

DESIRED PERSONAL TRAITS FOR K-12 DISTRICT LEADERS

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INTRODUCTION

On every job advertisement there are desired professional qualities clearly listed but there are also personal traits that are a major factor in a successful job fit as well. Perhaps the personal traits are even more important in some situations. The soft skills help the new leader relate to and connect with people in and outside of the organization more so than professional traits.

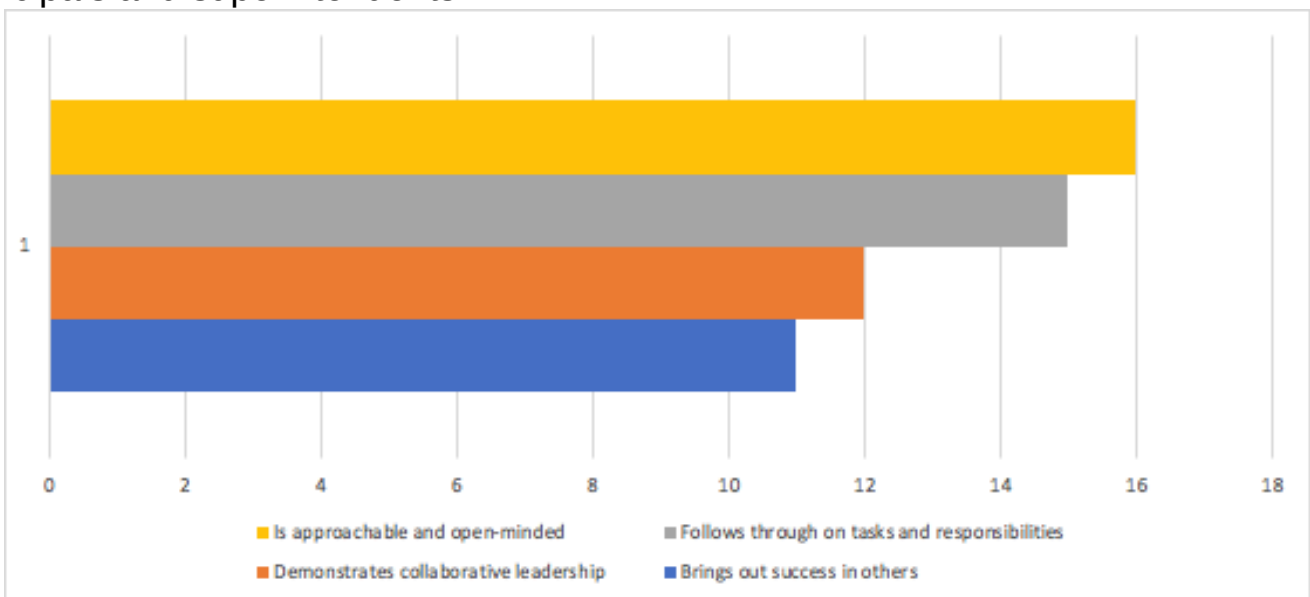
They are often the first impression many people have of the district leader. Personal traits are also a major contributor to the relationships that district employees have with their boss and motivate or demotivate people each and every day.

Earlier this summer, GLS released desired professional qualifications.

As a quick refresher, those desired qualifications include:

1. Building community and school relations
2. Having the ability to lead school improvement efforts
3. Effectively managing district resources
4. Being visible in the school and community, and
5. Being a strong instructional leader (curriculum development, assessment, instruction)

Professional and personal traits are equally as important when choosing the next leader of a district, or applying to be the next leader of a district. It is clear that “fit” means a new leader has both the professional skills but also the personal traits to be successful in their new organization and perhaps new community. Grundmeyer Leader Services (GLS) is pleased to share the top personal desired traits for K-12 district leaders from the last five years of helping schools hire new principals and superintendents.



Demonstrates Collaborative Leadership

According to Oxford Leadership, collaborative leadership is defined as, “leaders that engage the collective intelligence to achieve results across organisational boundaries.” In a world that is increasingly connected and becoming more global every day, it is easy to see why key stakeholders want the leader of the district to have a collaborative leadership mindset. The Community Tool Box (out of the University of Kansas) defines collaborative leadership as more of a process, stating, “It starts from the premise that “...if you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organization or community.

This type of leadership is a move away from both real and perceived silos that happen among district administrators and educators in the classroom. Collaborative leadership has a lot in common with servant leadership, which according to Inc, is “the idea that the typical hierarchy where employees are supposed to serve their bosses is turned upside down. Instead, leaders serve their people.”

“We need someone who has demonstrated the ability to actually have a profound impact on all aspects of a large school district, whose experiences include developing leadership in others and gaining the trust and partnerships of community allies.”

Key questions to consider for the district and leader perspective:

1. Please define your leadership style and provide some examples that convey your style in action.
2. What are the characteristics of a strong administrative team? How do you foster these characteristics?
3. In what ways do you involve parents in your school and help them in their role as primary educators?

One district survey stakeholder stated that, “We need someone who has demonstrated the ability to actually have a profound impact on all aspects of a large school district, whose experiences include developing leadership in others and gaining the trust and partnerships of community allies.”

The leader also sets the tone for the administrative team and lead teachers (TLC). How the leader promotes and facilitates collaboration is a major difference among leaders and their styles. It is more by how they act than what they say that defines how a leader demonstrates collaborative leadership traits.

