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Line in the Sand: An Essay on Principal-Teacher Relationships

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Academic Leadership Journal

It was a fall Saturday morning, and I was in my Auburn doctoral program monthly seminar where we talked of various topics of interest to our group of 15. Somehow the topic came around to the relationships between teachers and principals. Consensus of the group was that the proverbial *line in the sand* was an inevitable and unchangeable part of being a school principal. I, to the surprise of no one then or now, disagreed. This time I was not playing my well-honed role of Devil's Advocate, I really believed that there was no good or logical reason that there should exist, a barrier between teachers and principals.

I still remember my professor's reaction – he metaphorically fell on the floor in laughter! I did not let my feelings be hurt because this seminar was always a give-and-take that never got personal, and because my professor had also become a dear friend and mentor, but I have not forgotten his response either!

And, he was right. There is a "line in the sand," and though it is not observable, it is nonetheless real, and I now believe, necessary. So get on your Indiana Jones hat, and let's explore this relic in the sands of the relationships between school executives and the teachers who work for them.

Stephen Covey (1989), wrote in *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, that up until the 1970s or so, leadership was based on certain universal principals which, when taken together, demonstrated what we might call **leadership integrity** (my words, not Covey's). Covey called these principles: **True North Principles**. He went on to say that today, leadership is built around a cult of personality, focus group opinions, and polling data, and as a result leadership decisions are too often based on the question: "Will people like my decision, and, therefore, like me?" What this causes is a decision process based, not on the correctness of the decision, but on whether or not people will like the decision. This is a formula for failure whether it occurs in child rearing (where I have seen it demonstrated hundreds of times), classrooms (where it is a formula for out-of-control classes), or in the principal's office (where it creates a decision-making culture whose main attribute is lack of honesty and integrity).

Niccollo Machiavelli (2009) asked the same question. In his day it went like this: **Is it better for a leader to be feared than loved?** In today's leadership language I would translate that this way: **Is it better to be respected than loved?** Machiavelli's flawless logic was that **people fear at the discretion of the leader, but they love at their own whim**, and such love can disappear as quickly as the fog burned away on a sunny morning. Again, in our modern leadership language, **integrity is controlled by the leader's actions. The love of followers is determined by their emotions**. Surely, for President Obama, if nothing else is obvious from the midterm elections of 2010, it is that the same people who loved him two years ago executed a 180 at the polling place on November 2, 2010.

I wrote in a recent online discussion on the **IN*SITE** network (2010), "*Clearly principals should trust teachers, but that trust must be bolstered by transparency and reciprocity. Most issues of trust begin in classrooms, not in principal's office. The line in the sand is drawn, not by principals, but by*

teachers.”

With very few exceptions, and I freely admit that there some, principals have nothing to gain by excavating a line in the sand. With 20 years of experience at the principalship level and above, I think I can pretty accurately speak for principals as a group when I say that the relationship between teachers and principals is governed by the teacher not the principal. Principals cannot make teachers come into their offices and have a dialogue about issues. Interestingly, a corollary to this is that the people who never come to the principal's office are often the very same people to label the principal as unapproachable. Principals cannot be the initiator of friendships; if they are, the teachers are viewed as “pets.” Principals cannot raise the morale of a single person in the building; they can only set the circumstances where people find their own reasons to perform at high levels.

Perhaps the line in the sand is best viewed as a continuum.

Figure 1. *The Line in the Sand Leadership Continuum*

On the far left, the line will be the most blurred, but the effects will be negative not positive. Working conditions may be viewed positively, but student achievement is not commensurate with conditions. Some people will do an excellent job, but the culture of the organization does not encourage collaboration. At the far right, the line will be the most prevalent and the effects are the most negative. Working conditions are not good. Low morale and soldiering (simply getting by until 3:00) is typical. Some people may, in fact, do an outstanding job, but they are isolated from colleagues by the leadership style. The closer one moves toward the middle, the more leadership, not just decision-making, is shared. At this place on the continuum, Elmore (2000) tells us that accountability is equal among all staff members, and collegiality around problems of practice (true Professional Learning Communities) dominates the culture of distributed leadership. There is a line in the sand, because the principal is still the boss, but it neither dominates performance nor negatively affects morale on a routine basis.

True leadership, like courage and commonsense, is just not very common in leadership at any level in any profession today. Leaders need not be Superman or Wonder Woman, just people of honesty, integrity, and common courage who will build school cultures for adults and kids based on True North Principles not Facebook-like Thumbs Up opinions.

I look back on my 30 years in public school leadership frequently, and in my reflecting the loneliness of leadership is a common thread woven in many colors through the fabric of my experiences. I did not like the feeling then or now, but it is a given. Loneliness is the offspring of honesty – especially in the short term. But, when I look on the vestments of my leadership experience – some given, some assumed – I also see golden threads of satisfaction, and I smile, and sigh contentedly.

Questions for Reflection

*Is leadership inherently a lonely job? Is it because of **the line in sand**?*

Have you experienced leadership on the continuum? Are your experiences more red, orange, or green?

Where would you place your current assignment on the continuum? Why?

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