

Introduction

Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes.

Oscar Wilde

Lady Windermere's Fan (1892)

The principal's role in the school emerged early in the nineteenth century. The increase in the number of students and teachers led to the need for a principal to coordinate the clerical aspects of the school.

The term "principal" appeared as early as 1838 in the Common School Report of Cincinnati, and Horace Mann referred to a "male principal" in his annual report of 1841 (Pierce, 1935). Historically, the position of head teacher and principal teacher preceded the development of the role of principal. The introduction of supervision of instruction as an additional administrative task led to the gradual elimination of the teaching component of the principalship. The principal in a nonteaching role became a general trend in large cities subsequent to 1860 (Grady, 1990).

The typical progression to the principal's position is from a classroom teaching position to an administrative position. In larger school districts, there may be intermediate administrative positions between teacher and principal such as assistant, associate, or vice principal; coordinator; team leader; or head teacher. In smaller districts, teachers move directly into principals' roles. Although the early principals had no specialized,

formal training for their roles as principals, in the 20th and 21st centuries universities assumed responsibility for providing principal preparation programs. Accreditation organizations such as NCATE, and standards such as those promoted by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), provide guidance and uniformity to these preparation programs.

Even though principals participate in preparation programs, there are many mistakes they can make. A review of the literature concerning a principal's mistakes yields few results (Bulach, Boothe, & Pickett, 1998; Bulach, Pickett, & Boothe, 1998; Davis, 1998, 2000). Focusing on mistakes may be construed as "negative" or in bad taste. The truth is, we learn from both positive and negative examples. Without acknowledging the mistakes principals make, the profession appears to exist in a perpetual fantasy land where mistakes are never made. When a principal makes a mistake he or she must hide the event, since no one else appears to make mistakes. This is an unnecessary burden for the principal. The quote "to err is human" applies to the principalship as it does to all human occupations. We strengthen the profession by providing an honest and accurate portrayal of the position. For this reason, this book is an important contribution to our understanding of the principalship. This book is a collection of mistakes principals make.

Ideally, principals could learn from the mistakes other principals have made. For principals, who are often isolated by their position, this book offers the reassurance that "I'm not the only one who makes mistakes!" The book is specifically designed for principals as a means to reflect on their personal behavior and experiences.

The mistakes described in this book reflect many years of conversations with teachers and administrators as well as my own years as a principal and a teacher. Most of the scenarios concern mistakes that a principal can and should avoid. Unfortunately, some of the mistakes are career-ending disasters for the principals. In most cases, the mistakes are common occurrences that could be remedied if the principals would examine their own practices.

There is another genre of extreme principal behaviors that Blase and Blase (2002) describe as “The Dark Side of Leadership”: principal abuse of teachers. Those pathological behaviors and their effects are not the focus of this book.

The mistakes reported here are divided into the broad categories of People Skills, People, Principal, Job, Tasks, Personal Issues, and Fatal Attractions. Many of the mistakes overlap because of the nature of the principal’s work.

The People Skills section highlights the mistakes from the human relations—interpersonal relations side of the principalship. These mistakes are presented first because they are the mistakes that may cause a principal to lose a job (Cohn, 1989; Davis, 1998; Martin-Lucchesi, 1990). For this reason, avoiding these mistakes should be of primary concern to a principal.

The People section includes mistakes related to working with professionals and parents. Working with adults distinguishes the work of the principalship from the teaching role. Although teachers work with parents, in the principal’s role responding to parental concerns takes on greater significance. Meeting the needs of teachers is a major aspect of the principal’s work because student learning is directly related to the work of the teachers. It is the principal’s responsibility to develop the best teaching staff.

The Principal section includes mistakes that reflect principals’ shortcomings. These include being bossy, inconsistent, or weak. The scenarios provide a mirror for the principal, an opportunity “to see yourself as others see you.”

The Job section includes the mistakes that relate to the principal’s position. These mistakes are grouped as endless work and time constraints—concerns frequently described by principals. Managing these issues are primary challenges for adult professionals.

The Task section highlights mistakes related to the work a principal must accomplish. The task areas of the principal’s role formed the early foundation of principal preparation programs. Principals are expected to master each task area in order to demonstrate fitness for the principal’s role. These

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areas continue to challenge principals. The mistakes in this section include ignoring preparation, displacing goals, avoiding decision making, change dilemmas, professional development vacuum, and failing to supervise.

The Personal Issues section discusses family and health mistakes. These mistakes affect a principal's ability to do the job or to enjoy doing the job. If these mistakes are not avoided, principals destroy their personal lives. Families disintegrate and health deteriorates.

The final section is Fatal Attractions. The mistakes in this category can be career-ending disasters. These mistakes must be avoided since they may have extremely negative consequences.

The scenarios in each section illustrate the mistakes that can occur in each area. The spirit of the book is that principals are not destined to make these mistakes. By considering these scenarios and the discussion and suggestions that follow, principals should be able to steer clear of many of these mistakes. The principalship is an applied field, one learned through practice. These scenarios describe the practical experiences of both principals and teachers. For new principals and experienced principals, they suggest strategies for avoiding some of the mistakes other principals have made.

The mistakes reflect the real world of the principalship. Individuals preparing for the principalship and those who are principals should find comfort in knowing "they are not alone" in their experiences.