

The Defining Qualities of Amazing School Leaders

GDC Team

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School leaders are more than just authority figures. They are also moral figures. Great men and women of authority have always taught valuable moral lessons through belief and action. These are people of few words, and the words they speak lend strength to those around them. This may sound a bit poetic, but there is truth in it. Our school leaders are just such people.



What makes an amazing school leader? What makes them figures of inspiration and empowerment? Why do we trust them and look up to them? Why do we remember them long after our time in school is behind us? They may have different styles, approaches, and mindsets. Nevertheless, there are qualities that they all share.

What Makes School Leaders Great?

There are lots of different things that define effective school leaders. The truth is they need to be more than just effective. Everyone sees different aspects as the most agreeable or beneficial. It's the characteristics above and beyond what's required for their jobs that make them stand out. Let's discuss a few of them below.

They Lead by Example

There used to be an alarming phrase floating around in management circles. It was *do as I say, not as I do*. This certainly doesn't exist in the vocabulary of true leadership. It's a distressing thing to hear from any authority figure. Exceptional school leaders know this better than anyone.

The best school administrators have high expectations of their teachers. They also have high expectations of their students. The highest expectations of all, though, are the ones they have of themselves. They know that under their care, no one can thrive and excel unless they do.

Such is the example they set for everyone around them every day. It's about saying, "we can do it together, and I'll show you how."

They Share an Achievable Vision

Exceptional school leaders are remarkably prudent. They temper the process of [creative visualization](#) with realism. It is their business to understand what is achievable with the resources they have. They must take into account the individual strengths and weaknesses of their team. From there, they delegate as necessary.



They also know how to lead others to go beyond personal boundaries. Not in a way that's detrimental, but in a way that's liberating. They lead the way by focusing on possibilities. People come together willingly under such mindful direction. The only looking back school leaders do is to assess how to continue moving forward.

They Are Problem Solvers

While others are merely reacting, great school leaders *act*. Things are going to go wrong. Money will be scarce or simply not there. Conflicts will arise involving students and staff. Program implementations will have hiccups and glitches. There will be gaps in achievement to be addressed. Resources will be at a premium. A thousand headaches assault administrators of all levels. They always meet these challenges bravely.

Proactive thinking makes a school leader someone we look up to. Empowering others through positive action and careful decision-making is their code.

They waste no time lamenting a lack of funding or any other roadblocks. There is no place for blame or finger-pointing on such a person's agenda. Amazing school leaders are not focused on problems—they're focused on solutions. Their first thoughts in a crisis are things like:

- How do we approach this problem constructively?
- What is the worst-case scenario? If it were to come true, would we still be okay? How would we do it?
- How can we inspire teachers/students in our home corner to rally together?
- Who in the district or community would be willing to help us?
- How can we form these alliances and maintain them for the benefit of all?

They Make Everybody Better

Principals and other school leaders are responsible for ensuring students receive great teaching. They do this by finding, shaping, and holding on to excellent teachers. From there, this standard is passed on from teachers to students.



We learn best by doing, no matter what role we fill at school. Ensuring people become their best happens in two ways. The first is through providing guidance. The second is providing opportunity. As school leaders build up those around them, they give plenty of room for growth and progress.

They Listen Critically

There is a huge difference between listening and simply waiting for your turn to talk. School leaders listen first, always. Communication in any successful organization is a two-way street. Exceptional school leaders know the teachers and students under their care are people with thoughts and opinions.

| *They listen carefully and welcome input from everyone. There isn't a sense of "us" and "them."*

A school leader's door is always open for business. It should be a safe place others can go to express themselves. They field so many concerns and questions from staff, students, and parents. In many respects, listening is one of their highest callings. School leaders listen without judgement, and strive to give the best answers. Feedback is given in a timely, professional, and supportive way.

They are Compassionate and Patient

The cultivation of compassion is crucial in educational settings. This applies to students, teachers, and administrators on every level. In fact, it applies to anyone with any kind of emotional stake in teaching and learning.



School can be stressful for everyone. People are feeling beings, and sometimes we get overwhelmed. As much as we may try to keep it at bay, it happens. This can lead to the need for understanding and support on more than just a professional or academic level. The best school leaders use their hearts as much as their heads.

They Learn From Mistakes and Encourage the Same

Even school leaders make mistakes. The good example they set for others works just as effectively with failure as with success. If something goes wrong, they don't lose their heads. They immediately question where the learning opportunity is in the situation and focus on it diligently. They call upon the support and expertise of those around them.

Their focus is on teamwork, and a willingness to accept failure and move beyond it.

Debrief sessions are all about reflection for progression. The success and progress of their teachers and students matters more than anything to a great school leader. They understand that **useful failure** is a practice that creates the desire to do better. Learning from mistakes is one of the most valuable things we can teach our students.

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