Problem Solving —an Effective Approach to Revitalising A Mid-aged School?

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The Case

An experienced principal took over a 40-year old school that had not been run well by his predecessors. The school had a change of three principals within the last five years. Initially, the Principal looked into the overall performance of the pupils and found out that although the academic results were well above the national average, quality passes as the main indicator of pupils' success were absent. There were not enough A*s as expected. Pupils could have performed better because they came from homes where parents were from a higher socio-economic status and very supportive. He noticed that there were discipline problems among pupils at various grades. Above all, the Principal knew that this school used to have a good reputation, and was aware of the environment the school was in: parents and residents had a poor impression of the school now. The Principal observed that many teachers, especially those senior ones, were unhappy, demoralised and rebellious. What he learned was that their unhappiness and negative work attitude were the result of an inappropriate leadership style of the previous school principals.

The Principal was determined to regain the reputation for the school, and to give the community the impression that the school still had high academic standards and discipline. To the Principal, the most crucial concern was to make changes in the teaching staff if he wanted to see the school nurturing successful students. First he did a thorough investigation in the deployment of teachers to see whether their duties were according to their personal and professional interests. Then, he identified those who were positive and set them as examples for others. He managed to distinguish those who were vocal and negative, and perceived possibilities for making them positive again; he discovered that they had certain potential, found out where their talents lay, encouraged them to make proposals for new programs, called them in to see what they needed, appreciated their ideas, and provided them with necessary materials. Also the Principal was able to discover a teacher who had been problematic but was good at gardening. Inspired by the Principal, the teacher became enthusiastic and helped in beautifying the campus.

The Principal came in December, and wanted to make a difference within half a year. Before the end of Term II, all the staff noticed changes in the school. At Registration in July, they saw parents coming back. In contrast with the previous year's Registration where the staff had to sell the school, and still there were a lot of vacancies in the end, now with so many parents eager to send their children here. the Principal had to consider setting up a new class.

Case Analysed

a. The Behaviors of Principals at the Four Levels

According to Sergiovanni's “four-level leadership theory”, at Level One, the Administrators focus on the school's administrative work. These principals assume the role of "management engineers" who provide planning, organizing, coordinating, and scheduling for the school, and are skilled at manipulating strategies and situations to ensure optimum effectiveness. This behavior is to ensure that the school is managed properly. At Level Two, Humanitarians emphasize human relationships. Such principals assume the role of "human engineers" who emphasize human relations, interpersonal competence, and instrumental motivational techniques. As human engineers, they provide support, encouragement, and growth opportunities for teachers and others. At Level Three, Program Managers are more effective because they bring aspects of the Administrator and Humanitarian styles to their practice but provide educational aspects of leadership, and focus on more complex matters of educational program development and implementation. These principals
assume the role of “clinical practitioners” who bring expert professional knowledge and bearing to teaching, educational program development, and supervision. As clinical practitioners, these principals are adept at diagnosing educational problems, counselling teachers, providing for supervision, evaluation, and staff development, and developing curriculum. At Level Four, Systematic Problem Solvers focus primarily on students’ success. As mentioned earlier, these principals do whatever is necessary so as to give students the best possible chance to learn. Realizing that expanding choices results in better schooling, principals at level four work for this expansion by taking a problem-solving, even an entrepreneurial, approach to their leadership practice. The next section reports such behavior of a principal, the object of the case study in this paper.

b. The Behaviors of the Principal in the Case

The Principal’s behavior in the case study is identified as Level Four behavior, that is, he is a Systematic Problem Solver. His initial attention is on the overall performance of the pupils and focuses on quality passes, namely, A*s, and finds this lacking. He looks at the problems of the school as the starting point: 1) poor academic results, 2) discipline problems; 3) demoralised teachers; and 4) dwindling enrolments as a result of falling P1 intake. He assumes responsibility in handling these problems and mobilises the necessary people and resources to confront and resolve the problems. The focus of this principal is on student success, which was his main indicator of success in his former school. His commitment is to do whatever is necessary by way of delivering and inventing programs so that pupils are given the best possibilities to learn. As is shown in the case study, his attention is centered on making changes to the school to help it regain its reputation.

