

EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: A NEW STUDY OF BEST LEADERSHIP PRACTICES FOR SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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In these politically contentious and economically difficult times, school principals are increasingly at the center of demands to increase teaching effectiveness and improve student learning, while simultaneously decreasing costs and making due with diminishing resources. The success of these endeavors depends to a significant degree on their leadership abilities.

Management Research Group® (MRG), is a global leader in assessment-based individual and organizational development, and has been studying leadership empirically for over four decades. In a recent study of leadership effectiveness among school principals, we found that principals approach the leadership role in ways that are distinct from leaders in the private sector. Additionally, a number of leadership behaviors were found to reliably distinguish superior principals (as measured by the perceptions of their bosses, peers, and direct reports) from less effective principals. The findings and their implications are described in this research brief.



How do school principals approach leadership, and which leadership behaviors are most strongly associated with success?

The Participants

Fifty US school principals from 9 states (Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, New York, Tennessee) and 15 school districts participated in the present study. Seventy percent of the participants were female, with a median age of 50 years (range 31 to 62) and a median tenure of 4 years (range 4 months to 23 years). Both parochial and public schools were represented.

The Measures

Each principal completed MRG's LEA 360™, a 360 degree leadership assessment and development tool. The LEA measures 22 dimensions of leadership behavior (what leaders actually do) and a separate global measure of leadership effectiveness (how effectively they're perceived in their role). The LEA dimensions are described in the appendix.

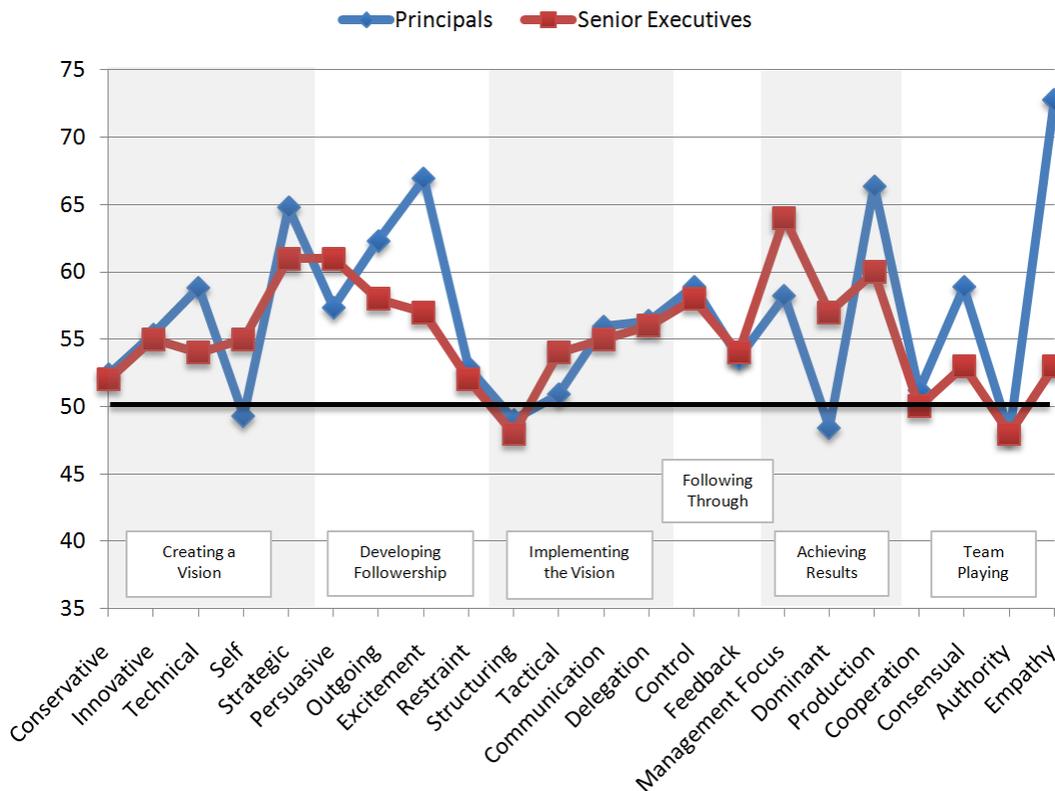
The Process

School principals completed the LEA 360™ as part of independent, ongoing leadership development programs. Principals were rated by an average of 1 boss, 3 peers, and 5 direct reports. For each principal, the ratings of bosses, peers, and direct reports were averaged using a weighted mean that gave equal weight to each observer group. This yielded 22 leadership behavior scores and one overall effectiveness score for each principal. Self-report data were not used in the current investigation.

The Findings - School Principals as a Group

How do school principals approach the leadership role compared to leaders in private corporations? The median leadership profile for school principals is provided in figure 1. Scores are percentile ranks based on a normative sample of 68,228 US managers and executives. For example, the median score for principals on Empathy is 73, indicating that school principals scored higher than 73% of a general business population on this measure. For comparison, the median profile of 4,276 US senior executives (CEOs and Senior Vice Presidents) is also plotted.

