



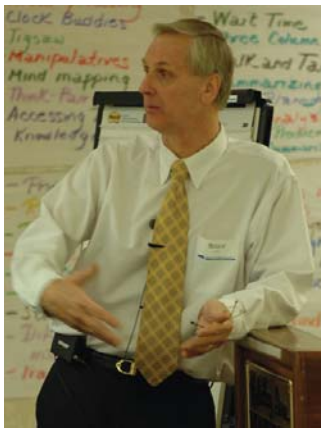
Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

October 2007
Volume IV
Issue X

Just for the ASKing! is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that help administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. The focus of this issue is on what makes some school leaders more successful than other school leaders.

Talking Out of School: Conversations with Successful Leaders



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

The longer I worked with a certain elementary principal, the more impressed I became with her leadership style and capacity to run a successful school. As I reflected on my interactions and conversations with her, I started thinking about conversations I had with other successful leaders and the lessons they had taught me about leadership. It prompted me to ask: **What makes some school leaders more successful than other school leaders?**

I concluded that **success meant having productive, achieving students, a qualified and satisfied faculty, a supportive community, and a strong school culture.** As I reflected on leaders who were successful, I thought about the qualities they possessed. Although the styles of those leaders were different, specific beliefs and behaviors guided them in leading their schools. I determined that their stories should be told.

Wisdom. Susan is a relatively new elementary principal whose wisdom is expressed in her primary philosophy of education: **Make time for people; things will wait.** She goes to great lengths to interact with staff members, frequently asking, “What can I do to support you?” In addition, she believes that no job is too small and often “rolls up her sleeves” to support a grade level or an individual teacher. When I see her, her enthusiasm is contagious. Recently she told me, “When you bring satisfaction to others, you’re a happier person.” **There is no doubt that she goes to her job every day a happy person.**

Priorities. A popular lapel pin that many educators wear is inscribed with the words: **Children First.** Mike who has been a principal for eleven years, is the living embodiment of that sentiment. When I visit Mike’s school, I am repeatedly amazed by the number of students he can identify by name. When children see him, they eagerly approach him wanting to show him something they’ve accomplished. What is most impressive is his sincerity as he interacts with students. As Mike explained, “Success is not about test scores or awards or media recognition or the number of trophies in the display case. It’s about the kids.” **After being around Mike for any period of time, one is reminded of why we do the work we do.**

Humility. Ann is a veteran high school principal who has been an administrator for over 20 years. I remember her saying that it is important for an administrator to remember what it was like to be a teacher. The teachers are upbeat and eager to follow her leadership. As she explained to me, “I never want to have a **we-they** attitude in the school.” When teachers praise her for something that has gone well, she is quick to let the teachers know that they are “the ones on the front line with students every day.” **Her self-effacing attitude and strong sense of humility has enabled her to reach great heights in her professional life.**

Professionalism. A strong school culture is one in which the adults work together in a collegial manner. Such a culture cannot exist without leadership and a clear vision. **Leslie** is a middle school principal who has established a structure in the school in which adults meet and talk about instructional issues on a routine basis. In addition, they develop common assessments, discuss the results and make instructional decision based on the resulting data. The professional environment that Leslie has created is one that any principal would envy. She can often be found dropping in on department or subject level meetings. She recently talked to me about her latest indicator of a successful leader. She told me that on several recent occasions she walked in on meetings, and as she put it, “I was so excited to realize that my presence didn’t matter! The high-powered conversations continued without any interruption.” **No one stopped to see what the principal wanted because their professional collaboration took precedence.**

Focus. When I talked recently with **Dave**, he spoke with great enthusiasm about the work he was doing in his high school. The primary initiative in the school is on **literacy**. He believes that schools must focus on a limited number of ideas in order to be effective. As he spoke, he gave much credit to the dedication of the teachers who understand that literacy is the key to success in school and in life beyond school. The staff development sessions, the carefully-designed approach to promoting literacy, and on-going support for students are indicators of his vision. “When you have too many goals going on simultaneously, the attention and focus of the staff is watered down,” Dave said. **Focusing your time and energy on a limited number of ideas can yield great results.**

Omnipresence. When **Andre** became a high school principal, he knew intuitively that his constant presence in the building could have an impact on the culture of his school as well as on the dedication of teachers and the achievement of his students. “Being office bound is just not my style. I need to be with the kids,” Andre told me. Students often marveled at his ability to be in so many places. Andre attends evening programs, athletic events, parent meetings, and academic assemblies. His big smile and sincere support for students, teachers, and parents makes him beloved by his entire community. “**There is no greater satisfaction than seeing first hand the accomplishments of young people,**” Andre noted.

