

Confusion, Conclusion, and Assessment

The internship is often loaded with unknown and/or unexpected situations and teaches the important quality of working through ambiguities—making connections, relating the unknown to the known, seeing patterns, perceiving commonalities, working through uncertainty and sometimes chaos, and understanding consequences. Rexford Brown of the Education Commission of the State tells us that the primary conditions of thoughtfulness are mystery, uncertainty, disagreement, questions, ambiguity, and curiosity. Margaret Wheatly (1992) suggests that chaos is a natural life-enhancing process. This chaos is often created when an individual feels overwhelmed by a situation. Chaos tends to be exactly what we fear in our professional lives. It is very uncomfortable when you are in a leadership role and you don't know or understand something. As a result, there is a natural tendency to retreat (flee), fight, or create some artificial sense of understanding and tighten control.

Leaders have a great fear of such situations that are confusing and complex. They don't want to be uncomfortable and uncertain, particularly when they are in a leadership role, so they try to make sense out of their confusion and falsely present the sense that they have the appropriate answers—they are very decisive. We see confusion as a sign of failure. Yet, we know that one person seldom has all the information, understanding, and knowledge to be able to develop the best solutions for the complex situations that we face as educational leaders.

Gentz and Murphy (2005) suggest that confusion is an asset for leaders (and interns) who are open to improving communication, challenging old assumptions and values, and developing more creative approaches to problem solving. But, this means giving up the controlling, decisive, take-charge demeanor. They state,

No matter how capable or well prepared, managers regularly find themselves confronting bewildering events, perplexing information, or baffling situations that steal their time and hijack their carefully planned agendas. Disoriented by developments that just don't make sense and by challenges that don't yield to easy solutions, these managers become confused—sometimes even lost—and don't know what to do. (p. 359)

This is a particular challenge for interns, who are often confronted with new situations, with minimal information to go on and in an unfamiliar environment. The response is typically to deny a sense of confusion, keeping quiet about it, and to hide or cover it up. This often results in opting for action even when totally confused—not a good leadership practice. The belief of some interns is that “anything less than take-charge decision making shows abject weakness.”

INTERN REPORT

My principal/mentor wanted to conduct a whole-staff orientation/development session and had a very tight and aggressive timetable in order to get it done. The planned date was less than two months away and the principal/mentor told me "I haven't much time to discuss the orientation/development program but I'm really not concerned because the program is pretty straightforward. You need to have the plans completed in the next two weeks." I did not see the program as straightforward and, in fact, was confused and thought to myself "'Not much time,' what an understatement!" I really needed much more clarification but did not want to appear stupid so I did not ask additional questions for clarification. Deciding to withhold my confusion in a followup discussion with the assistant principal, I stated, "It's too bad we didn't have more time with the principal, but I think we've got enough to begin planning." I later learned that the assistant principal

was thinking, "It's good the intern is in charge and can make sense of this. It seems the intern is clear even though I am not."

When the principal saw my plan, she was very disappointed. The plan was far off the mark from what she wanted. I'm sure she was thinking, "Wow! I had more confidence in the intern than deserved. I won't make that mistake again." She really was confused on how the plan could be so off the mark and admonished me *and* the assistant principal, creating further strained relations between all of us. I realized that concealing my confusion had not resulted in greater respect, as I had hoped, but instead, with strained relationships and loss of respect from both my mentor and the assistant principal. Crucial weeks and many staff hours had been wasted and I was treated differently. In the future I will never try to conceal my confusion when I am responsible for a task. That is not good leadership.

Gentz and Murphy (2005) created the five-step Reflective Inquiry and Action (RIA) model to address situations where there is confusion, chaos, and/or complexity. This model provides an orderly way to move forward even when you are confused. The five steps are:

1. *Embrace your confusion.* Confusion is not weakness. In fact, it takes courage to acknowledge that you are confused and will have to search with others to discover solutions.
2. *Assert your need to make sense.* Unambiguously assert, with conviction and without apology, your sense of being confused and your need to engage in a process of shared learning to understand the situation and options prior to beginning planning and decision making.
3. *Structure the interaction.* You must quickly provide a structure to search for new bearings, conditions for others to enter into a joint inquiry, a timetable, and identification of the information the team will need to clarify and resolve the issues. It is very important in this stage to take control and make it clear you are in charge—and in charge of a process that will produce a clear outcome.
4. *Listen reflectively and learn.* It is essential that you listen reflectively to understand what was said with an open mind, allowing your basic assumptions to be challenged as you check the depth and accuracy of your thinking under conditions of joint inquiry.
5. *Openly process your effort to make sense.* Externalize your thinking process regarding the issues at hand by discussing what your understanding is out loud so others can understand how you are now thinking, thus avoiding premature closure. (Gentz & Murphy, 2005, pp. 362–365)

The RIA process asks us to think outside the box so we can better understand our confusion. This model is particularly helpful for interns who are thrown into situations for which they have had limited experience or historical knowledge and no network of reliable sources beyond their mentor and university supervisor (who undoubtedly have limited time available).

