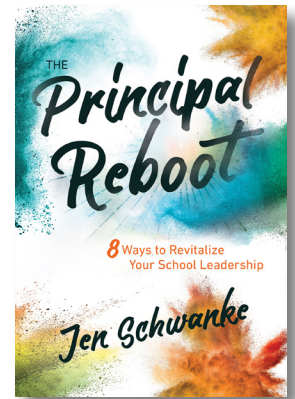


ASCD® LEADERSHIP SUMMARIES for EDUCATORS

The Principal Reboot

8 Ways to Revitalize Your School Leadership

by Jen Schwanke



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

In today's constantly changing landscape, even the most dedicated, talented, and experienced principals can face challenges that leave them feeling lost and overwhelmed. Despite their best efforts and a true belief in the importance of their work, their enthusiasm may begin to diminish as the many demands of the job begin to get in the way of seeing the incredible rewards. Soon, the energy that propelled these principals early in their careers seems nowhere to be found.

In *The Principal Reboot*, you'll discover some of the most important tools, strategies, and inspiration that will help you rediscover your passion for being a principal—and new ways to be more effective than ever before. From creating a fresh new vision for your school to building more powerful and lasting relationships with your staff members and students, to establishing a more meaningful place in your school's community, to improving instruction, leadership, and the use of data, you'll find actionable strategies for rebooting your work as a principal and helping your school succeed as a result.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to define your school's values and mission through rebranding.
- How to strengthen relationships with staff, students, and community.
- How to lead renewed efforts to improve instruction.
- How to develop teacher leadership.
- How to use data effectively and innovatively and improve operational procedures.



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Introduction

This book is meant to provide ideas, inspiration, and support for principals as they navigate school leadership in an ever-changing world. Together, we'll cover eight key areas to reboot your leadership, including rebranding your school with renewed values and mission; reconnecting with your school and community; reinvesting in relationships with students and staff; revamping instructional leadership; reenvisioning teacher leadership; reframing your approach to growth and achievement data; and revisiting your school's operational practices. In the final chapter we'll look at why taking time for yourself to relax, rediscover, and revive can bring you back to the joyful, satisfied, successful principal you aspire to be.

It's a long career. There's no reason it shouldn't also be fruitful and satisfying.

Rebrand

We've all had that moment when we are working away at a task—alone, with a team of teachers, or with a group of students—and we are struck with this question: What are we even trying to do here?

As any principal knows, it is easy to unwittingly lose focus and purpose—within ourselves, certainly, but also with our entire school community. We may assume we are moving in the right direction, because we are assiduously setting goals and creating improvement plans, but we can't be sure. There's no real way to know—not without an endpoint to guide us.

Why?

Rarely does a restaurant have a published mission statement. There is no need, really; it is obvious to employees and customers alike: *A restaurant's purpose is to provide a comfortable dining experience, good food, and appropriate experience-to-value. A restaurant should also be financially profitable.* Diners come in, order, eat, enjoy their experience, and walk away feeling that they had a good meal for an appropriate price. Restaurant employees cook the food, deliver it, clean up afterward, and care for the diners; in return, they earn tips and compensation. It is an easily recognizable give-and-take. Mission accomplished.

Schools are more complicated. Each teacher carries a differing philosophy and sense of purpose; some have years of experience, whereas others have mere months. Consequent-

ly, a school's teaching staff is comprised of a wide range of college or postgraduate training approaches.

Principals are hired to lasso all these components together and keep the school moving forward toward the same goal. Sounds simple, but *simple* doesn't mean *easy*. It's teaching students to read, write, and compute while developing habits of collaboration and communication. It's developing the social, emotional, and academic health of all students, in spite of their widely differing backgrounds and abilities. It's preparing to launch students into a postsecondary world, to be responsible citizens in cooperation and harmony with one another. It gets complicated very quickly, and there is no single formula for getting it right.

We can save our sanity by revisiting and reinvesting in the *why* behind our work. We can gather input and insight from teachers and staff so that the *why* stays at the forefront of everyone's mind.