Invitation. As a middle school principal, **Nancy** read an article which asked the question – **Who do you invite into your life?** The article presented the belief that how you spend your time and the people you spend your time with can speak volumes. As principal in a very diverse school, Nancy makes it a priority to spend time with some of the neediest kids. “Often the kids who need you most can become faceless, nameless entities in your school. I think it is important to seek them out and show them that you care and are available for them.” In addition to working closely with students, Nancy also makes it a priority to give her “undivided attention” to faculty through visits to classrooms, hallway conversations, and sit-down meetings. “**Time will always be limited. I choose to spend mine with people,**” Nancy concluded.

Balance. I enjoy my opportunities to talk with **Dan**, a middle school principal, because I always feel that I come away with greater insights into how a strong principal thinks. One of Dan’s major beliefs is that a good principal must strike a balance between gathering enough input to make important decisions without being seen as “wishy washy or indecisive.” As Dan put it, “The stakes are too high to make important decisions without getting input from the stakeholders.” Making snap judgments or reaching conclusions in isolation does not work. “Just as we ask teachers to make judgments based on data, so should we as school leaders,”

Dan explained. **It is important to model what we expect others to do.**

Honesty. Eric understands that being human means being fallible. When I spoke with him, he told me that he learned from a mentor long, long ago that it was important to be honest with the people with whom you worked, and to admit it when you were wrong. As a relatively young principal, Eric remembers a message he heard from his mentor. “When we are young, we are often hesitant to admit we don’t know all the answers. For some people, it is hard to admit that they don’t have an answer but they will find one.” **“I quickly learned that just because you are the principal does not mean that you have a lock on all the right answers. Plain and simple, honesty works,”** Eric said.

Encouragement. Maria has a very calm and personable demeanor. She successfully led three different high schools during her career. When I asked her what she considered to be the hallmark of her career, she avowed that one of her major guidelines as a principal was to encourage teachers to take risks. As she explained, “I had a sign in my office that said: **Whatever It Takes.** It was not just there for decoration. I wanted the teachers to feel that they can take risks in the classroom if it will lead to greater student learning.” **Maria’s approach resulted in many innovative ideas being implemented in classrooms across the schools she led and the students benefited greatly from her belief.**

Power. As a successful elementary principal, Donna is well aware of the responsibilities she has as well as the authority she has to carry out her duties. Although she shuns the use of the word “power” to describe the authority she has, she likewise fully understands the difference between “personal power” and “position power.” As Donna explains it, “When one uses her position to exert authority and control, it never results in a school culture that is alive and thriving. On the other hand, when a principal uses the strength of his or her personality to support and honor teachers, much can be accomplished.” Donna elaborated, “Principals are under a constant microscope. Everyone is watching to see how we operate. **I never want to create an environment where people fear me and avoid me when I am around.**”

Open-mindedness. Jack became a teacher in the late sixties and began his administrative career in 1980. As a veteran principal of close to 20 years, Jack’s behavior and appearance are not indicative of his chronological age. When asked about his leadership style, he quickly refers to one of his favorite quotes from Henry Ford. Ford is credited with saying, “Anyone who stops learning is old whether at 20 or 80. Anyone who keeps learning stays young.” Jack’s attitude has helped him make some of his best decisions in recent years. Through his open-mindedness, he has put into place the concept of professional learning communities as well as promoted the use of assessment “not as an end result but as a tool in the learning process.” Jack concluded, **“Resting on one’s laurels and coasting in the latter years of one’s career is not only unprofessional but downright unsatisfying.”**

© 2007 Just ASK Publications & Professional Development

Permission is granted for reprinting and distribution of this newsletter for non-commercial use only.

Please include the following citation on all copies:

Oliver, Bruce. “Talking Out of School: Conversations with Successful Leaders.” ***Just for the ASKing!*** October 2007. Available at www.justaskpublications.com. Reproduced with permission of Just ASK Publications & Professional Development (Just ASK). © 2007 by Just ASK. All rights reserved.

To subscribe to this free monthly e-newsletter please visit: www.justaskpublications.com