

Commentary

‘Copers’ and ‘Transformers’



Illustration by Susan Sanford

By Jean Johnson

Does it matter how someone talks about his or her job? If you were hiring a principal for a struggling school, what would you look for? A candidate with a specific plan to turn the school around, or one who would respond to day-to-day events as they occur?

This is the question that leaps out of [Public Agenda's](#) latest work on school leadership, a series of focus groups with principals in high-needs public schools conducted for the [Wallace Foundation](#). Our goal was to delve beneath the broad-spectrum discussion on reclaiming struggling schools to ask principals who work in them what they actually do on a daily basis. We wanted to know what changes they believe would help them succeed, and what skills they consider essential to their jobs. It was a small-scale study—not definitive by any stretch of the imagination—but what we saw was unforeseen and intriguing.

We talked to men and women from different backgrounds working

in high-needs districts in different parts of the country. Across the board, they cared deeply about the schools and students in their charge. As far as we could tell, they were all motivated and hardworking. Yet after relatively short conversations, the majority fell into one of two distinct categories—they were either “transformers” or “copers.” The contrasts in how these two groups talked about being a principal were often stunning.

The “transformers” had an explicit vision of what they wanted their school to be like, and they talked about specific changes they were making now or planned to make in the near future. This year, introduce the new reading curriculum. Next year, get a teaching coach for math. Some had scanned their teacher rosters and pinpointed the teachers they wanted to move out. Maybe it couldn't be done in one fell swoop, but they had their plans. This year, A and B; next year on to C. Most could tell you

chapter and verse: This is my plan; this is where I am with it; this is what's going well; this is where I need help. Many of these people were amazing human beings. That's where we got the title of our report. Our transformer principals were engaged in “a mission of the heart.”

Some education critics have suggested that school leaders need to function more like corporate executives and less like government administrators. Yet, based on what we saw in this study, corporate leadership may not be the best analogy for principals. After all, corporate heads have personnel and monetary resources that probably just aren't feasible in public schools. To me, the transformer principals were more like small-business people—like someone starting a restaurant or a design firm or a bookstore. They were putting heart and soul into their own small endeavor. It was the realization of a vision that almost possessed them. They brought a can-do attitude to

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the job, and, notably, they had a “business plan” clearly in mind. They had goals and strategies outlined for this year, the next, and the year after that.

Unfortunately, some of the principals we saw were “copers.” There’s really no other way to put it. They meant well, it seemed to us, but they just couldn’t get above the day-to-day crises. This principal was typical: “I find myself wearing so many hats ... it’s unbelievable. I just cannot free myself up.” Some copers described situations that would probably overwhelm anyone. “They burned down part of my school in January. They destroyed all my textbooks and all my games equipment and everything. It took five fire engines to put it out. They stole four teachers’ cars, and they set fire to them. ... If you suspend a child, you have to be careful because they usually bring the father, the mother, the grandmother, and the two brothers to come and sort you out.” These principals were struggling themselves, and yet their job was to transform a struggling school.

So what makes the difference between a transformer and a copper? Is it the human being or the circumstances? The principals themselves put a lot of emphasis on character and personality. Many said that some of what it takes to do a principal’s job probably can’t be taught—nurtured and strengthened maybe, but not taught from scratch. One said: “If you don’t know who you are as an individual, and if you’re not centered, you will crumble in this position.” Another named “courage” as an indispensable requirement: “You have to have the courage to stand by the conviction. Sometimes you have to have courage when you have to stand up to an angry parent. You

just have to say, ‘Your child is not safe. He cannot stay in my school. ...’ Sometimes you have to have the courage to say to a teacher, ‘Perhaps this is not the vocation for you.’ ”

If transformers bring special traits and gifts to the job—zeal, confidence, clarity, persistence—then perhaps the field needs to recruit for those qualities.

But other comments suggested that character and drive alone may not be enough: District policy and working conditions count, too. Some of the transformers mentioned that they had been given a fair amount of autonomy to select and train staff members and make other decisions. Equally persuasive to us, a number told us that they had been given administration support—a lieutenant of their choosing to help them, someone to focus on the administrative tasks while they focused on the teachers and the students and the learning.

Does being a transformer really ensure that students learn more? This small, exploratory piece of research can’t answer that, but I suggest that all of us who care about reclaiming troubled schools pursue the question. It certainly seems as if the transformative role should lead to better outcomes for students, but we don’t know, and we need to know. Could some copers become transformers if they had better support and worked under more reasonable conditions? Many were savvy, caring people who just could not seem to rise above the daily din.

But we also need to look at the other side of the coin. Could some of our transformers eventually become worn down and burnt out? Could the passage of time and lack of support turn them into copers? While we were conducting this research, we saw astonishing human beings working extremely long

hours with a passion and single-mindedness that was truly admirable. But how long can we expect these principals to keep up this pace? Are we asking them to make sacrifices in their personal lives that are simply unsustainable? Can anyone, even with enormous commitment, really keep up this level of energy and sparkle year after year after year?

More to the point, is the field ready to ponder and address these questions and give the transformers (and the students and schools they serve) realistic, fair-minded answers?

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