

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS: A PRIORITY FOR SCHOOL REFORM?

AUTHOR

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ABSTRACT

In order to cultivate a culture that challenges the status quo and expects excellence, school leaders need to learn, develop, and demonstrate high levels of emotional intelligence. Studying emotional intelligence provides leaders with the awareness necessary to meet the needs of a staff that is engaged in developing a common vision for their school, maintaining a focus on high achievement for all students, and creating school cultures of trust and respect. Leadership continues to be a focal point for school reform, so policy makers and institutions of higher education need to act on the research that shows the relationship between emotional intelligence and effective leadership.

The role of the principal is more challenging than ever. School reform in the 21st Century requires leaders to transform schools into autonomous, systems-thinking organizations, revolving around professional learning communities that can embrace change and create a high performing learning environment for students and teachers (Moore, 2009). Leithwood, Seashore Lewis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) concluded that leadership is second only to classroom instruction among school-related factors for improving student learning. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) also reported that leadership is vital to school effectiveness. Although leadership continues to be one of the focal points for implementing school reform, the

funding and initiatives for professional development, feedback and coaching for school leaders are limited and scarce.

Much of the literature on restructuring and redesigning schools is very descriptive about the turmoil, resistance, stress, anger, frustration and other emotions experienced during the process (Blankstein, 2004; Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008; Evans, 1996; Moore, 2009). Restructuring and reorganizing a school requires a leader skilled in emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence (EI) can be defined as an "ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action" (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p.189). Fullan (2001, pg.74) stated, "In a culture of change, emotions frequently run high," and added that emotional intelligence, creating successful relationships and leading change will be the responsibility of all future principals.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE LITERATURE

Although considered a fad by some, emotional intelligence and the importance of successfully dealing with emotions have received the attention of some popular leadership books (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). George (2000) indicated that emotional intelligence is important to the process of leading and should be considered an essential component of effective leadership.

Emotional intelligence has received serious justification by empirical research, unpublished studies and dissertations (Barling, Slater, & Kelloway, 2000; Gardner & Stough, 2002; Higgs & Aitken, 2003; Law, Song, & Wong, 2004; Sy, Tram & O'Hara, 2006). Van Rooy and Viswesvaran (2004) conducted a meta-analysis of 69 emotional intelligence studies and concluded that emotional intelligence could be considered a valuable predictor of job performance. There is enough research to suggest that leaders high in emotional intelligence may be more skillful in influencing, inspiring, intellectually stimulating, and growing their staff.

A COMMON THREAD IN LEADERSHIP: DEALING WITH EMOTIONS

A common theme in the literature of school reform is the wide array of emotions experienced during the change process (Blankstein, 2004; Bredeson, 1993; Evans, 1996; Fullan, 2001). Leaders must learn to "address emotional as well as conceptual work" (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p.116). Emotions can be intense, disruptive, de-motivating, motivating, exhilarating, positive, and negative, and they can challenge the leadership abilities of any person. Those who are skillful in dealing with emotions are referred to as having high emotional intelligence. Palmer (2003) suggested that "emotions are

not just something that we feel; they are a source of information" (p.6). With emotional information, leaders can build trust and cooperation, display empathy to employees, display social awareness, develop collaboration, understand the loss that people experience during the change process and display skill in addressing issues and solving problems. Effective leaders possess the ability to understand and "manage moods and emotions in self and in others" (George, 2000, p.1027). Wheatly (1999) wrote in her epilogue from *Leadership and the New Science*:

Once I understood the nature of the work, it helped me relax and be more generous. I learned that people get frightened if asked to change their world view: And why wouldn't they? Of course people will get defensive; of course they might be intrigued by a new idea, but then turn away in fear. They are smart enough to realize how much they would have to change if they accepted that idea. (p.176)

Being aware of the emotions and moods of staff members during school reform initiatives or while leading change, will enable the principal to support and coach teachers during the change process.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

Chubb and Moe, (1990), Evans (1996), and Fullan (2001) have discussed the need for school reform and systemic change. The reform included better educated school administrators with training on how to lead change. Researchers in education are also reporting the importance of handling emotions (Cherniss, 1998; Fullan, 2001, Williams, 2008). Patti (2007), a coach and trainer of school administrators in New York, stated that many principals need additional support in learning to deal with emotions and conflict. Effective middle school and high school principals will need to understand and manage emotions to implement and lead school reform. Moving teachers from isolation to collaboration, changing the focus from teaching to student learning, implementing structures and processes that systematically monitor student learning and increase accountability, and distributing leadership is a huge paradigm shift for most American schools. It will be a daunting task and will take an emotional toll on teachers, students and principals. For school leaders to think they can make such a cultural shift without resistance, conflict and emotions, is to say that the leaders have not been well educated in the research of leading change. Leaders not skilled in dealing with such resistance and emotions will experience much personal stress and will not be able to sustain or endure the change process.

Many researchers have contributed to the field of school leadership. Previous research indicates that the principal and superintendent have little direct effect on student outcomes (Hallinger & Heck, 1996, 1998; Leithwood, 1994). However, the research is very clear that leadership has a direct effect on school organization, school ethos, teacher efficacy, staff morale and satisfaction, staff retention, teachers' commitment, teachers' extra effort, and teachers' attitude toward school reform and change which do have a direct effect on student outcomes (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Geijsel, Slegers, Leithwood, & Jantzi, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). Therefore, leadership can influence reform which can have a positive effect on student outcomes.

