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Principals and How They See Their Work

Low Guat Tin, Susan Morriss

Introduction

Work is a four letter word and often times this "dirty" word is a very important element of our lives. Many do not grasp the significance of "work". Psychologists have found that when people find meaning in their work, then work is looked at in different perspectives. It is no longer a drudgery, hours that must be slaved away. Work is no longer a "dirty" word. And people do get excited about work.

We recently met with eleven female secondary school principals and did hour long, sometimes two-hour long, interviews with them to find out what work and management means to them. The interview included questions on educational background, career path and influences, perceptions of success and discrimination, and style of management.

Why did we focus our study on female principals? Well, the interviews are part of a larger cross-cultural study being conducted with our counterparts in other parts of the world. Secondly, it is a very encouraging fact that 53 percent of Singapore's secondary school principals are females (MOE, Education Statistics Digest, 1997) and we want to find out what makes them tick — these women with multiple responsibilities.

The lucky eleven?

These eleven female secondary school principals were picked through a stratified random sampling process — just your typical lucky draw. Hopefully, the principals did not feel that process was an unlucky draw. The principals represented a range of background and experience with ages ranging from 35 to 55 years. Eight were married with children. The majority had been principals from 3-4 years with one having just been promoted. They all headed government schools.
What did we find?

The interview data showed many interesting facets about the principals and what they thought about their work and their management style. In this paper, we want to highlight a few areas that were consistent among the principals and seem important to share.

1. A passion for their work

For a start, we found the majority to be passionate about their work. They were committed to the profession, committed to "do that much more for the children", committed "to touch lives and make the difference for them". They were prepared to work long and hard, including Sundays and holidays. They displayed a great capacity for work. They enjoyed their work and for many, the work was consuming. One said that "all I know is we work very, very long hours... you can't even do your planning in school... there are days when I come in at 7 and go home at 7". Another said:

"To be an effective leader one must be very passionate about what you do and you must be able to give that passion to the teachers. And I am an energiser, and sometimes the teachers ask, where do you get all the energy from? It just comes naturally, because if you have a passion for what you do, and the conviction, you will give total commitment. That is very valuable."

2. A desire to nurture self-discipline

Many were very demanding of themselves and others too.

I've been told that I'm very humane and very caring – that is the caring part. But they also know that when I want a task completed, it has to be completed – no nonsense about that. I'm very particular about time frames, deadlines, and quality of work.

The most important thing is self-discipline among both my staff and pupils. Where staff is concerned they will know what the commitment to the pupils will be and also commitment to themselves...

They were disciplined and they demanded discipline from others. And being disciplined is an essential trait to those who want to succeed. According to Marriott, Sr., founder of the Marriott chain, "Discipline is the greatest thing in the world."
Where there is no discipline, there is no character. And without character, there is no progress." (Collins & Porras, 1994)

3. A belief in teamwork

These were women leaders who believed in working in teams. Like Stott & Walker, (1995) they saw teamwork as essential to an effective organization and they encouraged a collaborative environment. The principals desired to work hand in glove with their management team and the rest of their staff, even though that may be difficult, as evidenced by what they said:

"They [staff] fail to understand that teamwork means that even though and in spite of the fact that we are not alike, we can still work very well as a team to maximise each others' strengths.

My HODs are not used to team decisions, they are used to one person's decisions, which is the principal in the past. I try very hard to bring them in and move them towards a team decision.

Others among them were more fortunate and more able to work with their staff as a team. "...the staff morale is very high, team building is very high with the teachers working together in a very collaborative, collegial way. They are able to discuss with each other on the pros and cons and they are very open about it. We work on what we call a very transparent system...."

One can understand why there is this emphasis on teams because research (e.g., Tjosvold, 1991) has consistently shown the benefits of having teams in the workplace. The positive synergy that is generated goes a long way to help members in the team. Working in teams also help to increase flexibility and quality in the workplace. Literature (e.g., Robbins, 1997) also indicates that to compete more effectively and efficiently, organisations have turned to teams in order to be better able to utilise employee talents.

Thus, these female principals, most of whom were trained in the National Institute of Education's Diploma in Educational Administration programme and have experienced working as a team with course participants throughout their year long training course, have realised the potential that can be gained by working as a team with their staff.
4. A keen support for their staff

We also found the eleven principals to be very supportive of their staff. They emphasised the importance of an open, supportive environment in the school. All the eleven principals stated that they have an open-door policy, making themselves easily available to staff and students. They are attentive to their staff and they practised the most important human relationship skill – listening.

I listen a great deal...I enjoy working with my HODs...I like to believe that I am open and supportive, very supportive. I listen to my teachers, especially where their personal problem are concerned. And you come to understand that each teacher will have his or her own feelings...

They can talk to me anytime, they will drop in. Of course, there are those who say they cannot find me, I have to leave school for cluster meetings and other meetings, so I asked them to leave me a note and I will make time to listen to them. I will go to them.

Another way in which they support their staff was the attention paid to the development of teachers and staff. The principals want to be involved in upgrading and updating their staff. They want to be "personally involved in their development to some extent." Many are altruistic and would not hold back a good worker because of their selfishness, rather they would "...groom them...develop them and I assure them that if they are good, I will not be so selfish as to keep them. I will let them go and recommend them to another school."

These women identify good teachers, develop and stretch them and then recommend them for promotions. And in this respect, promotions are "...celebrated, I try to encourage certain people whom I think have the potential to move onward and upward." These women have the interest of the system at heart, so it is not just wanting their school to do well by retaining their best teachers, but rather the system should benefit. They are more than prepared to push them on to take leadership positions in other schools.

What emerges?

As one looks at the picture that emerges of these eleven principals, it shows women who are excited and passionate about...
qualities such as empathy, warmth, genuineness, involvement and good communication are linked to school effectiveness."

their work; who care very much about their students and staff, and who strive to improve their school environment, as well as the educational system. This pattern presents components of a recognised and an effective leadership style.

Research (e.g., Frashner and Frashner, 1979) claims that "for thousands of years women have been conditioned to be accommodating, compliant, other-directed, sensitive, nurturant, compromising, patient and empathetic," and to the Frashners, these traits are increasingly associated with effective administration. To them, the typically male managerial mode is inappropriate in educational administration. In more recent times, Murgatroyd & Gray, (1984) and Mortimore, et al. (1993) have shown that qualities such as empathy, warmth, genuineness, involvement and good communication are linked to school effectiveness. The nurturing qualities identified in the female principals are seen as strengths of management.

And we know that our picture of school leadership can be painted across more than just eleven secondary schools.

References:


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