How?

Where do we begin in creating and implementing a philosophy-driven, purposeful plan for our school?"

A couple decades ago, there was a great push across the United States for districts and schools to create and write mission statements. School leaders diligently assembled committees, held meetings, and created these statements. After the luster wore off, though, many principals found that their mission statements had grown dusty and rusty, stale and buried beneath new mandates, goals, and committees. For some of us, our mission and vision have disappeared altogether, inexplicably absent from our conversations, our planning, and even our websites.

To address shortcomings in yourself and your school, it may be time to dust off those mission statements and re-communicate your overarching purpose. It is a process that takes extensive planning and a fierce commitment to follow through. The principal is the person best qualified to lead the work, because they are the ones who truly know the teachers, staff, students, and community. The principal has already invested time in observing and absorbing cultural nuances of the building, and thus has a vision of what the school can be.

Communicating the Results

- Creating and agreeing on a common vision doesn't mean the work is done. Next comes the job of sprinkling your mission statement throughout everything

you do. Let's take it beyond the usual steps—adding it to letterhead and putting a banner at the school's main entrance—and think about some unconventional twists. You will want the statement to be a proverbial rooftop shout from every student, teacher, and classroom. Here are a few ways to publicize and advertise your school's new identity with enthusiasm and flair.

- **Create a new logo:** Develop an updated graphic design that represents your mission.
- **Enhance branding:** Communicate the positive stories coming from your school.
- **Use music and videos:** Use student voices and performance to bring your brand to life.
- **Develop a Quality Profile:** Publish a comprehensive, graphic-based summary of your school's successes.

Reconnect

Too often in our role as principals, we rely on repetitive patterns in how we communicate and connect with students, staff, and families. Year after year, we follow the same school calendar, host the same community events, and offer the same experiences for students and their families. Our “resting state” becomes reactionary; we address problems as they come to us rather than eliminate them before they start. When things begin feeling rote and—dare we say it?—boring, or when we aren't preparing for long-standing events with excitement and enthusiasm, it might be time to seek new and refreshing ways to connect with stakeholders.

School and Community: One and the Same

The community within the school walls and the community outside the school walls can't exist without each other, so they can't be addressed separately. The lines are too blurred. It helps to take a comprehensive look at school and community relationships as they truly exist in practical terms. When we talk about a school community, we are referring to students, parents, and teachers who are in the school during the day, and they are all part of a larger community where our students and their families live and work. For principals, it is beneficial to think about the school's roles, expectations, and impact on the larger community, and be mindful of how our leadership can enhance the relationship for everyone involved.

Knowing Your Community

From the onset of public education, schools have often been seen as the hub of an entire community—the reason and anchor for many decisions pertaining to residents. School buildings can be de facto town halls for local community events. Political and social identities of a residential area can manifest themselves in and around the school. The mascot, colors, and motto of the school district are often well known and celebrated with intense loyalty.

This isn't always true, though; in some cases, schools and communities are not so closely tied together, particularly in highly populated areas.

Regardless of how a school fits into the community—through deep, long-established roots, a distant, peaceful coexistence, or somewhere in between—principals can solidify and enhance their school's role in the larger community by considering how the two can flourish together in mutually productive ways.

Reexamining Your School's Programs, Calendar, and Flagship Events

Many schools fall into a rut with the standard, long-running events they host. To remedy the situation, try this: identify an event or a system your school engages in that has you feeling bored or even resentful, then answer these questions:

- How many years has your school hosted this particular event?
- If you're feeling apathetic about the event, might staff and students be feeling the same?
- Is there a better way to accomplish your goals? How might you update your approach?
- What would happen if you proposed eliminating the activity or replacing it with something else?
- If an event is still beloved by your students and their parents but you are not sure you, as the principal, can endure it one . . . more . . . time, what can you adjust to make it more enjoyable and manageable?