Figure 1. Median Leadership Profile for School Principals and Senior Business Executives



Note: Scores are median percentile ranks, based on a general US business population (N=68,228) represented by the black line at 50. The median profile for a 4,276 group of senior business executives (CEOs and Senior VPs) is also plotted.

A review of the profiles in figure 1 provides some interesting insights into the leadership approach of school principals. As a group they tend to demonstrate an active concern for people, are gregarious, and operate with a good deal of energy, intensity, and emotional expression. This approach helps them to keep others enthusiastic and involved. As leaders, they adopt a strong orientation toward achievement, and hold high expectations for themselves and others. They are thoughtful and analytic in their approach, emphasizing strategic thinking and long term planning. Additionally, they tend to lead through their technical knowledge, identifying strongly with their field of expertise.

There were many similarities between the leadership approach of school principals and corporate senior executives. This was especially true in the areas of strategic visioning, comfort with change, approach to communication, delegation and feedback, follow through on tasks, and balancing their own needs with the needs of others. However, there were some notable differences. Compared with senior executives, school principals

- Were much more likely to approach the leadership role by building strong supportive relationships that demonstrate active concern for others.
- Capture their followers on an emotional level, helping to keep them enthusiastic and involved through dynamic expressions of energy and passion.
- Are much less likely to push vigorously for results through an independent, forceful and aggressive approach.

Next, let's look at those leadership practices that distinguish more effective, from less effective principals.

The Findings – Leadership Best Practices for School Principals



What factors distinguish principals that are seen as super stars by those around them? We can correlate ratings of leadership behaviors with ratings of effectiveness to identify those practices that are most strongly associated with success.

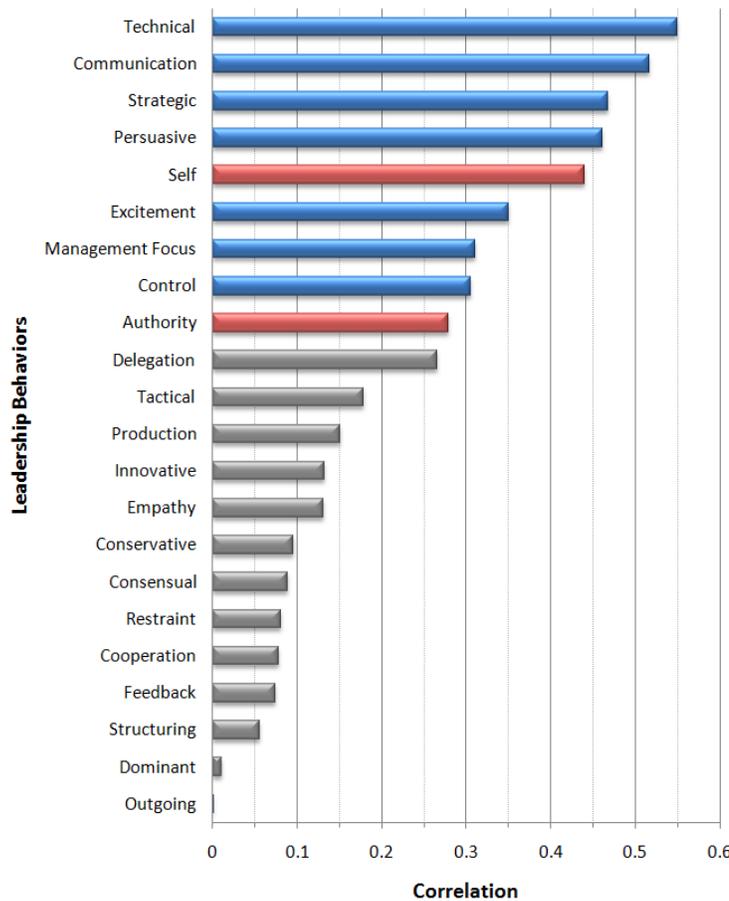
These correlations are presented in figure 2. Blue bars represent positive relationships, while red bars represent negative relationships. For example, the higher a principal scores on Technical, the more likely they are to be seen as effective. Conversely, the *lower* they score on Self, the more likely they are to be seen as effective. Gray bars represent correlations that did not achieve statistical significance (i.e., there was insufficient evidence, given the current sample size, that these correlations differ from zero).

From the figure, we see that (in order of importance), more effective principals:

- Maintain in-depth knowledge and expertise in their area. This expertise guides them in decision making and increases their credibility with others.

- Clearly express their thoughts and ideas, keeping others informed of their expectations. School systems are complex environments and keeping a clear and constant flow of information is vital.
- Analyze the future impact of their decisions and understand the impact of these decisions on their school, the staff, students, and the community.
- Use effective persuasion to build commitment to their ideas and initiatives. They build followership by selling their ideas, rather than by commanding obedience.
- Are willing to seek input from others, rather than believing that they are the only one with the answers to questions. This approach helps to build staff involvement and promotes effective team building.
- Energize others, getting them enthusiastic and involved. School environments can be difficult and demoralizing environments. Effective principals help others to feel valued, understand the importance of their roles and recommit to the school’s mission.
- Are comfortable being the one in charge and seek out opportunities to be influential.
- Set deadlines and monitor the progress of activities to ensure success.
- Challenge the perceptions and mandates of superiors. They are willing to kill “sacred cows” in order to develop a more effective organization.

