

## Understanding and Coping with *Leadership Blues*

By Lenoar Foster

Three counterbalancing realities confront the contemporary school principal and each one has the capacity to produce psychic highs and lows in the conduct and vision of principals as they lead schools to higher levels of instructional improvement and community engagement. First, contemporary principals are expected to provide an organizational vision that will serve, promote, and advance the agendas of multiple constituencies. Second, previous personal and professional relationships are altered when individuals assume the role of the principal. And third, the work and role of the principal is invariably a lonely enterprise. In far too many principalships, a failure to acknowledge and balance these dissonant realities can result in a type of *leadership blues* that has serious consequences for productive, meaningful, and stable leadership.

*Leadership blues* are personified in principals who feel overwhelmed by the complexity of the work and tasks they have been asked to perform. Energy levels are depleted and a myriad of physical and psychic behaviors threaten the capacity of active and productive leadership. Principals retreat more into their offices and become fixated on performing perfunctory desk-bound activities. Teachers receive less recognition for their hard work and efforts, and a critical and discouraging climate pervades leadership decisions. Paradoxically, the principal enters into a world of disconnections in which the vision and goals of leadership are replaced by the need to keep order and control. In this kind of disconnected reality, March and Weiner (2003) observe that "the primary administrative talent is not one of knowing how to make good decisions but of knowing how to manage impressions, making the institution look good in the eyes of others and creating an illusion of direction and control" (p.11). Such a context can be fertile ground for the maintenance and perpetuation of the status quo in which leadership acquiesces to the very dysfunctional environment that protects itself from change. In the worst outcome, principals "consider leaving the field entirely or request classroom teaching assignments" (Adams, 1999). And, perhaps in the most insidious outcome, some principals fail to detect how *leadership blues* have diminished their agency and capacity, and find themselves maintaining a "pretense of confidence and strength, even when feeling uncertain and weak . . . it [becomes] better to shift attention than to confront criticism" (March & Weiner, 2003, p.11). Significantly, as March and Weiner (2003) further observe, "the best strategy for an ambitious administrator is to depict oneself as the champion of uncontroversial changes to observers on campus

while appearing to eyes outside the campus as having engineered controversial changes in efficiency" (p. 11). This strategic leadership posture staves off further internal and external confrontations and lessens the ability of the principal to advance the cause of productive change for the school at large. Indeed, the illusion of progress may for a time be embraced by the very school constituencies which welcomed the leader's initial clarion call for a new vision. Ultimately, however, this illusion has only short term value and utility, and followers become disillusioned as the stance, action, and inaction of the principal becomes increasingly viewed as infrastructure for the status quo.

The reality of the disconnected and conflicted world in which principals seek to advocate, empower, and exercise leadership is fraught with internal and external dimensions of positivity and negativity that challenge psychic and physical powers and energies. These two dimensional polarities challenge the individual psychic and body electric of principals to make meaning of personal commitment and direction in the face of certain and uncertain demands. When principals lack individual capacity and fail to accomplish this important task in an efficient manner and on a consistent basis, they fail. The leadership literature is replete with reasons to justify that failure: the complex task of creating a school-wide vision, long hours of work, workload and complexity of the job, feelings of being overwhelmed with very high expectations, state and district mandates that require "mountains" of paperwork, and increasingly complex societal and social problems intruding upon the world of the school (Hertling, 2001; Richard, 2000; Yerkes & Guaglianone, 1998).

The suggestions and solutions proffered by the world of practice, while practical at some level, often fail to provide a meaningful context in which to deconstruct *leadership blues* because the leadership demands and energies are merely transferred, instead of changed. Suggestions include redesign and organization structure of the job of principal, reinvention of the role of the principal by reallocating administrative duties and tasks, job sharing, a rotating principalship, or upgrading the role and work of the assistant principal. Others propose increased levels of professional development aimed at increasing interpersonal and decision-making skills, education of the community about the demanding role of the principal in order to garner increased support, financial support for sabbaticals for burned-out principals, creation of family-friendly environments that support and accommodate the personal lives of principals, or perhaps, creation of financial incentives that reward the complex work of principals (Davis, 1997; Doud & Keller, 1998; Langer &

Boris-Schacter, 2003; Muffs & Schmitz, 1999; Richard, 2000; Rooney, 2000; Yerkes & Guaglianone, 1998).

The onset of *leadership blues*, in many instances, may signal both a failure and a sense of failure of principals to actualize their continuing vision for an educational environment of positive, nurturing, and empowering outcomes. This is a reality at both the personal and institutional levels. While the occurrence of some aspects of *leadership blues* is associated with the onset of stress and anxiety factors associated with health concerns (Carr, 1994), this same framework can be embraced in a positivistic fashion to warn principals of their possible tendencies to let their visions erode over time. That is, the onset of *leadership blues* can signal the need for principals to re-cultivate, re-define, and re-cast their visions in meaningful ways that energize their followers to embrace change and improvement (Searcy, Hall, & Edwards, 2000).

The recasting of a vision must embrace logical, epistemological, and ethical considerations for the ultimate purposes of schooling, as well as the role and purpose of a principal's leadership initiatives in this process over time. Leadership education and professional development programs can assist aspiring and practicing principals to use *leadership blues* as a frame for improvement. Imagine a time when principals could embrace the reality of this phenomenon as a sign of strength of practice rather than as a weakness. That is, *leadership blues* should be viewed as a natural occurrence which, if recognized and handled appropriately, can be used to help principals counter "unrealistic expectations about their jobs, their associates, and themselves" (March & Weiner, 2003, p.10). Such individual capacity has the potential to reorient school leaders in new directions because of their ability to see *leadership blues* as an opportunity to "get below business as usual and chart a new and better course" (Searcy, Hall, & Edwards, 2000). Embracing what might appear to be a negative construct in order to derive a positive outcome requires that principals be able to use "contradictory strategies that either separate or integrate their personal and professional lives" (Langer & Boris-Schacter, 2003, p. 15).

Response to *leadership blues* is an important orientation and skill set that preparation programs must incorporate into the education and training of future principals. The strategy represents a counterintuitive approach to handling various stressors inherent in leadership and for renewing leadership capacity at institutional or personal levels of performance. The changing nature and scope of contemporary leadership in schools require

principals who are psychically skilled and physically able to survive uncertain and sporadic adversity and to transform it into opportunities for continued growth, development, and success for their school communities. Wolverton, Wolverton & Gmelch (2002) observe,

Stressors take the form of opportunities, constraints, or demands that are related to personal or organizational goals, where the outcome is thought to be both uncertain and important. Job satisfaction results when an individual's response matches the stressor that requires a solution and the level of stress experienced tends toward optimum.... Stress and job satisfaction occur in the here and now; job satisfaction captures the essence of past encounters with stress (pp. 102, 103).

It is difficult to be a successful school leader and even harder to sustain successful leadership that continually inspires, supports, nurtures, and empowers others towards learning, growth, development, and excellence. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) observe that sustained and successful leaders "renew their own energy by attending to their own learning . . . and are emotionally open about their mistakes as well as their triumphs" (p. 268). Understanding and coping with the *leadership blues* provides an opportunity for school leaders to constantly reassess their own learning in the pursuit of leading others to success and excellence. Inevitably, such skills sustain and energize on-going and positive leadership.

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