15 Tips for the New Principal / School Leader

August 1, 2012 (updated for 2013), By Bill Carozza

This is the season of new beginnings. Administrators search for novel ways to inspire their staffs and balance exciting initiatives and necessary mandates into a vision that will move a faculty. But for many educators, it is their first taste of the Principalship as they receive an endorsement from a School Board and Superintendent to be a building leader for the first time.

**ACSI notes:** along with some thoughts from our office and vantage point.

1. **Meet with all of your staff individually.**

I’ve found the best way to discover the true flavor of your building is to simply listen to the players who make up the school. Do not offer advice but take good notes and let your new teachers, paraprofessionals, specialists, office crew, kitchen staff, and custodians all give their perspective on what is working and what is not. In one of my Principalships, I tabulated the results of my interviews (kindly sanitized without criticism of individuals) and it became a component of my goals for that year and a major topic at the opening staff meeting. These actions validated the opinions of all of the staff.

**ACSI notes:** The school administrator is the key leader in the school and must have a relationship with his or her staff and faculty that is both Christ honoring and mission focused. Get to know your staff by scheduling individual time to listen and catch up. Take notes so you remember what you hear, and look for theme or common strands of concern.

2. **Honor the history of your school.**

As a new principal in my mid-30’s I thought that I had it all figured out and that the veteran teachers were nice people but not privy to the latest in pedagogy. That may or may not be true with your “vets” but they do hold the history of your building and the culture that binds the school together. Sure, there will be changes that need to be made over time but earn your respect in the short term so that you will have influence in the long run.

**ACSI notes:** No school exists in a vacuum and to ignore a program’s history and heritage is a critical mistake made by many new administrators. Give yourself time to learn the history, get the back story, and discover who the key individuals have been in the school’s development.

3. **Identify the major players and support them.**

Find those teachers who have passion, a hunger for knowledge, and an ability to take measured risks and give them all the support they may need. Perhaps the best support is your confirming words. But while you do this, be careful to...

**ACSI notes:** Every school has those who are respected and lead. Know who the key “unacknowledged” leaders in the school are – staff, faculty, or parents.

4. **Be fair to all.**
This will be difficult. It’s only natural to spend more time with those who share your philosophy, simply match your personality, or those you can trust. But it’s crucial to be seen as even handed. One former Principal colleague of mine lost her job over time because she was seen as having favorites. Thus, while humanly difficult, it is important to...

ACSI notes: While there is some pushback on the concept of fairness, there is a place for avoiding issues of preference or favoritism with staff or faculty. Key to this issue is to know the school’s policies and engage them without favor to all staff, following those guidelines equitability and in a just manner.

5. Be kind, caring, and respectful in all of your relationships and be willing to apologize.

While cliché, relationships really do matter. Too many leaders are afraid to look weak and thus apologies are rare. Asking for forgiveness and being forgiven is a sign of strength for both parties and usually leads to respect and healing. In your first year, don’t be afraid to admit when you’re wrong while holding your ground respectfully when you’re not.

ACSI notes: The strength of a school leader is, surprisingly, found in their ability to admit error, take the heat, ask forgiveness if necessary, and then move on, valuing the individual in the process. Remember that your faculty is the make/break element in the school equation. Maintaining biblical relationships with them is critical. Consider Blanchard’s “One Minute Manager” to help you be effective as a leader.

6. Focus on school and classroom culture.

I am surprised that more pre-service teacher programs don’t highlight the enormous importance of classroom management for success. One of the most popular and proven approaches in this area, Responsive Classrooms, has conducted research that shows the unsurprising link between the culture in one’s classroom and academic achievement. Spend time with your new teachers and help them succeed with their management. Be visible in the hallways, cafeteria and playground.

ACSI notes: Along with classroom culture is school culture. Know what it is, what you want it to become, and then provide direction, training, and assessment of that culture to keep it vital, focused, and applicable. A Christian school must be known by its foundational cultural values — Christ, God’s Word, and discipleship of students.

7. Budget

Like your facility, do not leave the responsibility and knowledge of your budget to others. This includes the student activity accounts as more Principals are fired due to mismanagement of these accounts that any other reason. Have your administrative assistant regularly check the line items so that you don’t grow short in any area. Also, ensure that you legitimately spend what you have budgeted. It’s not good to have large overages toward the end of your fiscal year as this is a sign that you didn’t need this funding anyway.