Figure 2. Correlations Between Leadership Behaviors and Overall Effectiveness



Note: Correlations are Spearman Rank Order correlation coefficients. Blue bars represent positive correlations, red bars represent negative correlations, and gray bars represent correlations that are non-significant ($p > .05$). Correlations are sorted by absolute magnitude.

You may wonder why behaviors like empathy, goal orientation, and gregariousness were not significant predictors of success. Remember that school principals, as a group, tend to demonstrate these behaviors to some degree. Therefore, they are less likely to distinguish higher performing principals from less effective ones.

Discussion



School principals face the daunting task of meeting the often conflicting demands of teachers, administrative staff, students, parents, school boards, and state and local government agencies. A wide range of leadership skills are needed to meet the needs of these varying constituencies, while at the same time promoting an environment that maximizes learning and self development.

Understanding the leadership behaviors that school principals bring to the table is a critical first step in planning successful training and development programs. A second critical step is identifying those leadership behaviors that are most associated with success in this complex role.

In the current study, school principals were found to demonstrate a number of leadership behaviors that are distinct from those seen in a general business population. They are very similar to senior executives in many respects, yet demonstrate a number of unique differences as well.

Nine leadership practices were found to correlate significantly with success as a school principal. It may be worthwhile paying particular attention to these behaviors when developing leadership training programs for school principals.

There are a several limitations to the current study. While the study sample was highly diverse, each participant was involved in a leadership assessment and development program. Therefore, participants may not be representative of US school principals in general. Additionally, there was a higher percentage of women in this sample than the national average. Results may be more representative of female principals than male principals.

Second, leadership effectiveness was necessarily defined as the *perception* of effectiveness by senior school officials, other principals, teachers, and administrative staff. Measures of school success based on standardized test scores, rates of graduation, and the like were unavailable. However, this limitation may not be as serious as it first appears. School principals operate in social context and understanding the behaviors that are seen as important by their constituencies is both a reasonable and highly practical goal.

Future research should attempt to replicate these findings while extending outcome variables to include measures of student and faculty success.

Appendix. Leadership Effectiveness Analysis™ Behaviors



CREATING A VISION

Conservative: Studying problems in light of past practices to ensure predictability, reinforce the status quo and minimize risk.

Innovative: Feeling comfortable in fast-changing environments; being willing to take risks and to consider new and untested approaches.

Technical: Acquiring and maintaining in-depth knowledge in your field or area of focus; using your expertise and specialized knowledge to study issues and draw conclusions.

Self: Emphasizing the importance of making decisions independently; looking to yourself as the prime vehicle for decision-making.

Strategic: Taking a long-range, broad approach to problem solving and decision making through objective analysis, thinking ahead and planning.

DEVELOPING FOLLOWERSHIP

Persuasive: Building commitment by convincing others and winning them over to your point of view.

Outgoing: Acting in an extroverted, friendly and informal manner; showing a capacity to quickly establish free and easy interpersonal relationships.

Excitement: Operating with a good deal of energy, intensity and emotional expression; having a capacity for keeping others enthusiastic and involved.

Restraint: Maintaining a low-key, understated and quiet interpersonal demeanor by working to control your emotional expression.

IMPLEMENTING THE VISION

Structuring: Adopting a systematic and organized approach; preferring to work in a precise, methodical manner; developing and utilizing guidelines and procedures.

Tactical: Emphasizing the production of immediate results by focusing on short-range, hands-on, practical strategies.

Communication: Stating clearly what you want and expect from others; clearly expressing your thoughts and ideas; maintaining a precise and constant flow of information.

Delegation: Enlisting the talents of others to help meet objectives by giving them important activities and sufficient autonomy to exercise their own judgment.

FOLLOWING THROUGH

Control: Adopting an approach in which you take nothing for granted, set deadlines for certain actions and are persistent in monitoring the progress of activities to ensure that they are completed on schedule.

Feedback: Letting others know in a straightforward manner what you think of them, how well they have performed and if they have met your needs and expectations.

ACHIEVING RESULTS

Management Focus: Seeking to exert influence by being in positions of authority, taking charge, and leading and directing the efforts of others.

Dominant: Pushing vigorously to achieve results through an approach which is forceful, assertive and competitive.

Production: Adopting a strong orientation toward achievement; holding high expectations for yourself and others; pushing yourself and others to achieve at high levels.

TEAM PLAYING

Cooperation: Accommodating the needs and interests of others by being willing to defer performance on your own objectives in order to assist colleagues with theirs.

Consensual: Valuing the ideas and opinions of others and collecting their input as part of your decision-making process.

Authority: Showing loyalty to the organization; respecting the opinions of people in authority and using them as resources for information, direction and decisions.

Empathy: Demonstrating an active concern for people and their needs by forming close and supportive relationships with others.

MRG is a global organizational assessment firm based in Portland, Maine and Dublin, Ireland. For additional information on this and other studies, please contact us at info@mrg.com or visit us at <http://www.mrg.com>.