Reinvest

Every Monday morning, principals and teachers walk into school, preprogrammed for the same start:

“Good morning,” we greet one another. “How was your weekend?” “Fine. Yours?”

“Fine. Thanks.”

And thus begins another week of similar, predictable conversations and interactions. We check in with staff, often through bland and rote interactions, and sometimes we even avoid people with whom we have tense or awkward relationships. It's easier that way, right?

In this chapter, we will jump out of those constraints, break routines, and offer inspiration to work toward more meaningful relationships with those around us—namely, our students and our staff. Let's begin by reexamining our connection and rapport with our staff.

Connecting with Staff

The adults who work in schools are a complicated mix of personalities, and they hold a variety of philosophies. We have our eternal optimists—teachers who bounce in every morning and greet the day with positivity and a willingness to take on any challenge. Conversely, every staff has those teachers who feel like dead weight. They are negative, cynical, and toxic to the positive mission of the school. And, of course, there's everyone in between.

How, then, can we double down on our efforts to engage staff members without adding more to our workday or sapping our energy? Can we reinforce the positive behaviors of role-model teachers at the same time we improve the efforts and spirits of the ones dragging us down?

These are some of the questions we can ask ourselves and ideas we can try to actively reacquaint ourselves with staff, particularly with the successes and challenges facing teachers in their personal and professional lives.

Connect Personally

- Do I know my staff members individually?
- Am I giving too much time and energy to certain people at the expense of others?
- Am I hosting office hours or coffee chats?
- Am I encouraging wellness by supporting teachers' social, emotional, and health needs?
- Am I really listening to staff, or just passively hearing them out until they're finished talking?
- Am I having fun?

Connect Professionally

- Is there a conference or institute we might attend as a team or staff? Could we even plan a team presentation?

- Is there a tough challenge or task the staff could tackle together?
- How can principals connect with teachers through instructional coaching conversations?
- Am I conducting classroom visits with no agenda or judgement? Do I give immediate and positive feedback whenever possible?
- Have I helped teachers formulate quality long-term goals for themselves and our school?
- Does our school come together to scatter seeds for growth and change?

Connecting with Students

Principals can always reinvest in relationships with students, particularly by modeling an enhanced commitment to know (and correctly pronounce!) student names and really understand individual stories. Even better, and more far-reaching, is empowering teachers and support staff to do the same. The effort goes beyond "Student of the Month" celebrations or honoring high-achieving students for their accomplishments; it also goes beyond the natural and traditional "lift up" of the athletes, musicians, and artists in our schools. We also want to ensure we get to know students personally so we can honor and support their hard work, their academic progress, their social growth, and the important role they each have in our school.

Revamp Instructional Leadership

Sometimes leading instruction feels like catching fish with bare hands: it sounds doable and should get easier with experience and patience, but it's always slippery and unpredictable. Being an instructional leader takes instinct, a continual commitment to learn, and ongoing perseverance. But when it works, isn't it fun? Exciting? Immensely rewarding?

The foundations of good instruction stay largely the same over time, but the tools we use when teaching can—and absolutely should—change and evolve. As principals, we are charged with being the instructional leaders of a school, and we can find great energy and excitement by leading teachers out of outdated, mundane learning experiences and toward innovative instructional practices.

Abandoning the Old

So many times, we equate "taking a risk" with daring to try something new. In a classroom, however, taking a risk might

mean having the courage to let go of traditional practices that no longer have value beyond habit or nostalgia and that may, in fact, inhibit progress or innovation. Many teachers hesitate to abandon what feels “safe” and “acceptable” without securing the principal’s blessing, which we can’t offer unless we do some deep thinking. As a good place to start, principals might reassess three traditional teaching practices: packets that are primarily for busy work, homework that has limited instructional or academic value, and vendor-based programs that do not have the capability to provide differentiated instructional experiences.

