The “Right Stuff” for Leadership Success

(Aspiring Superintendents Newsletter-Winter 2010)

We all have met, worked with and watched leaders whose skills and style we have admired. We may have even attempted to emulate their approach to problems, repeated their words and copied their actions in our own work. Along the way each of us have added our own flavor of leadership, our own approaches and ways of meeting the challenges we face. At some point, we likely will reach the point where we feel ready to “be on point” for leadership in a school district.

This description may fit you today or some day soon. You have paid your dues, learned the key lessons presented to you and built the leadership skills you think you will need to survive and succeed. So, what can you do to project your readiness and convince others to give you the opportunity to lead as a superintendent?

Here are six behaviors shown to project the image of someone who is or should be in charge. First, *be a problem solver*. It does not take exceptional talent to find and point out problems. The true “value-add” comes from defining problems in ways that make them solvable and identifying or developing ways to solve them. Your value likely will be viewed as even greater if you can lead groups to accomplish this task. It is one thing to admire the solutions of others, but having the opportunity to be included in the process of finding answers can be a truly special experience.

Second, *consistently align your words and behavior*. One of the fastest, most effective way to build trust in your leadership is to “walk your talk.” People want to know that what you say is your commitment, not just a rhetorical reference. Conversely, one of the easiest ways to undermine your authority and prospects for leading is to become known as someone who “talks a good game,” but is incapable of following through.

Third, *be a realistic optimist*. People like to be around hopeful, uplifting people, but they want to be certain that the hope is grounded in reality and holds promise to become reality. Often this behavior is seen in concrete approaches that hold the promise of positive, useful outcomes. It also is found in a firm and unflagging belief in the goodness and potential of others. This aspect of optimism can give us access to the energy, insights and skills of others who may possess the answers we need, even if they do not yet know they have them.

Fourth, *be persistent*. It can be easy to give up or avoid difficult tasks, especially if they are not directly in our area of responsibility. Complaining that others have not done what is necessary to solve a problem or fix a situation can deflect from our responsibility. The leadership differentiator is found in a willingness to engage in the work that must be done even when not doing so would not necessarily lead to blame for us. Similarly, staying with the task until it is done can project a level of competence and leadership commitment that others seek.

Fifth, *help others see meaning in events*. Today’s complex and rapidly changing environment can leave people feeling vulnerable, confused and victimized. The opportunity for leadership comes in “connecting the dots” for people to help them see how what is happening around them can be useful, meaningful or at least understandable. Our ability to interpret events in ways that assist people to build meaning and act in ways that move them and their work forward positions us uniquely as someone to turn to in times of crisis, confusion and uncertainty.

Sixth, *be present* for people when they need you. Relationships are the “glue” that holds organizations intact and allows people to work together for important purposes. Our commitment to really listen, empathize and encourage, even when we are busy and face multiple competing priorities will not be lost on others. Leaders who choose to focus on people during times when events, tasks and circumstances may tempt them to put their energy elsewhere not only build respect, these are the times when these leaders develop a level of loyalty that extends well beyond a willingness to follow and cooperate. These are times when we can build a profile of someone to whom people want to commit and follow especially when times are tough.

Don’t be surprised as you practice these behaviors if you find that others begin to see you as the leader they want to emulate, learn from and become. You also likely will find that school boards begin to see you as the leader they want to depend on, learn from and hire to lead their organization.