

## Chapter 10

# Fallibility

**Developed through life experience rather than by attending a university class on school administration for twelve consecutive Thursday nights, character is manifested by one's ability to give and get respect. A principal who lacks this ability will fail.**

For children to learn, they must feel free to try new things. In an effective mathematics class, for example, children are encouraged to explore every solution without penalty. The desired atmosphere is one of encouragement and teamwork—youngsters help each other and never deride others or make fun of failed attempts. Moreover, the teacher must be willing to make attempts and admit mistakes. Values are taught through modeling appropriate behaviors rather than by direct instruction.

For teachers to admit their fallibility requires school leaders to do the same. The chain of influence that creates a school climate—whether positive or negative—starts with the principal, influences the teachers, and impacts the children. A principal who believes that there are no dumb questions, only better solutions, helps develop a positive school learning climate. A school leader who engages in simple honesty regarding his or her own mistakes engenders the same responses in everyone else. Admitting errors is a sign of strength; reluctance to show fallibility is a sign of weakness.

It is not difficult for a school leader to determine whether he or she has created a positive school climate. One indicator of such a learning atmosphere is that teachers, acting in a professional and courteous way, feel free to criticize. If the principal is open to suggestions, he or she inevitably will receive them. Conveying the concept that all wisdom does not reside at the top creates a second benefit: school staff members feel as if “we are all in this together.” A good idea, a better way, or even a workable solution can come from any source.

## Star Principals' Ideology

An effective leader must have an ideology characteristic of star principals in schools serving children in poverty. This ideology derives from a set of beliefs that predispose the principal to act in certain ways. Without the undergirding ideology, the actions themselves would be hollow behaviors. They could not be influential unless they represented the principal's true beliefs. Conversely, the principal's genuine beliefs would be of no value if they were not also translated into actions that bring them to life. The ideology combines both a set of beliefs and a set of actions demonstrating them.

Where and how does such an ideology develop? Beliefs result from individuals reflecting upon and extracting learnings from their life experiences. Formal university training may teach examples of leadership behaviors, but it is unlikely to transmit the belief system that must undergird it. Training can only be of value if the candidates have been carefully screened and selected as individuals predisposed to believe the ideology of star principals. It is possible to train candidates with the appropriate beliefs to perform in ways star principals do. Without such selection, the formal training of school administrators is essentially a set of university courses that does not predict future behavior of those certified as leaders.

## A Question of Training

Does graduate training in educational administration improve U.S. schools? Haller, Brent, and McNamara (1997), researchers engaged in training school administrators, set out to answer that question. First, they discovered that the United States is one of few countries requiring graduate training for school administrators. An examination of other industrialized countries without such requirements, however, revealed that U.S. schools are not administered any better. Second, though private schools fair better than public schools, most have no formal requirements for administrator training. Third, the educators examined qualitative data from a professor of school administration. For example, asked if he had used the theories and concepts he taught at the university, the professor was forced to answer "no." Fourth, they surveyed practicing principals about the value of formal preparation on actual practice and found that more experienced principals were more dissatisfied with the training. In fact, all principals surveyed noted many irrelevancies in professional training. Fifth, upon examining specific attempts to connect principals' training and practice, they found no correlation between how principals were rated in training and in practice. Haller et al. (1997, 227) concluded the