

POINT OF VIEW

By John A. Gibson
BUSINESS MANAGER
HOMEWOOD SD 153

Changes in leadership, work environment and work location are things that we will all deal with at some time in our careers as school business officials. Whether you are the one moving or a new leader is coming into your organization, what are some of the challenges that come along with these changes? And how do you move forward successfully?

At the start of my career as a school business official, I made several job changes in a span of only four years. These movements were in an upward direction (and by choice), but they each resulted in a change in my work environment and in who was my boss. With each change, I had to adjust to a new school board, a new boss, a new business office staff, a new educational philosophy, a new community and new financial systems and processes.

In that fourth year, having finally made it to the “big chair,” I started work in the capacity of school business official with the expectation that my boss would be retiring after my

first year and that I would have a new superintendent in my second year there. This time, I would experience the arrival of a new boss instead of moving to one.

Despite this advance knowledge of change, I had concerns about how things would be with another new boss, number four in as many years. Was this a good time to begin looking for another job? Should I stay and adapt? What affect would my decision have on my career as a school business official?

THE CHALLENGES OF CHANGE

Although my experiences may or may not be similar to yours, there are some challenges that every leader will face in the wake of a changing work environment.

1. RECOGNIZING AND BUILDING ON YOUR LEADERSHIP VALUE

“Many people associate strong leaders with the success of an organization, but regardless of its size or purpose, an organization succeeds through the efforts of many people rather than the reputation of any single person.”¹ A school superintendent is designated as the leader of a school district – but what about the other administrators? Will you be known as one of the critical members of your school district leadership team? Your new boss needs to see you in that light.

Part of recognizing your role as a leader in the school district is taking steps to improve your own managerial and leadership skills through training, mentoring and experience. Not only should your resume stay updated, but you should, too. There are so many new initiatives, rules and requirements in education that you must stay updated on your professional knowledge. The required Administrator Academy seminars are helpful but they are not enough. “Leadership is an improvisational art. You may be guided by an overarching vision, clear values and a strategic plan, but what you actually do from moment to moment cannot be scripted. You must respond as events unfold.”²

2. KEEPING ABOVE THE “FRAY”

“Leadership shakeups” rarely occur when leaders are doing the right things and objectives are being met or exceeded. Shakeups invariably occur when a leader betrays a trust or stakeholders lose confidence in that person’s ability to lead, guide and influence others effectively. Leaders who break or betray a trust lose credibility, and with it, the ability to lead.¹

Unfortunately, a breach of trust or a lost confidence can occur without notice and for trivial reasons. With a seven-member school board, any number of school administrators and a school community, the situations that can change your favor within the school district are many. It is not always enough to “do your job.” To be a successful leader, you must be able to manage relationships and stay above the fray of politics, favoritism and other non-child centered activities. Remain knowledgeable and focused on the kids.

3. MANAGING COMMUNICATION

Typically, the school district superintendent reports directly to the school board and regularly updates the school board members on school news, educational happenings and school business matters. He or she will also communicate with the other administrators that report to the superintendent. However, if you are a school district administrator or principal, do you keep your staff and constituents regularly updated? What kind of relationship do you need to have with the school board, parent organizations and other outside entities? If you are an administrator and do not communicate with these groups, it is important to consider how they will perceive your work in the school district without having met or seen you.

By communicating regularly with your district leaders, staff and constituents, you will be in a much better position as a leader where district leaders and staff trust your words and actions. Listening is also one of the most important components of communication and it can build an atmosphere of mutual respect and appreciation among your team.



FOOTNOTES:

1. DR. RAY BENEDETTO. SURVIVING A LEADERSHIP SHAKEUP. BUSINESSNEWS DAILY. JANUARY 29, 2013.
2. RONALD A. HEIFETZ AND MARTY LINSKY. A SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR LEADERS. HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW. JUNE 2002.

FOUNDATIONS FOR SURVIVAL

Dr. Ray Benedetto identifies three “critical anchors” that can help your organization build a strong foundation for eventual leadership change. These anchors, which should be active within your organization, can also help you evaluate your current leadership or just manage any unexpected changes you encounter. “If these anchors are not in place, preparing for a new job with another employer might be in order.”

ANCHOR #1: REEMPHASIZE ORGANIZATIONAL PURPOSE.

Your core values, vision and mission, are the anchors that keep everyone steady and underpin the organization’s culture. Culture is the “social glue” that keeps everyone together. Reinforcing the values, vision and mission helps others see beyond themselves and any other person.

ANCHOR #2: REGAIN TRUST BY PURSUING MORAL AND ETHICAL “HIGH GROUND.”

Re-examine practices based on core values to stabilize the organization after major leadership changes. Try to “stay above the fray” during a leadership change. The military services constantly emphasize compliance with core principles and values which helps align everyone — regardless of rank, position or responsibilities — on the vision and mission on a daily basis despite leadership changes.

ANCHOR #3: COMMUNICATE OPENLY AND REGULARLY WITH EMPLOYEES TO REGAIN TRUST.

Employees at all levels need and want to know what is going on. They need to be respected for the value each person brings to the organization. Lack of regular communication gives rise to rumor, speculation and distrust, which work against the leaders who remain and continue to carry responsibilities for company performance.

Reference: Surviving a Leadership Shakeup. *BusinessNewsDaily*, January 29, 2013.

WHEN THE INEVITABLE HAPPENS

As a leader in your school district, it is your responsibility to tie the district’s core values, vision and mission to the work that you and your staff perform on behalf of children. Demonstrating this leadership will show value to a new boss who needs a strong and dedicated administrative team to be a successful leader. It will also help your staff to maintain their focus and remain dedicated to the school district’s goals.

Stay ready for change, so that your new leader can quickly adapt to the new environment and your leadership style. Think about, “How do we move the district forward and help the new leader to lead?” Remember the analogy of the military, which continues to maintain its core principles and values despite leadership changes.

As a school business official or administrator, you are also guided by moral and ethical principles which allow for a re-examination of how you operate when leadership changes occur. In the end, I decided that with one year in the school business manager’s chair, it wasn’t time for me to move on simply because I was getting a new boss. It took some counseling and good advice from a trusted colleague, but the best decision for me was to stay on the job, gain valuable experience and stay “above the fray.”