As with any successful leader, the school principal must perform as a highly skilled multi-tasker at all times. Of course, referring to the principal’s responsibilities as tasks is a major understatement, but this is a word that we are all familiar with. A day in the life of a principal can include responsibilities that range from consoling an upset parent, to presenting a proposal before the school board or monitoring a classroom for a sick teacher – all before lunch! Their most pivotal role is to be leaders among their team, which involves providing ongoing support to teachers and school staff.

Just like principals, teachers are frequently juggling innumerable tasks at the same time. While their responsibilities may differ slightly, they might include activities such as conducting well-planned lessons, caring for sick or struggling students, de-escalating and monitoring disruptive student behaviors or emailing a parent about their student’s successful completion of a project. We refer to teachers as the front-line staff, or primary change agents, in the lives of their students. Why? Teachers spend the most time directly working with students and are hopefully able to develop healthy, caring relationships with each student.

So, how do principals ensure that they are always working toward preserving and, most importantly, supporting this gold mine of resources? One of the most significant ways a principal can demonstrate support is by developing and maintaining a supportive relationship with all staff, especially those primary change agents.

Supportive relationships allow principals to fulfill all roles and responsibilities professionally and effectively. The development of mutual trust, respect and confidence through setting mutual goals and exchanging information produces an organizational atmosphere that is conducive to quality services. The development of trusting and mutually caring relationships can benefit morale, particularly during stressful situations within the school environment. Studies have suggested that offering social support may prove more important than any other variables (e.g., salary, behavioral problems) in fostering long-term staff retention. (Boys Town, 2007).

Let’s take a closer look at four behaviors or expectations that promote supportive relationships in schools.

1. **Communicate** – Communication is an extremely important factor in developing a supportive relationship and can be facilitated in several ways.
   - **Allow Them to Express Feelings** – Teachers are more likely to express their feelings when they have been given permission to do so. First of all, principals must ask themselves if they allow time during individual meetings (regardless of how much time is available) to allow teachers to share feelings, opinions, thoughts, etc. With some teachers, the principal may need to ask very direct questions to assure the teacher that they are genuinely interested and want to hear from them. This goes beyond just those feelings about the job. Of course, the key is to ensure that the relationship
doesn’t cross professional boundaries into a social relationship. As the saying goes – *people do not care what you know until they know that you care.*

- **Using Teacher’s/Staff Ideas** – Building on the previous point, whenever it is possible to use a suggestion or idea presented by a teacher, use it! Or at least look into the possibility of using it, even if it has to be fine-tuned. This not only helps keep that teacher motivated, it may encourage other teachers to offer their suggestions or ideas, too. Just be sure to give credit to the person who originally came up with the idea, as failing to do so could have the opposite effect on staff members.

- **Make Yourself Available** – As busy as principals are, teachers need to know that principals are available to provide advice, direction, support, crisis intervention and other forms of assistance whenever possible. When the opportunity to spend time with teachers becomes available, be responsive during conversations and listen attentively. When principals establish a pattern of not being available, teachers lose confidence and trust in their leader. Establishing, publishing and disseminating communication guidelines are paramount to teachers’ awareness of the next step or person to contact when principals cannot make themselves available.

- **Provide Feedback** – Research indicates that feedback should be given in a positive and pleasant manner, even when it is corrective. Feedback is most effective when given as immediately as possible or preceding the person’s next opportunity to make the correction or change.

- **Honesty** – Finally, honesty in any relationship is key. Everyone prefers real, true and accurate information, especially from their leader. With honesty comes sincerity, many times staff members can tell if their leader is being insincere and this can destroy the relationship more than help it.

2. **Praise Job Performance** – Stronger relationships develop when principals take time to notice teachers’ efforts and accomplishments. John Maxwell states, “recognition is a way to give meaning to a person’s existence.” Everyone needs and wants praise . . . even those who state differently. A study completed by Blasé and Blasé reported the following findings:

“Praise focusing on specific and concrete teaching behaviors significantly affected teacher motivation, self-esteem, and efficacy. It also fostered teacher reflective behavior, including reinforcement of effective teaching strategies, risk taking, and innovative/creativity…”

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3. **Be Pleasant** – Everyone prefers being around people who are pleasant. One of the principal’s primary responsibilities is to establish and maintain a positive work environment. Of course, the principal cannot always be held responsible for other adult’s behaviors. They can, however, set the expectations and model behaviors that promote a positive climate for all staff, students and parents. Simple behaviors, such as smiling, using a pleasant or neutral voice tone, using humor, being able to laugh at themselves, giving rationales and just being polite help promote a positive environment. Keep in mind, people do what people see so **be what you want them to see!** One of the principals that I had the privilege of working with shared a story about a staff member who was known to be “grumpy.” As a conversation ensued between the staff and a parent (who was also not having a good day), the principal made the decision to step in and demonstrate a different way to address the parent. She started by listening, using a calm voice and showing a bit of empathy. The intervention helped the parent calm down, helped side-step a potentially volatile situation, but most importantly showed the staff member how to apply the feedback he had been given. Did that one instance fix the person... probably not, but at least the staff member had an opportunity to witness a different way to handle the situation and create a different outcome.

4. **Staff Development** – Research has also revealed that staff development or promoting professional growth rates high among the factors that demonstrate supportive relationships to teachers. Teachers sought more growth in terms of supporting collaboration efforts among educators and developing coaching relationships among educators, among others. Principals often serve as the conduit through which teachers can achieve their career and personal goals, which when used effectively, can promote supportive relationships.

Being a principal comes with a multitude of challenges, supporting your staff and letting them know you are all on the same team is one of the most important steps you can take in making your life easier and improving school culture. Remember back to when you were a teacher and how you wanted to be treated by your principal. Need more tips? Watch our FREE on-demand webinar, *Leading in Times of Change: Using Coaching and Consultation to Achieve Your Goal.*

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