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Welcome to district leadership: 7 things you need to know

By Dr. Dana Godek and Michael Moore June 3, 2024



July is an exciting time in school districts. The students are out of school. The budget is adopted. And there are people in new leadership roles. Are you newly promoted? Are you moving from school leadership to district leadership? Congratulations!

All new roles present challenges, but in our experience the transition from the principalship to a district role feels like a very big step to many people.

In this article, we'll look at why that's the case. First, we'll define district leader success criteria. Then we'll discuss why, as the cliché says, "What got you here, won't get you there." Finally, we'll look at the leadership shifts—in perspective, behavior and priorities—that provide a path into effective district leadership.

What makes a successful district leader?

The core challenge for new district leaders is about identity. You got promoted because of your success leading adults who reported to you. While you certainly had a boss or two, you spent nearly all your time as The Boss (apologies Bruce!) at your school.

As a district leader, you'll spend most of your time surrounded by colleagues and by more senior leaders. One newly promoted leader told us, "I used to make 30 quick decisions in a day as a principal and now every decision I need to make requires a meeting or a committee."



As you build a new identity as a district leader, consider how will you be judged given the daily attention you'll be getting from everyone around you. We believe these six success criteria can serve as a scorecard:

1. **Achievement of district goals.** All district leaders are expected to understand, promote and execute the district's goals.
2. **Improved student outcomes.** As a school principal you had a direct impact on student outcomes. Now your impact will be less direct, but unless you're in a purely operational role you're still expected to improve student performance.
3. **Effective team functioning.** Because of the transparency and cross-functional nature of district work, you'll be judged by your ability to keep your team on-time and on-task.
4. **Successful cross functional work.** While it's important to know your "lane," it's also important to be seen as a team player by colleagues and be seen by senior leaders as someone who can manage projects.
5. **Sustainable initiatives.** You'll likely be expected to design and implement new projects, anticipate trends in your area of responsibility and determine what's worth spending time and energy on. If you are implementing larger district initiatives, you will want to use strong change management practices to ensure both fidelity and sustainability.
6. **Stakeholder satisfaction.** Getting to know your end-users and customers quickly will be critical, even if it's your hometown (sorry again Bruce). You need to understand who they are and what they need and confirm those findings with the senior team in relation to the broader district goals.

Why is district leadership different?

Earlier, we used the cliché: "what got you here, won't get you there." The reason that the move from school to district leadership feels like such a big step to many leaders is because the skills that made you a successful—and promotable—principal are in some way counterproductive for district leaders.

As a principal you were able to build strong relationships with staff and students because you saw them everyday and got to know them. As a district leader, you'll spend less time with more people making it hard to use relationships as your 'go to' appeal.

As a principal you could make dozens of quick decisions in a day and delegate tasks to direct reports. As a district leader, many decisions require discussion across teams or departments, stretching out the decision-making process.

As a principal you focused on things that were happening that day or as far out as the next break. You were excellent at "firefighting." As a district leader, you are asked to think about next year and the next several years, reducing the level of urgency.

As a principal you were a generalist. You could build a master schedule, deal with an angry parent and give effective feedback to a new teacher. Except for the superintendent, district leaders are functional leaders, experts in important but narrow roles. You might be tempted to debate things that you experienced as a principal that didn't seem quite right coming from a central office. Use these perspectives and trust your intuition with your team, but resist 'fixing' other departments until you know the lay of the land.

As a principal you established the political context. Others knew what was important to you, how you would react to different situations and how you managed others. As a district leader, you have been dropped into a complex political context where you don't set the tone.



Making the shift

There is a path to becoming a successful district leader that will take at least a year to master but can be accelerated through intentional shifts in perspective and behavior. Those shifts are:

1. **Observe and learn the political context.** You have leadership skills and capabilities but not all the context to use them effectively. Ty Wiggins, author of *The New CEO* offers this advice: "If it's on fire, fix it. If it's smoldering leave it alone until you have more context."
2. **Be strategic.** Lengthen your time horizon to focus on the district's goals. Trust the managers on your team to develop the tactics for getting work done.
3. **Build your team.** Distribute leadership across the team and make sure they can articulate and measure their goals. Provide training and coaching. Interact intentionally with them individually and collectively.
4. **Support your colleagues.** Be curious about how they work and make decisions. Have their back in meetings. Offer opportunities to work together on small wins.
5. **Focus on your function but don't become an island.** We agree with Patrick Lencioni's focus on "Team #1"—your boss and their team—but it's also important to master your team's specific workflow and production.
6. **Don't talk about the work, do the work.** Let a good ol' dry erase board in your office talk about the work for you. Your meeting calendar will prioritize your work quickly. Don't let it. Prioritize the work and then your calendar. The number of meetings can quickly overwhelm you. When invited, ask why your attendance is needed and how you can best prepare and participate.
7. **Communicate and advocate.** Celebrate success. Be humble about challenges. Make it easy for others across the organization to see what you are working on and how they're connected to it. Be sure to state your team brand and department mission in most conversations so people get to know what you're about and where you're taking your team.

Congratulations on moving into a bigger role. You are likely on the way to even bigger and better things!

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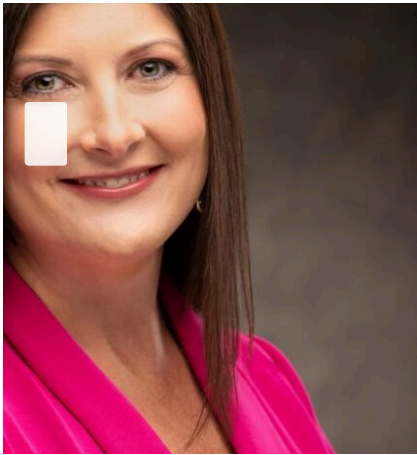
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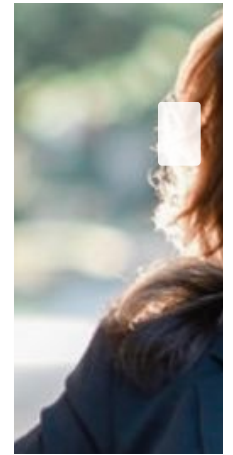
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