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## Principals Identify Top Ten Leadership Traits

Education World surveyed 43 principals to learn what they consider essential traits of successful school leaders. Vision, trustworthiness and credibility, daily visibility, and a sense of humor were among the ten traits that topped the list! Included: Principals comment on the most important characteristics of strong leadership!

- "If you don't know where you are going, it makes no difference what path you take," said Helene Dykes, principal at Marian Bergeson Elementary School, in Laguna Niguel, California. "Without a clear vision, you have no way to prioritize what is most essential. A clear vision allows you to focus energy on the most important things to do."
- "If credibility and trust are not established, nothing the principal sets out to do can be achieved," added principal Betty Luckett, of Oakes Elementary School, in Okemah, Oklahoma. "As a principal, trust and credibility are the foundation for my goals and objectives. It is also the fuel for my vision."
- "An effective administrator must be visible," said John Grady, principal at Fairgrounds Junior High School, in Nashua, New Hampshire. "Students, staff, and parents need to see the administrator in the classrooms, in the corridors, at lunches, at bus duty, and at extracurricular activities. If this is accomplished, the administrator will know his or her constituents, be aware of what is taking place in the building, and send the message to all that he or she is concerned."

Vision. Credibility. Visibility. Those are three of the most important leadership traits, according to the Education World Principal Files (P-Files) principals. Forty-three [Principal Files](#) principals identified and sequenced in order of importance the ten qualities they felt were the most essential in strong school leaders.

See the sidebar for survey results. [Click here](#) for more details about how the survey was conducted and for detailed survey results.

### A VISION AND A PLAN

Having a stated vision for the school -- and a plan to achieve that vision --

was the most important quality in school leaders, according to the Education World P-Files principals.

"The principal needs to be the person steering the ship," Jed Landsman-Yakin told Education World. Landsman-Yakin, principal at Belfry (Montana) High School, added, "The ship, of course, is the educational system, and the direction is as important as the ship."

Landsman-Yakin went on to say that during his years in education, he has seen many bad captains and floundering ships. "We must do better! That is why I think having a vision is the most important quality of a strong school leader," he added.

"If you don't know where you are headed, how can you get there in the most efficient, successful manner?" wondered Bonita Henderson, assistant principal at Roselawn Condon School, in Cincinnati. "Every trip needs to have a plan, or you can get lost and have an unproductive trip. Well-made plans ensure the best trips and provide time for handling unforeseen obstacles."

## WALK-AROUND MANAGEMENT

Being visible -- getting out of the office and being seen all over the school -- was the most frequently identified quality of a strong school leader. All but two of the 43 principals surveyed included this quality on their top ten lists.

"Getting out of the office and seeing what's going on in the school is very important to the welfare of everybody -- the students, the parents, and the staff," said Dee Anna Manitzas, principal at the Accelerated Learning Middle School, in San Antonio. "By getting out of the office, a principal is able to take the 'pulse' of what is actually happening inside and outside the classroom. By being visible to all, everybody feels a part of the quest for education.

"Communication is a two-way street," added Manitzas. "On so many occasions, I have been able to provide answers to teachers' and students' questions by popping in on classes and [by being a presence] around the school."

Visibility is an extremely important characteristic of a strong school leader and one of the most difficult to accomplish, according to principal Steven Podd.

"Interruptions, crises, phone calls, paperwork .... They are all excuses to stay behind the desk," said Podd, of Smithtown Middle School, in St. James, New York. "But I solve more problems and head off many others by being in the cafeteria, hallways, and classrooms. I always make sure I get out of the office as frequently as possible, and then I visit my assistant principals and drag them around with me too!"

The result of a Principal Files survey is this list of the top ten traits of school leaders, presented in order of importance.

1. Has a stated vision for the school and a plan to achieve that vision.
2. Clearly states goals and expectations for students, staff, and parents.
3. Is visible -- gets out of the office; is seen all over the school.
4. Is trustworthy and straight with students and staff.
5. Helps develop leadership skills in others.
6. Develops strong teachers; cultivates good teaching practice.
7. Shows that he or she is not in charge alone; involves others.
8. Has a sense of humor.

"It's also good exercise if you have a large school like mine!" added Podd.

9. Is a role model for students and staff.

"The students seem to be able to 'sniff' when the principal is out of the building," observed principal Marie Kostick, of Goodwyn Junior High School in Montgomery, Alabama. "By being visible, the principal communicates a message that students and teachers are expected to maintain high standards, not only with academics but with behavior."

10. Offers meaningful kindnesses and kudos to staff and students.

"High visibility is also a natural expression of interest and concern," added Kostick.

## IT'S ALL ABOUT TRUST

The second most-frequently listed trait, and fourth in overall average, was that school leaders need to be trustworthy and straight with students and staff.

