



What makes a great principal?

Miro Martin

You don't have to be a champion tennis player to be a champion tennis coach. I may not have been a great principal, but I believe that my 18 years of experience as a principal gives me some idea of what makes a great principal.

Making a difference – longevity, popularity, sartorial elegance and, in my case, good looks and modesty, all mean nothing if you have not made a positive difference in your community. This difference covers many areas including physical improvement of facilities, academic achievement, reputation of the school, morale, innovation and school climate. Maintaining the status quo doesn't make you great. Some principals spend years in lovely school communities and they are highly regarded because they have never rocked the boat. They have kept under the radar, always had their paper work done on time and have never been brought to the attention of their supervisors. Some of them have never actually done anything noteworthy. I guess there's a place for these principals. Some staffs and communities like things just the way they are. Each principal has his or her strengths and may be great in one school and a flop in another. It's often a case of choosing horses for courses. There are, however, certain aspects of greatness that I believe relate to all principals in all situations.

Communication skills – a great principal is someone who can communicate clearly with all members of the school community. Communication is a two-way process and involves listening as well as speaking. Listening is not just a matter of sitting quietly and nodding in an understanding manner when someone is speaking to you. It also involves being intuitive and gauging the mood or body language of the community. A great principal makes sure that information is readily available and in a format that is easily and clearly understood by all members of the community. A great principal clearly articulates his vision and expectations. Communication is not all about information and knowledge. It also involves empathy and sensitivity. A great principal can offer a shoulder to cry on for a bereaved staff member or congratulate a student for an achievement. He instinctively knows when it's a good time to reproach a staff member or introduce a new or unpopular initiative. This principal knows his clientele. Ideally, he

knows people by name and goes the extra mile to get the whole story about a student or staff member before making decisions that may have serious consequences. Good communication avoids ambiguity. Great principals make decisions based on what's good for the school, not what's popular. They don't try to please everyone, but display diplomacy in the way they deliver their decisions. They are consistent.

Temperament – I have come across some dreadful principals in my time. Some were feared because they were tyrannical. Some had dreadful tempers and were defensive or unapproachable. Some were weak as water and would do anything to avoid confrontation. I believe that the great principals have self-control over their own temperament. There are many times I would have liked to smack a parent or staff member in the mouth or tell them exactly what I thought of them. Fortunately I had fairly good control over my Italian blood. The gas bottle analogy – a barbecue salesman once told me that, if a gas bottle ever caught fire, you should never try to put it out because you would inevitably get burned. You should simply wait for it to burn itself out. It's amazing how many times this technique has worked for me when I have had an irate parent or staff member in my office. Eventually they will run out of fire and you will get a chance to speak. Remaining calm and not getting flustered are important assets for the great principal.

Making the tough decisions – Swallowing the Frog – an experienced principal once told me about a fraternity initiation rite she came across in America. To get into a particular fraternity students had to do the usual misdemeanours such as egging the lecturer's car or letting the air out of their tyres. One of the tasks was also swallowing a live frog. Most students managed all their pranks but failed when they got to the frog. Those who succeeded were the ones who tackled the frog first. This anecdote served me well during my time as principal. I found that if I got the toughest task out of the way first then the rest of the day seemed easy by comparison. It isn't a good idea to procrastinate where tough decisions are concerned. Great leaders have the ability to know just how long they should wait before making a decision. Decisions made in haste can be just as bad as those made after lengthy periods of procrastination.

Credibility – you have to know what you're talking about. Early on in my career I worked in a religious order school where the principal was a cleric

with no teacher training or teaching experience. To say that she made some poor decisions is a major understatement. Many teachers, including myself, left because we could not carry out her instructions with a clear conscience. One of my strengths as a principal was that I had taught every primary grade from kindergarten to Year 7 before I became a principal. I had planned lessons and interacted with children of all ages. After becoming a principal I made time to visit classrooms regularly and I also taught lessons, sang songs or told stories to the children. This was a huge advantage when I sat down with staff to discuss their own planning or how to deal with the children. I also kept up-to-date with the curriculum even after I stopped teaching. I kept studying throughout my career and attended many refresher courses. And, of course, being a writer for *Education Today* certainly gave me great credibility. My wife says that I'm a legend in my own lunchtime.