BENEFITS OF THE INTERNSHIP

The experience of learning how to handle the knowns and the unknowns in educational administration is the major benefit to completing the internship. You will learn more about leadership and how it works in action. You will gain much-needed experience and you will learn to handle all types of situations, even those that seem ambiguous and chaotic. Perhaps most important, the experience is a confidence builder, helping interns to develop supportive beliefs in their own capabilities to handle the job, even with a relatively heavy workload. As one student states, "It's a good chance to get your hands dirty and learn what you're made of." It also helps to recognize that there is still much to learn and wisdom to gain, before being able to best fulfill the duties of an administrator. However, there is the recognition that the foundation has been laid, and the wisdom will come through continued education and experience. The internship should give the intern the confidence to walk into an educational leadership position feeling prepared, regardless of what challenges may occur.

A major benefit of the internship is building the confidence needed to pursue a position in educational leadership. Browne-Ferrigno and Muth (2004, p. 475) found that:

The students who assumed positions as quasi-administrators or interns appeared to be more confident and goal oriented toward assuming the principalship than their cohort peers who continued to work as teachers. Those engaged in administrative work linked content topics being studied in their coursework to real-world applications, and they often discussed how their mentors addressed problems of practice. They were able to contextualize what was being discussed and to link textbook learning to authentic practice.

There is no foolproof way to adequately prepare for an educational leadership position. In a 2001 study, these authors suggested, "that readiness to assume a principalship following completion of an administrator preparation program depends upon: (1) an individual's prior leadership opportunities and experiences within K-12 education; (2) encouragement from and mentoring by practicing principals; and (3) personal issues such as family responsibilities and career goals." Interns are much more likely to take state licensure exams, obtain state administrative and supervision certification (endorsement), and interview for positions in educational administration than are those who focused mainly on teaching during their administrative preparation programs (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2001).

CONCLUDING THE INTERNSHIP

It is important that you complete any unfinished business and debrief existing administrators regarding the status and outcome of your work (especially unfinished work) and anything that needs to be solved, discussed, and/or dealt with prior to concluding your internship experience. This provides an excellent time to reflect

on what you have learned, the ways you have grown, the skills you have developed, and what you have achieved. You might ask yourself questions like:

1. What important instructional improvement goals did I complete as part of my internship? What was my level of success in these efforts?
2. What hindered the implementation of goals?
3. What facilitated the accomplishment of goals?
4. What are the things I liked (a) most about my leadership? (b) least about my leadership?

The end of your internship presents an excellent opportunity to critically examine your leadership behavior. Brown and Irby (2001) proposed a four-stage structure for approaching this retrospection process. Their questions for the self-assessment process are excellent for completing a review of your internship experience and what was learned.

1. Did the action(s) taken result in the intended outcomes?
2. Were the actions effective and appropriate for the situation?
3. Were the actions consistent with the espoused Leadership Framework?
4. What impact did decisions or actions have on students, teachers, and/or the community?
5. Is this leadership behavior representative of district expectations?
6. Were options that were derived from multiple perspectives considered?
7. Were a variety of alternatives considered?
8. How might this situation have been approached in a different manner? And what types of results might be expected?
9. What action(s) might have resulted in a more positive impact?
10. How does this experience promote growth? (Brown & Irby, 2001, p. 32)

You will want to assess your personal level of proficiency in relation to the standards on which you based your internship experience (i.e., ISSLC, ELCC, state, or others). The entire process of retrospection serves as a catalyst for self-development, self-confidence, and ultimately, improved performance.

Retrospective Assessment

The conclusion of your internship provides an ideal opportunity to discuss your strengths and skills with your mentor and others as well as the areas in which you need to increase your abilities, and how best to achieve those improvements. You might begin by providing a brief overview of the experience and summarizing what you have learned and taken from the experience. You might integrate important learning experiences with theory, research, knowledge, and best practice. There might be discussion of how to apply what was learned to future leadership situations, with a focus on areas needing improvement.

You and your mentor may wish to include an assessment of successes and less than expected results in regards to your activities and experience. The Performance Standards for Prospective Principals form provided in Form 2.4, which is discussed under "Mentor's Assessment" on page 27, might be useful in this process. The qualities to be addressed are typically leadership behaviors; strategic planning; facilitating student learning; developing, implementing, and evaluating curriculum and instruction; supervising and evaluating faculty and support staff; relations with faculty and support staff; professional development; community relations; management; maintaining physical security of students, faculty, and support staff; and operations (see Chapter 2 section Supervisor Visits and Triad Meetings). This meeting should end on a very positive note, with a good sense of closure for all involved.

