

Development of a Leader; Lessons Learned

As the new administrator in an established school, it is important to develop my leadership skills so that I can effectively guide the school in a changing culture. The existing administrative team is seasoned and works well together. This project enabled me to utilize the existing strengths of our school as I evaluated and cultivated needed skill sets. Blending those will facilitate growth for our faculty, students and school.

It was challenging to keep working at difficult areas because they often seemed personal. However, the project also accentuated that as a leader I must keep learning. There are few tangible benchmarks that will show I have “arrived” as the leader. It is an on-going process in which I will continually need to be intentionally developing those skills. Experience does bring confidence and growth. However, in a rapidly changing culture, many situations require a fresh look. As a leader I must be cognizant of that and continually learning so that I can lead the school to meet its mission of growing students who can be successful in their world.

Angie Petersheim, Administrator
Shalom Christian Academy
126 Social Island Road
Chambersburg, PA 17202
717-375-2223
apetersheim@shalomca.com

Development of a Leader: Lessons Learned

John F. Kennedy said that “Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.” In this year, I have often recognized the truth in that statement. Leadership skills should never be static. An effective leader is continually cognizant of her skills and her style and working to improve and adjust those.

As a new administrator in an established school, it is important that I intentionally develop my leadership skills in order to guide the school in responding effectively to changes. The existing administrative team is seasoned and works well together. These two components became the focus of my project as I desired to blend the school’s strong leadership with my own leadership style.

Shalom Christian Academy, as with many schools, has been impacted by competition from the variety of educational options, the transformation in the access and use of technology and how that impacts classroom instruction, the changing family dynamics and a host of other challenges. Any one of these requires a great deal of focus and deliberation. The effects of each influence daily decisions. The purpose of my project was to examine what skills I needed to hone so that I could successfully navigate these terrains. I focused on my communication skills in both corporate and individual settings. I intentionally evaluated my abilities to lead the administrative team. I considered how to personally remain effective in a demanding position.

Shalom Christian Academy is in some challenging times. It has been a process to learn how to provide information in a way that is honest, but does not bring a sense of impending doom. Corporate communication is often in writing or in presentations. This allows time to

evaluate my words and my message. It takes discipline to prepare in advance, to practice, to get feedback prior to going public, but it is vital to communicating well. The alternative is a call for disaster.

It is also essential to be cognizant of the spontaneous opportunities to put out the message and to take advantage of those. It is not all planned, but there must be a certain preparedness and awareness.

Meetings, done well, can bring synergy and productivity. Our administrative team meets weekly and typically did not have a written agenda. This year I have implemented the practice of compiling agenda items so that there is a sense of purpose and a gauge of the length of the meeting. In the next academic year, I plan to add a ranking of items so that important decisions have priority in the meeting time.

I've also learned to summarize information at the end of meeting. I cannot assume that decisions made are equally understood. It is helpful and saves time when I briefly reiterate what was decided and who was responsible.

Organizations are really the people within them. Developing relationships is key to the success of any mission statement. As I interact and lead, my expectations must be specific, concrete and with timelines. This helps everyone be clear on the next step. I am particularly challenged by one creative individual whose exact work completed in a day often seems nebulous. I've given him the task of listing what he sees as his responsibilities so that we can begin to align priorities. This summer I am planning how to provide more structure so that tasks are completed in a timely manner and in order of importance for the school. This also requires a bit of finesse as I consider how to help him buy-in to this value.

Expressing expectations clearly is imperative. In any organization, there are challenging

people. Being aware of that helps me have perspective, but there must also be recognition that people can change. As I consider how to lead, I must create an environment where everyone knows the parameters. Being direct about expectations alleviates confusion for that person who may be confused about whether or not he/she is being required to make a change. It reduces my frustration when the person chooses not to respond because he heard it as optional.

As I interact with my administrative team and staff, I am more aware of intentionally guiding and teaching rather than just giving answers. One person with whom I work tends to be dramatic and react quickly. I have been teaching her to pause and listen rather than speaking. We meet weekly and as I am aware of situations, I can make suggestions on how to manage those. This has made her more effective which means I don't have to be directly involved.

Stepping into this role, I was fortunate to be surrounded by an administrative team with whom I had worked for the previous ten (10) years. Yet, there was a shift, as I became the leader and not a peer. One component of my project considered how I was making and would continue to make that transition. This longevity in our relationship had established some habits and perceptions. Perhaps the biggest challenge has been for me personally to change my own perception, to see myself as their leader and accept the rights and responsibilities that come with that.

At the end of the school year, I initiated a team evaluation process. We completed a team evaluation form taken from a book by Patrick Lencioni, The Five Dysfunctions of a Team. This provided a framework for a discussion on how we work together administratively. Included in this exercise was time for each of us to "present" to the others our own strengths and weaknesses. That information, along with the results from the evaluation, helped us to openly discuss the positive and negatives of our working together. It brought attention to areas of

needed improvement so that we can continue to be effective. It becomes my responsibility to keep the team accountable.

Everything really does end at the administrator's desk. This requires that there is discipline in managing one's personal life and recognizing how that impacts my performance.

Time management for a head of school is a common struggle. There are many demands from many people. Stephen R. Covey in his book, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, advises people to evaluate how they spend their time in a typical day. I used his quadrant models on several days as a way to determine what was demanding my time. One of my first questions for myself as I reflected on the Quadrant I (Urgent, Important) activities was, "Is this activity part of my job or does it belong to someone else?" I try to discipline myself to ask that question regularly and to find a solution if the answer is "no". Covey notes, ". . . the urgency of these matters is often based on the priorities and expectations of others." (p 152). Being intentional in evaluating those gives me perspective on how I become involved.

A goal for the upcoming school year is to periodically use the quadrant exercise as a continual self-evaluation. Those dates are already scheduled on my calendar. I anticipate completing the exercise and purposely reflecting it my activities.

I've discovered that being at this level of leadership is a lonely place. While the administrative team is supportive, and I consider each of them my friend, there are times when I must be their leader. With that in mind, I sought a peer mentor with whom I can exchange ideas, discuss issues, seek advice and, at times, commiserate. I am still in the beginning stages so the relationship hasn't been fully developed. At this stage we schedule monthly meetings for this purpose. My aim is to reach a place where our times do not have to be scheduled, and it can be more spontaneous.

Accepting the position as head of school can be formidable as one realizes the trust and responsibilities that come with the role. There is pressure to do it well since the well-being of the school seems profoundly dependent on decisions made and actions taken. As I've been in this position, I realize how casual comments and simple nuances carry a much heavier weight than I often intend. People are watching the leader and expecting solutions and direction. The expectations, both real and imagined, bear heavily at times.

Journaling has become especially helpful during this season. It gives perspective on the tasks, frustrations and questions. It causes me to reflect. It provides opportunity to consider specific situations and how each can be managed. I can list possible scenarios. It is valuable as I analyze my personal proficiencies. This exercise of putting words on a page, helps me define things in ways that simply thinking about may not allow.

This year has solidified my awareness that I must keep learning as a leader. Our students and the culture they live in will continue to change rapidly. While experience will ease some of the doubts and give confidence for some of the challenges, many situations will require a fresh look. In a world that requires an ability to adapt, schools must be prepared to critically evaluate current methods, and not be fearful of making bold steps to change. The head of school must be a conduit for that.