

Self-Reflecting for Leadership Gains

AS THE PARADIGMS of public education evolve and sometimes conflict, I have found that a periodic self-assessment of basic leadership principles can keep me grounded and moving forward.

In that spirit, I lately have asked my administrator colleagues to join me in posing 10 questions to promote self-reflection. In building my list below, I included a growth challenge for each query.

I would remind my colleagues that these are intended to be questions that someone asked either of them or about them before they were elevated to a school system leadership position.

► **Am I an effective manager in my realm?** What this question is really asking is: Do I know process? Do I respect process? Do I follow process? Management is all about making processes work and adjusting them to changing circumstances. The growth challenge here is to identify a process that I would like to follow more effectively or improve upon this year.

► **Am I an effective leader in my realm?** Am I able to analyze cause-and-effect relationships? Am I informed on the latest research in my realm? Can I listen to and give feedback to those I supervise in such

a way that their professional practice will improve? How can I tell when I have done an effective job of listening carefully to someone? The growth challenge here is to identify some topic I would like to learn more about this year.

► **Can I tolerate a degree of ambiguity?** Can I accept that many answers are not immediately available nowadays? Indeed, the questions associated with leadership in public education are quickly outnumbering the known answers. The growth challenge here is to identify an area of ambiguity I would really like to clear up this year.

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► **Am I open to advice, assistance and mentoring?** Do I recognize the power of synergy? Do I understand that attempting to go it alone is a mistake even for the most seasoned leaders among us? The growth challenge here is to identify a respected colleague from whom I would seek mentoring this year.

► **Am I self-affirming?** Am I able to recognize, on my own, those aspects of my performance that are laudable? The higher one advances in the leadership hierarchy, the more cautious one needs to be in processing those affirmations that do come. The growth challenge here is to recognize oneself for some worthy deed or trait.

► **Is the mission for children always my primary focus?** Can I recognize and distance myself from the many distractions from our mission? Even though these distractions are often predictable, saying “no” is frequently uncomfortable for public school leaders. The growth challenge here is to identify a distraction I will conquer this year.

► **What is my leadership style?** Am I a people person? Am I collaborative? Do I know how much to empower stakeholders? Do I recognize that leadership is both an art and a science? As the years go by, it becomes easier to forget to reflect on these fundamental questions. The growth challenge here is to describe my leadership style as others would.

► **Am I able to keep confidences?** Do I understand how critical this is for a leader? Am I setting an example and promoting a culture of appropriate boundaries? The growth challenge here is to identify a category of confidences I will especially safeguard.

► **Am I known as a principled leader and decision maker?** What is at the center of my paradigm? What are the true motivators of my day-to-day behavior? The growth challenge here is to identify a vehicle for principled decision making and use it.

► **Can I find joy in my work?** Can I resist our troubling national tendency to squeeze the joy out of every occupation? The growth challenge here is to find some consistent source of joy in my work this year.

Personal Evidence

Every leader is a work in progress when it comes to each of these considerations. The ultimate question is this: Am I committed to the continuous reflection necessary to keep getting better?

In my own ongoing professional growth, I have found these reflective questions provide welcome and valuable structure when confronting the galaxy of random issues that can trouble a district leader. The complexity and potential controversy embedded in so many decisions make each day on the job unique. In contrast, these considerations are timeless and comforting in their familiarity.

I have seen evidence of these reflections affecting the work of leaders in my district. I will hear a supervisor specifically reassuring teachers as we cope with the *ambiguity* of the forthcoming evaluation systems. I will notice my human resources administrator invoke an improved screening *process* while presenting a set of recommended candidates. And leaders frequently reference our district’s vehicle for *principled decision making*, Stephen R. Covey’s *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, as we address matters of conscience.

As for *mentoring*, I am fortunate to work in Maryland because all 24 district superintendents meet monthly for collaboration and insight. And the nine Eastern Shore superintendents conduct their own similarly beneficial monthly gatherings. These frequent opportunities for synergy with respected colleagues are always enlightening as I seek to stay grounded and move forward.

HENRY WAGNER JR. is superintendent of Dorchester County Public Schools in Cambridge, Md. E-mail: wagnerh@dcpmsmd.org

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