

The Crossroads: Confronting Ethical Dilemmas within the School Setting

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Discussion

Today's school administrator must have a wide range of skills and a broad knowledge base in order to function successfully while meeting the demands placed on him or her by the needs of the students, the desires of the parents and the requirements of the state and federal governments. It is a balancing act of personnel, resources and human relations that ebb and flow day to day or even hour to hour. Yet even mastering the ability to recognize these issues and circumstances is not enough for administrators to be successful leaders. The strong leader not only manages these situations but is also able to lead personnel through a shared vision towards a common goal or objective. Furthermore, a successful leader is able to accomplish all of these things without sacrificing the professional ethics that they hold true. The professional ethics of the leader serve as a sort of compass that guides the leader through difficult decisions concerning what is best for the child (Shapiro & Stefkovitch, 2005) while balancing the needs and the concerns of the organization. Unfortunately, there are times when school leaders are put into situations to act in ways which would contradict their personal ethics and thus, they must decide whether their position and employment within the organization are more important than their ethics and beliefs.

"Being responsible sometimes means pissing people off" (Powell, n.d., p.2)

Managing the various factors within a school setting is a difficult endeavor. Many times, the issues involved stir passions within those involved due to the nature of schooling. Parents are understandably protective of their children and will contest those activities and decisions that they deem harmful to their children. The emotional concerns of teachers must also be continually taken into account as changes in programs or resources will directly affect their jobs. Local school boards hold a significant authority over school administrators; hence, their opinions should also be taken into account. However, trying to please each group of constituents while effectively directing an academic institution is not always possible. If a school leader holds to professional ethics, the primary concern should not be towards placating those around him or her, but rather, making the best decisions for the students, regardless of whether or not all will be pleased with the situation.

"Real courage is being scared to death and saddling up anyway" (Owen, 2004, p. 28)

Like many leaders, there are times when administrators are confronted with situations in which their personal ethics are challenged. In one case study, Anthony Savedra¹, a principal of a small rural school, was faced with just such a decision. As the new leader of a school which had undergone continual administrative turnover over the past nine years, Savedra was in his second year as principal after barely surviving the first. The first year was marked with problems learning the culture of the new district, and its politics, and establishing new relationships with a new staff. Furthermore, relationships with the governing board and key members within the community were strained by what was seen by them as apathy towards issues they viewed as important. By the mid point of his second year, the school had begun making a change. Attitudes within the school were changing, professional development was being conducted with a purpose and goals which were shared, and communication between Savedra and the staff had improved. The superintendent of the district had had ongoing conversations with key staff members to gauge their feelings concerning the school. They indicated that they were happy with the direction that the school was headed as well as with the growth of Savedra. Throughout the year, Savedra and the superintendent had short discussions about his growth as principal and whether or not any board members had shared any new concerns. Each time the board members were discussed, Savedra did not indicate concerns. For this reason, it came as a surprise to Savedra when the superintendent acknowledged that the board was unpredictable, that he himself did not know how much longer he would be around and he encouraged Savedra to use his current position as leverage for a position in a larger district. Even after Savedra indicated that he was happy with the students, the staff and the direction that the school was headed, the superintendent stated that it is always best to be in control of one's own future. The superintendent added that Savedra had a bright future that could be made easier by leaving the micromanagement in which the members of the board engaged. At this point, Savedra had to decide whether he would try to stay and see through the projects and programs that had been started or avoid the problems by leaving for another area in hopes of working with a less intrusive board.

"Know where to draw the line" (Owen, 2004, p. 62)

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005) describe and compare the ethics of care, justice, critique and professionalism in *Ethical Leadership and Decision Making in Education*. They describe the ethic of care as placing students as the primary concern in all decision making. In contrast with the ethic of care, the ethic of justice is focused on laws and the interests of the society rather than on the interests and needs of the individual. The ethic of critique challenges us to re-examine or challenge the norm and to be more reflective on our own decisions to judge whether or not we have been true to our values. Shapiro and Stefkovich focus primarily on professional ethics and how they are related to the other three ethics. Central to Shapiro and Stefkovich's theme of professional ethics for school administrators is the idea that its true purpose is to act in the "best interests of the student" (p. 25). Not surprisingly, none of the ethical models presented focuses upon taking care of one's own needs and interests before those of others. Furthermore, the utilitarian model of ethics would dictate that the interests of the individual should be sacrificed for the good of the whole (Hinman, 2001). Therefore, it is reasonable that Savedra decided that the best and most "ethical" thing to do was to continue in a position where the

working conditions might not be ideal, but where a positive difference was being made for staff and students.

It would have been very easy for Savedra to leave, for he did not live in the community and drove nearly an hour each day just to get to work. However, a significant amount of work and effort had been placed on establishing a set of goals and a vision for the school and progress was being made. If he had decided to leave, not only would he be leaving the school to look for its third administrator in 5 years, but the teachers and students would have to go through the entire process of program establishment again. During his short tenure on site there had been a change which resulted in all parties working together towards common goals. In his mind he judged it to be unethical to leave simply to avoid possible problems with a handful of people.

"Always finish what you start" (Owen, 2004, p. 34)

Savedra's decision followed the Utilitarian approach to ethics as described in the Markkula Center article from 2005 written by Velasquez, et al. (p. 2). The article outlines several approaches to ethics but describes the Utilitarian approach as following a series of steps before making a decision that "provides the greatest good for the greatest number" (p. 2). Savedra analyzed the situation and judged that while he believed he would be able to acquire a similar job elsewhere, he was happy where he was and was making a positive impact for others. This is not to say that Savedra's decision is the correct ethical decision for all and that this example should be used as a guide for others who find themselves at an ethical "crossroads." Savedra's decision was influenced by many factors, including his upbringing, experience level, confidence level, the support of those he held in high regard, and his own personal ethics and values. Others in similar situations may not come to the same conclusions, nor should they be faulted for not doing so. We all have to make difficult decisions at some point. The key is to base those decisions on some sort of ethical philosophy. If you can still look yourself in the mirror in the morning and smile, you probably chose well.

Notes

1. Names of persons and/or places have been changed.

References

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