach school law, district policy, education theory and leadership principles. Graduate level work in these areas is often rigorous and beneficial. But the prevailing

mental model of the overworked, stressed out, do-it-all principal is rarely challenged or even addressed.

The result is a public school system full of disillusioned, overwhelmed and frustrated principals. Drawn to the job because of a desire to make a difference with teachers and students, the prevailing paradigm has them stuck in their offices – their energy, enthusiasm and expertise steadily waning.

A Better Mental Model

The well-known movie *Master and Commander* offers an alternative backdrop for studying the complexities involved in leading large numbers of people who are charged with fulfilling a specific mission. Cannonballs and scurvy aside, leading schools and commanding sailing ships can be quite similar, and embracing a mental model of the principal as “captain of the ship” can give school leaders a whole new sense of what their job really is – one that gives them permission to do less and focus instead on high impact activities that make the greatest difference.

Nineteenth century sailing vessels were busy, complex operations. Hundreds of seamen had to work together to operate sails, yardarms and rudders to navigate the ship. Cargo had to be stored, meals had to be prepared, and the sick or injured required treatment. The crew included gunners, sail makers, coopers, and carpenters – each with specific technical skills and tasks to accomplish. Sometimes these were experienced seamen who knew their jobs well. Other times, crews were outfitted with whoever was available and “newbies” received on-the-job training. However, in order to reach their destination and accomplish their mission, every crew member needed to properly complete his task at the right time – failure to do so put everyone at risk. As it was in the nineteenth century, so it is today.

Enter the captain.

Sailing vessels, both historical and modern, carry hundreds of crew members, each responsible for performing a specific job. But each ship has only one captain, and his job is qualitatively different from the rest of the crew. The captain has two primary responsibilities: (1) to keep an eye out to sea to insure the ship remains on course; (2) to keep an eye on the crew to make sure their work is coordinated and executed well. That’s it.

Keeping an eye out to sea involves maintaining a proper course towards the intended destination, speeding up or slowing down when appropriate, navigating safely through storms, and getting back on course after the tempests have passed. No one but the captain has this responsibility.

Keeping an eye on the crew is just as important. Each crew member is a specialist who performs a particular task, and relies on others in their respective roles to do the same. Crew members haul the ship’s lines, trim its sails and grind its winches. The captain observes, coordinates and supports their work. The captain has the unique job of insuring that crew members perform well by providing training, oversight, acknowledgement and corrective feedback.

A ship captain earns his position by moving up through the ranks. He may know how to trim sails, haul lines, and grind winches – all skills he acquired earlier in his career – however, the moment he is commissioned as “captain”, he must let go of performing these tasks and take up the business of leading and managing the crew. Essentially, the captain must stop working in the system and start working on the system.

The Principal as Captain of the Ship

The parallel to the principalship is clear. The principal’s role in a school is the same as that of the ship’s captain: first, attend to the school’s mission, vision and direction; second, make sure that each staff member has the support needed to do his or her work well.

The principal's primary functions include training and developing, coaching, supporting and directing staff. Nobody else in the entire school has this charge. If a principal does not do this work, it goes undone and the entire organization suffers.

The stress and strain principals feel is the inevitable result of doing two or more jobs simultaneously. Principals are trying to do the leadership work that they have been charged with, while at the same time attend to a whole host of low-level administrivia. They labor relentlessly in a futile attempt to perform both captain and crewmembers' work, and how many of them would end that sentence is "And doing neither one particularly well." The result – principals spend the bulk of their days hunkered down in their offices, buried under mountains of paperwork, doing their employees' jobs.

But just as the captain needs to plant himself firmly up on deck to know where the ship is headed and to monitor the crew's performance, a school principal needs to be "up on deck" at school, present where the real work is happening. "Up on deck" includes walking the hallways, interacting with parents at drop off and dismissal, and most importantly, in classrooms observing teaching and learning. This can only happen when the principal stops doing their employees' jobs and instead, begins training and developing staff to do their work themselves.

If you are a principal who is burnt out, overwhelmed and frustrated because you have been doing captain and crew member's work for far too long, here are 5 steps you can take to "end the insanity" and provide your school with the leadership it desperately needs from you:

1. Change your point of view. Look at your school through the eyes of a ship captain and take note: What "up on deck" work is there to do that only I, the principal, can do? Given sufficient training and development, what administrative work could others do?
2. Review every piece of paper strewn across your desk and ask yourself, "Is this my job or is there someone else in my organization who's job description actually includes this?"
3. Deliver each piece of paper to the specific person who is responsible for its completion and ask them to handle it.
4. If a staff member is not yet competent to perform a certain task(s), train them so that they become competent.
5. Get out of your office and into classrooms. When you are interrupted from this mission critical work because front office staff requires your assistance to complete their duties, make a note and schedule a "training and development" session for them.

Shifting principals' efforts into "captain-only work" takes time and practice, but it is energy well spent. It is the most effective way for school leaders to stop working in the system, get "up on deck", and start working on the system that requires their leadership and direction. Then it's smooth sailing ahead!

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