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Abstract

Ethical decision-making is an important skill for leaders that can be acquired and improved with experience. Successful leaders consistently make right decisions and inspire confidence in others. While many fields include formal ethics classes as a part of their required curriculum, only recently has the field of education included formalized ethics training for principals. This article provides guidance and advice for those seeking to increase the likelihood they will make better decisions each day.

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Ethical decision-making is an important skill for leaders that can be acquired and improved with experience. Successful leaders consistently make right decisions and inspire confidence in others. While many fields include formal ethics classes as a part of their required curriculum, only recently has the field of education included formalized ethics training for principals. This article provides guidance and advice for those seeking to increase the likelihood they will make better decisions each day.

Do you know someone who always just seems to make the right decisions? A person who always hits the mark in the hiring process? A person who is calm in a crisis; steady and confident when faced with a tough choice? Although people have innate personality traits they rely on to help them make decisions, ethical decision-making is a skill that can be acquired and improved upon with experience. Successful leaders consistently make the right choice, and are trusted by those they lead. Their confidence is contagious, and they allow others to make good decisions as well.

Conversely, we all know those who may not have an abundance of these skills. They never seem to hire the best person, or are sometimes so frozen to make a decision, one is either made for them, or they never fully take a position. These people could have certain personality traits that may never allow them to attain a high level of skill, yet many still find themselves in leadership positions that require them to make tough and important decisions.

Making the best choice is part of ethical decision making, yet many administrators working in the field today have not had formal ethics training or classes. Professional fields such as nursing, medicine, law, and business have traditionally required ethics courses, while generally educational administration has not (Shapiro & Stefkovich 2011). However, within the past twenty years there has been growing interest in the importance of ethics training for school administrators with an emerging sense that developing ethical competence fulfills an obligation to students, and helps develop ethical schools (Greenfield, 1993).

As school leaders, frequently we are faced with making tough decisions that many times do not have any good options, and we must make decisions where no one is either happy or satisfied. Making the best choice in such a situation may be among the most important decisions you can make.

Equally difficult is having to make a decision where all possible options are acceptable. Kidder (1998) states that the toughest choices are not those that center on “right verses wrong” but instead they are choices that must be made between “right verses right.” Circumstances may sometimes force a decision to be made that pits values we hold against each other, such as truth verses loyalty, or short-term gain verses long-term results.

Making the best decisions, from the easiest to the most difficult, essentially involves discovery of a problem or question, an initial assessment, a determination of potential options, and making a final decision. Each require skills that when done properly, increase your chance to choose from the best of all available options. Predictably, inadequate or ineffective work decreases your odds of making the best decision.

The discovery stage is where you become initially aware of a situation that may require action on your part. Such information may be brought to you, or you may become aware of a situation on your own. This could be viewed as a sort of triage for deciding what you may need to deal with yourself, delegate to others, or ignore. Your action during this initial step is a skill in itself---to decide to proceed or not is in fact a decision, and as recent events at major universities and the National Football League have shown, the consequences for erring at this stage can be severe.

The ability to assess a situation and conduct an investigation is also important. Leaders who make the best decisions are those who have done the work to have the best choices available to them. More importantly, having the ability to choose the best option among many possible choices is what makes a great leader, and ultimately makes everyone more successful.

The focus of this article is not to teach you how to conduct an investigation, or how to increase your self-confidence to make tough choices. There is, however, some practical advice that may shape your thinking to become the type of leader who consistently makes the best decisions.

School leaders don't have the time to fully reflect on the traditions of moral philosophy---from the utilitarian approach (should I choose whatever does the greatest good for the greatest number of people?)---from a “Golden Rule” approach (what would I want to happen if I were in their shoes)---or from a rules-based approach (I am sticking to my principles.) But school leaders would be wise to have such foundational knowledge as part of their core beliefs.

That is because politics, friendships, relationships, money, and protecting institutional name can and will influence decision-making. Lacking solid moral reasoning, those factors can determine the decision. They should not.

How to Become a Great Decision Maker

School leaders are faced with daily decisions, the majority of which are not difficult and have no major consequences. But there are other frequent decisions that potentially have life changing implications. Budget cutting---what to cut? Staffing decisions---whom to add, whom to cut? How do you balance accounting for individualized student difference while acknowledging broad based diversity? How can a safe environment be created while ensuring the protection of student rights?

Your chances of making the best decisions improve by determining the following each time you are faced with such decisions:

- Ask yourself if a decision needs to be made, and if you are the proper person to make the decision. (Does a decision need to be made?)
- Investigate and get as many facts as you can. If you miss something, you miss a possible solution. If you miss something, you can make a decision different from one you may have made with more information.
- Ask yourself if this is a question of right verses wrong. In these situations, your decision may not be comfortable, but it should be obvious. This is particularly relevant in bullying, harassment, or other situations where one actor did something they should not have done.
- Ask yourself if your core beliefs apply. What decision may be for the greater good? Would I want this to happen to my family, or any other family? How does this apply to policy and rules?
- Listen to others. Hear a contrary view because it could in the end be the best choice.

Keep in mind the best option is not the same as the easiest option, and consistently seeking that route will invariably lead to bad decisions.

What Bad Decisions have in Common

So where have the people who make poor choices gone wrong? Bad decisions very often occur because leaders allow themselves (or are pressured) to be swayed away from core beliefs and base decisions on some form of favoritism (politics, finances, etc.) This can also lead to making the wrong decision in a situation that is really a right verses wrong problem. The lack of such foundation can also create inconsistency, with a leader frequently taking different actions even when given similar circumstances.

Not having enough time is not an acceptable excuse to avoid doing the right thing. For example, not making the necessary reference call or following-up on a concern raised by a parent. To not do these would in fact be decisions, and poor

ones. After all, it's bad enough, for example, to have a child predator on your staff; it's another thing entirely to have hired one. Making decisions without having all the relevant facts leads to poor decisions, especially because without all the facts potential solutions and choices can go undiscovered.

Finally, some people continually make poor decisions because of a lack of confidence due to consequences of previous poor decisions. If someone has been reprimanded or seen bad consequences resulting from decisions they have made, there is a learning opportunity, but also a natural reaction to be overly cautious in the future.

Conclusions

School leaders must make both easy and tough decisions every day, but there are ways to improve your chances to become a confident and inspiring leader, who is sought after when decisions need to be made. Ethical decision-making is a leadership skill that can be developed and improved, and over time will carry over to your staff and students.

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