"A leader earns credibility and trust by being honest, by knowing how to do his or her job, and by telling the truth and being up-front with teachers, parents, and students," said Jim Jordan, principal at Buford (South Carolina) High School. Trust earns a high spot on Jordan's list because it "is earned by doing all of those other things -- establishing a vision, involving others, taking risks, learning from mistakes, refusing to lose, inspiring rather than coercing, compromising, and much more." "A relationship not based on integrity and trust is not worth anything," added Julie Askew, acting principal at Eltham Primary School in Melbourne, Australia. "A principal needs to be utterly reliable. You may be the only constant factor in a student's life."

"If people -- staff members, students, parents, community members, central office employees, school board members -- don't believe you to be a person of integrity, it won't matter how well you communicate a vision, how visible you become, how hard you work to develop strong leaders and teachers," said Cyndi Patterson, principal at Alvin (Texas) Elementary School.

"My model of behavior starts with how I am with others," commented Sue Maguire, principal at Lake Louise Elementary School, in Lakewood, Washington. "Being trustworthy sets the standard for others to follow. Right relationships follow from the appropriate right start."

## INCLUDE OTHERS IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

It is clear from the survey results that a strong school leader must actively work to develop leadership skills in other people on the school staff.

"All too often, we complain about the isolation we feel," principal Laura Crochet told Education World. "And sometimes we *are* isolated, but at times it is of our own making.

"Either through insecurity or fear, we think we must be the *Big Principal*. We forget that the operation of the school relies heavily on even the water boy carrying our vision throughout the entire system," added Crochet, of Genesis Alternative High School, in Houma, Louisiana. "If we rely on others to carry the message, then they must be part of the decision-making process. Once they own part of the decision-making process, then they shoulder some of the responsibility."

"There is a lot of pretense about shared leadership, the 'flat' organization, shared decision making, consultation, and collaboration," according to

Graeme Askew, principal at Streeton Primary School, in Melbourne, Australia. "Many school leaders talk the talk yet still cling to the stick of autocracy and control.

"Some of us are too scared to take the risk," said Askew. "But when we do, we notice that the people around us leap into action, initiating exciting programs and doing much more than you would have expected.

"It's the old empowerment factor," concluded Askew. "Ownership is the stimulus. Yet so many of us still cling to hierarchy and power."

Judy Burt, principal of Walton Ferry Elementary School, in Hendersonville, Tennessee, summed up the importance of including others. "Building leadership in others is very important," she said. "It is a reflection of trust in others, empowers others, and provides for a future for 'the vision.' It ensures that the vision will go on whether I am here to see it happen or not."

### **A GOOD LAUGH CAN'T HURT!**

A school principal definitely needs a sense of humor to be successful, according to Jon Romeo, former principal at Mitchell Elementary School in Woodbury, Connecticut. "Principals need to laugh at themselves, laugh with their teachers, and laugh at the wonderful things the students do each day.

"The principal's personality more often than not is reflected in the school building," said Romeo. "I can't think of a more important trait for a school -- especially an elementary school -- than humor!"

So many traits are important leadership traits, but Marguerite McNeely, principal at Oak Hill High School, in Hineston, Louisiana, said a good sense of humor "is the one I feel helps keep good leadership from tiring.

"If a principal always takes things too seriously, he or she becomes quite dull and ineffective," added McNeely. "Laughter is a universal language and an excellent form of communication for both desired and unacceptable behaviors. A smile [accompanied by] a strong, stern look lets a person know something is unacceptable, and a grin and twinkle in the eyes helps those around us relax and perform to best of their abilities."

### **THAT'S NOT ALL!**

Being a role model landed in the ninth spot on the top ten list. Although it might not have been numero uno, being a role model is the one quality Gail Graham feels most strongly about.

"It is by no means the most important quality in the total school context, but it has significant implications," said Graham, principal at Whitney Institute Middle School, in Bermuda. "I try very hard to lead by example, and being a good role model is a major part of that.

"When all is said and done, one has to face oneself in the mirror every day," Graham added, "and I couldn't do that if I didn't always strive to exemplify the qualities of punctuality, good manners, fairness, consideration, good grooming, and those other qualities that I regularly expect from students and staff.

"Respect is an important part of what we try to instill in our students," Graham concluded. "Respect must be earned, and I firmly believe that one cannot earn respect without being the best role model that one can possibly be."

### **IT'S ALL ABOUT LEARNING, AFTER ALL**

For principal Graeme Lane of Balwyn North Primary School, in Melbourne, Australia, the key to successful school leadership is all about learning and teaching. "Our core business is learning and teaching," he told Education World. "You may have all the vision and drive in the world. You can set high standards; you can even laugh about the mistakes and get on with the job. However, if you really want things to be cooking, you must invest in your people and develop strong teachers who have a sense of purpose and a commitment to learning."

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