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Setting your mind on mentoring: Help on offer to protégé school principals

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Setting your mind on mentoring

Help on offer to protégé school principals

Picture the scene. You are a school principal and new to the job. You have the relevant educational qualifications, confidence in your abilities and intention to do a good job, yet are aware of the daunting task ahead and perhaps even afraid that there may be inadequacies in your preparedness for the difficult road before you.

New principals have many stressful adjustments to make at the beginning of their new role, including the need to master technical skills, address demands from an array of constituents, overcome any feelings of inadequacy, adapt to the fast pace of schools and also deal with the isolation that is often felt when tackling the high-stakes challenges of public education.

It has been claimed that principal leadership accounts for about 20 per cent of the school's impact on student achievement, second only to the impact of teachers. The past decade has brought increased accountability pressures on principals, along with demands to demonstrate instructional leadership that results in continuous improvement in student outcomes. In fact, almost all studies about successful school improvement point to the need for strong, academically-focused principal leadership. New principals, however, are often "thrown in at the deep end".

Fortunately, for some, there are lifejackets available – in the form of mentoring. In the USA, at least 32 states mandate new principal mentoring through legislation or policy. School districts have responded with mentoring programs for new principals, either following models set by their respective states or by creating their own.

No longer a concept of all-wise sage and passive recipient

However, this vital support strategy offered in the form of professional mentoring by experienced principals, comes with a proviso – the protégé principal needs to have a mentoring "mindset" to benefit from the advice and assistance being offered. One foundational tenet of mentoring is that it should be viewed as a learning partnership between the mentor and protégé. While a mentor brings wisdom and experience from years in the job, newcomers to the profession bring fresh ideas gleaned from experiences as students in a pre-service preparation program and as teacher leaders, as well as expectations that they will learn as they go.

The concept of the mentor as all-wise sage and the protégé as a passive recipient of the mentor's wisdom is changing to the new paradigm of the protégé as initiator of the relationship and the one responsible for setting the learning goals for the mentoring

partnership. It would benefit a new principal to know how to enter the mentoring relationship with the proper mindset, but there is limited research on what constitutes that essential mentoring mindset.

In an attempt to better understand how a protégé needs to be prepared for mentoring relationships, Searby (2014), an Associate Professor in the Educational Leadership Program at Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama, formulates and describes a protégé mentoring mindset framework, explaining: “The mentoring mindset of a protégé is a construct arising from those protégé attitudes, behaviors and competencies that enable the protégé to embrace the mentoring process and maximize the benefits of the mentoring relationship.”

For example, does the protégé take or lack initiative – i.e. institute contact with the mentor as a confident self-starter who takes mentoring seriously, or only respond when the mentor initiates or when in crisis, who lacks drive and motivation, merely going through the motions and wanting the mentor to say what to do? Does the protégé exhibit or lack curiosity, ask good questions or adopt a “know it all” attitude? Does he or she accept or reject feedback graciously or stubbornly refuse to accept weaknesses?

Opposing notions indicate absence or presence of essential mindset

Does he or she have – or lack – vision in setting goals, prioritizing time, organizing and seeing the big picture? Does the protégé demonstrate an ability – or lack of ability – to build relationships, use networks, pick up on social cues, to be an active listener, to keep confidences? Can he or she learn from mistakes and articulate effectively? Do they withhold sharing or are they transparent and forthcoming?

Such opposing concepts can, Dr Searby maintains, be indicators of the presence or absence of a mentoring mindset and consequently offer information that can be used to consider a person’s readiness for mentoring, openness to the process and the potential for benefiting from the mentoring relationship. Her study identified the following characteristics as those which mentors deemed as indicators of the presence of a mentoring mindset: taking initiative, having a learning orientation, having a goal orientation, being relational and being reflective. Those lacking a mentoring mindset demonstrated opposite characteristics: lacking initiative, lacking a learning orientation, lacking goal orientation, lacking relational skills, and being non-reflective.

It is worth noting that in some pairings of mentor and protégé, there are not compatible personalities, which might be a critical factor in producing productive mentoring relationships. For example, while the characteristic of being “open” is identified in the framework as a desired attitude, lack of openness could be a manifestation of a shy personality or of a “closed mind” – a disposition that could be improved upon. So, care must be taken to avoid using the framework characteristics in a way that sends out the message “everyone must look like this”. In fact, the author suggests that a very practical exercise for the use of her framework would be to present it to a group of aspiring new principals, and asking them to categorize which positive mindset characteristics are “teachable” or can be improved upon with mentoring support, information and practice;

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and which characteristics are more functions of personality and, therefore, less likely to change.

Keywords:

Professional development,
Educational leadership,
Competency assessment,
Adult learning,
Mentoring mindset,
Protégé competencies

Comment

This review is based on “The Protégé Mentoring Mindset: a framework for consideration” by Linda J. Searby. The purpose of the research was to define the phenomenon of a “mentoring mindset” in new school principals, as described by their mentors, and to identify the characteristics of those who are poised to receive the maximum benefits from a mentoring relationship.

Reference

Searby, L.J. (2014), “The protégé mentoring mindset: a framework for consideration”, *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, Vol. 3 No. 3, pp. 255-276.

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