ACSI notes: If you don’t know how to manage school finances, get some mentoring, take come courses, talk to other administrators, and be on a first name basis with the head of your finance committee. In the beginning, you will have to put in the time to go over the budget closely, carefully, and thoroughly. It does get better with time and experience (or at least your ability to get the big picture and only drill into what needs attention), but it will be an ever present companion. It may be a good idea to take a course in basic accounting or finance to help manage the budgetary issues and processes. Many school leaders are weak in the business side of the school process. Remember, you are running a “mini-district” with all the same work.
8. Grow some leather.
When I was in the classroom, I had few enemies. It appeared that everyone liked me. I was cool enough and became close friends with many of my colleagues. As soon as I became a Principal I found that the Teflon began to crack and that my decisions had a larger effect on my co-workers and their lives. I couldn’t make everyone happy anymore and this was difficult at first. Angry at me? I’m a nice guy! I soon realized that I had to grow a bit of leather and be content with making the right decisions, maintaining my respect for all, and understanding that I will be unpopular at times.

ACSI notes: It is challenging for a well-liked person to become a school administrator for this very reason – not everyone will like your decisions (and consequently, you) and the entire faculty will not be your closest friends. There is a natural gulf between teachers and administration, but absorbing some conflict in a Biblical manner will result in respect of you and your position. Don’t take it all personally.

9. Get to know your facility.
I was not blessed with fix-it skills. Just ask my wife. Yet, I have learned the wisdom of knowing what makes your physical plant tick. Do you know where all of the electrical panels are? Where are the shut off valves? What areas of your building are most needing repair? What’s the status of your maintenance plan? I guarantee you, while the Business Administrator or Facilities Director may have responsibility for your facility, no one will care as much or advocate as well as the Principal.

ACSI notes: In the Christian school, the senior leader in the school may also be responsible for all the facility management (depending on school size). Make friends with your janitors and maintenance people. Walk through your school and over the grounds on a regular basis, know where things should be, and set a vision for keeping (or making) the grounds / plant attractive and appealing. It is the first impression many families have of your school.

10. Set fewer and more succinct goals in Year 1.
Your vision for the school won’t be met in one year. Don’t kill your staff with initiatives in year 1 but set goals that can be met with an eye to 3-5 years for longer term goals.

ACSI notes: Getting ONE goal done is better than none of ten. Be cautious in the first year not to implement too many changes (if any). Change, even positive ones, create tension and anxiety. Move cautiously, with clear communication and preparation, in this area.

11. Model great practice.
Be sure that your staff sees you as a learner. When you communicate by written word, include a professional article. Staff meetings should be professional development sessions not informational diatribes. Lift up great practices from your passionate teachers.

ACSI notes: Many school principals don’t realize that THEY set the tone for professional development, for professional behavior (and dress), and for educational leadership. Do what you preach to your staff, be it devotional life, knowledge of the bible, certification, reading, professional development, etc. Set the stage by your own behavior for the staff to follow.

12. Keep your Board in the loop.
Earning the trust of your Superintendent is crucial in your first year. If you make a mistake, admit it to your Sup long before the public or the press find out. As one Superintendent told me, “I don’t like surprises”.

**ACSI notes:** For most Christian school leaders, they are the senior leader in the school. But, keep your board in the loop, and don’t let them be surprised by changes, challenges, or issues. No one in responsibility likes to be “surprised” by things they should have known.

13. Communicate well with your staff and community.

Find your best methods. Utilize podcasts, podcasts, blogs, email lists, and don’t neglect paper when necessary if digital means aren’t working as well as you’d like (especially with the community.) One of the greatest factors in leadership success is communicating one’s vision clearly and consistently.

**ACSI notes:** As the principal, you are the face, the voice, and the key educational leader in the school. If you think you have communicated enough, double that and communicate more. Your people need MORE information, not just enough.

14. Find a mentor.

The Principalship can be a lonely place. If you are in a smaller elementary school you may not have an Assistant Principal, and in that case, you may be an “only”. In addition to tapping your PLN, be sure to find other administrators in your district or outside your area to be there when you have a critical question or simply need to vent. A former Superintendent and Principal of mine were life savers for me in my early years.

**ACSI notes:** Connect with other Christian school leaders in your area or city. Reach out, ask for help, contact ACSI, make connections. Do not let yourself become isolated and disconnected. Initiate some lunches or contacts with others who lead.

15. Schedule yourself to be with students.

Always be out front when the kids arrive and be there when they leave. Ride buses. Play hoop at recess. Walk around and chat with kids during lunch. Get to their competitions outside of school. Play chess with them in your office and modify the stigma of the “Principal’s Office”. Ask them questions during your classroom walk-throughs. Read to them and have them read to you. Let them know that they are the most important part of your school life.

**ACSI notes:** Yep, get out of your office. Be seen, be known, and know your people, kids, parents. Walk through the campus, know the names of kids and parents, introduce yourself and be very visible. It instills confidence and helps you lead better.