Emotional intelligence can be the difference between a high performing school and a low performing school, and leaders who possess high levels of EI are more skillful in leading change and cultivating commitment among their staff (Beavers, 2005; Buntrock, 2008; Fullan, 2001; Moss, 2008; Moore, 2009, Patti, 2007). Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of 69 successful school leadership studies involving over 2,800 schools, 14,000 teachers and one million students. The authors identified 21 categories of leadership behaviors and practices that have had a statistically significant relationship with student achievement. Many of these behaviors and practices could be very easily integrated into programs designed to improve one's emotional intelligence: (affirmation, communication, fostering shared beliefs, comfortable with dissent, ability to self-disclose beliefs, ability to demonstrate awareness of the personal aspect of staff, increasing the high quality interactions with students and staff, and ability to inspire staff). Along with their findings, the authors reiterated that frustration and anger usually accompany the change process in creating highly effective schools.

Moore (2007) investigated the perception and effects of emotional intelligence coaching for school administrators in a case study. The data revealed that the school administrators experienced an array of emotions in their jobs. The qualitative and quantitative data indicated that there were benefits from the emotional intelligence coaching. The school administrators improved in their overall ratings from others on their improved emotional intelligence after several weeks of coaching. More importantly, each administrator stressed the importance of emotional intelligence in their jobs. The study suggested that emotional intelligence coaching may prove to be very beneficial to school administrators.

Williams (2008) studied the leadership characteristics of urban principals that were identified as outstanding. Twelve outstanding and eight typical principals were identified by peers, central office and the union. Data

from interviews, open ended questions and a variety of assessments were used in this mixed method of research. Williams discovered emotional and social intelligence competencies that significantly differentiated outstanding principals from typical principals. The competencies were (a) self-confidence, (b) self control, (c) consciousness, (d) achievement orientation, (e) initiative, (f) organizational awareness, (g) developing others, (h) influence, (i) analytical thinker, (j) leadership, (k) teamwork/collaboration influence, (l) change catalyst, and (m) conflict management.

In one of the largest studies on emotional intelligence and school leadership, Stone, Parker, and Wood (2005) studied 464 principals or vice-principals (187 men and 277 women) from nine different public school boards in Ontario. The researchers discovered that principals and vice principals in the above average leadership group scored higher than the below average leadership group on overall emotional intelligence and EI subscales. The authors concluded by suggesting that professional development programs should promote the development of empathy, emotional self awareness and flexibility. The authors also suggested the use of emotional intelligence assessment in the process of recruiting new school administrators.

While some may argue that there is still little empirical justification on the influence of the emotional intelligence of school leaders on school effectiveness, they must be reminded that one cannot confuse scientism with science. The research is very clear that leadership and school culture can have a direct and/or indirect effect on student achievement. There is also enough research that indicates leaders who are successful in dealing with their emotions and the emotions of others are successful in creating a positive culture. In addition, years of documented futile attempts of restructuring and redesigning our schools may be a strong indication that many of our school leaders may not be skilled enough to deal with the stress, anxiety, anger, frustration, role strain and conflicts associated with school reform or to be effective change agents. Learning about the change process is inferior to developing the skills to lead change.

Research has identified successful practices to increase student achievement and improve school effectiveness. The successful implementation of these practices may be dependent on the emotional intelligence of the school leader. The business world has accepted the importance of honing and developing emotional intelligence competencies in its leaders; education must now do the same. Emotional intelligence is important for school administrators and it is time to implement training programs for school administrators to develop these skills to deal with the emotions associated with school reform.

As schools struggle to balance autonomy and mandates, collaboration and teamwork, patience and persistence, school administrators are expected to be more skilled than in any other time in the history of education. There is sufficient evidence that leaders high in emotional intelligence are more effective and demonstrate more transformational leadership behaviors (Barling, et al., 2000; George, 2000; Law, et al., 2004). Learning to deal with the emotions of all share holders including parents, students and staff and learning to recognize and manage their own emotions are challenging tasks. However, research has indicated that EI can be developed and improved (Sala, 2001).

EQUIPPING CHANGE AGENTS

Successful reform efforts empower teachers to become active participants rather than just spectators (Ashton & Webb, 1986), but many principals do not have the skills required to support, coach, listen and to balance patience and persistence during such a transformation (Moore, 2007). Sarason (as cited in Dufour & Eaker, 1998) stated that “the turmoil associated with school reform cannot be avoided, and how well it is coped with separates the boys from the men and the girls from the women” (p.49). Without leaders who understand, accept, and work with the emotions associated with school reform, the intellectual, collaborative, and social capacities of students and teachers may never reach their full capacities. Many students and teachers will forever be limited by the current archaic educational systems in which they function.

Those most successful in leading reform are usually referred to as change agents and are not “particularly popular” (Reeves, 2002, p.41). Sometimes it is not enough to rely on persuasion, collaboration and inspiration to lead school reform, so leaders will have to be “empathetically assertive” when needed (Goleman, 1998, p.190). Such leaders are usually highly skilled in dealing with their emotions as well as the emotions of others. These leadership skills are of such importance to the process of restructuring and redesigning schools, that policy makers, departments of education, and universities can no longer ignore the research and must carefully reconsider their continuing education and professional development programs for school leaders. New programs must include leadership assessments, feedback, and coaching. In fact, developing the emotional intelligence of school leaders should be a priority in leadership programs and in leading school reform.

In conclusion, emotional intelligence and emotional intelligence coaching should be strongly encouraged for school administrators. School

administrators can benefit from learning how to deal with the emotions of others as well as their own. Universities, school boards and state department of educations should strongly consider implementing emotional intelligence development and coaching programs for potential and current school administrators. School administrators that have high emotional intelligence will not only have stronger relationships with their colleagues, teachers, parents and students, but may be more effective in leading change and initiating school reform.

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