Embracing the New

What if we approached the evaluation conversation by wondering what classrooms should look like not today, but in 10 years, in 20, or more? Principals usually feel like they are barely keeping up. Teachers feel the same way. But what if our vision extended far into the future? That is the question that should drive us now. Rather than ruminating on how and why things have changed in the past, it helps to wonder: *How will things be generations from now, if brave and strong leaders insist that we evolve the school experience for our students?* If we take some time with teachers to consider a vision for the future, and then set action steps for reaching that vision, it will help us be less worried or stressed about current challenges.

Reenvision Teacher Potential

What’s a great way for principals to reboot? Stop *doing* everything. That doesn’t mean intentionally neglecting responsibilities—quite the opposite, actually. It means re-envisioning what leadership looks like and taking action so the entire weight of a building’s success doesn’t fall on the shoulders of one person.

Why Shared Leadership?

Why should principals share leadership with teachers and staff? Here’s why.

It’s a long career. Especially for those of us who started on the administrator path early in our career, being the type of principal who insists on having a hand in every little thing isn’t tenable for the long haul. Letting go of control will alleviate some of the long-term stress of the job.

Teachers are skilled at what they do. Strong teachers are, by nature, leaders, even if on a smaller scale. Sometimes, though, they can be overlooked and underused

outside their classrooms. In fact, sometimes the best potential leaders are unintentionally slighted or unappreciated. Instead of overlooking them, we should use their expertise and empower them to lead.

Helpers increase efficiency. When we have other people helping clean the house, the work isn’t easier, but it’s distributed among many, so it feels easier. In the same way, having teachers help share leadership responsibilities makes a principal’s load feel a lot lighter.

Sharing improves community and culture. A reverse effect occurs when a principal insists on micromanaging. Far from being a revered monarch on the throne, the principal becomes overextended and begins to drop tasks, forget things, and appear ineffective. Teachers take notice, get annoyed, lose faith, and disengage.

Shared leadership enables instructional mastery. Teacher leaders should be the curricular masters for the school. They clarify and deconstruct standards, suggest how to approach instruction, and provide professional development for other teachers. Empowering teachers to be the experts will enrich the learning experience for students, allowing the principal to be a true instructional leader without having to be a master of all curricular areas.

Identifying Leadership Potential

Even longtime principals can grow blind to the supplementary talents of teachers. It is easy to miss rising restlessness. Teachers might be bubbling over with potential, but from our perspective, if everything feels steady and solid and there are no surface issues to address, we may overlook the possibilities. We keep doing the same thing and expecting the same output from our teachers, year after year. But as we re-envision teacher leadership, we’ll need to recognize when a teacher wants to be more visible in their leadership. As part of that process, we need to identify what skills they carry and how they could contribute to school decisions and direction.

Eight Areas Where Teachers Can Lead

Here are eight areas where teachers can have a leadership impact on your school:

1. Data and assessment.
2. Staff professional development.
3. Content support, department heads, team leaders.
4. Technology integration in content.

5. Club advisement, extracurricular activities, or academic/ extracurricular liaison.
6. Community outreach.
7. Political activism, lobbying, or educational advocacy.
8. Mentoring new teachers or student teachers.

What Principals Can Do

Now let's address some actionable steps principals can take to grow teachers into leaders.

- Capitalize on strengths
- Identify interests
- Help teachers set long-term goals
- Encourage risk-taking
- Implement structures for accountability partnerships
- Let them know you are watching, and learning, too
- Find ways to allow shadowing
- Don't push too hard. Encourage teachers to lead, but if they resist, let it go.

Reframe Data

Many school districts grapple with how to mitigate the high pressure, anxiety-inducing implications of standardized testing data in the face of significant but untestable factors such as poverty, trauma, absenteeism, apathy, staff burnout, aging facilities, funding inequities—the list goes on and on. For many principals, data review becomes just another thing to manage, another task box to check—which prevents it from being what it could be: the catalyst to motivate a school toward excellence.

Embracing Data

Data can serve many purposes in a school. These purposes remind us why principals should embrace data and make data part of their school's conversations.