Recognising talent – delegation would come into this area. Not even a legend can do it all himself. A great principal is able to recognise the talent and strength of his staff and, indeed, the whole community. This principal not only identifies the talent but also provides opportunities for this talent to develop and be expressed. I have given many examples of this in previous articles, e.g. At one of my schools we needed someone with computer expertise. No one was available but two staff expressed an interest to learn. I simply found timetable and budget opportunities for both these teachers to attend training. In a short time we had teachers who were confident and capable of leading the other staff in this area. At the same school I encouraged an experienced teacher to take charge of the curriculum area. She was reluctant at first but then became very enthusiastic and competent as she gained experience and knowledge in the area. One of

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the greatest innovations I experienced, "The Gold Class" about which I have written a great deal, was a result of two teachers coming to me with a proposal in response to a problem we had with some high needs students. All I did was clear the path and provide the vehicle. They did the rest.

Thinking outside the square – I mentioned in my last article that I valued this quality above all others in a teacher. The same applies to principals. If you can forgive a bit of self-indulgence I'd like to use an episode in my personal life to make a point about education. I am currently in Germany undergoing a cancer treatment called hyperthermia. It is not available in Australia. There are many case studies pointing to the success of this treatment e.g. go to <http://au.tv.yahoo.com/sunrise/video/-/watch/27631846/> This video clip was featured on Channel 7 Sunrise earlier this year. Australian doctors, like allopaths all over the world, have been indoctrinated into believing that only chemicals, radiation and surgery can treat cancer. Pharmaceutical companies that control multi-trillion dollar industries have a mortgage on all doctors' training and medical knowledge. Alternatives are a threat to business and are stamped out wherever possible. These forms of treatment are considered 'witchcraft' or quackery. As a result, people like me are made to feel like fools if we dare to seek help outside the traditional medical fraternity. There are patients here in Germany with me at present who have told me that hyperthermia is actually against the law in their country and that doctors risk being struck off if they practise or recommend it. I see a close parallel with education. The national curriculum and NAPLAN have now made education so rigid and controlled that most principals who want to remain employed

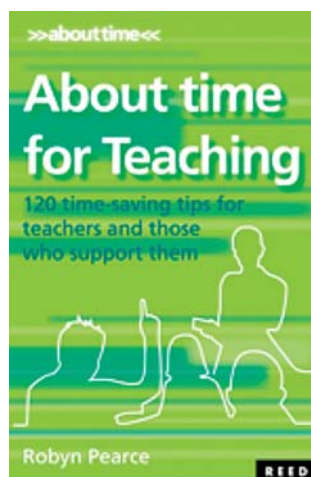
would not dream of trying something innovative. Thinking outside the square is heresy. If you want to be promoted, get funding, get enrolments, etc., you have to get good NAPLAN scores. The community is being indoctrinated into believing that these scores are all that matters. I had several families enrol their children at my school simply on the basis of our NAPLAN results that were available on the internet. Principals are restricted by the curriculum, NAPLAN and 'the system.' Great principals don't go against the system. Their moment of greatness would be short lived if they did. Great principals work within the system but have entrepreneurial and sales skills that allow them to implement their ideas without standing out in the crowd. Great principals question new initiatives and don't just implement them because they do what they're told. In short, great principals have a spine and will stand up to the establishment if they disagree with something and are faithful to their beliefs.

I haven't even scratched the surface of what makes a great principal. Intelligence, rapport, eloquence, formal qualifications, life experience, sense of humour, courage, fitness, enthusiasm, sense of mission, humility, vocation... the list would go on and on. I don't think a great principal needs to be 100% altruistic. You need to have some ego driving you. The great principal is good but not God. Sure, you are the one in charge and you have great power and authority but being a despot or narcissist is not part of the deal. It's all about what is best for the children and the community. **ET**



Miro Martin retired at the end of 2011. His plans for 2012 include continuing to write for *Education Today*.

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