You are to be congratulated on your work efforts that meet or exceed performance standards and should be thanked for your achievements. But, equally important are the specific areas where you need to improve performance. This does not detract from your strong points; in fact, everyone has areas in need of improvement. You need to actively listen to comments relating to areas in which you failed to meet expectations, discuss why, and explore how you might improve in future situations. Actively participate in this discussion and agree to specific actions that might be taken to improve your leadership ability. See how you can build on your strengths and set methods and dates for achieving improvements and possibly a followup with your mentor and/or your university instructor. Let "Continuous Improvement" be a motto for yourself and your organization.

This is a good time for some introspective analysis. You might use this time to redefine yourself as a leader. Some questions you might ask include:

- Who am I as a leader and what do I stand for?
- What provides me the greatest/least satisfaction?
- What are my strengths/areas needing improvement as a leader?
- What have I accomplished and what still needs to be done?
- What do I now want to do differently in my professional life?
- What are some areas of professional growth on which I will concentrate?

As a side point, these are examples of the types of questions you may receive during your job interview (see Chapter 15). Make time to process your experience and refine your thinking about your future role in educational leadership. Think through how the social web of your relationships has changed and how it might change again. How have these relationships redefined you? How will this change? Have you met your goals? Do you now have more confidence as a leader? The questions are almost endless and only you can know what questions are important to you.

Ending on a Positive Note

Terminating the intern/mentor relationship is rewarding in knowing what you have achieved. However, it is also a little sad because your duties and relationships will change, at least until you are promoted to an administrative position. You will certainly want to discuss appropriate ways to make yourself visible for future promotion (see Chapter 15), how to be in line for career opportunities that may develop in educational administration, and if your mentor would be open to providing recommendations and if you can seek advice and council from him or her in the future. Because of your mentor's commitment, it is important that you recognize her or his willingness to have taken on these responsibilities and spend time with you. You will want to end by providing a thank you card or note and a small gift to your mentor, to express appreciation for the time and energy he or she has given to you.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Assessment can help in determining the effect and results of your efforts and help you to understand your progress toward becoming an effective leader.

However, if you can say that you received important insights from the internship that you can bring to the job, insight which will allow you to be much more effective, then the internship was a success. An intern stated, "I was given the opportunity to prove [to] myself that I could do it. This alone has allowed me to

feel competent. I tested out my skills and got a professional feel about them. Now I have the key in my hand. I feel ready to move on. I am still not quite sure which doors this key will open, but I am sure that whatever I face I will deal with it as best as I know how" (Sweitzer & King, 2004, p. 279). Perhaps the acid test for the success of the internship does not occur until the intern gets her or his first job in educational administration.

Remember, "The journey is the reward." Putting your whole self into a task; engaging yourself in organizational improvement; encouraging your curiosity; developing passion, confidence, commitment, and camaraderie—these are the rewards.

It is, of course, important to recognize that professional development does not end with completing the internship, graduating from a leadership preparation program, receiving administrative licensure, or even obtaining an administrative position. These are only the beginning of the development process of becoming an outstanding educational leader. Further development, lifelong learning, occurs on the job and through professional associations; continuing education; attending national, state, and local conferences and workshops; reading books and journals; applying for grants; completing research and writing articles; and serving as a mentor.

You have earned your "rite of passage." Your journey is well underway and, hopefully, will continue throughout your life. Remember that satisfaction and happiness are not a destination; they must be found along the way of a successful career.

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section II

THE IMPORTANT INTERNSHIP TOOLS

The first section provided a plan and placed the process of the internship in perspective; this second section develops a few of the major tools and techniques for completing the work of the internship.

Interns have typically read books and completed coursework that provide a comprehensive background for the types of skills that are needed in order to have a successful internship experience. These might be considered the foundational tools that interns will need to take on increasing responsibility during their internship experience. The chapters in this section represent short reviews of key issues that encapsulate some of what has been learned in coursework, research, and readings. These are some of the important issues that you will want to review as part of your internship.

This section of the text/handbook provides a condensed review of some models, techniques, tools, and procedures that can help you carry out your internship activities. These are the types of skills that are typically required in order to confront real problems of practice. People who lack vision, human relation skills, or even good intentions tend to become technicians; and yet, those who lack the technical skills to accomplish the work of leadership become dreamers. Both types are likely to fail as educational leaders.

The tools and technical skills discussed in this section offer some of today's best answers to the technical challenges of carrying out the responsibilities of educational leadership and implementing education improvement. These are processes that can be immediately implemented during internship experiences. This section is a review of the processes which were given a more expansive treatment during your administrative and supervision preparation program and/or readings and experiences.

This section could not review all of the processes, tools, and techniques of effective leadership, but it does cover a few of the more basic and essential skills that are often cited as necessary for success. The tools for focusing on problems of practice discussed in this section include time management and handling an in-box (Chapter 10); running a meeting, brainstorming, and building a consensus (Chapter 11); effective communication, effective listening, and recognizing outstanding performance (Chapter 12); and conflict management and managing crisis (Chapter 13). You may read this section prior to beginning internship activities, or it may become a reference when you realize that you need a quick review of certain skills needed to carry out the internship activities.

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