Measuring progress and providing answers. Data helps us understand student progress. If students don't grow as we'd predicted, studying projection data to identify specific areas for intervention can provide answers to questions about which concepts or standards need revisiting or reteaching and which need strategies for enrichment. Further, data can help teachers structure conversations with

parents and colleagues.

Holding us accountable. Assessments help us know that teachers are covering the required standards, and they can be mirrors showing us what we've done well and where we need to improve. Assessment blueprints can be the starting point for planning a scope and sequence for an entire year. With consistent assessments and appropriate analysis of results, teachers will be more aligned in what they teach and how best to teach it. Data give us a checks-and-balances system, something to which we can answer, and the scaffolding to know and articulate our rationale for doing what we do.

Revisit Operations

Wise principals constantly adjust, assimilate, and alter how they approach operational decisions, depending on the situation. If I could walk away from this chapter with one goal achieved, it would be for principals to identify when they can—and should—take control and, when they do, to have the confidence to advocate professionally and fiercely for efficiency in school operations.

No one else can take on this responsibility as well as we can; no one else knows our building's needs like we do. Further, if we don't continue advocating and working toward operational excellence, we may feel helpless, disillusioned, and—yes—very weary. There are many facets of our jobs over which we have no control. We are often hamstrung by inefficiency; bad decision-making; archaic practices; and repetitive, ineffective systems. These things can be a primary factor in why principals experience burnout. To be held accountable for a school's operations but to have little voice in the matter is exhausting. That's why taking control over the areas where we can instill change is so important.

Relax, Rediscover, Revive

This final section will offer reminders of why we went into school leadership in the first place, and provide ideas for how to deliberately insert the joy back into our daily routines.

Relax

Here's the truth: being a school principal shouldn't have the power to shake your world. It's not *that* special. After all, there are a *lot* of us doing this work, which gives us a lot of collegial support, should we seek it. That collegial tribe can help us remember that *everything is going to be alright*. It's not a flat and easy path, of course; we have our

missteps and mistakes and our victories and triumphs. There are great days and horrible days. The job gives us fits and fatigue and, simultaneously, immeasurable pride and hope for our future.

Remembering this perspective offers reassurance that we can only do our best—and then, at day’s end, we need to let it go.

Rediscover

Sometimes we find ourselves in a professional rut, even if there’s nothing specifically wrong. We crave projects, something big that would matter to the world. We crave change, shake-ups that can make us see our work and workplace in a new way. When we’re feeling this way, it’s time to rediscover our passion for our work in one of a variety of ways.

- Join, or start, a cool new committee
- Organize travel options.
- Support, expand, or lead extra-curricular options for students
- Immerse yourself in a student activity or experience
- Teach adult learners
- Lead a review of resources so teachers can enhance their students’ experience
- Rethink your workspace so your office is a place that encourages fresh thinking
- Update your resume to remind yourself of the amazing things you’ve done—and what is yet to be done
- Make a bold move with your career—go back to

school, consider a new role, or make yourself an expert on a specific management skill

Revive

Schools should be places where we have fun while we do our important work. That’s why principals are always so proud if there is a culture of joy present in their schools. It’s the feeling that makes visitors remark on the spirit of happiness they feel when they walk through the doors. “We can’t describe it,” they say. “It’s just a *feeling*.” Establishing this culture is a team effort, starting with the office staff, who can prioritize and promote a positive culture by offering heartfelt greetings, sharing stories, and capturing giggle-worthy anecdotes. Make this part of your core mission as a principal, and watch your school be transformed for the better.

Conclusion

Reviving the spirit of the principalship takes work, just as being in a good marriage or planning a good vacation does. When we consider the scope of a career, though, and how many hours we’ll spend in this job over time, the investment of time and energy devoted to the cause will pay off in untold ways. Students and staff benefit from a leader who has energy, spirit, and a genuinely joyful attitude about the job, and so does the leader. It’s a long and exhausting career. We might as well make it a long, exhausting, *fabulous* career.



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