Most K-12 stakeholders are looking for a leader that will include them in ways that allow them to offer solutions to hard challenges in order to best prepare students for a highly unknown future, and retain and recruit good teachers to the district by allowing them opportunities to grow and serve.

Follows Through on Tasks and Responsibilities

Although this personal trait seems obvious, there is an apparent lack of follow through from many outgoing district leaders. There could be a myriad of reasons for this from the leader being too busy to not following-through on what they agree to take on. Most leaders want to be known for getting things done and responding to people in a timely manner. However, the pace of job and the on-going demands often take away from their best intentions.

“There are many situations that as teachers we have been told by principals that something is going to happen and then it never does. This is happening at all buildings and why are teachers held accountable for deadlines when principals aren't?”

This also has a great impact on culture and morale from district to district. Following through on tasks and responsibilities ultimately leads to a collaborative team that is built on trust. This trait impacts the relationship between students, employees of the district, parents, community members, board members, and every stakeholder. Great leadership requires this trust, and a simple but critical way to build it includes prompt and quality follow through.

Key questions to consider for the district and leader perspective:

1. What would employees in your current assignment say about your ability to get things done? Why?
2. When you are busy, how do you delegate tasks to ensure all necessary work gets done on time?
3. When you delegate important tasks, how do you follow-up on them to ensure they get completed?

Approachable and Open-Minded

Somewhere along the line, the silos of education have become so prevalent they seem nearly impossible to break down. Just call some schools and try to reach the building principal or district superintendent and you will soon figure out how approachable they are or are not. This feeling of frustration comes through again and again from stakeholders being surveyed. One stakeholder writes, “Community members need to feel the superintendent is open to their ideas and they will listen to concerns if they are approached.” while another states, “Approachability and open-mindedness allows clientele to feel comfortable in communicating and collaborating with District leadership”

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In our 21st Century world, approachability means more than talking to people at the Friday night football game or before the show choir event. Approachability means meeting with community stakeholders where they have coffee, soliciting feedback from community members online and requesting ideas from employees in the district who might have great solutions to genuine challenges if given the chance to be heard.

This trait gives insight to the fact that many in the community have not felt supported or even heard in their districts. For board members tasked with hiring new district leaders, it’s important to understand that finding someone that is truly approachable and open-minded is desired for many stakeholders (district employees and community members). For aspiring administrators, it’s important to understand that as a candidate, districts will be looking for this trait so it is best to be able to explain a plan for how to demonstrate approachability and open-mindedness.

Key questions to consider for the district and leader perspective:

1. When you have an important decision to make, what process will you use?
2. How would you convey your willingness to embrace new ideas with staff, students and parents?
3. How do you develop and maintain a trusting, open school culture?

Brings out Success in Others

As districts look forward to preparing students for the future workforce, the old system of sorting students on a one track program does not work any longer.

As the district leader, stakeholders are now looking for a leader who understands a new era of education, and how to encourage students to follow their passions and dreams. Success is not limited to students, but also to staff. This can include more personalized delivery of professional development, and allowing educators to use innovative learning models in their classrooms. In order to bring success out in others, a district leader must listen to the desires of every stakeholder--and take it one step further to meet every learner where they are.

The greatest success we'll know is helping others succeed and grow."

The teacher leadership and compensation system is one way to provide employees a pathway for leadership. Incentives for retention and promotion are also ways to empower the best employees.

Simply ways of showing gratitude for great performance, allowing an employee to pilot a new initiative, or providing support to a colleague trying something new are simple ways to foster success in others. A quote by Gregory Scott Reid suggests, The greatest success we'll know is helping others succeed and grow."

Key questions to consider for the district and leader perspective:

1. How do you motivate others?
2. How do you maintain personal/professional life balance?
3. What keeps you motivated?



CONCLUSION

The job of a district leader is complex, challenging and rewarding. The personal traits outlined in this paper may seem intuitive to some but reinforce the importance of personal relationships. John C. Maxwell says, “Students don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” The same can often be said for district stakeholders. The soft skills such as communication, approachability, collaborative leadership and follow-through are clearly important for both district and community stakeholders.

As candidates consider a job advancement, current superintendents think about moving to a new district and school boards deliberate about which candidate to entrust the district to, these personal traits (among others) are key to the success of that new leader. They are also arguably the key to longevity for the new leader in your district and community.

About the Authors

Trent Grundmeyer, Ph.D

Trent is the founder of Grundmeyer Leader Services LLC. Prior to his tenure at Drake University serving as an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership he served as a high school principal at Hampton-Dumont and Indianola High School. Trent was recognized as 2013 Secondary Principal of the Year by the School Administrators of Iowa organization. He earned his doctorate degree in educational leadership at Iowa State University in 2013 and focuses much of his research around technology integration and leadership.



Trent has many connections around the state and Midwest which provides and advantages to the districts he serves through the recruiting and hiring process. Grundmeyer Leader Search continues to grow based on Trent's integrity in the search process ensuring that the leader who gets hired is truly the best fit for the job.



Susan Gentz

Susan Gentz is the founder and owner of BSG Strategies, LLC, a consulting business focused specifically on education leadership and technology, through both practice and policy.

Gentz comes from a strong policy background as a former staffer in the United States Senate and Legislative Aide in the Iowa House of Representatives.

Along with experience at both federal and state levels, she served as the Deputy Executive Director for the Center for Digital Education, worked for a government relations firm in Arlington, VA and heavily worked on federal and state education policy at iNACOL, where she wrote published reports to move the field forward with innovative learning models, best practices, and policy recommendations.



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