As can be seen, the Principal is highly conceptual and perceptual when handling problems. He has a need to achieve, a desire to excel and a drive to succeed. This is reflected in his emphasis on, and seeking for, excellence and improvements in performance, and the confidence he displays in his staff to maintain definite standards of work. He takes an entrepreneurial approach to leadership. He regards processes as dynamic and not static, hence he identifies negative teachers and finds possibilities to make them positive. Realizing that better schooling is the result of expanding choices, he encourages teachers to make proposals for new programs. He inspires his staff through providing professional leadership to improve the school’s educational programs, but places the emphasis on the importance of the teachers’ contribution. He gives the staff due recognition, opportunities, and creates an encouraging and supportive climate. Although he was concerned with improving his teachers, he finds effective ways to solve each type of behavioral problems through different strategies.

The Principal believes that the school exists for the benefit of students, and therefore, focuses on their learning and achievement. He is like a “clinical practitioner” who is perceptive and able to “diagnose” the problem faced by the school and plans long term solutions to these problems. He is able to see below the “submerging current” and lets the real reasons “emerge from below the surface” to deal with them effectively. This is seen in the case of identifying the true reason of the problematic teacher as that of lack of motivation and gives him something (in this case, gardening) that he is good at doing. Because of his ability to do well in what he is interested in, the teacher becomes an enthusiastic worker who goes beyond the call of duty to beautify the campus, thus changing from a problem teacher to a contributor.

In summary, the Principal is operating at Level Four, and is very much result-oriented and student-centred. He believes that the bottom line of the school’s purpose is to produce desirable students’ outcome, and that students’ needs have to be served. The Principal does systematically by proper identification of teachers’ talents and interests and deploying them accordingly. He does all these in order to help the pupils excel in their academic performance, and to help project an image of the school that not only excels academically but one that inculcates discipline as well.

Conclusion

With an understanding of what constitutes competent leadership, the Principal in the case study has demonstrated three major competencies that have placed him at Level Four—
The principal recognizes when his staff need direction and initiates proposals, plans, and actions for himself and the staff to accomplish school tasks and effectively interacts with the staff to guide them (Drake & Roe, 1994). The principal is able to use a variety of concepts and perspectives when solving problems, and is at ease with conflicting situations considering all the factors when solving problems, planning, and making decisions (Drake & Roe, 1994). The principal has “a decided sense of direction and goal orientation” (Hughes, 1994). He behaves with the full assumption that he can be the “cause”, and can create changes and achieve goals. Addressing the principal’s role, Ubben and Hughes (1997) point out that schools really can make a difference in the achievement levels of students, but a school is most often only as good or bad, as creative or sterile, as the person who serves as the principal of the school.

In discussions shortly after the principal took over the school, the principal revealed that he would be impatient if he could not see changes soon and the goal of regaining the school reputation was not reached. What happened in half a year was that with all the skills, especially the above three major competencies, the Principal played a major role in changing the school and reaching the goals he set for the school through systematically solving the problems the school was facing, i.e., students’ lower academic performance, discipline problems, demoralized teachers, and the dwindling enrollment problem.

Just as Leithwood and Montgomery (1986) point out, Systematic Problem Solvers’ focus is largely unconstrained by established practice and their client orientation leads them to the invention and delivery of whatever legitimate services are likely to realize the goals held by their school for students. In the case study, such principal leadership behavior is clearly demonstrated. In their description of “effective schools framework”, Ubben and Hughes (1997) included two major areas, i.e., “a positive student climate emphasizing an orderly and studious school environment”, and “high expectations and clear goals for performance of students”. Clearly the Principal fulfills his role in establishing goals for this middle-aged school. Hence problem solving is a recommendable appropriate approach to revitalise a middle-aged school.

References:


