

# Putting the three I's: Inspiration, Instruction and Improvement, Before the three P's: Politics, Paperwork and Parents

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## **Background That Led to Your Inquiry:**

Before journeying into a principal position, I was an instructional coach. With the skills I was able to hone as a coach for 2 buildings, I believed and know I was a strong instructional leader, ready to help engage teachers in rigor and improvement. I lead professional development, trained small groups and whole staffs weekly. I knew being an instructional leader was an important piece of the principalship puzzle, but little did I know how encompassing the managerial part of the position would be.

In my second year of administration, I felt myself become completely overwhelmed and puzzled with the politics, parents, and paperwork of the position, and began losing ground with being the instructional leader I wanted to be. Therefore, the purpose of my action research was to create a plan to build instructional leadership into my school day, and return myself to the leader I wanted to be.

## **Statement of Your Wondering:**

With this purpose, I wondered how can I find the balance between a strong instructional leader and a complete manager.

## **Methods/Procedures:**

To gain insights into my wonderings, I first chose to distinguish between what was "instructional" and what was "managerial" within my job of principal. I need to discern between the two in order to gain insight to where my time was most spent. I created a T-chart and began listing my duties (meetings, emails, evaluations) between the two areas. It was important to choose one or the other for each duty. Only in 2 major tasks did I allow to have in both: School Improvement Plan(ning) and Staff Collaborations. These could easily be both at the same time.

Next, I asked for guidance from the people I know that have handled the principal's position well. I sent a questionnaire to 6 important leaders in my district (Superintendent, Asst. Superintendents, other veteran principals). I asked them 4 questions: 1.) What are some techniques you used to minimize the drag of managerial duties during the school day? 2.) Did you set aside times for certain tasks in you day? How often and how long of time? 3.) Is there anything in particular you did to become a better instructional leader for your staff? 4.) What advice do you have for principals looking for a balance between the two? Ultimately, how did you do it? I reviewed their responses to see the ideas and techniques they used, could work for me. I also started to read, The Ten-Minute Inservice by Todd Whitaker and Annette Beraux. I knew my instructional piece was lacking, and wanted to start on that immediately.

After placing all of my duties into the T-chart, I started analyzing my day. For 4 weeks, I logged my hours and calculated how I spent my day, every day. Keeping my planner with me, I wrote down how I spent my day

(ex.: 8-8:45- 2nd grade Close Reading meeting). At the end of each day, I typed it out and discern if the task was managerial or instructional in nature. I didn't realize how much time I was actually spending on managerial duties. At the end each week, my average school-day time logged on instructional duties was 28%, and on managerial duties was 72%. I thought this could be right, so I looked at my whole time spent during the weeks, not just the school hours. It was worse: 26% instructional and 74% managerial. The results caused me to go back and analyze my weeks. I began to question: Did I really that much time doing that? Did I only devote that much time to that important task?

### **Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:**

As a result of analyzing my data 3 important things I learned include: 1.) I was spending too much time on managerial duties. 2.) I need to streamline my tasks. 3.) I need to prioritize my duties.

I knew I was spending too much time on managerial items, but the data showed the significance of my time spent. My suspicions were confirmed. I'm spending too much time on the salad, and not enough on the turkey and potatoes! When you're thinking about a Thanksgiving meal, what's the most important? It's not the cranberry salad that Aunt Mabel made. I realized that many of my managerial duties could be shared across personnel in the office so I could get to cooking the turkey! I turned over various tasks to our Client Relations and Technology Specialist, to our Secretary, and Student Assistance Specialist.

After reading many of my responses from the questionnaire, one item kept resounding, I needed to streamline my tasks. All of the responses I received referred to scheduling limits. In order for a task to be completed, schedule a time limit, and do your best to make that time limit stick. When creating a time limit for the task, it creates a sense of urgency for the task to be completed and to move on.

I thought I prioritized my time, but it wasn't until I looked at my logs, and reread my questionnaire responses that I realized I wasn't prioritizing at all. I started to question my logged time: Was that incident a true emergency and needed my attention/time right then? Did I need to respond to those emails immediately or could they have waited? Many of my responses on the questionnaires restated the need for making a list and sticking to it. Also, prioritizing the list with 1, 2, 3 or A, B, C was offered. I questioned how many times my list was interrupted, and was it a true interruption.

### **Providing Concluding Thoughts:**

Upon thinking about my action research cycle, I proved that I am a continuous learner. There is always something to improve upon; and the day I say I'm done improving is the day I need to be done with being in education. I learned that my teachers need more turkey and potatoes and less salad from me. They need instructional improvement, not necessarily continuous parental deferment or intervention. Taking these reflections to heart, I implemented a few key insights from my action research, and found my week to be spent 45% on instruction and 55% on managerial duties. I affirmatively realized that I could do this. It was attainable. I can be the instructional leader I want to be. I have realized I need to implement more of the questionnaire ideas/ thoughts further and I need to log my activities once in a while throughout the school year to double check myself.

This action research cycle makes me wonder about the tools that are out there to help administrators streamline and prioritize their duties. Are there systems that work? I also wonder about how I could measure the impact of changes I've made to my day. I wonder how I could measure the differences between the days where my tasks are on managerial overload versus instructional surplus.

In order to make a difference, I need to be a change-maker. When I make a change, I model that change is good and we can all use a good change. It's important for administrators to live action research out in the open. It's collaborative to discuss with not only other administrators, but with teachers about my wonderings and thoughts. It affirms to my staff that I am wanting, trying, implementing, and analyzing what I can do that's better for kids. When my staff sees my thinking, not only hears it, but sees my logs, sees the books I'm reading, sees my goals out in the open, they want me to succeed too. They converse with me, ask me questions about it, and want to know if there's anything they can do. Those conversations can help change "backbone" teachers into "superstar" teachers (as Todd Whitaker would say.) And can change a "backbone" principal, into a superstar.

### **References:**

Whitaker, T., & Breaux, A. (2013). *The Ten-Minute Inservice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.